

What's Heaven Really Like?

HEAVEN #2 – Pastor Gary Combs – April 21, 2024 – 2 Corinthians 5:1-10

INTRO: Good morning church! We're continuing our 6-week sermon series entitled: "HEAVEN: It's Better Than You Ever Imagined." In today's sermon, we will be asking, "What's Heaven Really Like?"

Vision: But before we begin, I want to talk to you about the upcoming Citywide Prayer Rally. We're joining other Wilson churches to pray together for four consecutive nights beginning on Sunday, April 28th. We'll meet at Daniel's Chapel on Sunday, Bible Mission BC on Monday, Christ Temple of Praise on Tuesday, and at the Whirligig stage on Wednesday, May 1st to pray for our city on the National Day of Prayer! Why four nights with all these different churches? It's because we're collaborating with these churches in prayer that God would bring revival to our city, so that EMWC would have repeated opportunities to hear and respond to the gospel. We believe when fellow believers join together in unity to pray for their city that God will hear and answer. So as your pastor, I'm asking you to join us for these four nights of prayer.



Trans: Now, back to our sermon, today we're discussing "What's Heaven Really Like?" As we learned last week, some believe that we can't know much about heaven, when in fact, the word "heaven" or "heavens" is in the ESV 692 times; 426 in the OT and 266 in the NT. So there's a lot about heaven revealed in the Bible! We also learned last week that not only is there a lot in the Bible about heaven, but we're supposed to focus on it, seeking it and setting our minds and hearts on it. But we can't really do that, if we don't have any idea what heaven is really like.

Need: Do you ever give any thought to what heaven is like? I've noticed that people who have faced death, either personally or among their friends and family, tend to think more about what heaven might be like. As I mentioned last week, losing my father when I was only 8 led me to think about heaven earlier than most. And now that I'm older and my wife and I have lost all of our grandparents and parents, and many other friends and loved ones, we think more and more about heaven. Just this year in our church family we've had four of our church members graduate to heaven, three from our Wilson campus and one from our RM campus. So what's heaven like for the believer when they die?

Trans: How can we face death and eternity with confident knowledge and expectation of heaven?

BODY: In the apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, he encouraged believers that they could confidently face death knowing what their heavenly home with the Lord would be like. We can confidently face death knowing what heaven is really like. How can we confidently face death knowing what heaven is really like? The text gives **four realities** about heaven, so that we can always be of good courage.

Today's text: 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 (ESV) ¹ For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, ³ if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. ⁴ For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. ⁵ He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. ⁶ So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸ Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

WHAT'S HEAVEN REALLY LIKE FOR THE BELIEVER?

1. We will be with Christ. (BTW, I am thankful for Pastor Colin Smith at The Orchard Evangelical Free Church in Illinois for his sermon points on this same topic. His work helped us order up our sermon.)

EXP: (1, 6-8) First, look at v.8 "at home with the Lord." The believer who dies will immediately be with the Lord in the present heaven. What do we mean "present heaven?" The "present" or "intermediate" heaven is where the Lord, the angelic host, and the saints are now. "Paradise" (3x times in NT) is now present heaven:

ARG: **Remember what we learned from Paul's revelation experience** (3rd heaven/paradise)

2 Corinthians 12:2-3 (ESV) ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows

Remember what we learned from Jesus word to the thief on the cross (today/with Me).

Luke 23:43 (ESV) And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

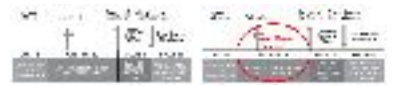
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Consider what Jesus told John to write to the church at Ephesus (Tree of life in present heaven)

Revelation 2:7 (ESV) He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

Here's a chart to help our understanding. Because the word heaven and heavens is used in the Bible to describe the atmospheric heaven, the stellar heaven, the present or 3rd heaven, and also the New Heaven.



- EXP:** (1, 6-8) **“We know”** (1, 6) (εἶδω, *eidō*) - to know, to have knowledge and understanding of, to behold or see. **“Tent”** (1) (σκηνοσ, *skēnos*) - temporary residence, (fig.) the body (the abode of the soul): tent, tabernacle. **“Destroyed”** (1) (σκηνοσ, *skēnos*) - Lit., “to loosen.” To demolish, destroy, dissolve or disintegrate. You don't have to worry about the destruction of this earthly body for it will be raised a heavenly body. **“Building from God”** (1) (οἰκοδομή, *oikodomē*) - a finished building or house. **“A house not made with hands”** (1) - This speaks of the new “home” for our souls, namely, our **“Eternal”** (1) body or resurrection body, designed and built by the Lord to live with Him forever. **“Good courage”** (6,8) (θαρρέω, *tharreō*) - to be of good courage, to have confidence. In what? That **“We know”** (1, 6) that we can't really die. Our soul is immediately transferred to be with the Lord Jesus. **“At home”** (6-9, 3x) (ἐνδημέω, *endēmēō*) - whether at home our earthly or heavenly body, we are confident in what we know, namely that we are in Christ now by faith and we will be with Christ in reality (“sight” v.7). **“Away”** (6-9, 3x) (ἐκδημέω, *ekdēmēō*) - to depart, emigrate. KJV “Absent from the body, present with the Lord.” This is immediate. **“Rather be”** (8) (εὐδοκοῦμεν μᾶλλον, *eudokoumen mallon*) - “be” - willing, pleased with; “rather” - to a greater degree, more. Paul said he was more desirous to be with the Lord!

