

Heaven is God Himself

Then I, John¹, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. (Rev 21:2-3)

Before the American Civil War, the black slaves composed many songs to sing in their churches, which are known today as Negro spirituals. One of their songs is a simple song about who's going to Heaven. They struggled with the question of how the white masters were religious, and had churches, and spoke much about God, but in some cases were cruel and ungodly in their actions towards the slaves. So the song simply went like this:

*Everybody talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't going there,
Everybody talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't going
Everybody talkin' 'bout Heaven ain't going there
Oh, my Lord.*

Just because you're talking about Heaven, doesn't mean you're headed to Heaven. Just because you like the idea of Heaven, doesn't mean you're headed there. Most people of course, think they are. They think the default place of the dead is Heaven. A Gallup poll in 2004 revealed that 81 percent of Americans believed in Heaven and an earlier poll said 77 percent rated their odds of making Heaven as "good" or "excellent". But for many of those people who are talking bout Heaven, it is a Heaven made in their own image, a Heaven of their own creation.

We can test whether you understand the biblical doctrine of Heaven by asking a basic question: would you still enjoy Heaven if God was not there? That is, all we have seen about Heaven – that it is a place, a place on the resurrected Earth for people with undying, unaging resurrected bodies, that it is a place of rest, and responsibility, and reward, where we have authority and honour and beauty, where we enjoy family love in its truest and deepest sense forever, where we experience unspoilt, unsullied, undefiled beauty forever – if you could have all this forever, without God, would you take it?

In some ways the question is a trick question, because it is asking an impossibility. There is no such thing as a family love without God, awe-inspiring beauty without God, a perfect Earth enjoyed with perfect bodies without God. All those things find their source in God, they are of Him, and through Him, and to Him. Without God, they are toys without batteries, music in a soundless vacuum, paintings in the dark.

But the question is really the fundamental test of our understanding of Heaven. Because if you can imagine those things without God, if you can imagine those things as joyful pleasures, simply without God present, then it is likely you misunderstand Heaven. If God is optional to your notion of Heaven, or perhaps one of many equal joys in Heaven, you may have a fairly worldly idea of Heaven, which is that Heaven is an eternity of independent, self-referential pleasure. I enjoy myself on Earth, sometimes I acknowledge God, sometimes I don't, and in Heaven, I get those same joys again. And in the same way – maybe He's there for me to acknowledge Him, maybe He isn't.

If you see God as one extra blessing in Heaven, if He is one of the nice things, but not the reason for the nice things, one of pleasures of Heaven, but not the source of the pleasure, one more joy, but not the ultimate reason for the joy, you probably have confused means with ends.

The hymn we sing captures it perfectly:

*The Bride eyes not her garment, but her dear Bridegroom's face;
I will not gaze at glory but on my King of grace.
Not at the crown He giveth but on His pierced hand;
The Lamb is all the glory of Immanuel's land.*

Heaven's deepest reward, Heaven's sweetest reality, Heaven's ultimate joy is seeing and loving God Himself. The Psalmist Asaph captured it when he said, “ 25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. 26 My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (Psa 73:25-26)” John Milton said, “Thy presence makes our Paradise, and where Thou art is Heaven.”

Samuel Rutherford said it this way, “Oh, my Lord Jesus Christ, if I could be in heaven without thee, it would be a hell; and if I could be in hell and have thee still, it would be a heaven to me, for thou art all the heaven I want.”

So this is the greatest reality of all. But what exactly will it mean? Working from the outer rings to the very core, we can learn three truths about being with God Himself in Heaven.

I. We Will Live In God's Presence

2 Then I, John¹, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. (Rev 21:2-3)

You remember that God's plan was always to be with and among His people. In the Garden of Eden, God's garden, where they lived in God's presence as his chosen people. Apparently, the Lord would appear daily in the cool of the day and walk and talk with them. After man fell, God continued to work to that goal. When God calls and constitutes the nation Israel, he says this:

I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. And they will know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, so that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God. (Exodus 29:45-46)

In fact, when Israel marched from Egypt to the promised land, the twelve tribes were arranged with three tribes at the north side, three on the south, three on the west, and three on the east, with the Tabernacle, the dwelling place of God in the very centre.

God dwelling with man becomes even more focused with the coming of the Lord Jesus. His very name – Emmanuel – means *God with us*, or *God among us*. John 1:1 tells us, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” In verse 14, John writes, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”, the word *dwelt* there containing the idea of dwelling in a tent. And then, the night before His crucifixion, He tells His disciples that He is going to go, but He will send the Comforter who will abide with them forever. Through the Holy Spirit, believers can abide in Christ, live in His presence, as long as they live.

But the final, and perfect experience of God's presence is Heaven itself. Here God sets up His very residence on the Earth. Heaven, God's home, and the Earth, our home, are joined and married forever.

