



HEAVEN: What's the Big Deal?

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You may be surprised by the title of this article*. To some, heaven is a very big deal and rightly so. But talk to many sincere Christ-followers and you will see that heaven is not so en vogue these days. And there is a good chance that if heaven is a big deal to you, you may well have a bits-and-pieces view of it anyway. Easy now...put those rocks down. The truth is most sincere believers have a smorgasbord of thoughts and ideas concerning heaven rather than a thorough, Biblical overview.

For example, if we were to point out that our eternal destination is not actually heaven but earth – a new earth that is – well, we may get lynched at the stake. Needless to say, this is the Biblical truth and we are going to take the risk to make clear what the Bible does teach about heaven. You may still tar-and-feather us after this article, but we ask you to prayerfully read this with a heart determined to search the Scriptures rather than falling back on tightly held assumptions you may have picked up along the way.

However, you may be on the other side of this issue. If you nodded your head at the title of this article...heaven-talk makes you yawn...our aim is to also reawaken the divine hope that you may have lost and help you to rediscover the big deal about heaven. To you, we gently shout: “Wake up and sell the coffin!”

During the 1900's the church went through its decadal threat of the end of the world. Certainly with the backdrop of the cold war (America vs. Russia: whoever has the most bombs wins!) and too many prophets of doom, the end of each decade was characterized by a surge of end-times hype. Books were sold and movies were made. While some made a lot of money, most went through the rollercoaster ride of expectations/fears raised (depending how you greeted this news) to expectations/fears doused. Plus in dealing with the inevitable reality of death, which accompanies every generation of human beings, this yo-yo ride of end-times madness certainly made the afterlife a topic hot off the press.

As we entered into this new millennium safe, despite the prophets of doom busier than ever and the paranoia around the Y2K bug (remember that?), there seemed to be a universal decision to ditch this rollercoaster ride. It is almost like every one said: “Enough of this already. Let's get on with life”. More to the point, I think, the exhaustion of the twentieth century decadal hysteria had numbed most to the reality of Christ's return and made any talk about heaven taboo. Today the concept of heaven seems far less important than, say, “Maximizing Life” or “Seizing the Day”. In fact, heaven is at best boring to most; and at worst, absolutely irrelevant.

*An apology upfront. Since this topic on heaven has so many implications, we make numerous references to related articles that may enrich your understanding of heaven. In an attempt to stick to the point of this article, we have made these references rather than going down too many rabbit trails along the way. We trust this has the desired affect of focusing this article rather than cluttering it.

So let us look at what the Bible teaches us concerning heaven, the second coming of Christ and the important relationship between these two truths.

1.) The Bible refers to three heavens.

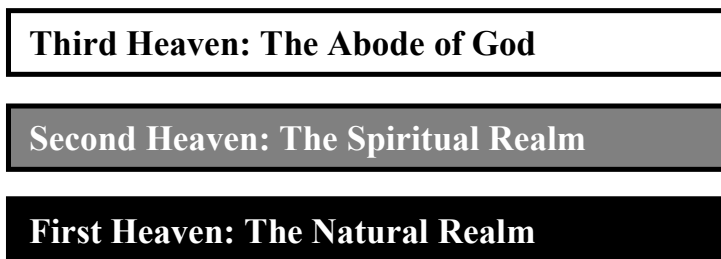
The first way in which the Bible uses the word “**heaven**” refers to the *abode of God*: “**our Father in heaven**” (Matthew 6:9). Paul refers to it as the “**third heaven**” and “**Paradise**” (2 Corinthians 12:2, 4); Jesus Himself used the word “**Paradise**” when assuring the man, on the cross next to Him, of his salvation (Luke 23:43).

The second way the Bible uses the word “**heaven**” is to refer to the *natural universe surrounding the earth*: God “**created the heavens and the earth**” (Genesis 1:1). Frequent psalmists used the word “**heaven**” in this sense, describing the created world: “**When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained**” (Psalm 8:3).

The third reference is to the “**heavenly places**” – the spiritual realm – in which our primary warfare against demonic powers takes place (Ephesians 2:6; 3:10; 6:12); the outcome of which affects our natural world.

Thus, in a nutshell, we presently live on this earth in the first heaven or *natural realm*. As the redeemed, we contend for God’s Kingdom to advance in the second heaven or *spiritual realm* with directly affects the first heaven. Our victory is only assured to the degree that we seek God’s Presence and will as He rules from the third heaven or the *abode of God*. Admittedly this is a mouth-full of nutshells but you get the point. God intends His Presence to manifest in every realm as His rule is established over all the created world.

Diagrammatically*...



*Although we admit diagrams have their limitations, they do help us to grasp concepts.

2.) *At death, the redeemed are welcomed into heaven until the age to come.*

When a person dies, he immediately faces his Maker (Hebrews 9:27). There is no purgatory, no cycle of reincarnation...when we die on this earth, *we leave our natural body and are ushered into an immediate audience with God*. The first judgment we all face is based on whether we have *recognized our need for salvation and placed our faith in God for this salvation*. This judgment at death separates the believers and the unbelievers.