ARG: Paul said to depart and be with Christ is “far better.”

Philippians 1:21-23 (ESV) ²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

ILL: It must've been hard at times for Paul to remember his heavenly visit and not want to go there immediately. “Someday you will read or hear that Billy Graham is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. I shall be more alive than I am now. I will just have changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God with Christ Jesus my Lord.” — Billy Graham

APP: The first reality of heaven is that believers will be with Christ Jesus! Which is better by far!

2. We will be fully conscious.

EXP: (2-5, 7) Look at v. 2. For what does our soul groan? For our heavenly dwelling. Do we groan to be in a place of what some believe to be “soul sleep?” No! We groan to “further clothed” (4) and “swallowed up by life: (4). Also note v.7, where faith becomes “sight.” You have to be conscious to “see.”

Some believe in soul sleep because Paul calls the death of our earthly bodies “sleep.” Our bodies sleep until the rapture, but our souls are conscious and immediately transferred to heaven.

1 Corinthians 15:51-52 (ESV) ⁵¹ Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all **sleep**, but we shall all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 (ESV) ¹³ But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are **asleep**, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. ¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen **asleep**. ¹⁵ For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord,

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will not precede those who have fallen **asleep**.¹⁶ For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.¹⁷ Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.

“**Groan**” (2,4) (στενάζω, *stenazō*) - to sigh, murmur, pray inaudibly:—with grief, groan, grudge, sigh.

“**Heavenly dwelling**” (2) (οἰκητήριον, *oikēterion*) - a dwelling place, habitation in heaven

“**Found naked**” (3) (γυμνός, *gymnos*) - unclad, without clothing, the naked body, open, lay bare

“**Burdened**” (4) (βαρέω, *bareō*) - to burden, weigh down, depress

“**Unclothed**” (4) (ἐκδύω, *ekduō*) - to strip one of his garments, to take off from one's self, to put off the one's raiments, fig., to put off the body, the clothing of the soul

“**Further clothed**” (4) (ἐπενδύομαι, *ependuomai*) - to put on, clothed over. Better clothed.

“**Mortal**” (4) (θνητός, *thnētos*) - liable to death, mortal

“**May be swallowed up**” (4) (καταπίνω, *katapinō*) - to drink down, to swallow up in life!

“**Life**” (4) (ζωή, *zōē*) - life; the state of one who is possessed of vitality or is animate

“**Prepared**” (5) (κατεργάζομαι, *katergazomai*) - to perform, accomplish. This future with Christ and with God as Father has been God's purpose all along and it's what the Spirit within us groans for.

ARG: John was fully conscious and he witnessed fully conscious saints (“souls”) in present heaven.

Revelation 6:9-11 (ESV)⁹ When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne.¹⁰ They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”¹¹ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

Randy Alcorn made 21 observations from this passage. Here are a few: (From his book: *Heaven: A Comprehensive Guide to Everything the Bible Says About Our Eternal Home*)



1. When these people died on Earth, they relocated to Heaven (v. 9).

2. These people in Heaven were the same ones killed for Christ while on Earth (v. 9). This demonstrates direct continuity between our identity on Earth and our identity in Heaven.

3. People in Heaven will be remembered for their lives on Earth.

4. “They cried out” (v. 10) means they are able to express themselves audibly.

7. The martyrs are fully conscious, rational, and aware of each other, God, and the situation on Earth.

8. They ask God to intervene on Earth and to act on their behalf: “How long . . . until you judge” (v. 10).

10. People in the present Heaven know what's happening on Earth (v. 10).

12. The martyrs clearly remember their lives on Earth (v. 10). They even remember they were murdered.

15. Those in Heaven are distinct individuals: “Then each of them was given a white robe” (v. 11).

16. The martyrs' wearing white robes suggests the possibility of actual physical forms, because disembodied spirits presumably don't wear robes.

17. God answers their question (v. 11), indicating communication and process in Heaven. It also demonstrates that we won't know everything in Heaven—if we did, we would have no questions.

18. God promises to fulfill the martyrs' requests, but says they will have to “wait a little longer” (v. 11). Those in the present Heaven live in anticipation of the future fulfillment of God's promises.

