

## **IF I DIE BEFORE I WAKE. . .**

### **The World I've Always Longed For**

#### Small Group Questions

**Introduction: What is one thing you most look forward too when you think of heaven?**

- 1. Why do some “intelligent” people say that there is no heaven? What are some arguments from nature and the Bible that support the existence of heaven?**
  
- 2. Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10. What does the end of chapter four have to do with the beginning of chapter 5?**
  
- 3. Are we to understand the teachings on heaven to be literal or figurative? What do you think? Does it make a difference to you if the Bible is literal or figurative on this subject?**
  
- 4. Why do you think no one in the Bible who was raised from the dead shared their experiences of the in between life and death experience?**
  
- 5. What would you do differently if you knew there were no life after death?**
  
- 6. How does the reality of heaven make a difference in your life?**

**2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10** <sup>16</sup>So we do not lose heart. <sup>(A)</sup> Though our outer self<sup>[a]</sup> is wasting away, <sup>(B)</sup> our inner self<sup>(C)</sup> is being renewed day by day.

You have a body and spirit. Your body is in the process of decay.

<sup>17</sup>For<sup>(D)</sup> this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,

Romans 8 says our suffering isn't worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed.

<sup>18</sup><sup>(E)</sup> as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Chapter 5, Paul starts talking about the separation of body and spirit.

<sup>6</sup>So we are always of good courage. We know that<sup>(M)</sup> while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, <sup>7</sup>for<sup>(N)</sup> we walk by faith, not<sup>(O)</sup> by sight.

And then Paul begins to talk about what happens at death. Paul had a heaven focus. And he believed that what Jesus went to prepare for him was real.

### Does Heaven Exist?

How do we know that what the Bible says about heaven is true, that it exists?

#### 1. The Bible REVEALS It.

There are some things we can learn through investigation. We dig up the evidence and study the facts. But there are some things we'll never know apart from God revealing it.

**1 Cor. 2:9-10 (NIV) However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"**

We have no way of knowing that heaven exists left to our own intellect and devices.

-- [10] but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

The Bible uses the word 'heaven' or 'heavens' 718 times with countless other allusions.

#### 2. Personal Experience SUPPORTS It.

Those is Scripture with near death, out of the body experiences were virtually silent on the experience. But that doesn't mean we don't have evidence of heaven's existence.

**Acts 7:56; 2 Corinthians 12:2-4; Revelation 4**

In Acts chapter 7 we have Stephen being stoned to death having a vision of Christ, sitting at the right hand of God in heaven. Paul's experience of the third heaven in 2 Corinthians tells us that it's real even though he couldn't explain it or describe it. In the book of Revelation, John is given several opportunities to peak into the goings on of heaven. In John 3, Jesus is having a conversation with Nicodemus about what it means to have a genuine relationship with God.

**John 3:11-13 (NIV)**

**I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. [12] I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of**

**heavenly things? [13] No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man.**

We know that during his ministry Jesus claimed and confirmed that he was in fact, the Son of God, the Son of Man which gives us the third reason to believe in its existence.

### **3. The Resurrection of Jesus CONFIRMS It.**

**Acts 1:3-11; John 14:1-3; Luke 23:43**

When Jesus fulfilled his own prediction of rising from the dead, it gave credibility to everything else he ever taught us.

**1 Peter 1:3,4 (ESV) Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup>to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.**

Everything about the Christian faith stands or falls on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Jesus proved who he claimed to be by rising from the dead then, he has earned credibility and authority. This is how we can know that heaven is real. Not just because he said he came from there. Not just because he said he's been there and knows what its like. We know that heaven is real because Jesus claimed to be the son of God and asserted that he would prove that claim by rising from the dead. And when validated that claim, then it bears to reason that everything else he claimed would be true, and everything else he promised could be trusted. Does heaven exist? I've run across people and so have you that just don't believe. They don't have any evidence or logical argument for not believing in heaven. They just don't believe in it, so it doesn't exist for them. I kind of wished that actually happened in life. Can you imagine, it happened this past week, deciding, 'you know what' I just don't believe in the federal tax system. I don't believe the Internal Revenue Service actually exists. Wouldn't that solve a lot of problems? This applies even more so to the existence of hell. In a couple of weeks we'll answer the question, "Does hell really exist?" About twice as many people reject the existence of hell. And they think that just because they don't believe in it, then it's not real. There are a lot of unpleasant things about life that would make it so much more convenient if they just weren't true. But just because you don't want something to be true doesn't mean it isn't true. We have substantial, verifiable evidence for the existence of heaven. Doesn't it require faith? Sure it does. But is it a mindless, groundless faith? Absolutely not. You have a reasonable argument for believing that heaven is real and that who trust in Christ go there when they die.

