

Buzz King  
[buzz@BuzzKing.com](mailto:buzz@BuzzKing.com)  
BuzzKing.com  
303 437 7419

**Revelation 21:1–4, ESV.**

*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. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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.”*

**Only a Child Is Innocent: *What is Heaven?***

It is very common when a patient is dying or has just died for a family member, a spouse or an adult child or a parent, to ask me if Heaven is real. They are looking for reassurance that their loved one is not simply disappearing forever. What I do is chat with them for a moment to gain an understanding of what they believe, and then instead of projecting my beliefs onto them, I affirm what they believe. The truth is that virtually any notion of Heaven that someone might believe in today can in part be backed up by the Bible, depending mostly on how literally we view the language of the Bible. Any biblically motivated notion we might encounter today has almost certainly been proposed by some respected Christian theologian of the past. The interesting part is that it's not obvious at all what I

think Heaven is like. The Bible is far from clear just what Heaven is. There are multiple interpretations we could get from the Bible, and if we look at the history of Christian theology, there are many other interpretations we could consider.

Let's start with Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which discusses a variety of issues that impacted real believers at the beginning of the Church. This is from near the end of the letter, where Paul turns to the resurrection of the dead. His purpose is to convince the faithful that this will indeed happen:

*<sup>50</sup> I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. <sup>51</sup> Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, <sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. <sup>53</sup> For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. <sup>54</sup> When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:*

*"Death is swallowed up in victory."*

<sup>55</sup> *"O death, where is your victory?  
O death, where is your sting?"*

The last verse is a loose reference to Hosea 13:14, which tells us that God can overcome all, even death. This passage from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians represents the traditional view of the End Times, backed up by multiple Bible passages. There are two stages to death. If we are Heaven bound, then when we die, we are immediately embraced by God, but do not yet possess our resurrected bodies. This happens at the End of Time.

But just what is Heaven? That is the hard part to answer, given what we have in the Bible. Let's consider some options.

The typical literal or evangelical image of Heaven is derived from many passages in the Bible that are taken to be literal and not metaphorical. Consider 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, a letter attributed to Peter, but which was probably written after his death. This is from Chapter 3, near the end:

*<sup>10</sup> But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.*

This, and other passages in the New Testament, say that without warning, the physical world around us, perhaps including the entire universe, will be destroyed. Then, a new universe will be created. The most detailed description we have is in Revelation, a book which many believe should not be taken literally. The new reality is described in the last two chapters of Revelation, 21 and 22.

Here is an excerpt, the vision of the author of Revelation, John of Patmos:

***21** 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. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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."*

Those who hold to the literal interpretation of Scripture believe, from Revelation and other passages in the New Testament, that in Heaven there will be many banquets, with lots of drinking, that we will no longer practice Communion because Jesus will be with us, and that most importantly, all who are in Heaven will see God. But since we will not be in the form we are in now, we don't know in what sense we will "see". However, this view of Heaven says that since we will be in a glorified state, we will be able to interact with God in a deeply personal and spiritual fashion. It will be an intimate relationship. We will be indestructible, and sin will never again impact us. We will, however, not be omniscient, like God. We will spend our time being happy and praising God. While we will be among those that we loved on Earth, there will be no traditional family roles. We will retain our identities, that is, we will indeed know who we were before we died. We don't know about the climate or what sorts of clothes we will or will not need. We are not sure if we'll be able to fully remember terrible things that happened to us on Earth, but if we do, those memories will no longer cause anxiety or pain. We will not sin, but we will retain free will.

Let's look at how the notion of Heaven has evolved over time, since the life of Christ, and how the view of Heaven has varied. First though, it's important to note that there are those who say that our conventional notion of Heaven, that it

is a different reality from the one we know now, is indeed rooted in the Bible, but that our interpretation of the Bible was, very early on, influenced by the Greek culture that surrounded the Jews in the centuries before Jesus and the Greek culture into which Jesus was born. Remember, the Jews of Jesus' time were heavily Hellenized, writing in Greek, often wearing Greek clothing. They did not absorb the cultures of the peoples who had invaded their land previously, like those of the Babylonians and the Assyrians, but many Jews accepted Greek culture as a good thing. Thus, they say, we inherited what Plato believed: that every soul goes to Heaven where it can forever contemplate the eternal, more or less mathematical, truths of reality. Plato called these the Forms.

Let's start with Irenaeus, who lived from about 125 A.D. to 200 A.D. He apparently knew people who had known the Apostles. Irenaeus is widely considered the first major Christian theologian. Although he was probably born in what is now Turkey, he served in what is now France and became a Bishop. His belief was that Earth would remain intact, that it would not be physically destroyed. He thought that those with weak faith would live there for eternity. But those who bore strong spiritual fruit on Earth would live forever in Heaven. He thought that if you had strong faith, but were not particularly productive, you would go to a sort of middling Heaven. In general, there would be layers of

Heaven, and one would end up on the layer one deserved. He also believed that there would be a path for those condemned to remain on Earth to incrementally earn our way back to the highest level of Heaven after death. And our bodies would be adapted after death so that we could live in pure Heavenly regions.

