

What is Heaven?

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the months after my father died in August of 2024, my mom often made the comment: I wish the Bible told us more about what heaven is like. She is not alone in asking this. Probably all of us have wondered about this or heard others asking questions about heaven. Some of our *Groundwork* listeners have suggested this as a topic. Today on *Groundwork*, we begin to dig into scripture to explore what the Bible does and does not teach us about heaven. Stay tuned.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we are beginning now a very short...they don't get any shorter than this...just a two-part series on biblical concepts of what we often refer to as *heaven*. We will be digging into, of course, both the Old Testament and the New Testament; but I think, Darrell, as we get started, we can say a few things as to what the Bible does *not* say; and I think, Darrell, that is important to do up front here, because at least some of the popular conceptions of heaven that people carry around with them...what happens to us after we die...some of those pop conceptions are not taught by the Bible.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, a lot of the conceptions come from pop culture; they come from media; they come from what they hear people say; and so, we have all these different euphemisms—the upstairs, the great upstairs, and the man in the sky, and all these things. As Christians, we are not supposed to be looking at what the world says this is. We are supposed to be looking to God to see what he says this is. Unfortunately, the scriptures have left a lot of room for the imagination, because they are not exactly clear on what heaven is in the literal sense of what we are looking for. So, that is where we kind of get some of these assumptions from.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; if you go to a website that contains the whole Bible and search the word *heaven*, you will find out that it occurs in most English translations about 622 times, but almost none of those occurrences carry with them much of anything to do with heaven in the sense of somebody saying: I want to go to heaven after I die. You don't find people in the Bible saying: I want to go to heaven after I die. Instead, there are two main uses of heaven in the Bible. The first one we encounter already in Genesis 1: God creates the heavens and the earth; and in that sense, heaven is the sky above; it is the realm over the earth. Heaven is where you see the starry hosts at night that Psalm 19 tells us proclaim the wonder and glory of God. Heaven is the place where rain, hail, wind, and snow come from. So, we sometimes hear about all creatures living under heaven; and nations under heaven. So, that is the first main use of heaven, Darrell. Heaven is what is literally, meteorologically up there.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; called the firmament in the King James...firmament, like this layer that is above us. When we look up, we are seeing heaven. But then the second sense of the word *heaven*, especially in the Old Testament is that, okay, this is the place where God dwells. It is not a place that human eyes can see; it is not a place that we

can kind of go find; it is actually where the holy and invisible God lives. So, there is heaven, where God is, and there is everywhere else underneath heaven; and so, that place has been talked about in scripture, and the wrath and judgment of God that happens are said as coming down from heaven. When God gives a judgment—when God gives a word—it is supposed be coming from that invisible and holy and separate place that no one can actually attain to. Only God is there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; so, sometimes wrath and judgment come; sometimes good gifts come from heaven, but it is the realm of God that we cannot see. It is also depicted as being “up there” metaphorically...not “up there”, like, you know, where the rain comes from, but up above us. In the New Testament, you know, Jesus teaches much about the kingdom of God, but interestingly, in Matthew’s gospel, it is almost always the kingdom of heaven. And I think, you know, Matthew wrote for a Jewish reading audience, who would be very familiar with that Old Testament background of heaven being the realm of God above us. So, that is why I think in Matthew you do not get “kingdom of God”, you get “kingdom of heaven”, because Jesus is invoking that Old Testament sense that that is the heavenly realm where God rules the universe from the throne of God in heaven. We cannot...again, with our physical eyes...we cannot see it, but we believe it is real, and that that is where God is; and now, as Christians, we believe that is where Jesus is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, as we say in the *Apostle’s Creed*.

DARRELL DELANEY

I also believe that one of the reasons why Matthew uses the kingdom of heaven is because the name of God was so holy that no one spoke it. If you were understanding the Torah and the Old Testament law, they thought it was blasphemy to even speak God’s name. So, when it says *kingdom of heaven*, not only is it talking about that invisible realm where God is, but they did not feel worthy enough to even speak God’s name. And so, he would do that as well, speaking to his Jewish audience; and there are other parts of the New Testament where Jesus is depicting, after his ascension, as the ruling to the universe at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, and you mentioned that, and we are going to see it right here in Ephesians 1, where it says:

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So that we live in the heavenly realms...1 Peter 1: ³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you.

So, heaven is not the future realm where we are going to all go after we die. In the Bible, heaven is the realm of God now; and when we pray in the Lord’s Prayer: Your kingdom come, your will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven... That means your heavenly kingdom that exists right now, not in the future, right now. We have to live in ways to bring that to this earth right now. So, the idea that heaven does not exist yet...that heaven is a future hope... No; in the Bible, this is the realm of God...the realm of Jesus as Lord of Lords and King of Kings. It exists right now, and we live in ways that bring that reality to bear on our lives already now on earth.