What happens to the *believer* at death*? The believer can rejoice knowing that **“to be absent from the body [is] to be present with the Lord”** (2 Corinthians 5:6-8). At death, the *believer* stands confidently at the **“judgment seat of Christ”** (vv. 8, 10); immediately welcomed into the third heaven to enjoy fellowship with God having placed his faith in the completed work of Christ**. Jesus assured the man, on the cross next to Him, of his salvation, saying: **“today you will be with Me in Paradise”** (Luke 23:43). The man was to expect that immediately after his death; he would be ushered into God’s Presence redeemed through his faith in Christ.

Believers who die on earth before Christ’s return are received into the third heaven, God’s abode, to enjoy the delights of glory divine. Although we can only surmise what this experience will be like, the word **“Paradise”** captures it well. The Bible, in fact, is brief on the details of this experience and seems to reveal only enough to get our imaginations soaring***. Even John admitted: **“it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but when He is revealed, we shall be like Him”** (1 John 3:2). Paul, having been allowed to take a peek into this glory, actually seemed to be prohibited from sharing what he saw (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). Or was it that he just could not explain in human words the incredible glory he witnessed?

But what we do know – this is a crucial thought, although initially a shock to most – is that *this experience in heaven is only for a limited period, brief in the light of eternity*. For when Christ returns to earth those who have already passed away will leave the third heaven and *return with Jesus to consummate His Kingdom on earth* with the believers who are still alive here. Paul comforted the Thessalonians who were confused about these matters: **“I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep [the believers who had died]...For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus”** (1 Thessalonians 4:13, 14). Bring them with Him...to where?

*What happens to the *unbeliever* at death? The unbeliever, having failed to acknowledge his need for salvation, will face **“the judgment seat of Christ”** (2 Corinthians 5:10, 11); banished to Hades to await final judgment (Luke 16:19-31). Final judgment then occurs at the white throne judgment where the devil himself will be judged and, with him, all those who are in Hades will be sentenced to hell: the **“lake of fire”** (Revelation 20:11-15). Thus Hades and hell are similar but distinct places. Both are places of judgment for rejecting Christ’s salvation and both are characterized by torment and punishment. Hades is the place of judgment for those who have not acknowledged their need for salvation and hell is the place of final judgment for the devil and all who have followed his lead. John refers to this final judgment as the **“second death”** of the unbeliever (Revelation 21:14).

**See pages 12ff of this article for a discussion on the rewards given to the believer at this time (2 Corinthians 5:10).

***See the footnote on page 13 of this article.

Paul did not give any room for misunderstandings to occur: **“For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout...Then we *who are alive and remain* shall be caught up together *with them* in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air”** (1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17). Paul nurtured the expectation that he would be alive at Christ’s return, an expectation we should all nurture. He comforted the believers at Thessalonica by explaining that those who died before Christ’s second coming would return with Him from heaven, participating with those who are alive on the earth in the glorious consummation of the Kingdom.

In this amazing moment, all believers will receive resurrected bodies to live and reign upon the **“new earth”** (1 Corinthians 15:35-58; Revelation 5:10). Although this does bring up the issue of the end-times, and we encourage our readers to consider our article on this subject*, the point must be clear: followers of Christ who die before Christ’s return immediately go to heaven; but when Christ returns to the earth, they return from heaven with Him to begin the age to come. Thus “heaven” is a *temporary* place of divine delight where those who die before Christ’s return await the age to come. And there is every reason to assume that this wait is but a moment in light of the unrestrained delight of communion with God (1 Corinthians 13:12) and the freedom we will have from linear time restrictions (2 Peter 3:8).

3.) Redeemed humanity was created for the earth not for heaven.

Although God created us in His image there were two distinct differences between us and Him. First, we were created with a physical body; where God is Spirit. Why did He create us this way? For one reason: so that we could live on this physical earth He created for us. Secondly, while God is Sovereign Ruler of all things, He has entrusted mankind with the authority to rule the earth’s domain: **“Then God said: ‘let them have dominion over...the earth’”** (Genesis 1:26-28). In other words, in God’s original plan He never created us for heaven; ***He created us for the earth... specifically to have dominion over the earth on His behalf*****. Then nowhere in His revelation to us did He ever promise that our final destination would be heaven.

Remember that in God’s original purpose for creation there existed an “open-heaven” between God in heaven and mankind on earth. Thus God and Adam enjoyed undisturbed fellowship with one another even though Adam got on with his God-given mandate *on earth*. There is no doubt that Adam was able to continually see and experience the awesome sights of God in all His glorious, heavenly splendour. After the fall, the Scriptures reveal that God’s people were allowed partial glimpses of this – such as when God peeled the curtain of heaven back for Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-4) and John (Revelation 4:1, 2) to catch a revelatory look at His heavenly glory – but it was standard experience for Adam before the fall.

*See our article entitled, “Living at the Edge of Time”.

The extent to which He delegated this authority to us is seen in how, when Adam forfeited this authority to the devil, God honoured the authority the devil now exercised. Jesus Himself, before the cross, referred to the devil as the **“ruler of this world” (John 14:30).