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ILL: **The Transfiguration reveals something of present heaven** (Matthew 17:1–8, Mark 9:2–8, & Luke 9:28–36)

Luke 9:28-31 (ESV) ²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. ³⁰ And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, ³¹ who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Moses and Elijah were clothed in white, they had form, they spoke, they knew about Christ's coming "departure" and accomplishment at the cross. It's as if heaven leaked into earth.

ILL: The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). Was it a literal or an instructional story? Clearly instructional. How much instruction should we take from it? At a bare minimum: they were conscious and remembered who they were and where they were.

APP: The second reality of heaven is that believers are fully conscious and aware. They will be able to see, hear, speak, think, feel, taste... They will be able to interact with the Lord and other saints and angels.

3. We will be actively engaged.

EXP: (9-10) Look at v. 9. No matter whether on earth or in heaven, "we make it our aim to please him." This points to activity. There's something for believers to do in heaven. Then in v.10 it says we have to appear before "the judgement seat of Christ." So, there's a report to be given of our work of faith on earth.

"**Make it our aim**" (9) (φιλοτιμέομαι, *philotimeomai*) - to strive earnestly, make it one's aim, labor.

"**Please Him**" (9) (εὐάρεστος, *euarestos*) - well pleasing, acceptable. We will be able to fully please God.

"**Judgement seat**" (10) (βῆμα, *bēma*) - a raised platform with a seat for a judge. Here, not the Great White Throne Judgement of unbelievers, but the Bema Seat of Christ, which is for the giving of reward. It is uncertain when this happens. Perhaps as each soul arrives in heaven or after the rapture.

ARG: **We will be engaged in worship around the throne of God.**

Revelation 4:2-4, 10-11 (ESV) ² At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. ³ And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. ⁴ Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. ...the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, ¹¹ "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

We will teach others and be taught by other saints.

Revelation 7:13-14 (ESV) ¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" ¹⁴ I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

ILL: The angels are spirits without physical bodies, yet they can see, hear, talk, move, eat, take on physical form, etc. We will probably have a similar heavenly or spiritual body to them and to Elijah and Moses. And like the angels, we will be actively watching and discussing and interacting in heaven.

APP: The third reality of heaven is that believers are actively engaged.

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4. We will be eagerly waiting.

EXP: (2-4, 8) The complete fulfillment of our groaning and “longing” (2), will take place after the present heaven, when we receive our “house not made with hands,” “a building from God,” which is our new resurrection body made just like the resurrection body of Jesus. This body will be better, far better.

“Longing” (2) (ἐπιποθέω, *epipothēō*) - to greatly desire, to long for, yearn after, crave.

Did you notice that the saints in present heaven in Rev. 6 were eagerly waiting?

Revelation 6:10 (ESV) They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

They were waiting on God's judgment, but surely also they were also longing for the New Heavens and New earth. You see, there will still be hope in present heaven. There will still be longing for the final move of God when He makes His home on the New Earth, so that heaven and earth are made one.

ARG: For the best is yet to come. There will be a new heaven and a new earth!

Revelation 21:1-4 (ESV) ¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I 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 the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

APP: The fourth reality of heaven is that believers will be eagerly waiting. But what a waiting room! For we will be with Our Lord Jesus, the angelic host and all the saints who've gone before us. There will be plenty to do and see and learn and experience. It's GOOD to follow Christ here. It's BETTER to be with Him in heaven! And it will be BEST when He comes to dwell with us in a new heaven and new earth!

CONCLUSION: What's Heaven Really Like for the believer in Jesus Christ? In the present heaven, believers will be ... 1) With Christ., 2) Fully Conscious, 3) Actively engaged., 4) Eagerly waiting.

In his novel, *Safely Home*, Randy Alcorn writes of a character named Li Quan who goes to heaven:

“Compared to what he now beheld, the world he'd come from was a land of shadows, colorless and two-dimensional. This place was fresh and captivating, resonating with color and beauty. He could not only see and hear it, but feel and smell and taste it. Every hillside, every mountain, every waterfall, every frolicking animal in the fields seemed to beckon him to come join them, to come from the outside and plunge into the inside. This whole world had the feel of cool water on a blistering August afternoon. The light beckoned him to dive in with abandon, to come join the great adventure.

“I know what this is,” Quan said.

“Tell me,” said the Carpenter.

“It's the substance that casts all those shadows in the other world. The circles there are copies of the spheres here. The squares there are copies of the cubes here. The triangles there are copies of the pyramids here. Earth was a flatland. This is . . . well, the inside is bigger than the outside, isn't it? How many dimensions are there?”

“Far more than you have seen yet,” the King said, laughing.

“This is the Place that defines and gives meaning to all places,” Li Quan said. “I never imagined it would be like this.”

Let's imagine what heaven is really like. Let's make sure we're ready for heaven. Let's pray.