

What Does the Bible Say About Heaven?

By *Randy Alcorn*

Since the publication of my novels *Deadline* and *Dominion*, I'm frequently asked about the basis for my understanding of what heaven might be like. I've studied and spoken on heaven and eternal rewards for years, and have a much different and deeper appreciation of this subject than I used to. I'm glad to share my perspectives on Scripture's teaching.

One of my central goals in writing *Deadline* and *Dominion* was to motivate people to think more about heaven, and to anticipate it with greater fervor and delight. If a brother or sister disagrees with some of my interpretations of Scripture, it does not matter, as long as he has been stimulated to give serious thought (perhaps for the first time) to his one true Home. I believe there is something inherently enriching about contemplating what the Bible says about heaven, something we as western Christians in the modern world have neglected to our loss. (The subject of the heavenly state in general and eternal rewards in particular is developed in my book *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, Tyndale House, 1989.)

Despite my best attempts to be careful with Scripture, my understanding is far from complete and is without doubt incorrect in some areas. But if the reader diligently investigates the Scripture passages referred to in this summary, he may discover to his surprise (and either to his delight or discomfort) that some of his own notions and assumptions about heaven are in fact not biblical. In the process, he will gain a far greater understanding of this vital subject.

This summary of my understanding of the scriptural teaching on heaven constituted the guidelines around which I exercised my imagination to portray scenes in heaven:

- 1. Heaven is the dwelling place of God** ([Deut. 26:15](#); [Matt. 6:9](#)).
- 2. Heaven is the dwelling place of God's angels** ([Luke 2:15](#); [Matt. 28:2](#); [Heb. 12:22](#)).

3. Heaven is the dwelling place of God's saints from earth who have died and now live there in his presence (Rev. 4-5; Luke 16:22, 25; Heb. 12:23).

4. At death, the human spirit leaves the body (Ec. 12:2) and goes either to heaven or hell (Luke 16:22ff).

5. There is immediate conscious existence after death, both in heaven and hell (Luke 16:22ff.; Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8; Rev. 6:9-11; Phil. 1:23). There is no "soul sleep" or period of unawareness preceding heaven. ("Fallen asleep" in 1 Thes. 4:13 is a euphemism for death, describing the spirit's departure from the body, ending our conscious existence *on earth*.)

6. Heaven is an actual place, to and from which Christ (John 1:32; 6:33; Acts 1:2), angels (Matt. 28:2; Rev. 10:1) and in rare circumstances people, even prior to their deaths, have traveled (2 Kings 2:11; 2 Cor. 12:2; Rev. 11:12).

7. Heaven is consistently referred to as "up" in location (Mark 6:41; Luke 9:51). We do not know whether it is a place "in the heavens" (the universe beyond the earth) or entirely outside the space/time continuum. We do know heaven is someplace, and presently that place isn't earth.

8. Heaven is where Christ came from (John 6:42), where he returned after his resurrection (Acts 1:11), where he now is and from which he will physically return to earth again (Acts 1:11; Rev. 19:1-16).

9. Heaven is described as a city (Heb. 11:16; 12:22; 13:14; Rev. 21:12). The normal understanding of a "city" is a place of many residences in near proximity, the inhabitants of which are subject to a common government. "City" may also connote varied and bustling activity.

10. Heaven contains for believers a permanent inheritance, an unperishing estate specifically reserved for us. (1 Pet. 1:4).

11. Heaven is the Christian's country of citizenship (Heb. 11:16;

[Phil. 3:20](#)). Christ is our King. We are his ambassadors, representing his agenda on earth ([2 Cor. 5:20](#)). While on our brief stay here, we are aliens, strangers and pilgrims ([Heb. 11:3](#)). Ambassadors, aliens and pilgrims identify themselves and plan their lives with a focus on their home country. Should they become too engrossed in the alien country where they temporarily reside, they can easily compromise their allegiances to their true King and true country.

12. God's people should long for heaven. This pleases our Lord, who has prepared a place there for us ([Heb. 11:13-16](#); [2 Cor. 5:2](#)). We should be ever-motivated by the anticipation of heaven ([Phil. 3:14](#); [2 Tim. 4:8](#)).

13. Heaven and all that it represents should be a central object of our attention in this life. Our hearts or minds are to be continuously set on these "things above" where Christ is in heaven, not on "earthly things" ([Col. 3:1-4](#)).