The Book of Revelation does not conclude with the redeemed going to heaven, rather it concludes with *the heavenly Jerusalem coming down to earth* (Revelation 21:1-27). No matter how we work out our understanding of eschatology, the end result is the same: Jesus is triumphant and He creates a **“new heaven and a new earth”** (Revelation 21:1). Why would He create a **“new earth”** if we were to live eternally in heaven? Why would we require new resurrected bodies unless God intended us to live forever on this new earth (1 Corinthians 15:35-52)?

God created mankind to live and rule on this earth and He intends *glorified* mankind to live and rule on the *new* earth*. His original plan is His eternal plan! What is even more exciting is that the imagery of John’s glimpse of this new heaven and new earth takes us directly back to the scene of creation. John describes a restored “open-heaven” between God and His people: **“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”** (Revelation 21:3).

John even catches a glimpse of **“the tree of life”** (Revelation 22:2) ala Garden of Eden. Thus just as God originally intended with Adam, He and mankind will enjoy undisturbed fellowship with one another even as mankind gets on with their God-given mandate to rule the earth. The visionary declaration that God’s people **“shall reign on the earth”** (Revelation 5:10) is gloriously fulfilled: **“And they shall reign forever and ever”** (Revelation 22:5).

*What about verses like Matthew 6:20, where Jesus teaches us to **“lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys”**? Is He not teaching us that our eternal dwelling place will be the third heaven? No, there is no reason to come to this conclusion, especially when the clear teaching of Scripture reveals that our eternal dwelling place is a new earth in the midst of an “open third heaven”. In this verse, Jesus is teaching us to have an eternity-mindset, rather than being bound to an earthly, temporary perspective. Throughout the chapter, He addressed the motives of our heart (Matthew 6:21), making it clear that we are to give, pray and fast for *our Father* who is in heaven (Matthew 6:4, 6, 9, 18). The Father is the focus of Jesus’ teaching, not a mansion in the sky.

Similarly, the apostolic writers urged an eternity-mindset, attempting to enable their readers to view this life as a temporary time of preparation for the age to come. For example, when Paul says to the church at Philippi that their **“citizenship is in heaven”** (Philippians 3:20), he does not mean the third heaven is their eternal dwelling. Rather he is encouraging these believers to be eternity-minded rather than earthly-minded (vv. 1-19). In fact, he then reminds them that we **“eagerly wait for the Saviour”** (v. 20) to return from the third heaven and makes reference to the resurrected bodies we will receive when Jesus establishes His Father’s Kingdom on earth in the age to come (v. 21).

An often misquoted passage of Jesus is John 14. Most make this entire passage about heaven; but it is not, it is again about the Father, whom Jesus mentions fifteen times in twenty-one verses (vv. 1-21). Jesus said: **“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me”** (v. 6). He did not say, “No one gets to heaven except through Me”. When He taught, **“In My Father’s house are many mansions”** (v. 2) and **“I go to prepare a place for you”** (v. 3), Jesus was not referring to heaven but to the Father’s Presence. He was encouraging these terrified believers (v. 1) that they would soon have the same peace and assurance He Himself was enjoying in His Father’s embrace despite the ordeal He faced. Waxing eloquent about heaven would hardly have been an encouragement to these frightened disciples.

Under Judaism, only one person could have direct audience with God; the high priest went before God on behalf of the nation once a year. There was only place for one before God under the Old Covenant; Jesus was now ushering in a new covenant in which there was **“place”** for everyone to come before the Father. Indeed, in the Father’s heart there **“are many mansions”** – there is place for all! He then continued to assure His disciples that He would not leave them as **“orphans”** (v. 18) but would indwell them with His Spirit (vv. 15-17): **“at that day [Pentecost morning: Acts 2:1-4] you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you”** (v. 20). Thus in this passage, Jesus’ focus is on the Father not heaven. He is encouraging His disciples about the intimate relationship with the Father made possible in *this life* through His sacrifice and the indwelling Spirit, not about heaven after they die.

To be crystal clear then: when sin separated man from God, it closed the “open heaven” between God in the third heaven and mankind on earth, the first heaven. The second heaven, the spiritual realm, became a conflict zone determining whether mankind would or would not enjoy the Presence of God from the third heaven. In this age, through Christ’s first coming, we have access to the Father’s Presence now – even though we do so amidst struggle and conflict – but in the age to come, through Christ’s second coming, we will once again enjoy a restored “open heaven” as the third heaven overshadows the first heaven, the new earth, in which we dwell.

Diagrammatically...

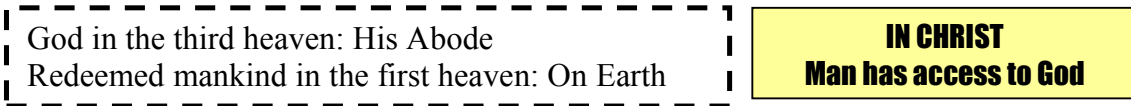
Before the Fall...



