

# “Heaven: An Introduction”

Luke 20:27-40 <sup>1</sup>

The Pharisees and the Sadducees were far from friends. These groups differed on many theological points, and they were also political opponents. Even so, Jesus was higher up on both of their hate lists than they were on each other's, and the New Testament records a number of their tag-team efforts to trap and discredit Jesus.

In our text this morning, Jesus has just brilliantly deflected the Pharisees' carefully-crafted blow about whether or not Jews should pay taxes to Caesar. The Scripture records that *“They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent”* (Luke 20:26).

Seeing the failure and embarrassment of their colleagues, the Sadducees stepped forward with another carefully-crafted conundrum that they had often used to stump the Pharisees. The question was about the doctrine of resurrection from the dead, a doctrine in which the Sadducees did not actually believe, and the question had to do with whether or not we'll be married in the afterlife.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus' answer again brilliantly parried their strike, but it also raised some interesting questions about which we still wonder: *“The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection. But in the account of the burning bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive”* (Luke 20:34-38).

The Sadducees' question had two presuppositions, and Jesus answered both of them. The first presupposition had to do with marriage in the afterlife. To this presupposition, Jesus said, *“Marriage is for people in this age.”* He told us that in the life to come, we who were once bound by death will live forever; we won't be married as many were on earth, and in both of these respects we'll be like the angels, who were created long before we were.

The second presupposition had to do with whether there is an afterlife at all. The Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection from the dead because they only accepted the Mosaic Law (Genesis-Deuteronomy), and they didn't see any evidence for resurrection in those books. Since their position on this issue grew out of an attempt to be faithful to Scripture, Jesus did not belittle their question, and He answered it out of those five books.

*“But now, Jesus said, referring to Exodus 3:15, ‘as to whether the dead will be raised—even Moses proved this when he wrote about the burning bush. Long after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had died, he referred to the Lord as ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ So he is the God of the living, not the dead, for they are all alive to him”* (Luke 20:37-38, NLT).

Taking both of these presuppositions together, our question for the morning is, if we won't be married in the afterlife, what will that life be like? Rushing in perhaps, where angels fear to tread, this morning we're going to look at a brief “Introduction to Heaven.”

The Bible actually provides a surprising amount of commentary on the life to come. While it's better in general to focus on those things God has made blindingly clear rather than on

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on November 10, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> The question is based in the “levirate law” of Deuteronomy 25:5-6.

those things God's wisdom has chosen to leave shrouded in mystery, I'm going to try this morning to offer an introduction to Heaven such as a Park Ranger might give to tourists to orient them to the self-guided map they have in their hands. It isn't possible in so short a time to look into details very much, but I want you to be somewhat oriented to the map.

It's important for you to bear in mind that the map I've provided is my own, and is no more inspired than are the study notes in your Bible. Both are faithful efforts to increase understanding, but neither carries the weight of the text "above the line" in your study Bible.

I hope you'll remember one thing and do one thing in response to this message. I want you to remember that for those of you who have been born again, God's Spirit lives within you, the Spirit of Truth who will guide you into all truth and tell you all you need to know about the future (John 14:16-17, 16:12-13).

And what I want you to do is to go home and take your Bibles and do what the believers in ancient Berea did after they listened to Paul's teaching: "*They received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true*" (Acts 17:11). Well, please open your "maps," and off we go.

You'll see that I've listed thirty-six characteristics of Heaven with Scripture to support each affirmation. This list is certainly not exhaustive, and next week I'm going to offer a similar overview of what the Bible says about Hell as a reminder that Heaven is not a universal destination for all humankind.

I'm not going to go over this list this morning. What I hope you'll do with your map is to take it home, look up every biblical reference I've offered, and then ponder what the implications of these truths might be for your life. If you'd like to study these things more fully, one of the best recent works on the subject is Randy Alcorn's book with the simple title, *Heaven*, especially the first section of the book.<sup>3</sup>

In the remainder of this message this morning, I want to focus first on what the Bible tells us about what happens to believers when we die, and after that to consider what God's ultimate purposes for creation might be. It's not necessary that you agree with me . . . but it is necessary that you study the Scriptures for yourself.