Note: The popular notion of Christians being "so heavenly minded they're of no earthly good" is a myth. On the contrary, most of us are so earthly minded we are of no heavenly or earthly good. C. S. Lewis said, "It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one." God commands us to be heavenly minded, and doing so will give us the perspective and motivation to live on earth as he has commanded us ([Heb. 11:26-27](#)).

14. There is a sense in which believers are currently in heaven with Christ ([Eph. 2:6](#); [Col. 3:3](#)). Our intimate link with Christ in his redemptive work somehow makes us inseparable from him. As we walk with him and commune with him in this world, this reality makes it sometimes possible to experience a faint foretaste of heaven's delights and wonders.

15. Heaven will provide us delivery from the present conditions of material decay and corruption ([Matt. 6:20](#)).

16. Heaven will provide us delivery from the current sinful human condition ([Rom. 7:24](#)).

17. The redeemed in heaven are described as “shining” and wearing “white robes,” indicating their moral purity and righteousness (Dan. 12:3; Matt. 13:43; Rev. 3:4; 6:11).

18. Heaven is a place of great joy and pleasures for the redeemed (Psalm 16:11).

19. The names of Christ’s redeemed are written in heaven (Luke 10:20; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 20:15).

20. When in his presence, Christ will give new names to the righteous, known only between him and them (Rev. 2:17). This implies some level of privacy.

21. The wicked, those whose sins remain uncleansed by the blood of Christ, will be excluded from heaven (Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; Rev. 22:15).

22. Heaven’s central draw is our anticipation of being with Christ (Phil. 1:23).

23. Another draw of heaven is our anticipation of continued and unhindered life, and ultimate reunion with Christian loved ones who’ve gone before us and will come after us (1 Thes. 4:14-18).

24. Heaven has not remained the same since its creation, but has undergone several phases, and will experience future change as well. At least five distinct phases of heaven seem identifiable. There was the pre-sin heaven, before Satan fell (Is. 14:12-15), apparently taking a third of the angels with him (Rev. 12:4). There was the Old Testament heaven of Paradise or “Abraham’s bosom” (Luke 16:22), which was then one of two compartments of Hades, “the place of the dead,” the other compartment being Hell. Then came the current post-resurrection-of-Christ heaven, where Paradise seems to have been relocated from Hades, and where believers now come directly into his presence at death (Eph. 4:8-10; 2 Cor. 5:8). The millennial kingdom, where Christ rules over the earth with his redeemed seems to be a phase of Heaven (Rev. 20:14). Then there is the Heaven still to come after the final judgment, the New Jerusalem in the new heavens and new earth

[\(Rev. 21-22\)](#)).

Similarly, what we now refer to as Hell (the only compartment of Hades left since the relocation of Paradise to Heaven) will, after the Great White Throne judgment, itself be relocated in the eternal lake of fire, the ultimate hell ([Rev. 20:14-15](#)).

Note: Heaven is not yet as it one day will be. There is still sin and suffering in the universe which will not be relieved until after the present heaven and earth pass away, and the heavenly city is established ([Rev. 21:4](#)). There are said to presently still be “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” ([Eph. 6:12](#)). This may explain the apparent incongruity of the already-fallen Satan’s coming before the presence of God ([Job 1:6](#)) and the future “war in heaven” ([Rev. 12:7](#)) in which Satan is cast down in some further or final sense. He is not finally defeated until a thousand years after he is bound in the pit and then after one last rage of evil, thrown forever into the lake of fire ([Rev. 20:2,7,10](#)).

The resurrection of believers has not yet occurred, and will not until just prior to the new heavens and earth ([Rev. 20:12-15](#)). Hence, though the present heaven we enter at death is a wonderful place, it is not yet complete, not in its most glorious form.

25. Heaven contains an actual sanctuary which served as the pattern for the earthly tabernacle ([Heb. 8:5](#); [9:11,23-24](#)). Jesus currently “serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the LORD, not man” ([Heb. 8:2](#)). In heaven there is a temple that contains the prototype ark of the covenant ([Rev. 11:19](#), [15:5](#)). (This violates the popular notion of a “spiritual” heaven with no physical form, suggesting heaven is a more tangible reality than we often imagine.)

26. Christ promised his followers they would live with him in heaven ([John 12:26](#); [13:36](#); [14:2-3](#)).

27. Jesus described heaven as having many rooms or dwellings, and promised that he himself would go there and prepare a place there for us ([John 14:2-3](#)).