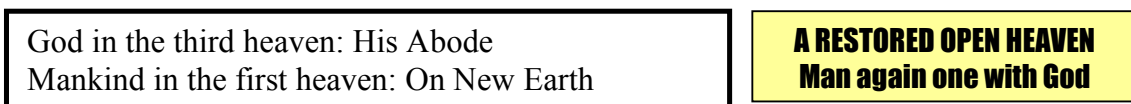
After the Fall...



Because of Christ’s first coming...



Because of Christ’s second coming...



A good and important question to ask is: What happens to the “old” earth? This actually has vital implications for how we live out a Kingdom life on this earth now. If this earth is just going to be tossed out, then how do we apply our Kingdom mandate now...today...as we live on this planet earth*? The Bible makes it clear that God will create a new heaven and new earth because **“the first heaven and the first earth had passed away”** (Revelation 21:1). But what does this mean? Also the Bible reveals that at the coming of the Lord, **“the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up...the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements [a reference to the earth again] will melt with fervent heat”** (2 Peter 3:10-13). Huh? Sounds painful?!

*Please see our article entitled: “The King & His Kingdom”.

One interpretation of these verses claims that the “old” earth is going to hell in a basket and will thus be destroyed lock-stock-and-barrel. However, when you consider that **“the earth is the Lord’s and all its fullness”** (Psalm 24:1) then you have to question whether God is really going to destroy *His* earth or will He simply remove the curse from it in judgment. Certainly the references to fire in these verses refer to the judgment of God rather than a literal “frying” of the earth. But let us allow Peter to explain himself. In an earlier verse, he explains the fire-metaphor: **“But the heavens and the earth...are reserved for fire until the day of judgment”** (v. 7). The New Living Translation brings this out clearly: **“God has also commanded that the heavens and the earth will be consumed by fire on the day of judgment, when ungodly people will perish...and the earth and everything in it will be exposed to judgment”** (2 Peter 3:7, 10 NLT).

However the clearest indication of what may be in the mind of God comes from the use of the word “new” in “new earth” and the phrase “**had passed away**” in “**the first earth had passed away**” (Revelation 21:1). The word “new” (Greek: *kainos*) is the same word used to describe who we are now in Christ: “**a new creation**” (2 Corinthians 5:17). And the phrase “**had passed away**” is the exact same description of our new life in Christ: “**old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new**”.

The Greek word used for “new” in both these verses refers to a new form or quality not to a new time or season (as the Greek word *neos* does). In other words, it does not refer to something that is brand-new, never-before seen in existence; rather it refers to something reformed and restored to its original purpose. When we become a new creation by His grace, we are not re-created completely from scratch; rather we are miraculously redeemed and restored. Surely, in the same way that we become a new creation through the redemptive act of God so the earth will become a new earth through God’s redeeming power*. The systems (kingdoms) of this world will be judged and the curse of sin will be removed from the earth. John declared in wide-eyed wonder: “**And there shall be no more curse**” (Revelation 22:3).

The implications are literally earth-shaking. We are the custodians of this earth and we need to grasp our role as stewards of His Kingdom mandate. For one, Jesus taught us to pray to our Father “**in heaven**” this way: “**Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven**” (Matthew 6:9, 10). Jesus did not teach us to pray for God to take us to heaven. No! He taught us to pray for God to bring heaven to earth through us. We are to pray and then actively participate in bringing the rule and order of heaven to earth (Matthew 6:33). Jesus would not teach us to pray this way if He did not intend for it to be this way!

*Think about all the words in the Bible that begin with the prefix “re,” which means, “to go back”. Revive, restore, redeem, repent, regenerate, renew, refresh, refine, reconcile, rebuild, repair and resurrect. They all refer to God taking us and His creation back to something original.

4.) *Biblical hope is centred on the return of Christ**.

The Bible teaches us a lot about the subject of hope. We as the redeemed, of all people, should be loaded with this divine substance. Yet most believers do not know what Biblical hope is, or more to the point, they have lost this divine hope. Many may be able to define hope correctly as “earnest expectation” but most sell it way short of its divine power by applying it only in phrases like: “I have an earnest expectation that I will get what I pray for”. We do not mean to imply that one should not have an earnest expectation of answered prayer when we pray in line with the revealed will of God. Of course not! We only point out that this is but a small application of the concept of hope. Biblical hope – a fully loaded truth – is, in fact, centred on the return of Christ, which ought to give us divine perspective before we even begin to pray and should enthuse our lives with dynamic expectation.

Let’s look at a common mistake many make in understanding hope. For every one message on Biblical hope we hear today, we probably hear 10,000 on faith. And when we consider the topic of faith, few passages are more quoted than Hebrews, Chapter 11. The writer begins this wonderful chapter, often called, “The Hall of Faith,” with these words: “**Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen**” (Hebrews 11:1). The link between faith and hope is obvious but the context of this statement is often overlooked.