### **How Are We to Understand Heaven?**

There are so many ideas about heaven out there. How do you imagine heaven? What does it look like to you? What do you look like in heaven? What will our existence be like in heaven? A lot of our imagery of heaven comes from the book of Revelation. Even in religious circles, you'll find various interpretations and explanations about heaven. Did John in the book of Revelation use symbols and earthly language to

illustrate what cannot be adequately described? Paul says no mind has conceived what God has prepared. C.S. Lewis seems to take the symbolic view; that what we read is simply an illustration of what can't be adequately explained. Others, like Randy Alcorn believe that most of what we read can be interpreted literally. Will Heaven be filled with streets of gold? Or is gold the most precious, purest commodity that we know and so John describes heaven in those terms so that we might catch a glimpse of how awesome, overwhelmingly beautiful and majestic heaven will be? There's nothing wrong with gold. And we have to be careful not to buy into Greek philosophy that says that all matter is evil, it's not. So, if God wanted to use gold, he could use gold.

### **Rev. 3:12 (NIV)**

**To him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God.**

Is that to be taken literally? Are some of us actually going to be pillars in the temple? When you line that up with everything else we read and understand about what we'll be like and what we'll do, that's seems symbolic to me. The Bible talks about resurrected bodies. Will we have physical bodies in heaven? We'll talk about that, possibly next week. Paul writes about a transformed body in 2 Corinthians. So, it seems that we'll exist in some type of realm where we will at least be aware of our identities; we'll recognize each other, relate to each other. We'll perform physical activities. Here's what I believe is important to keep in mind when we're struggling with the questions we have about heaven. The Bible tells us: His thoughts are not our thoughts, his ways are not our ways, his reality is not our reality. Here on earth, we are confined to a time/space continuum that gives us a finite, earthly perspective on everything. We are not prohibited to understand, we're just limited in what we can understand. The spiritual reality of heaven will be centered on the presence of Jesus. It's all going to be about Jesus. Our focus, our desire, our activity will be centered around the one who died for us. This is what I believe, if you're going to heaven to pick out your mansion or to grab some gold, I think you'll be disappointed. Not because those things won't be there in abundance, but like everything else; they will pale in significance to the matchless splendor and majesty of the presence of Jesus. Silver and gold don't satisfy here, so why would they satisfy there? I just believe they will be appreciated for what they are and nothing more. So, interpreting heaven, is it literal or figurative? Bottom line: There are things we can know and understand and there are things that leave us to imagine or speculate. Paul could not express what he saw. He could not explain it to us. That doesn't mean we can't have enough understanding to stand on faith for the things we don't understand.

### **What is Heaven?**

The Bible uses the term heaven in three different ways. In 2 Corinthians Paul tells us he went to the third heaven. So what's heaven number one and heaven number two?

#### **1. First Heaven: ATMOSPHERE**

The first heaven is what we know to be the atmosphere surrounding the earth we inhabit. God created a blanket of air surrounding everything that exists on earth.

**Isaiah 55:9-10 (NIV)**

**"As the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.**

**[10] As the rain and the snow**

**come down from heaven,**

**and do not return to it**

**without watering the earth**

**and making it bud and flourish,**

**so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,**

The hydrological cycle; where water gets evaporated up into the atmosphere gets dispersed across the earth; the atmosphere. Genesis 1 describes this part of creation:

**Genesis 1:20 (ESV)**

And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds<sup>[a]</sup> fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens."

And so, the first heaven it's the cloudy area that you look up and see on any given day.

Heaven number two is the universe in which our world is placed.

**2. Second Heaven: UNIVERSE**

**Genesis 1:14-17**

And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for<sup>(A)</sup> signs and for<sup>(B)</sup> seasons,<sup>[a]</sup> and for days and years,<sup>15</sup> and let them be lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light upon the earth." And it was so. <sup>16</sup>And God<sup>(C)</sup> made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. <sup>17</sup>And God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth,

**Psalms 33:6 (NIV)**

**By the word of the Lord were the heavens made,  
their starry host by the breath of his mouth.**

So the second heaven is that part of creation where the sun, moon and stars sit and operate, the solar system and the larger galaxy. But then, there is a third heaven that Paul called paradise which is the dwelling place of God.

