

What Will Heaven Be Like?

An Invitation to Recover the Christian Hope

Romans 8:18–25; John 20:24–29 or Luke 24:36–43; Revelation 21:1–5; 1Cor.15:20–23, 54–58

OPENER: Last Fall

Last fall, during one of my pastoral visits, a woman in our congregation asked me a simple question: “What will Heaven be like?”

Judy was living with cancer. She was no longer very mobile, but her mind remained clear. That gave her a great deal of time to think—not abstractly, but personally—about what lay ahead.

“What will Heaven be like?” She said...

I defaulted to the answer I had given many times before.

“What does it matter?” I said. “We will be with Jesus, and it will be beyond anything we can imagine.”

That was not a false answer. Being with Jesus is the heart of Christian hope. Whatever Heaven is like, Christ’s presence will be its greatest joy. Yet Judy was not satisfied.

“I know that, Pastor,” she said. “But what will it be like?”

Her question startled me because I realized that I had answered a question she was not asking. Judy was not asking whether Jesus would be enough. She was asking what Jesus had actually promised.

She wanted something more substantial than an existence beyond human imagination. She was approaching the border between this life and the next, and she wanted to know whether Scripture gave her anything firm upon which to place her hope.

So I tried again. I spoke about resurrection, the renewal of creation, the removal of suffering, and the promise that God will dwell with his people. That fuller answer seemed to calm her. Later, Judy and her daughter bought a small book containing Scripture passages about Heaven with brief commentary. Together they began reading and talking about the promises of God.

A few weeks later, I had a chance to answer the same question...

Main Point

This time, because of Judy, I was better prepared. I could say more than, “We cannot imagine it.” I could speak about what Scripture does reveal. We talked, and we prayed for understanding and comfort. The fear began to loosen its hold.

Those encounters are why I want our whole congregation to undertake this study together.

This is not a specialized class for people who enjoy debating end-times theories. It is not merely an opportunity to satisfy our curiosity about the afterlife. We are studying Heaven for Judy and for every person who has lain awake wondering what death means, where departed loved ones are, whether we will recognize one another, and what kind of life God has promised beyond the grave.

Last Sunday, we listened to Paul describe creation as groaning while it waits for the children of God to be revealed. We heard that God has not abandoned the field. Creation is suffering, but its suffering is not meaningless.

As I began preparing this study, I realized that Romans 8 was still speaking. Creation's groaning leads us directly into the hope of resurrection and the renewal of all things.

Randy Alcorn's book *Heaven* will serve as our guide, but Scripture will remain our authority. Alcorn's book was published in 2004, and it sat in my to read pile for 21 years... The book is not a collection of near-death experiences or sentimental stories about what someone claims to have seen. It is an extended study of Scripture intended to recover the physical, personal, relational, and creation-centered character of Christian hope.

Alcorn summarizes God's promise as "a resurrected life in a resurrected body, with the resurrected Christ on a resurrected Earth." This sentence is the backbone of the book and will become one of the central truths of our study.

The Christian hope is not that our souls will escape the physical world and live forever in a distant spiritual realm. Our hope is that Jesus Christ will return, the dead will be raised, creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay, and God will dwell with his people in a renewed Heaven and Earth.

To understand this, we will need to distinguish between the present Heaven and the final Heaven.

The present Heaven is where believers are with Christ after death. When we say that a Christian who has died is now with Jesus, we have good reason to believe it. Paul was confident that to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord. But that intermediate condition is not the completion of the Christian story.

The final Christian hope is resurrection.

God's people will not remain disembodied spirits. Christ will raise us and give us glorified bodies. Heaven and Earth will be brought together, the curse will be removed, and God's dwelling will be with humanity.

Take Away

The end of the biblical story is not human beings leaving Earth to live with God somewhere else. It is God coming to dwell with his resurrected people within a redeemed creation.

This understanding reconnects Heaven with the whole biblical story.

God created the world and called it good. Sin brought alienation, suffering, corruption, and death into that good creation. The Son of God then entered creation in a genuine human body. Jesus lived among us, died in the flesh, and was raised bodily from the grave.

His resurrection was not an escape from physical existence. It was the beginning of physical existence redeemed from death.

The risen Jesus could be seen and touched. He spoke with his friends, walked with them, and ate with them. He remained Jesus, yet he was no longer subject to death and decay. His resurrection is the firstfruits of what God intends for his people and, ultimately, for creation itself.

Romans 8 tells us that creation's groaning is not the groaning of a funeral. It is the groaning of childbirth. **Something is coming.** The creation now subjected to frustration will be liberated when God's children experience the redemption of their bodies.

God does not surrender the world he called good. Redemption is larger than rescuing individual souls from punishment. In Christ, God is reclaiming human beings, human bodies, human relationships, and the created order itself.

That conviction gives us permission to ask the questions Christians are sometimes reluctant to ask.

Questions We Ask

Will we recognize one another? Will we eat and drink? Will there be animals? Will we work, learn, create, travel, play, and discover? Will there be music, art, cities, nations, and culture? Will we remember our former lives? Will Heaven ever become boring?

This study will help us explore those questions without losing sight of the One who makes Heaven possible.

Its general answer is that resurrected life will be genuinely human life, cleansed from everything that presently corrupts it. We will not become angels or lose our identities. We will become fully human as God intended humanity to be.

Worship will remain central because Christ will remain central. But worship will not be limited to singing around the throne. Every good activity offered to God can become worship.

This study can comfort those who are grieving. Death remains an enemy, and separation still hurts, but death does not have the final word. The relationships we surrender to Christ are not simply erased. Resurrection means that death interrupts the fellowship of God's people; it does not permanently destroy it.