Here is one of the hardest things about life as a believer now. We live on the Earth, we do our work, we learn, we discover, we eat, we drink, we relax. But the difficulty is that so often our lives feel

divided. We do things without any reference to God. We know the truth that He indwells us and that we are in His presence, but we so often think and act as if He is absent. We struggle to connect our lives to the presence of God. We feel a tearing, and a guilt that we cannot seem to bring God into what we see and do more of the time.

A man by the name of George Herbert wrote a fantastic poem about this called *The Elixir*, where he speaks of the secret that turns all of life to gold, as it were.

*Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see,
And what I do in anything
To do it as for Thee.*

We battle with that now. But in Heaven, there will be no struggle to do that. Look at Revelation 21:23:

The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. (Rev 21:23)

There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever. (Rev 22:5)

Now think about what this means. Right now, we see things because of the sun. The sun shines, its light bounces off objects, and that light enters our eyes, and so we can see colour and depth, and texture, and shape, and movement. When you see something during the day, it is through the light of the sun, and at night it is because of a lamp, some kind of artificial light.

In Heaven, everything you see, you see because of Christ. His glory is the light that bounces off everything – the trees, the city, the rivers, the other people. You will see nothing in Heaven without the Lamb's light. He illuminates everything. You believe in the sun not only because you see it rise, but because by it you see everything else. So in Heaven, you will not only see the Lamb, but by Him you will see everything else. There will be nothing in Heaven that does not remind you of Him. You will be in His visible presence everywhere, and everything you do will be lit up by His glory. No division, no tension, no struggling to remember Him.

II. We Will See God's Face

4 They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads.

In Heaven, we will see His face. Whose face? Well, the face of Jesus Christ our Saviour. The face of the one who died for us on the cross. The face of the one who has prayed for us since birth. The face of our King and Bridegroom. His literal face? Yes, his literal face. A face with eyes, proportions, expressions. Jesus is the God-Man, and in Heaven, we will see a Man there, a Man who is God the Son, a man into whose eyes we will look. To look into His face is to look into the face of the Triune God.

9 For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; (Col 2:9)

8 Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." 9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? (Joh 14:8-9)

the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2Co 4:6)

3 who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, (Heb 1:3)

To look into the face of Christ will be to look at God. Will we not see the Father, and the Holy Spirit? Well, in Revelation we do see some kind of manifestation, where John keeps speaking about Him who sat on the throne, *and* the Lamb. In Revelation 4, John describes One [who] sat on the throne. *3 And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance.* He also speaks in Revelation 4 of the seven lamps of fire, which seem to be a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. So it seems there will be ways that we see the Father and the Spirit. But what we can say with certainty is that we will look into the face of God the Son.

Why is that special? For two reasons. First, this was deadly before Christ's work on the cross. God told Moses,

20 But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." 21 And the LORD said, "Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. 22 "So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. 23 "Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen." (Exo 33:20-23)

People who saw an appearance of God the Son before Bethlehem expected to die. Jacob wrestled with Him, and *called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." (Gen 32:30)*

Gideon expected to die: *So Gideon said, "Alas, O Lord GOD! For I have seen the Angel of the LORD face to face." 23 Then the LORD said to him, "Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die. (Jdg 6:23) (Jdg 6:22)*

Manoah, father of Samson, expected to die: *22 And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, because we have seen God!" (Jdg 13:22)*

We will gaze upon the face of God, and because of His work on the cross, having justified, sanctified and glorified us, we will be able to look without death. John Donne said, "No man ever saw God and lived. And yet I shall not live till I see God; and when I have seen Him, I shall never die."

The second reason why seeing His face in Heaven will be special is that before that it was always veiled and mediated. Before Heaven, we only see Him through the eyes of faith.

8 whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, (1Pe 1:8)

For us now, we see Him only through belief in His Word. And even those comparatively few that saw His face on the earth were still seeing His face veiled. They were not seeing all there was to see, but in His humiliation, much of His glory and beauty was veiled. Three disciples got a glimpse of His unveiled face on the Mount of Transfiguration, but the rest of the time, it was veiled.

Heaven will be an unveiled, unmediated sight of Him. for we shall see Him as He is. (1Jo 3:2) Faith is laid aside, and turns to sight. Fanny Crosby, the blind hymn-writer was once approached by someone who said, "What a pity you were born blind." Crosby replied, had I been born with sight, my first request would have been that God remove it at birth." "Why?", asked the puzzled person. "Because when I get to Heaven, the first sight I will behold is my Saviour's Face."

Believers long to see His face.

Faces contain a world of truth. Painters have known this for centuries. In the eyes, in the

expressions, are communicated so much about the person. In our century, computer programmers are finding that out. Facial recognition software are programs that enable a computer to use its camera to see a face, and by mapping the face into zones, compare it to existing database of pictures and algorithms. Some software is now trying to read human emotions, and finding that across culture, certain combinations of movements on the face communicate certain emotions. Faces are really windows into the soul.