The author of this letter was attempting to encourage these Jewish Christians to persevere through the enormous struggles they were facing. They were the most marginalized, oppressed people on the planet; persecuted by the Roman Empire for being Jewish and rejected by their fellow Jews for following Christ. They were on the verge of throwing in the towel. The writer reminds them of their destiny in Christ and urges them to continue firmly in their faith. He appeals to their divine hope: “**Now faith is the substance of things hoped for**”. But what were they to hope for?

Wonderful thing this thing called “context”. We do not have guess what their hope was, nor do we have to consult some theological expert to find out. The opening word “**Now**,” in verse 1, reminds us to connect this thought to the previous one, recorded in the preceding paragraph:

“Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: ‘For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.’ But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. Now faith is the substance of things hoped for...” (Hebrews 10:35-39; 11:1).

*The New Testament does not use the phrase, “the return of Christ.” Rather it refers to His “**coming**” (see 1 Corinthians 15:23); a word (Greek: *parousia*) used to describe the official arrival of a king, whose arrival would be permanent and have a lasting impact. It was never used of Christ’s first coming; it was reserved to describe His second coming in which He would consummate His victory. However, the full intent is lost in the English word, “**coming**,” therefore we have chosen to use the phrase, “the return of Christ” to be clear in referring to His second coming.

What were they in danger of losing hope in? The return of Christ! To walk in victorious faith they were to recapture their *hope of His second coming*...and to live “every day” in light of “that Day”. The author of this remarkable letter then highlights the many heroes of the faith...both those who experienced incredible victories and those who suffered gruesome setbacks...coming to a mind-blowing conclusion: **“And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us”** (Hebrews 11:39, 40). What was he talking about?

The Old Testament believers, who he details in this Hall of Faith, lived by faith – in victory and struggle – because they set their hope on the Messiah who was to come. We are now to live by faith – in victory and struggle – *because we set our hope on His second coming!* Yes, our salvation is assured because the Messiah *has come* but we are to now live by faith – in this present age – with the divine hope of His return motivating every fibre of our being. In Peter’s words we are to live dynamic lives of holiness and godliness **“looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God”** (2 Peter 3:11, 12). Not just **“looking”** – which would be a start for most today – but also **“hastening”** – cooperating in such a way as to bring it to pass – His return! We can make sacrifices for His glory and the advance of His Kingdom because we live in *earnest expectation* – hope – *of His return*.

The church in the West today has, numbed through the 1900’s tendency to suspend living and wait for the rapture, lost her earnest expectation of Christ’s return and, in doing so, lost her divine hope. Without this hope there is a lack of true, heroic faith today; rather than being the selfless, sacrificial church Jesus envisioned, we tend to be a fat, apathetic and self-absorbed church trying to fill the void that hope would otherwise occupy. This is the same reason that many of the churches addressed in the Book of Revelation had become apathetic and weak. John’s Revelation was written to awaken the divine hope of His return in order to jumpstart Kingdom-advancing faith. His apocalyptic vision concludes with Jesus proclaiming: **“I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work...Surely I am coming quickly”** (Revelation 22:12, 20).

With this divine hope, the heroes of old gave everything to see God’s purposes come to pass. With this divine hope, they sacrificed all to usher in the first coming of Christ. With this divine hope, we are to give everything to see His Kingdom come now on this earth, knowing that it will climax in His return. With divine hope we can make every sacrifice required knowing that our true reward does not lie in this age but the one that is to come.

And should we die before Christ’s return, or be required to give our lives for Him as a martyr, we have the joy and hope that we will spend the remainder of this age in **“Paradise,”** as we wait in awesome and heavenly expectation of returning with the triumphant Jesus to establish His Kingdom on earth.

5.) The God-given delights of this age are appetizers of the glory to come.

With all this talk about sacrifice and selflessness, you may think we are advocating a disdain for the beauty and delights of this created world. Not so! Nothing has hurt the Name of Christ more than its association with dull faces and black clothing. A negative, gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms.

In fact, herein lies a wonderful truth. God has created us with five natural senses for one reason: ***to absolutely enjoy the delights He has created in this present age.*** To be overwhelmed at the sight of the sun setting is a gift from God. To be thrilled by the tantalizing of our taste buds is another gift from God. To be intoxicated by the fragrance of a flower is yet a further gift from God. To be enraptured by the sound of music is still a further gift from God. To be delighted by the touch of one's lover is yes, another blessed gift from God. Our Father in heaven has created us to enjoy – find great pleasure – in the delights He has made. But we can only truly delight in them when we understand that they are all just foretastes of glory divine.

None of these natural God-given delights fulfil us permanently and neither are they designed to do so. After the beauty of the sunset we see the harsh realities of our fallen world. After a mouthful of delight we bite into a rotten fruit. After the perfume of the flower's fragrance we catch a whiff of a sewer's stench. After the melody of music is over we hear a shriek of pain. After a lover's touch we may be inflicted by a hand of cruelty. We are to enjoy the delights that God gives knowing none of them will ultimately fulfil us, yet they all serve as a foretaste of the glory that awaits us in the age to come...when the curse of sin is no more.