DARRELL DELANEY

And because God is eternal and he is the great I Am, always existing one, and he is ruling now, that when Jesus went around healing people and restoring people to the way things were, he is showing how the

governance of the kingdom of heaven rules now. And so, that *now* is a perpetual now. It is always now. It is not sometime when you die. It is not years down the road. It is actually, in real time, happening at this moment; and that is a different perspective than what we have been taught heaven is by pop culture and by whatever people have said.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is also important to realize in the Bible ultimately heaven, as our ultimate destination, is not going to be like you see in the *New Yorker* cartoons, you know, where people in white robes who have sprouted angel's wings or living on clouds...some misty, vapory... No; it is going to be not that kind of a realm. It is going to be a new creation, which we get in Revelation 21, when John of Patmos sees ²the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming *down* out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband. ^{3b} Look; God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. ⁵He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"

So, as we pointed out before, in the end, God does not say: Hey, I am making all new things. No; he says: I am making all things *new*. All the things that exist. So, heaven as our ultimate dwelling place, is going to be here on this earth. It is going to be a new creation. Not some cloudy, vapory, misty place. So, we should never picture heaven as being cut off from the creation we know now.

In just a moment, talking about making all things new, the Old Testament previews that for us, and we want to dig into that. So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Darrell, we just saw that at the very end, scripture shows us that God's heavenly realm will descend to this earth—to this creation, where God will make all things new. Now, we are going to get some previews of that in the Old Testament. We will get to that in a minute, but sometimes, Darrell, we have heard the phrase about criticizing somebody of being so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly good; and I think we have already begun to see biblically that that should never be true, because the realm of God exists now, and it gives us our marching orders for how we live on earth. Your kingdom come (on earth) as it is in heaven. That is how Jesus taught us to pray. So, the idea that if somebody lives with their head in the clouds, they are pining away for some wistful, cloudy, vapor, and so, they don't work for justice now...they are distracted, and that makes them useless here on earth. That should never be the posture of a true biblical believer. If we understand heaven as being the current, existing realm of God that dictates how we live now, if we are heavenly minded, we will be of great earthly good.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; that is a very important point that you are making, because the misnomer is that you skip over...I call it leapfrog theology...you skip over this life and think about the by-and-by and the pie-in-the-sky. This will be over soon, and heaven will come later. But no; if you set your mind on things above and Christ is with the brokenhearted, and Christ is the God of justice and the God of making sure things are set the way they are, or as they should be, at least, down at the end of creation, then you are actually part of that process today; and that gets us back to some of the parts of the Old Testament, because the prophets have made clear that God's desire for his creation is shalom. My definition for shalom, Scott, is that when God makes sure that nothing is missing, nothing is broken, and everybody has everything that they need, that is shalom. That everybody has exactly what God has intended for them to have. But there are not many words in Hebrew that most people know. Shalom is not one of those words.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; we know shalom, and we think it means *peace*, and we think peace means no war. Peace means lack of conflict; well, it does mean that, but shalom is not so much about the absence of something like conflict, it is about the presence, as you just said, of a whole lot of good things. Neal Plantinga has written that shalom

is a creation-wide concept in which all of life is webbed together in mutually edifying relationships. Shalom is where every person and every creature makes it their mission to take care of all other persons and creatures. So, Darrell, shalom means flourishing—it means delight—it means mutuality and care and respect, and above all, self-giving, agapic love. Shalom is the realm where, in the words of Julien of Norwich, all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well. We get some previews of that, Darrell, in the prophet Isaiah in Chapters 11 and 25.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, picking up at Chapter 11, it says: ⁶The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. ⁷The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. ⁸The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. ⁹They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We call this sometimes, Darrell, the peaceable kingdom. There is a lot of artwork. Some of us have seen paintings depicting all of these creatures that are now enemies living together in peace.

About fourteen chapters on in Isaiah, in Chapter 25, we get a similar vision from Isaiah, in verse 6: On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. ⁷On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; ⁸he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is a beautiful picture of this, and not just in this passage, but in all the passages that kind of go with the shalom idea. It is like God pulls back the curtain and gives you a vision of him with you, and with the animals working together; a grand banquet of food and drink coming together of all creatures and peoples, and it is a common way to depict that. It is called new creation in the Old Testament; and over and over, we hear about this everywhere, where God is showing the harmony that happens between creation and his creatures with God and creation as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I once heard some wry person say: Well, the lion will lay down with the lamb, but I don't think the lamb is going to get much sleep. That is like, no, he really will. When it really happens, the lamb will sleep like a baby; no fear of the lion anymore. So, yes; it is shalom, often depicted as a great banquet of wonderful food and drink. The coming together of all people and all creatures around a common banquet table, as God takes away fear, wipes away tears, and brings all things together; and it is that presence of God, and it is our altogether basking in the presence of God, that makes all the difference. What is heaven finally, Darrell? It is about being in God's presence and loving being in God's presence.

