

WHAT IS HEAVEN? ©

John 14:1-7

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I want to share this joke with you. It's funny, but it also has some descriptions in it of how we often envision heaven.

A preacher and a cab driver both died and went to Heaven. When they arrived there, Saint Peter greeted them and took them on a tour of their new home.

As they were driving the preacher was amazed at what he saw. There were streets of gold and huge pearly white mansions lining both sides of the street.

They stopped in front of one of the mansions and Saint Peter told the taxi driver that this is where he was going to live. The taxi driver gleefully ran towards his new home.

The preacher and Saint Peter then continued on their tour when all of a sudden they stopped in front of a tiny little cabin. Saint Peter told the preacher that this was going to be his new home.

The preacher asked in an astonished voice, "Why did that taxi driver get a huge beautiful mansion, while I, a man of the cloth, have to live in this tiny little cabin?"

"Because," said Saint Peter, "When you preached, people slept, but when he drove, people prayed!"

*The song **Beulah Land** says:*

*I'm kind of homesick for a country, to which I've never been before.
No sad good-byes will there be spoken, for time won't matter, anymore.
Beulah Land, I'm longing for you, and some day, on thee I'll stand. There my home shall be eternal, Beulah Land, sweet Beulah Land.*

I love the thought of being homesick for our eternal home. G.K. Chesterton wrote about heaven, "When I heard that I was in the wrong place ... my soul sang for joy, like a bird in spring. I knew now ... why I could feel homesick at home."ⁱ

C.S. Lewis, in his book, *Mere Christianity* (p.120), writes, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

When we are introduced to people, Fred and I are often asked, “Are you related to Bill Gates?” Fred’s reply is a good one, I think. He always says, “No, we’re related to the Pearly Gates!”

What is heaven? Where is heaven? We have grown up with ideas of pearly gates and streets and mansions of gold, of angels sitting on clouds, playing heavenly harps,

Webster defines heaven as *the visible sky; or the firmament*. Theologically speaking, Webster says, *heaven is the dwelling place of God and his angels, where the blessed go after death*.

My concordance lists the word heaven or words with heaven in it 609 times in the Bible. Scriptures speak of the *God of heaven*, of the *heavenly hosts*, of the *Kingdom of heaven*. Jesus talks about himself as being the *Bread of heaven*. Revelations tells us there will be a *new heaven* when Christ returns.

But, while Revelations gives us highly symbolic images of what the New Heaven might be like after Jesus returns, the Bible does not give us a definite, clear description of what heaven ... right now ... looks like, or where, exactly, it is.

Heaven is what we think of when we think of eternal life. And eternal life is life in living fellowship with God ... both now and forever.

Jesus talks often, especially in the Gospel of John, about eternal life.

- “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”
(John 3:16)
 - God, who created the world and all that is in it, loved the world in spite of the broken, sinful state it had gotten itself into. Because of this amazing, unconditional, saving love, God sent His only Son to show us His love, to redeem us from the power of sin and death. In fact, it was God himself, Immanuel, God with us! The Word became flesh and lived among us.
- “Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”
(John 4:14)
 - Did you know you can be dehydrated and not be aware of it? There are so many people in the world who are spiritually dehydrated and do not even know it! Yet here, in our Savior, is the longest, coolest drink of living water that will quench the

most spiritually dry thirst ... forever more ... into eternity! And it is for all who will drink! All who will believe ...

- "... my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life ..." (John 6:40)
 - Jesus Christ is the Light of the world, our Lighthouse. Even though we can't see heaven, we can trust, by faith, that if we keep our eyes on the Light, He will guide us safely to our eternal home. The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

The passage today from John 14 is one I find particularly comforting and assuring. "In my Father's house are many dwelling places," Jesus says to the disciples. Some translations say "many rooms", King James says "many mansions".

I don't know about you, but it doesn't really matter to me whether it is a mansion or a little room. What matters to me is that it *is*. It matters that it exists ... that there is a place for you and for me. It matters a great deal that I believe that that moment when I saw my mother let out her very last breath on this earth ... while I could not see it ... she passed into a spiritual, heavenly, eternal life. It matters that, as your pastor, I can assure you, ... my beloved congregation, that the same is true for you and your loved ones ... I believe by faith, it is true.

And yes, it certainly matters in my own life too, when I think about my inevitable death. Eternal life has always been an important part of the Christian witness from the very beginning. Without the hope that Jesus gives us of eternal life, facing death would be even more difficult than it already is. Not many people I know are looking forward to the actual event of dying.

There is a bluegrass song that Allison Kraus sings that rings true: "Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die."

Yet, because of our belief in Jesus Christ, because of the promises of God through Christ, we are given a great hope and the courage to face the unknown. We can say, along with Paul "*O Death, where is your sting? Death, where is your victory?*" (1 Cor. 15:55)

We also can agree with Paul (Romans 8) that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I think it is always helpful to look at what Christians before us have said about faith matters. In our *Presbyterian Book of Confessions in The Larger Catechism* this faith statement is made regarding what happens after we die:

The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church ... (or all believers) ... enjoy immediately after death, is in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory; waiting for the full redemption of their bodies ... (7.196)

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you." **Jesus said!** "If it were **not so**, *I* would have ***told*** you!" I'm going there to prepare a place for you and I will come back and take you to be with me."

Jesus said, "You know the way to the place where I am going."
And Thomas said, "Huh uh! We do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

And Jesus said, "I am the way. I am the truth. I AM the life."
Jesus is the way. Believing in him. Trusting in him with your life ... your life today, tomorrow and into eternity.

We may not have a clear vision of what heaven looks like, or where it is. It is a mystery to us. Yet, just because we can't see this place of eternity, this glorious dwelling place of God and all the saints, it doesn't mean it isn't there.

As Paul said in his second letter to the Corinthians, in chapter 5: "we walk by faith, not by sight," and our faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit that gives us hope in the promises of God.

And we can say with confidence (Romans 14:7-9) "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord: so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

There is a song that you may know, titled ***I CAN ONLY IMAGINE:***

*"I can only imagine what it will be like, when I walk by Your side...
I can only imagine, what my eyes will see, when Your Face is before me! I can only imagine. I can only imagine.
Surrounded by Your Glory, what will my heart feel?
Will I dance for you, Jesus? Or in awe of You, be still?"*

*Will I stand in Your presence, or to my knees will I fall?
Will I sing 'Hallelujah!?' Will I be able to speak at all?
I can only imagine! I can only imagine!"*

Can you imagine?

We don't know where heaven is. Is it way up there?

Or is it so close we can feel it, could even touch it, but just can't see it with our earthly eyes?

I can only imagine! Can't you?

ⁱ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, (Chicago:Thomas More Association, 1985), 99-100.