The early church knew how to feast as well as fast. Their celebration of the Lord's Supper was indeed a grand meal in which they celebrated in anticipation of His return...and actually viewed the Lord's Supper as an appetizer of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (1 Corinthians 11:26; Revelation 19:9; Jude 12). The delight of their "love feast" was a "starter" anticipating the five-course meal awaiting them in the age to come. Paul even described the Holy Spirit as a down payment – literally, the first instalment – of the glory to come (2 Corinthians 1:21, 22, see also Romans 5:1-5; Colossians 1:27). As much as we enjoy the fellowship of the Spirit's Presence with us now, we admittedly "**see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face**" (1 Corinthians 13:12). We experience Him and His life-giving Presence only to a degree now but will in the age to come experience Him in absolute fullness.

This is a liberating truth. In a Christian world obsessed with finding absolute fulfilment now – attempting by all means possible to maximize life on this earth – the Scriptures, in fact, teach us the opposite. We are to delight in the pleasures that God freely and extravagantly gives to us now, ***yet with the understanding that they only serve to express God's greater intention to fulfil us in the age to come.*** Thus we can enjoy these delights without becoming hooked on them; knowing their limitations and understanding their purpose.

When I watch the rising of the sun and the beauty of a new day dawning, I am filled with the wonder of God's glory and anticipate the extravagant beauty of the age to come. When the joy my children bring me move me to tears of delight, I am filled with awe at the glory of God and eagerly await the sublime enchantment of divine communion with God and His Beloved in the next age. And then armed with this heart filled with glory and hope, I am empowered to make the sacrifices required in this fallen age to hasten the coming of the glorious age He will establish.

The richest entrepreneur or movie star living in Hollywood lives in an absolute squalor junk compared to the glory and majesty of God's new heaven and earth. That which we consider so grandiose on this earth and so vital to a comfortable, fulfilled life, pales into insignificance in the light of eternity. The battles and struggles we fight in the confines of this fallen world will all be so worthwhile when Jesus' return suddenly answers our confusion and clears our doubts. The injustices we weep over now will be made right and God will dry our every tear.

One of my all time favourite C.S. Lewis quotes actually addresses this point ingeniously: *"Indeed if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday by the sea. We are far too easily pleased"*. While we enjoy the God-given delights of this age, we are to – knowing their limitations – use them to fan into full flame our passion for His return and the "holiday by the sea" prepared for us in the age to come.

After Paul outlined the life-threatening challenges he suffered, he then said: **"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*..."** (2 Corinthians 4:17). You can almost hear the devil groan. The prince of darkness had just thrown everything he had at Paul, to which Paul – with divine hope providing clarity – simply responds: **"our light affliction, which is but for a moment"**. He then reveals his eternity-driven perspective: **"...while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal"** (2 Corinthians 4:18). Only from the perspective of eternity can our vision become clear and our lives be true. Only in eager expectation of Christ's return can we live as we ought and accomplish what we should as this generation of believers.

*The word "glory" in this sense captures the full, undiluted picture of the wonders of the age to come; Christ triumphant and the redeemed restored into God's original plan, dwelling on a new earth and enjoying an "open heaven". For example, when Paul marvellously proclaims, **"Christ in you, the hope of glory"** (Colossians 1:27), he is not just assuring the church at Colosse that they are going to heaven; rather he is assuring them that they have a future in the glorious age to come in which Christ reigns Sovereign and Triumphant (vv. 13-20).

6.) *Our rewards in the age to come are determined by our faithfulness in this present age.*

Heaven is often used in a broad way to describe the glory of the age to come, referring to the “open heaven” that we, the redeemed, will enjoy as we dwell upon the new earth. Certainly, in comparison to this fallen world, our eternal dwelling will be heavenly. However, using the word “heaven” so broadly does muddy the waters concerning the age to come. And given the confusion, it is important to be clear on this issue*. The present age makes very little sense without a clear and compelling... and Biblical view of eternity. If all we are going to do in eternity is sprout wings, lounge about on puffy clouds and strum along on our harps to a Hosanna chorus, we are not only a long way off from the Biblical view, but we provide no compelling vision to live large, selfless lives in this age. A lethargic church bored with the thought of eternity will never usher in the Kingdom mandate: “Hey, we may as well enjoy the delights of this present world all we can, ’cause heaven sure ain’t appealing!”

However, in Jesus’ parables of the “**talents**” (Matthew 25:14-30) and the “**minas**” (Luke 19:11-27) we are taught that we are stewards, doing our Father’s business (Luke 19:13), and He is coming back and will ask us to give account. And then based on our faithfulness to what He has given us; ***He will reward us and determine the substance of what role we fulfil in the age to come.***

First, we are taught to live for one and only one goal; to hear His sweet words: “**Well done, good and faithful servant...Enter the joy of your lord**” (Matthew 25:21). Then, with our expectation stirred at the thought of these affirming words, both parables remind us that we begin the age to come with the rewards of our faithfulness in this present age. The Bible speaks boldly of the numerous, lavish rewards the Father longs to pour out upon those who are loyal to Him. For instance, the Bible speaks of the “**crown of righteousness**” for holy living (2 Timothy 4:8), the “crown of honour” for believers who fulfil their destiny (1 Corinthians 9:25), the “**crown of rejoicing**” for believers faithful in discipling others (1 Thessalonians 2:19, 20), the “**crown of glory**” for those who serve as elders (1 Peter 5:2-4) and the “**crown of life**” for those who are martyred for their faith (Revelation 2:10).