That brings us back to Revelation 21 again. Revelation 21:22:

I did not see a temple in the city because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. ²⁷Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

DARRELL DELANEY

Now, you said earlier, Scott, that the shalom concept and the kingdom of heaven concept are not the absence of something, but are the presence...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

Of God, and the light is actually that picture. There is no darkness anywhere because he is the light, and that light touches everything that is the presence of God; and we see that again in Isaiah Chapter 60, where it says: Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.² See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.³ Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Just a beautiful image. The Bible begins with: Let there be light. Light is the first thing God creates, even before there is a sun or a moon or any proximate source of light, God just creates light, and that is where the Bible begins, and that is where the Bible ends; that God is light and all people...all nations...all creatures will live in that light and the security that that light provides. No more dark nights and dark nights of the soul; no more dark nights, when, you know, thieves who can do things under the cover of darkness. No; the Bible begins and ends with light.

Well, in just a moment, we will wrap up this episode by returning to the questions we noted in the beginning in terms of how are we to think about heaven according to the Bible? Stay with us.

Segment 3

DARRELL DELANEY

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, let's recap. We are going to have four points here. 1) The Bible does not generally say much along the lines of what people today mean when they say: I want to go to heaven after I die. People in the Bible don't talk that way, and we have already seen the reasons why. 2) We have seen that the realm of heaven is not some far off, future reality; it is the realm of God right now, where Jesus Christ the Lord rules the universe right now, seated at the right hand of the Father. So, the realm of God exists now and we lean into that already now.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, we see that, and the third point is that ultimately when all things are made new, this realm of God that we call heaven will be a portrait of shalom of all people and all creatures standing in a right relationship with each other and with God. And as we all look together and we all bask in the radiant presence of our triune God, we are engaged already now in the ongoing work of ensuring the flourishing and the delight and the wholeness of everyone and everything else around us. Ultimately, the fourth point is if we want to think about heaven as our eternal destination and home, then it is the picture of that peaceable kingdom that we read about in Isaiah, and that radiant new city of God that we read about in the book of Revelation that depicts heaven as descending onto this creation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, in short, heaven will not be a place unlike anything we have ever known, but it will be strangely familiar, because it is going to be this current creation made new. Now, of course, Darrell, as we are sitting here, given the wars, the conflict, the poverty, injustice, famine, the brokenness we see all around us in this present creation, even if we are still in this present creation and all of those things are gone, okay, that will be unlike any place we have ever been; but not that the scenery is so much different, but the atmosphere of the creation. The creation will still be very familiar. So, it is not that this current creation won't exist at all, but it will exist in the splendor and the shalom that God had in mind in the beginning when he said: Let there be light. We have been digging into Isaiah in this episode, Darrell; let's go to one last passage in Isaiah 65.

DARRELL DELANEY

Picking up in verse 17, it says: See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, now will they come to mind. ¹⁸But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. ¹⁹I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. ²⁰Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; the one who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere child; the one who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. ²¹They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²²No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So again, God through Isaiah conveys the idea that God may be doing some *recreating* in the end; it will be not just a new heaven, but also a new earth. You know, Genesis tells us that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. We can see that in the end the heavens and the earth will endure. In fact, some of us are familiar with the traditional *collect*, or a prayer that emerged from the history of the Church that says: Oh, God, you hate nothing you made. Indeed, that is why God wants to maintain all things, albeit, purified from sin and evil, of course. Darrell, this is why some writers, like Larry Rasmussen have said that if we picture heaven as anything other than this creation renewed, then that would be like conceding defeat to the devil.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, you know, because God creates...he is the Creator. The enemy destroys things. Even when God flooded this place, he renewed it in a way. I mean, it talks about him using fire at the end as well, but I think that is more of a purifying fire than a destroying and disruptive fire. I think that God is very good at redeeming and restoring the beauty and quality of the things he has made; and I don't think it is any different with the new heaven and the new earth. I think God is going to redeem it and restore it back to better than it was before, so that we can continue to praise his name in things that look strangely familiar but are now redeemed.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, I like what you said. Only in the Bible...only God creates. All Satan...all the devil can do is destroy. So, the fact that this current creation will endure, that God will be renewing the face of this earth and this creation, the endurance of that creation is going to be true because Jesus won. Jesus won; the devil lost. So, destroying God's good creation...polluting it...sullyng it...making creatures go extinct...these are all things that have been very high on the devil's to-do list from the beginning; but in the end, God will show his victory by restoring the very creation that we read about originally in Genesis 1.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; and Paul reminded us of this in Colossians 1, when he says: ¹⁵The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have supremacy. ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Paul likes the little Greek phrase: *ta panta*, which means all things; and this is all things...all things...all things...all things; it is all over the place here. This creation has its future in the Person of Jesus Christ. He made it; this creation has a future, which is why in a famous anecdote...maybe it is apocryphal, I don't know...but somebody once asked Martin Luther: What would you do if you knew Jesus was coming back

tomorrow? Luther said: I think I would plant an apple tree; because Luther believed that that apple tree would have a future in God's new creation; and we believe that, too; thanks be to God.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Darrell Delaney. We hope you will join us next time as we examine what the Bible tells us about heaven and life after death.

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DARRELL DELANEY

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