With respect to **what happens to believers when we die**, I want to look first at a very interesting conversation in 1 Samuel 28. In this encounter, King Saul is facing a battle with the Philistines in which Israel is badly outmatched, and he has gone to a woman who was a medium—today we might call her a "channeller"—to try to force a word from God about his situation:

<sup>11</sup> *Then the woman asked, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" "Bring up Samuel," he said.*

<sup>12</sup> *When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!"*

<sup>13</sup> *The king said to her, "Don't be afraid. What do you see?" The woman said, "I see a ghostly figure coming up out of the earth."*

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<sup>3</sup> Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Tyndale, 2004). Alcorn's book is fairly exhaustive. He really does try to take seriously all the Scripture tells us about Heaven, and he makes a valiant effort to separate what the Scripture really tells us from the pervasive Platonic philosophy that regards physical matter as "unspiritual" at best and evil at worst. The book is somewhat repetitious, and in places quite speculative, but it's still worth your time and consideration.

See also Anne Graham Lotz, *Heaven: My Father's House* (Nelson, 2001); Billy Graham, *Death & the Life After* (Nelson, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> “What does he look like?” he asked. “An old man wearing a robe is coming up,” she said. Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel said to Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” “I am in great distress,” Saul said. “The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has departed from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do.”

<sup>16</sup> Samuel said, “Why do you consult me, now that the LORD has departed from you and become your enemy?” <sup>17</sup> The LORD has done what he predicted through me. The LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors—to David. <sup>18</sup> Because you did not obey the LORD or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the LORD has done this to you today. <sup>19</sup> The LORD will deliver both Israel and you into the hands of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines” (1 Samuel 28:11-19).

The main things I want you to notice here are that Samuel, though physically dead, still existed in conscious and recognizable form. He remembered what had happened on earth prior to his death, was aware of what was happening on earth right up to the present moment, and he knew what was about to happen. Each of these things is quite significant.

Now consider these verses from Revelation 6:9-11: <sup>9</sup> When he [the Lamb, Jesus] opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. <sup>10</sup> They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” <sup>11</sup> Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

Once again, we find that believers who have died experience conscious continuity with their lives on earth. They remember not only their earthly lives, but the fact that they were murdered. They know what is happening on earth, and that their deaths have not yet been avenged. They have direct access to God, experience the passage of time, and apparently have bodies of some sort that are able to put on white robes.<sup>4</sup>

And, consistent with these vignettes, Jesus told the dying thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). The apostle Paul said that to die was to be with Christ (Philippians 1:23), and to be absent from the body was to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). Hebrews tells us that the believers in Heaven are watching our lives and encouraging us to finish our own journeys with complete faithfulness to Christ.

Beyond this, Hebrews tells us that while “*these were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect*” (Hebrews 11:39-40). And that brings us to the **consideration of what God’s ultimate purposes might be.**

Nearly four thousand years ago, Job made a statement that was profoundly prophetic: “I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:25-27).

Two thousand years before God became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, Job affirmed the present existence of Him who later said, “Before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58). And eyes of faith can see in this statement not only Christ’s first coming, but His return as well (Revelation 19:11-16). Beyond this, Job amazingly affirmed that after his physical body was dead

<sup>4</sup> See Alcorn, pp. 65-67 for a much fuller treatment of these verses.

and decayed, yet in his own flesh he would yet see God, which is a prophecy of God's future restoration of all things.

At Pentecost, Peter affirmed that a time is coming when God will restore *everything* (Acts 3:21), an event that Jesus called "*the renewal of **all things***" (Matthew 19:28). Here's how God characterized that event through the prophet Isaiah:

*"See, **I will create new heavens and a new earth.** The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more" (Isaiah 65:17-19). "**As the new heavens and new earth that I make will endure** before me," declares the LORD, "so will your name and descendants endure" (Isaiah 66:22).*

Referring to this prophecy, Peter wrote, "*That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise **we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells***" (2 Peter 3:12b-13).