Some feel a little queasy and embarrassed on God’s behalf at the mention of rewards, as if God has to bribe us to action. But this is certainly not the Father’s heart. In the same way that I don’t seek to bribe my children to perform for me yet take great delight in blessing them when they do well, so the Father’s heart is not to tease us with a “dangling-carrot” but to lavish on us the pleasure He feels for us. And He does so unashamed and with great delight.

*Having said that, it is also helpful to point out that some of the Biblical writers, like Peter, occasionally did use the word “**heaven**” very broadly. For example, in his first epistle, he refers to our inheritance that is “**reserved in heaven**” (1 Peter 1:4). Although reading the entire context (vv. 3-10) makes it very clear that he is referring to the glorious age to come, quoting just that one verse (v. 4) may muddy the waters today. Certainly this was not a problem in the first century when the apostolic teaching of Christ’s return was clear.

These parables teach us that our faithfulness to what God has given us will be the main means the Father uses to reward us in the age to come. In His parable of the “**minas**,” for example, Jesus taught that the master blessed his servant: “**Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities**” (Luke 19:17). Although the Bible does not explain the details of our life in the age to come, we certainly will not sprout wings or lounge about on puffy clouds. We will be living the quality and substance of life we were created for, without the restrictions of a fallen, sin-riddled universe. *And the substance of the role we play in the age to come is determined by how well we respond to the training for reigning we are put through in this present age now.*

Jesus clearly taught that the faithful servant was entrusted with authority to rule and reign. Paul mentioned the same thought when he rebuked those in the church at Corinth for failing to govern their disputes as a family, instead airing their dirty washing in public: “**Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?...Is it so that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren?**” (1 Corinthians 6:3, 5).

In the age to come, we will judge angels. While we have no clue what this will involve*, the point is emphatic: *the substance of our role in the age to come is determined by our faithfulness in this present age.* We really are...right at this very moment...training for reigning.

*As we have mentioned, a couple of times in this article, the Bible does not detail what our life in the next age will involve. It only offers hints; enough to get our minds racing but not enough to be conclusive. It is our opinion that God does this for three reasons:

- (1) As our Father, He has a glorious surprise for us and builds up our sense of expectation by not giving the full secret away.
- (2) As our Father, He knows that too much information on the glories to come would rob us of initiative in the present age. Can you imagine if a parent placed a bowl of ice-cream and hot chocolate sauce next to a bowl of spinach and cabbage and said to his child, “Eat your vegies and then you can have desert”? This would be cruel and unproductive. The kid would never stomach the vegetables engrossed with the sight and smell of the desert. Instead, the wise and loving parent puts the vegetables in front of his child and says, “Finish your food and then I’ve got a wonderful surprise for you afterwards”. Sharing the news of the desert motivates the child to eat the vegetables but being brief on the details avoids stealing the child’s initiative to actually finish the food first. If God shared too much about the age to come we would neglect our Kingdom responsibilities in this age, drooling over the prospect of the next.
- (3) Our finite minds could not comprehend the infinite pleasures of the age to come even if God did spill the beans!

Various thoughts then exist as to what we can expect in the age to come. One topic thrown around is whether or not we will marry and procreate in the age to come. Of course, Jesus was asked a question down this line of thinking so let us use that account as a backdrop to briefly discuss this issue.

The Sadducees came to Jesus in an attempt to catch Him out and strengthen their place in the religious hierarchy of the day (Matthew 22:23-33). They proposed a hypothetical scenario in which a woman married seven brothers; after each one died of course. They then asked the barbed question: “**Last of all the woman died also, whose wife of the seven will she be?**” (vv. 27, 28). Why would this strengthen the Sadducees’ position? The Sadducees were a sect within Judaism who only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament as sacred and therefore saw nothing within them to support the doctrine of the afterlife. They did not believe in the resurrection. They believed that you live, you die...full stop! No wonder the Sadducees were a little sad-you-see. What a tragic worldview! By devising this hypothetical scenario they intended to make a fool of Jesus and draw public attention to their theological intelligence. Jesus, of course, was not amused.

(Continued on page 14 in footnote)...

Of course, an implication of this is that while we will be rewarded for faithfulness, we will also be “unrewarded” for unfaithfulness. Paul makes it clear that **“at the judgment seat of Christ”** we will **“receive the things done in the body [while we were alive on the earth], whether good or bad”** (2 Corinthians 4:10). Earlier, he explained that some would **“suffer loss”** when their **“work”** is **“revealed by fire”** (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). While the context of this passage directly addresses apostolic ministries and their faithfulness (vv. 5-11); it does bring insight into Christ’s judgment of all believers in their faithfulness to Him and His will for us.