**3. Third Heaven: DWELLING PLACE OF GOD**

**Matthew 6:9; 7:11; 10:32**

Jesus makes this reference over and over again in the gospels that God, his Father is "in heaven" Matthew 6 – he taught us to pray, Our Father who is in heaven. Matthew 7 – if you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more does your father "in heaven" know how to give to those who ask him. Matthew 10 – if you confess me

before men I will confess you before my father “in heaven.” Where is God? In heaven. Heaven is the dwelling place of God.

### Where is Heaven?

If God is there, then where is there? And this is the first thing to understand about heaven. It’s a place.

#### 1. Heaven is a PLACE

Jesus in speaking to the disciples and we understand this to be written to us as well:

#### **John 14:2 (NIV)**

**In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.**

Heaven is not a figment of your imagination, it is not a feeling or an emotion or a psychological fantasy; it is a place, a real place where God lives. A place that has been prepared for God’s people; a tangible, experiential place; and yet it will be an eternal, supernatural place as well. In the Bible heaven has been described as a country. Hebrews 11, Abraham longed for a better country. In that same chapter, it tells us Abraham was looking for a city whose builder and designer was God. And so heaven is described as a city. In our culture that may not mean much but in ancient, biblical culture, cities were very important to the prestige and security. Heaven is described as a kingdom where God reigns. And as Jesus suggests, heaven is a house (John 14) with enough rooms to accommodate everyone who shows up. It’s a country that I want to go to. It’s a city I want to live in. It’s a kingdom I want to be a citizen of. And it’s a home like no other. Those of us who grew up in warm, loving families – heaven is like that famous line in the Wizard of Oz: There’s no place like home. God gives us a glimpse of how much he loves us by giving us children. I’m crazy about my kids. One has already taken off to build her own life. And the other one is teetering on the edge of the nest. This has been my goal in parenting – to create an environment that when my kids think of home, they wanted to come home. When they say, “There’s no place like home.” I want that to be a good thing. Where is heaven? Heaven is a place.

#### 2. Heaven is UP

Most of us, when we think of heaven think ‘up.’ The first heaven is up, the second heaven is way up. And the third heaven is out of this world ‘up.’

#### **Acts 1:11; Ephesians 4:8-10; 1 Thessalonians 4:17**

The Bible says that Jesus ascended into heaven. Where are we, on the globe? Ok, when you think of up from where we live, it’s this way. But what if you lived in South America? Up would be this way? Think about it, the Bible just says it’s ‘up.’ But at right angles with the earth’s surface, up is in all directions. There are a couple of references indicating that heaven is in the north. Isaiah 14 talks about heaven in the recesses of the north. Ps 48; Ezekiel 1 allude to heaven being in the north. We have a ‘north’ star. Is that to be understood literally? All we know is that heaven is up. And it’s far away.

#### 3. Heaven is FAR AWAY

Heavens one and two are places that can be located. If the third heaven is an actual place, (if you take the literal view) What do we know of the physical realm at this point in the progress of science and astronomy? We already know that distances in space are so great they have to be measured in light years which is 186,000 miles a second, over 11 million miles a minute. Our solar system is part of a galaxy that has a diameter of 100,000 light years. How many galaxies are there? No one knows Are you getting the feeling that heaven is far away? When the Soviet cosmonauts entered space in 1961 they came back making sure the rest of us knew that God wasn't spotted and that heaven wasn't found. That's doesn't bother me that they couldn't find heaven. Heaven is so very far away and yet it is so very near.

#### **4. Heaven is VERY NEAR**

Paul was caught up in the third heaven and didn't even know what was going on. Jesus hung on the cross and told the thief next to him. . .

**Luke 23:43 (NIV)**

**Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."**

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye; absent from the body, present with the Lord. Here's the question for you to think about today.

**One Question to Ask: Do I believe heaven is real?**

What you think about heaven, how you view it, your attitude toward it will affect what you do today. If you're not convinced of the reality of heaven it's not going to make much difference what you do today or the next or for the rest of your life. But if you believe, if you are convinced that heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people, friends, it will change how you live today. It will change your priorities, your focus, your purpose, your values, your attitude toward those not yet convinced. It changes everything.

**Next Week: Read Luke 16:19-31**

**Text Your Questions to 219-379-7147**