And God allowed John, the last of the Apostles, to see a vision of how that renewal will take place: "***Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,'** for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eye. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away'*" (Revelation 21:1-4).

As Randy Alcorn put it, "God has never given up on his original creation. Yet somehow we've managed to overlook an entire biblical vocabulary that makes this point clear. **Reconcile. Redeem. Restore. Recover. Return. Renew. Regenerate. Resurrect.** Each of these biblical words begins with the *re-* prefix, suggesting a return to an original condition that was ruined or lost. . . . If God's plan was merely to take mankind to the present, intermediate Heaven, or to a Heaven that was the dwelling place of spirit beings, there would be no need for new heavens and a New Earth."<sup>5</sup>

He continued, "The idea of the New Earth as a physical place isn't an invention of shortsighted human imagination. Rather, it's the invention of a transcendent God, who made physical human beings to live on a physical Earth, *and* who chose to become a man himself on that same Earth. He did this that he might redeem mankind *and* Earth. Why? In order to glorify himself and enjoy forever the company of men and women in a world he's made for us."<sup>6</sup>

The symmetry seems too remarkable to be accidental: "In Genesis, God plants the Garden on Earth; in Revelation, he brings down the New Jerusalem, with a garden at its center, to the New Earth. In Eden, there's no sin, death, or Curse; on the New Earth, there's no *more* sin, death, or Curse. In Genesis, the Redeemer is promised; in Revelation, the Redeemer returns. Genesis tells the story of Paradise lost; Revelation tells the story of Paradise regained. In Genesis, humanity's stewardship is squandered; in Revelation, humanity's stewardship is triumphant, empowered by the human and divine King Jesus. . . . We live in the in-between time, hearing echoes of Eden and the approaching footfalls of the New Earth."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Alcorn, p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> Alcorn, p. 81.

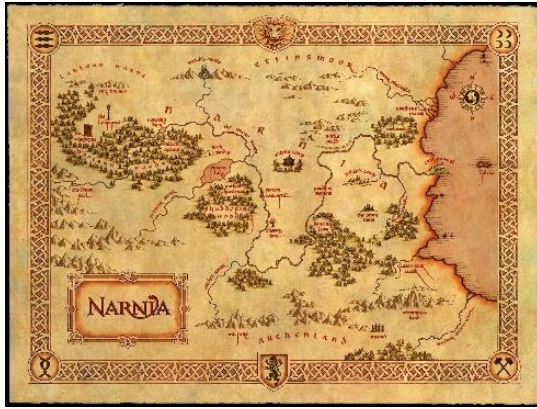
<sup>7</sup> Alcorn, p. 85.

It was in the writings of C. S. Lewis many years ago that I first encountered the idea that the New Heaven and the New Earth might be physical realities much like the world in which we now live, only without sin and death and suffering and corruption. As the years pass, I am increasingly impressed with the huge amount of Scripture that must be either ignored or “spiritualized” in Platonic fashion in order to escape that conclusion.

For me, the pieces are beginning to come together; but it is not at all necessary that you put the pieces together in the same way. We walk together in agreement around the affirmations that Jesus is “*the way and the truth and the life*” and that His Name is above every other name “*in heaven and on earth and under the earth*” (John 14:6; Philippians 2:9-10). Beyond this, most theological points have room for disagreement.

Well, all this has been simply prologue to the principles you have on your “map.” I hope that you’ll take your maps home and make your way through these incredibly encouraging truths. Until Jesus comes, we can take both courage and comfort from the Bible’s affirmations that our loved ones who are in Christ are with Him *right now* in unimaginable glory, AND that there is greater wonder still to come, on that great and glorious morning when the dead in Christ shall rise (1 Thessalonians 4:15-18)!