This study can also give greater meaning to our present lives. If God intends to redeem creation, then bodies matter. Relationships matter. Work matters. Beauty, craftsmanship, music, food,

animals, land, and culture matter. We do not worship these things, but neither do we dismiss them as meaningless parts of a world God plans to abandon.

We will, however, study with discernment.

Alcorn sometimes moves from what Scripture clearly promises to what he believes we may reasonably imagine. He considers possibilities involving pets, sports, technology, travel, and exploration. These ideas may help awaken our imaginations, but they should not all be treated as established doctrine.

As we study, we will distinguish among three categories:

- What Scripture clearly teaches.
- What Alcorn reasonably concludes from Scripture.
- What Alcorn imaginatively suggests might be possible.

There is nothing wrong with sanctified imagination. We cannot eagerly anticipate something we refuse to imagine. Nevertheless, our imaginations must remain servants of Scripture rather than becoming substitutes for it.

Friends Faith Walk

As Friends, we will also bring our particular emphasis upon the present work of the living Christ. We believe Christ has come to teach his people himself. Through the Holy Spirit, the life of the coming kingdom has already begun among us.

The New Creation is not yet here in its fullness, but its firstfruits are present. Whenever Christ brings reconciliation where there was hostility, mercy where there was cruelty, truth where there was deception, and holiness where there was bondage, the life of the coming kingdom becomes visible.

We do not create Heaven through human effort. We do, however, become signs of the world Christ has promised. Our worship, discernment, peacemaking, faithful presence, care for creation, love for our neighbors, and treatment of the vulnerable can bear witness to the kingdom that is coming.

The Whole Church...

This is why I want the whole church to come.

Come if you are approaching the later years of life and have quietly wondered what awaits you.

- if you are grieving someone you love.
- if you have ever felt anxious about death.
- if your children or grandchildren have asked questions you did not know how to answer.

- if you want to understand resurrection, the New Earth, and the future of God's creation.

Concluding

And come even if you are not presently asking these questions. Someone you love eventually will. When that moment comes, I want us to be a congregation capable of offering more than vague reassurance. I want us to be able to open Scripture, speak clearly about the promises of Christ, and help one another hope.

When the next Judy asks us, "What will Heaven be like?" we do not have to dismiss the question by saying it is beyond our imagination. We can answer carefully and humbly:

We will be with Jesus. We will be raised. We will remain ourselves, but without sin and death. God will renew his creation. We will live in his presence with his redeemed people. We will worship, serve, learn, create, rejoice, and discover. Every tear will be wiped away, and nothing belonging to Christ will remain under the power of death.

Jesus Christ is risen. Resurrection has begun. The love that holds us now is the love that will finally raise us, restore creation, and bring God's good work to completion.

Major Scripture Foundations

1. **Romans 8:18–25** — Creation and bodily redemption
2. **1 Corinthians 15:20–23, 35–58** — Resurrection is the Christian hope
3. **Revelation 21:1–5** — The New Heaven and New Earth
4. **Revelation 22:1–5** — Life in the renewed creation

Supporting Scriptures

The Present Heaven

- **2 Corinthians 5:6–8** — Believers who die are at home with the Lord.
- **Philippians 1:21–23** — Paul desires to depart and be with Christ.
- **Luke 23:42–43** — Jesus promises the repentant criminal that he will be with him in paradise.

Resurrected Bodies

- **Philippians 3:20–21** — Christ will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body.
- **1 John 3:2** — When Christ appears, we shall be like him.
- **Luke 24:36–43** — The risen Jesus can be seen and touched, and he eats with his disciples.
- **John 20:24–29** — Thomas encounters the bodily risen Christ.

The Renewal of Creation

- **Genesis 1:26–31** — God created the physical world and called it very good.
- **Isaiah 65:17–25** — Prophetic vision of new heavens, a new earth, joy, flourishing, and peace.
- **Isaiah 11:6–9** — Creation lives in peace under God's righteous reign.
- **2 Peter 3:13** — Christians look forward to a new heaven and new earth where righteousness dwells.
- **Acts 3:19–21** — Christ remains in heaven until the time when God restores everything.
- **Colossians 1:19–20** — Through Christ, God reconciles all things to himself.

Recognition, Identity, and Relationships

- **Matthew 8:11** — People gather with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in God's kingdom.
- **Matthew 17:1–4** — Moses and Elijah retain recognizable identities.
- **1 Thessalonians 4:13–18** — The dead in Christ rise, and God's people remain together with the Lord.
- **1 Corinthians 13:12** — Our presently partial knowledge will give way to fuller knowledge.

Work, Worship, and Meaningful Life

- **Revelation 5:9–10** — God's redeemed people become a kingdom and priests who reign.
- **Revelation 7:9–17** — A great multitude worships before God and is shepherded by the Lamb.
- **Revelation 22:3–5** — God's servants serve him and reign forever.
- **1 Corinthians 15:58** — Because resurrection is certain, our present labor in the Lord is not in vain.
- **Colossians 3:23–24** — Ordinary work can be offered to Christ.

The Coming Kingdom Already Breaking In

- **Luke 17:20–21** — God's kingdom is already present among his people through Christ.
- **2 Corinthians 5:17** — Anyone in Christ participates in new creation.
- **Galatians 5:22–25** — The Spirit produces the character of the coming kingdom within us.
- **Ephesians 1:9–10** — God's purpose is to bring all things together under Christ.
- **Revelation 21:5** — Christ declares that he is making everything new.