28. When we are in heaven, it may be possible for us to welcome

others into our dwelling places. After speaking of the shrewd servant's desire to use earthly resources so that "people will welcome me into their houses," Jesus tells his followers to use "worldly wealth" (earthly resources) to "gain friends" (by making a difference in their lives on earth), "so that when it is gone [when life on earth is over] you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9).

Note: Our "friends" in heaven appear to be to those whose lives we've touched in a significant way on earth. They will apparently have their own "eternal dwellings." This fits the Bible's portrayal of heaven as a city. In a nonparabolic context, Christ promised to prepare for us dwelling places in heaven (John 14:2-3). Luke 16:9, then, may literally mean these eternal dwelling places of friends could be places to fellowship and/or reside in as we move about the heavenly kingdom.

29. Some believers will receive a "rich welcome" when they enter heaven (2 Peter 1:11). It seems possible, and in keeping with Luke 16:1-9, those who on earth have impacted and/or been impacted by the arriving believer (perhaps including family members), and who have gone to heaven before him, may participate in the welcoming committee at his "rich welcome" into heaven.

30. Christ's resurrection body appears to be the prototype for our own heavenly bodies (1 Cor. 15:20, 48-49; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2). After his resurrection, Jesus emphasized he was *not* a "ghost," a disembodied spirit, but had a physical body (Luke 24:37-39).

31. In our resurrected state we will have real "spiritual" bodies with physical substance (1 Cor. 15:42-44). We will be capable of talking, walking, touching and being touched (Luke 24; John 20-21). Christ's resurrection body had an ability to appear suddenly, apparently coming through a locked door to the apostles (John 20:19), and "disappearing" from the sight of the two at Emmaus (Luke 24:31). If our resurrection bodies have the same properties as his, this suggests an ability to transcend the present laws of physics and/or to move and travel in some way we are now incapable of.

32. Christ ate food in his resurrection body, and he and we will eat and drink in heaven (Luke 14:15; 22:18). Yet there will be no

hunger or thirst in heaven ([Rev. 7:16](#)). It would seem the resurrection body does not need what is now essential—food, drink, oxygen, covering, etc.—but that it is nonetheless fully capable of enjoying some or all of these things (and no doubt many more).

33. Between our entrance to heaven and our resurrection, we may have temporary pre-resurrection bodies (e.g. [Luke 16:19ff.](#); [Rev. 6:11](#)). This fits the notion that unlike God and the angels, who are in essence spirits though capable of inhabiting bodies ([John 4:24](#); [Heb. 1:14](#)), man is in essence both spiritual *and* physical ([Gen. 2:7](#)). Hence, between our earthly life and our resurrection, a temporary body would allow us to retain the qualities of full humanity.

Note: Some Christians seem strangely repulsed at the biblical teachings of the tangible nature of our heavenly bodies and the heavenly state. But this teaching should not surprise us, since humans have both a spiritual and a physical dimension. We do not become inhuman in heaven, we become everything humans are capable of being by virtue of both creation and redemption. [Matthew 22:30](#), for instance, does not teach we will be genderless (gender is a God-created aspect of humanity) or otherwise non-human, but simply that there will be no marriage in heaven.

Much misunderstanding stems from the Greek/Platonic belief that the body is evil and the spirit's highest destiny is to be free from the body. This is in stark contrast to the biblical belief that God is the Creator of both body and spirit, both of which were marred by sin, but both of which are redeemed by Christ. True, I need to be delivered from my earthly body, which is subject to sin and decay ([Rom. 7:24](#)). But the promise of the heavenly state is not the absence of body, but the attainment of a new and sinless body and spirit. In [1 Cor. 15](#), Paul regards the new body—not simply the new spirit—as essential to our redemption. If the body is not redeemed, then man is not redeemed, since man is by nature body as well as spirit. A spirit without a body, like a body without a spirit, is not the highest human destiny, but would be a state of incompleteness, an aberration from the full meaning of humanness.

34. At death the believer is ushered into heaven by angels ([Luke 16:22](#)). We may be accompanied in death's relocation by ministering

angel(s) who have served us while we were on earth (Heb. 1:14). Some angels are assigned to children, and they have special continuous access to God (Matt. 18:10). This suggests that ministering or guardian angels could be assigned to people even prior to their conversion to Christ, though this is uncertain.