## Heaven: An Introductory Map



1. You're going to live forever . . . somewhere. When you die, you will go immediately into either heaven or hell (Luke 16:19-31).
2. Heaven is the REAL "never-ending Story," the home that God has prepared for you since the creation of the world (Psalm 16:11; John 14:2-3; 2 Corinthians 5:1, 6-8).
3. What God offers you is worth everything you've got to give (Matthew 13:44-46).
4. Whatever joy, and whatever pain you experience in this life is not even worth comparing to what God is going to do for you in heaven (2 Corinthians 4:14-18; Philippians 1:22-23)!
5. Heaven is full of outrageous gladness, joy, and celebration (Psalm 96:11; Isaiah 44:23).
6. People from every nation and tribe and people and language will be in heaven (Revelation 7:9).
7. God is preparing a feast beyond description to welcome you to heaven (Matthew 22:2; Revelation 19:9).
8. There will be no hunger or thirst in heaven. There will be more than enough for all (Revelation 7:16-17).
9. There will be no need for sleep in heaven (Revelation 21:25).
10. We will be able to see and hear everything, not just what is available to our senses now (Isaiah 64:4; 1 Corinthians 2:9).
11. We will understand those things that we don't understand now (1 Corinthians 13:12).
12. God likes to make things, and there's just no knowing what kinds of interesting, wild, colorful, surprising things await us! (Genesis 1-2).
13. There will be some sense of time in heaven, but it will operate differently from time as we know it now (2 Peter 3:8; Revelation 22:2).
14. We will recognize each other (Luke 16:19-31).
15. We will know and recognize more people in heaven than on earth (Matthew 8:11, 17:1-5; Luke 22:17-18; 1 Corinthians 13:12).
16. We won't be married in heaven, but there will be continuity of special relationships (Matthew 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:35; John 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20).
17. While we'll no longer be married in heaven, the nature of our relationship with our loved ones will be even better than on earth (Luke 20:27-40).
18. We are not going to be spirits without bodies, but we will put on new heavenly bodies (2 Corinthians 5:3; 1 Corinthians 15:47-51; Philippians 3:21).
19. Our heavenly bodies will never die. They will be perfect, full of glory and power, like Jesus' transfiguration/ resurrection body (Matthew 17:2/Mark 9:2/Luke 9:29; 1 Corinthians 15:42-53; Hebrews 12:23).
20. Because our resurrection bodies will be like Jesus' resurrection body, we can expect that our eternal bodies will be touchable, warm, able to eat and drink, visually similar to our previous bodies, and recognizable

(Luke 24; John 20-21;  
Philippians 3:21).

21. Further, our bodies will not be limited by time or space, but will be able to materialize and dematerialize at will, and able to operate independently of gravity (John 20:19-20; 1 John 3:2-3).
22. We will have work to do in heaven (John 5:17; Revelation 7:15).
23. Part of our “work” will be to praise God continually (Revelation 5:11-14).
24. Angels will one day destroy the world as we know it, after which God is going to make everything new again—a New Creation (Revelation 8-9, 16, 21:5).
25. The New Heaven and the New Earth will be similar to the ones we know, but without any negatives or deficiencies. God will make everything new—as it was originally intended (Isaiah 65:17, 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 3:12, 21:1-2).
26. There will be no tears, no sadness, no separation, no pain, no death, no anxiety in the New Creation (Revelation 21:4).
27. The New Earth will be set free from all natural catastrophes (Romans 8:18-23).
28. The Bible indicates that there will be vegetation in Heaven (the Tree of Life). It seems likely that there will be animals, too—perhaps even the ones we have known here (Psalm 36:6; Isaiah 11:6-8, 65:25).
29. The capital city of the New Creation—the New Jerusalem—will be beautiful beyond description (Revelation 21:10-27).
30. It’s possible to be pre-registered as a citizen of heaven (Luke 10:20).
31. Jesus is the only way into heaven (John 14:6).
32. The angels rejoice when you return to God (Luke 15:7).
33. You can know for sure that you’re going to heaven (John 3:16, 5:24, 6:40, 10:28; 1 John 5:13; Romans 10:9).
34. Jesus could come back at any moment (Matthew 24:44; 2 Peter 3:10). *Are you ready?*
35. There will be different levels of glory, but every cup will be full to overflowing (2 Corinthians 12:2).
36. You are preparing your own cup . . . even now (Luke 16:9).

