

One of the things that continuously surprises me is the interesting concept of heaven and our eternal home that most Christians hold that seems anything but biblical. Most people are well past that childhood stage of thinking that we become angels and spend eternity lounging around on clouds playing harps and doing little else. Angels are, of course, a completely different species of created being to humanity anyway. But what does the Scripture tell us about our eternal home and why is this a time and place to look forward to with great excitement and expectation? When we look around at our sophisticated, multi-faceted world of incredible wonder, beauty and add human ingenuity and progress what could heaven possibly hold out?

The disciples, like us, were filled with intrigue and wonder. In John 13 we see that the disciples saw Jesus as their Messiah who would immediately lead them into eternity with Him. The thought of Jesus leaving and not taking them with Him straight away was almost too great to bear. They were willing to lay down their lives for Jesus and yet, He told them He was about to go away without them. How devastating it must have been, for Peter, when Jesus observed that Peter would deny him three times within the next day. The disciples desperately wanted eternity and eternity with Jesus. And Jesus does not rule this out here. In fact, Jesus makes a fascinating comment that has left us pondering ever since ... **“I go to prepare a place for you. And if 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.”** (John 14:2–3). We have already, in our reflections on the Book of Revelation, seen how Jesus will return, how the church will be raptured and how the Tribulation Saints will finally receive their salvation. We know Jesus will bring all His people to Himself but then what? What is this place that He has been preparing for so long? Is it heaven, paradise or something else?

We need at this stage to have a biblical understanding of heaven. What did heaven mean to the people of the Scriptures? To the Jewish community? To Jesus?

To the Jewish mind-set of the time heaven meant a number of different things, just as the term does in English today. The “heavens” were the place the rain came down from and the place where the sun and stars held their residence. In this way the various levels of “the heavens” are a physical realm at various stages beyond earth. But “heaven” was also understood to be the residence of God and the angels where they are able to see the earth and all that is happening on it. Heaven does not contain God Who is too great to be constrained in such a way. In this view “heaven” or “the heavens” are a physical dimension of another order, just as angels are created beings of a different order. Within this combined conceptualisation there are seven different levels of heaven with the highest, the seventh, being the throne room of God Almighty. Consequently, the term “God of Heaven” became popular during Persian times. The Persians were seriously into astrology. The practice of lifting hands in prayer towards God as a sign of humility and the acceptance of His divine will as revealed in the stars became normalized.

One suspects that the descriptions of the heaven where God dwells in the biblical portrayal of heaven is not somewhere that would greatly appeal to most people to live. When we look at the seventh level of heaven in Revelation chapter 4, we see through John’s eyes, a throne room and floor of hard surfaces, precious minerals and intense light. It is not a place wonderfully suited for a

human being one might think. This is the dwelling prepared for God and the angels before human time and during the lifetime of humanity. In Jewish thought, a lower third level of heaven was a paradise akin to the Garden of Eden, a place for those saints already called to be with God, the likes of Enoch and Elijah and, potentially, the place for the Jewish faithful in eternity. But, if that were the case for eternity, what has Jesus been working on?

What is promised is actually even more glorious and wonderful. It is the revelation that many Christians are not actually aware of and have often confused with the Rapture and the Millennial Kingdom. Revelation 21 tells us quite explicitly that after the Great Day of Judgement the physical order as we know it will pass away. The world and heavens as we know them are no more from this point. A small side-track: The heavens and the earth have passed away as has the *sea*. Remember that the “sea” is a regular metaphor for evil. God has now dealt with evil once and for all. Jesus victory is complete. The old and corrupt, including all evil and every sin, have now passed away and are gone forever. This verse does not mean there is no sea in the future – so all those who love sailing, swimming, diving and the like in the sea don’t have to worry.

In the place of what has departed, John sees a new heaven and a new earth. How wonderful that would be to see. A world without the stain of pollution and destruction, without warfare and evil, without disease and conflict. A world of pure beauty and wonder with everything in perfect balance. There are some parts of our world now that are just glorious and we have lots of them in New Zealand. What will come will far surpass this. Then, out of heaven, John sees a new Jerusalem descending upon the new earth. This is a glorious Jerusalem almost beyond our imagining. And it is big, wow, is it big. The city of God is a perfect square, equal on all sides at a length, width and height of almost 2,500 kilometres (1,500 miles). Some have suggested it will be a pyramid shape which is possible and will no doubt really get some people thinking. But more likely, like the Temple, it will be straight sided. Regardless, it’s been calculated that is big enough for every person that has ever lived to have an extremely large farm. If we were to consider a world map, and place this city over the area of modern Israel, we would realize just how big an area this covers. And it would rise into the air more than twelve times the height of the Auckland Sky Tower or three times the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. We are told that this city it is made and reinforced with walls like diamonds overlaid with gold and precious stones found reflective of the Temple’s Priest’s breastplate.

The prophecy of Isaiah 54:11-14 for Jerusalem will be fulfilled: **“O you afflicted one, tossed with tempest, and not comforted, Behold, I will lay your stones with colourful gems, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of rubies, your gates of crystal, and all your walls of precious stones. All your children shall be taught by the LORD, and great shall be the peace of your children. In righteousness you shall be established; you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear; and from terror, for it shall not come near you.”** (NKJV Is 54:11–14).

All of this is fine and wonderful in itself. We might begin to imagine earth as the wonderful paradise it would be if all of human encroachments and destruction were removed and the planet had grown and matured without corruption. But this is not all of it by far. This city is not only the city of God’s people, although we will live there in the place Jesus has prepared for us, it will also be the residence of the Lord, of God, of Jesus walking again with humanity. God will live with us

and be the true Light of the City. The City will have a central road of pure gold and twelve glorious gates that will never be shut because there is nothing to fear. There will be no crying or sorrow.

Consider this for a moment. God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and it was His great joy to walk with them and for them to share the Lord's presence. Now, in this final chapter of the old earth and the beginning of a whole new aspect of eternity we will walk with God again. But now, instead of a single constrained garden, the whole of earth will be a livening paradise for humanity and our permanent home will be in the city of God. It is hard to imagine how wonderful this will be. The Scriptures tell us that we will be perfectly known just as we will now and see clearly. The next journey will be far greater and more glorious than our minds can currently conceive. The world will be awesome and our relationships unstained by corruption and Jesus will walk with us. We can only imagine what the worship and celebration will be like.

The City of God will be our eternal home. As the Book of Hebrews puts it: ***“But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of the just made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.”***

We have an eternal home to look forward. A home so glorious it is beyond imagining. Like Christian in Pilgrim's Progress, that wonderful allegory of the Christian walk, we need to fix our eyes on the Glorious City and its King and keep our feet on the path, avoiding distractions and diversions so that eventually, in time, that city will be our home.

Amen.