Note: Angels are individual beings who have their own names, and are capable of reasoning, speech and interaction (Dan. 8:16-26; Luke 1:26-38; Dan. 10:13, 31; Rev. 12:1). Angels active on earth are normally invisible to human eyes (2 Kings 6:17). They are sent out by God in response to prayer, and wage war on behalf of God and men (Dan. 9:21, 23; 10:12-13; Rev. 12:7). Angels can take on physical form and appear as humans (Gen. 18-19). We can respond to or interact with angels, unaware of their identity (Heb. 13:2).

35. In heaven, we will worship God along with the angels and redeemed people from every race and background (Rev. 4:9-11; 5:11-13; 7:9-12).

36. In heaven, we will sing praise songs along with all the rest of God's creation (Rev. 5:13).

37. Communication, dialogue, corporate worship and other relationship-building interactions all take place heaven (Rev. 1-22). Apparently saints and angels and God will all interact together, building and deepening their relationships.

38. In heaven, we will exercise not only intellect but emotions (Rev. 6:10; 7:10). Angels too seem capable of responding with emotion (Rev. 7:11-12; Rev. 18). Heaven is described as a place where there is great rejoicing (an emotional response) over what God is accomplishing on earth (Luke 15:7,10).

Note: Some suggest there will be no emotions in heaven. But emotions are part of God-created humanity, not some sinful baggage we are to be cleansed of. We should not expect the absence of emotion there, but pure and accurately informed emotions, emotions guided by reality, not easily misled and subjective feelings. The tears that will be wiped away are the tears of suffering over sin and death (Rev. 21:4). Since we are capable of now shedding tears stemming

from joy, there is no reason to believe there could be no tears of joy in heaven. (For instance, at meeting Christ or at reunion with loved ones.)

And since the loving acts of God for his people, including his death on the cross, naturally prompt the spiritually sensitive to tears (and we will be more, not less, spiritually sensitive in heaven), it seems possible that there could be tears of sobriety and gratitude over the redemptive price Jesus paid for us. This could be true throughout eternity, but certainly could apply prior to the New Heaven and New Earth where the “no more tears” promise first appears.

39. Heaven is a place from which God is said to exercise his wrath against godlessness on earth ([Rom. 1:18](#)), and even to send down his judgment of fire ([Rev. 13:13](#); [20:9](#)). In heaven, saints gain an increased sense of holiness and long for God’s wrath and vengeance to be poured out against injustice ([Rev. 6:9-11](#)). Angels in heaven too long for God’s judgment to be exercised against the ungodly ([Rev. 16:4-7](#)).

40. In heaven, we will have eternal rewards, permanent possessions and positions which vary from believer to believer ([Matt. 6:19-25](#); [25:20-21](#); [Luke 19:17-19](#); [1 Cor. 3:12-15](#); [2 Cor. 5:9,10](#)). Rewards will be granted in light of our faithfulness and motives ([1 Cor. 4:2,5](#)). In dispensing rewards, Christ will not overlook the smallest act of kindness done in his name ([Mark 9:41](#)).

Note: Heavenly rewards are promised to those who endure difficult circumstances out of their trust in God ([Heb. 10:34-36](#)), and to those who persevere under persecution for their faith ([Luke 6:22, 23](#)). A life of godliness ([2 Peter 3:11-14](#)) and compassionate obedience ([Matthew 25:20, 21](#)) will be richly rewarded by our Lord. When we extend hospitality and give a meal to those too poor or incapacitated to pay us back Christ promises us “although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” ([Luke 14:14](#)).

Salvation and rewards are completely different. Salvation is God’s work for man given as a free gift, to which man can contribute absolutely nothing ([Eph. 2:8-9](#); [Titus 3:5](#)). Rewards, however, are man’s work for God. Salvation is dependent on God’s faithfulness

and mercy, while rewards are conditional, contingent as well on man's faithfulness (2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26-28; 3:21).

41. At least five different crowns are given as heavenly rewards: the crown of life (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10), the incorruptible crown (1 Cor. 9:24, 25), crown of rejoicing (1 Thes. 2:19; Phil. 4:1), crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:1-4), and crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

The crowns may relate to positions of ruling in heaven (Luke 19:17; Rev. 2:26-28), but in any case they are lasting reminders of our work on earth, and Christ's faithfulness in enabling us to do that work. Ultimately these crowns put at Christ's feet, to recognize him (Rev. 4:10). Our rewards are given not merely for our recognition, but for God's eternal glory. However, Scripture sees no contradiction whatsoever between God's eternal glory and our eternal good.