Whatever we, as believers, do with selfish motives will be exposed for what it is, and we will **“suffer loss”** as we are “unrewarded”. Of course, we have no real idea what this suffering will mean. We do know that it is not an issue of salvation. Paul explains that those who **“suffer loss”** will **“be saved”** (v. 15). We can only imagine that at the very least we will **“suffer”** the regret of missed opportunities; realising all the good we could have done but failed to do, realising all the pleasure we could have brought to our Father but didn’t.

...(Continued from page 13 footnote).

He answers their question with two responses. First, he calls them deceived – the literal meaning of **“you are mistaken”** (v. 29) – and makes a simple yet pointed statement. Second, He quotes from Exodus – which they did consider sacred – and asks a rhetorical question that directly undermines their theological standpoint making them look foolish. His comments were not lost on the watching crowds who **“were astonished at His teaching”** (v. 33) and in fact, Matthew records that word got around that Jesus **“had silenced the Sadducees”** (v. 34).

We point out the details of this context to make it clear that Jesus did not have much patience with the error of the Sadducees. He saw them as a direct enemy of the truth. Of course, their teaching that there was no afterlife was in complete contradiction to His message of hope. Thus it is important to note that His response to them was a blatant rebuke rather than a teaching on the afterlife. We should therefore not be so emphatic in the conclusions we draw.

Let us then look at Jesus’ pointed response to the Sadducees to highlight the various thoughts around this subject.

To the Sadducees’ question, **“whose wife of the seven will she be?”** (v. 28), Jesus said: **“You are mistaken...For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven”**. Jesus didn’t even give their hypothetical scenario a second look; rather He rebuked their theological error, in essence saying, “There is a resurrection; there is an afterlife...stop playing little games to prove your riddled thinking”. He then said a statement that seems to clearly state that in the afterlife we will not marry or procreate but we will be like the angels in heaven. On this basis, some believe that the answer to this question is clear. Angels do not have a gender per se and in the age to come we will be **“like angels,”** thus making marriage unnecessary. We will enjoy a new connectedness in relationships that transcends the constraints of physical relationships now possible in this age. We concur that this thought has merit.

However, we should also be open to a second interpretation. How will we be **“like angels...in heaven?”** Certainly for the believers who die before Christ’s return, they will be without body and be very much **like the angels in heaven until** Christ returns again. In His return, they will return with Him, receive their **glorious bodies** and be part of His Kingdom establish on **the new earth**. At this point, we will no longer be like the angels in heaven...we will have a body and we will dwell on the earth. At this point, is God’s original plan in creation not restored? If so, then in the same way as Adam and Eve were commissioned to take dominion and populate the earth, will we not enjoy these same responsibilities and privileges as we take dominion on the new earth? If we concur with this line of thinking, we then have to acknowledge that Jesus did not aim His answer at the age which is to come but simply addressed the issue of death in this age. Based on the Sadducees’ theology and question, this would be another valid interpretation.

If we hold to this second interpretation we may also conclude that procreation will no longer be part of the new earth. Perhaps every human being that God intended to create is to be borne within this present age and that birth, as we know it, will not be part of the age to come. This is, of course, speculation and there is nothing wrong in thinking that if procreation was part of God’s original plan in Genesis 1, then why should it not be part of God’s eternal plan in the age to come.

The point of this discussion is to highlight that we do not have dogmatic answers to questions concerning the age to come. Even Jesus’ answer to the Sadducees was not intended to be a teaching on the afterlife. We do not hold to any one definite answer in regard to these questions; we are convinced that God never intended to be clinical concerning these issues. As stated, He is deliberately unclear...yes, clear enough to stoke our hopes into flame but not enough to try to package the divine glories of the age to come into our finite little intellectual boxes.

Here is a final thought. Experts tell us that we only use about 10% of our brain capacity. Why? No one knows for sure, but you can only imagine the horrors if fallen man were able to use 100% of his brain potential. One thing is for sure, the human race would not use it for good; rather he would undoubtedly use it to exploit and ravage this planet with more precision and speed. Perhaps God only allows us to use 10% of our brain capacity to save us from ourselves.

If we were able to use 100% of our brain, theoretically speaking, we could span the limitations of geography and even time. We would no longer be bound by the restrictions of our current time dimensional space. Is it not possible that in the age to come, with our resurrected bodies, we will be enabled to use the full potential that God created us with? And yes, for the good of mankind and the universe God has created us for!

The resurrected Jesus ate food (Luke 24:42, 43), could be touched (John 20:24-28) yet walked through walls and could materialize at will (John 20:19; Acts 1:3). Was He not perhaps using the full potential of His resurrected body? Is this not another Biblical hint of the glory to come; not enough for us to make dogmatic statements about, yet just enough to get our hope soaring?

Can you imagine a world in which every human being is actively living for the glory of God and the greater good of mankind? Then you are seeing a glimpse of the age to come...and have tapped into divine hope.

Are you now, in response to this eternal vision, living in such a way as to bring this to pass? If so, you now understand Biblical faith.

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