Have you ever been transfixed with a face, so captivated by it that you simply stared, mesmerised by its perfection, warmed by its gentleness, calmed by its peacefulness? Faces contain libraries of truth about a person.

To see Christ's face will be to see the ultimate emblem and physical communication of His inner beauties. The old theologians called this the beatific vision – seeing the beauty of God.

Spurgeon: “In the beatific vision it is Christ whom they see; and further, it is his face which they behold. They shall not see the skirts of his robe as Moses saw the back parts of Jehovah; they shall not be satisfied to touch the hem of his garment, or to sit far down at his feet where they can only see his sandals, but they “shall see his face;” by which I understand two things: first, that they shall literally and physically, with their risen bodies, actually look into the face of Jesus; and secondly, that spiritually their mental faculties shall be enlarged, so that they shall be enabled to look into the very heart, and soul, and character of Christ, so as to understand him, his work, his love, his all in all, as they never understood him before.”

That leads to the third and greatest experience of God.

III. We Will Experience Union with God

21 "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. 22 "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one:

23 "I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. 24 "Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. 25 "O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me. 26 "And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them." (Joh 17:21-26)

When Jesus prays to the Father, His prayer is essentially about extending the love and glory and unity in the Trinity to believers. The Father, the Son and the Spirit are in union, love each other, and enjoy the others' glory. The old theologians spoke of something called perichoresis, which means mutual indwelling. Each of the Persons of the Trinity indwells the other, and through this mutual indwelling, they are in perfect union. Now the prayer of Jesus is that believers would be in union with Himself, clothed with His glory, experience the love of the Father.

Now that has already begun. If you are a Christian, then you are in Christ, and Christ is in you. This is illustrated with the vine and branches, the body and the head, and with the wife and the husband. By being joined to Christ through the Holy Spirit, all the benefits of salvation come to you.

But this union is not consummated and experienced fully. It is as if we are in the betrothal phase. We are joined to Christ, and united to Him, but not yet together.

7 "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has

made herself ready." 8 And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. 9 Then he said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!'" And he said to me, "These are the true sayings of God." (Rev 19:7-9)

To put it simply, once we are in Heaven, we will not only see God's face, but we will be united with Him and to Him in ways that only marriage pictures right now. In Scripture the euphemism for the marital bed is the word *know*, and fitting it is, because the deepest perception you could have of someone is through union. Ours will be a spiritual union, of which earthly unions are a shadowy picture. Small wonder that Satan wishes to pervert and distort the marriage bed, because it is one of the highest symbols of the holy and perfect union we will have with Christ.

And what will be the result of being in perfect union with Christ? Fulness of joy. Ecstatic, soaring, overflowing joy.

11 You will show me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Psa 16:11)

“When God gave man his capacity of happiness, he doubtless made provision for the filling of it... He that sees the glory of God, in his measure beholds that of which there is no end. The understanding may extend itself as far as it will. It doth but take its flight into an endless expanse and dive into a bottomless ocean. It may discover more and more of the beauty and loveliness of God, but it never will exhaust the fountain. The body of man may as well swallow up the ocean, or his soul embrace immensity, as he can extend his faculties to the utmost of God's excellency...How blessed therefore are they that do see God, who are come to this exhaustless fountain! They have obtained that delight which gives full satisfaction...They can sit down fully contented, and take up with this enjoyment forever and ever, and desire no change. After they have had the pleasure of beholding the face of God millions of ages, it will not grow a dull story. The relish of this delight will be as exquisite as ever, there is enough still for the utmost employment of every faculty.”

Fulness of joy – if you are already finding joy and relish in God now. Like the old Christian who was on his deathbed, and his young nephew offered to read him some Scripture. He said, “Uncle, do you want me to read you the sweetest verse in the Bible?” He nodded. The nephew read, “In My Father's house are many mansions, if it were not so, I would have told you, I go to prepare a place for you.”. “That's not the sweetest verse, my boy. Keep reading.” “And I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.” The old Christian smiled. “That's the sweetest verse.”

Those 77% of people polled who believed they were going to Heaven needed to hear A.W. Tozer “I can safely say on the authority of all that is revealed in the Word of God, that any man or woman on this earth who is bored and turned off by worship is not ready for heaven!” Heaven is not simply immortality living for yourself. Heaven is the restoration, and the perfection of why God created the universe in the first place: to have a world of free-beings, who live on the Earth without dying and rule it for His glory, enjoying the family love of one another, revelling in the beauty of its holiness, and loving Him with all their hearts, soul, and minds, for all eternity. If that's the Heaven we're talking about, and longing for, we may well be going there.