Note: While heaven will be wonderful for all its inhabitants, not every believer's position and experience in heaven will be the same. As hell has different punishments (Matt .11:20-24; Luke 20:45-47), so heaven has different rewards. Perhaps it will be a matter of differing capacity. Two jars can both be full, but the one with greater capacity contains more. Likewise, all of us will be full of joy in heaven, but some may have more joy because their capacity for joy will be larger, having been stretched through their trust in and obedience to God in this life.

42. Heaven should be looked to by the believer as the time when all righteous acts—many of which will have been disregarded and some punished on earth—will be finally rewarded. There is a "proper time" for the harvest, a time that normally follows our life on earth—"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9).

The Christian's works done for God's glory will have eternal significance—of those who die in Christ, God says "their deeds will follow them" (Rev. 14:13). Our rewards in heaven will link us eternally to our service for Christ while on earth. There is a radical change in our location, but no essential discontinuity between our lives here and there.

Note: As Scripture gives no opportunity for the unbeliever to go back to earth and live his life again and this time to put faith in Christ, so there is no opportunity for the believer to go back and relieve his life, this time for Christ. There is no indication that rewards missed by virtue of lack of service on earth ([1 Cor. 3: 13-15](#)) will be later achieved in some other way. In heaven, how we have lived on earth will have eternal effects.

43. In heaven, we will serve God ([Rev. 7:15](#)). Service implies responsibilities, duties, effort, and creativity to do work well. (Work with lasting accomplishment, unhindered by decay and fatigue, and enhanced by unlimited resources.)

44. In heaven, we will be given rest from our labors on earth ([Rev. 14:13](#)). The rest granted us when by Christ on earth ([Matt. 11:28-29](#)), paradoxically, is a rest we now must “make every effort to enter” ([Heb. 4:11](#)). Heaven’s labor will be refreshing, productive and unthwarted, without futility and frustration. Perhaps it will be like the Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden ([Gen. 2:15](#)), before sin brought the curse on the ground, with its thorns ([Gen. 3:17-19](#)).

45. In accord with our service for Christ while on earth, we will reign with Him in heaven ([2 Tim. 2:12](#); [Rev. 3:21](#); [22:5](#)). This implies specific delegated responsibilities for those under our leadership ([Luke 19:17-19](#)). We judge or rule over the world *and* we judge and rule over angels ([1 Cor. 6:2-3](#)).

46. At the center of the future heaven will be the city of the New Jerusalem. The exact dimensions of the heavenly city are measured by an angel and reported as a 12,000 stadia (1500 mile) cube ([Rev. 22:15-17](#)). This base of over two million square miles would stretch from the west coast to the Mississippi river, and from the borders of Canada to Mexico, covering two thirds the entire land mass of the United States. More astounding is its 1500 mile height. By present standards, that would be 780,000 stories. It is apparently within this vast city that we will have personal dwelling places, which Jesus has prepared for us ([John 14:2](#); [Luke 16:9](#); [Rev. 21:2](#)).

Note: While the dimensions and proportions may have symbolic importance (e.g. the Holy of Holies, God’s dwelling place, was a

cube), this does not mean the dimensions are not literal. In fact, Rev. 22 goes to great lengths to express these exact dimensions and to emphasize they are in “man’s measurement”—if the city really were these dimensions (and there is no reason it couldn’t be), what more could we expect God to say to convince us of this?

47. Heaven’s New Jerusalem is filled with magnificent beauty, including streets of gold and buildings of pearls, emeralds and precious stones (Rev. 21:19-21)

48. Heaven has light, water, trees and fruit (Rev. 22:1-2).

49. The heavenly city’s gates are always open, and people will travel in and out, some bringing wonderful things into the city (Rev. 21:24-25; 22:14). Travel outside the city suggests the city is not the whole of heaven, but merely its center.

50. Heaven contains some animals (including wolves, lambs, and lions), at least in its millennial phase (Isaiah 65:25). Even before the millennium, there are horses in heaven (Rev. 6:2-8; 19:11), enough for the armies of heaven to ride (Rev. 19:11; 2 Kings 6:17).

51. In heaven, we’ll eat and drink at a table with Christ and the redeemed saints from earth, communicating and fellowshiping and rejoicing with them (Matt. 8:11; Luke 22:29, 30; Rev. 19:9). □