Augustine, who lived two hundred years later, from about 354 A.D. to 430 A.D., and who heavily influenced Christian thought through his massive work *The City of God*, believed that when Jesus returns at the End Times, our earthly bodies will be transformed into something glorious and immortal. He believed that the Earth will be completely reengineered into an incorruptible environment where our new bodies will then reside. There will be no more evil, only good, and we will spend our time praising God.

As the Middle Ages wore on, the Church intensified the belief that we become glorified after the End Times. Thomas Aquinas, who lived from 1224 A.D. to 1274 A.D., was an Italian theologian who heavily influenced our interpretation of the Bible. He did not believe that God would destroy the Earth. Rather, God would come at the End Times to cleanse the world of sin and corruption. However, our bodies would be destroyed. God would give us new bodies so that we could know the unknowable and see things that humans right now cannot see. We would find eternal happiness and become more like God.

People consider the ultimate medieval perspective of Heaven to be due to Dante, who lived from 1265 to 1321, his life overlapping with Aquinas' life, but dying about a half century after Aquinas. He wrote the *Divine Comedy*. In it, he describes a mystical trip through ascending levels of paradise, starting with a renewed Earth. He travels through multiple spheres of increasingly heavenly bliss and spiritual perfection, which encompass the planets and the stars. It all culminates in the place where God resides. This became a standard way of viewing Heaven. But a few hundred years later, the Renaissance came along, and we migrated back toward something less abstractly structured and more in line with previous interpretations of Heaven. Martin Luther, who lived from 1483 to 1546, had a very simple notion of Heaven, one where we do not have to eat or drink, and we simply spend our time contemplating God. He did seem to worry about whether we might get bored in Heaven, but he assumed that praising God would "keep us occupied". He thought the world would not be destroyed but would be cleansed. John Calvin, who lived from 1509 to 1564, thought that our current bodies would rise again. But, very importantly in my opinion, he noted that the biblical writers talked about the afterlife in very physical terms only because they didn't know how to express purely spiritual concepts, and so we really have no idea what Heaven looks like. As we moved into the 1600's,

theologians began to believe more in a reformation of this world rather than its destruction, and that the Earth would be repopulated in a beautiful way, perhaps without humans, and so we would all end up in another place, Heaven. The most well-known Puritan theologian, Jonathan Edwards, who lived from 1703 to 1758, believed that Jesus would return to Earth to defeat all evil and then bring all good people back to Heaven with him. We would live there forever, serving God happily, and enjoying the beauty of Heaven.

A huge change happened in the latter 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the rise secularism, the French Revolution, and the Enlightenment. Christians began to question the very idea of Heaven. It was seen as a trick to pacify the masses. This belief has continued up to today and is widely accepted in the United States and western Europe. Protestants began teaching something called the “Social Gospel”, which focuses on improving earthly conditions for the poor and heavily deemphasizes the notion of any sort of afterlife. Reinhold Niebuhr, an American Reformed theologian, who lived from 1892 to 1971, did not believe we maintained any individual identities when we died. He all but concluded that we simply disappear forever at death.

So, back to the issue of what a chaplain says when someone is dying or has just died and a loved one wants to know where that person is now. I regularly ask



people what they believe. I've been given versions of almost everything we've looked at in this message. And this is only from people with a Christian background. If someone asks me what I personally believe – and yes, I get asked this frequently – I tell them that the Bible is extremely poetic in its description of Heaven. I personally do not think that the authors of Scripture believed that they knew, in a true literal sense, what Heaven would be like. Much or most of what people tend to infer about the nature of Heaven comes from the Book of Revelation, which I happen to believe is intended as an allegory about God's struggle with the corruption that arises from evil influencing human activity. Using symbolic language John of Patmos describes universal principles, with the most important one being that ultimately, God will not tolerate evil. It will end.

I don't think that we should focus on the nature of Heaven, just as we discussed in the last message, that we shouldn't focus on the nature of Hell. We should serve God today and serve God's people today, but we should also accept the frequently repeated biblical statement that evil will one day disappear. Will we be around to witness this? I believe so. What will it all look like? I have no idea, and I don't think we should sit around worrying about it. We should let God deal with us when we are dead – and leave it at that.

A year or so ago, I spent time with a couple while a team tried unsuccessfully to save the life of their only, and very small, child. When the child's death was finally called, the father asked me where his little girl was now. He clearly expected me to be able to tell him. I told him that he and I were not innocent. Both of us had done things that God would deal with someday. Adults are always a little corrupted, and only children are innocent. His child, I said, embodied only goodness and had never done anything wrong. I told him that I did not know precisely where his daughter was, that no living human knows this, but that I knew with total confidence that God would be with his child for all of eternity. I asked him to describe to me one very happy time he had had with her. He told me that he had recently gone on a walk with his daughter and that she had spent ten minutes smiling and laughing while she let a bunch of ants crawl up her index finger before gently putting each of them back on the ground, making sure they were not squashed. I told him to imagine his daughter for all of eternity joyously watching those ants wander around her finger, and that God would treat her as gently as she treated those ants.

So, don't worry about what Heaven looks like or how it will feel to be there. Live your life the way Christ taught us - and trust God to take care of us properly when our job here is done.