

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #130:

SOME MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT HEAVEN

By John Temples

Tell me if you've heard this one before: A man and his wife were killed in a car wreck and awoke in heaven. As they were being welcomed, an angel asked them, "Are you glad to be here?" The man said, "Well, to tell the truth, I don't know. When I lived on earth, I played golf every day. I love to play golf. I don't know if I can enjoy being in heaven if I can't play golf. He was told, "That is no problem. You can play golf here." The angel took the man and showed him a golf course more magnificent than any he had seen on earth. He was told that he could play a different course just as nice as that one every day if he wanted to. And they were all free. And he would never hit a bad shot. The man began sobbing. His wife asked him, "What is wrong with you? You are in heaven. You can play golf every day for free on the best golf courses you have ever seen. Why are you crying?" The man replied, "Remember when I had that heart attack? If you had not insisted I go on that horrible health-food diet, I could have been here ten years sooner."

There are dozens of versions of that joke, but it illustrates how a large number of people view heaven. I'm afraid many of the conceptions folks (including even Christians) have about heaven are wrong. Let us examine some Myths and Misconceptions about Heaven.

FIRST MYTH: HEAVEN IS JUST LIKE EARTH, ONLY BETTER

This first myth is exactly what the joke suggests: that heaven is an idealized version of my present state on earth. If I am a golfer, heaven is endless golf courses. If I am an Indian, heaven is "the happy hunting ground." If I am a fisherman, heaven is one big lake full of fish. The main idea many people have is, in heaven I will do pretty much what I do now; only it will be a perfect version of my present life.

This is a myth, and it cheapens and trivializes heaven. The truth is, heaven is nothing like earth. It is true that several descriptions of heaven in the Bible, particularly in Revelation, portray it in earthly terms, such as:

- A magnificent palace/court with a king on a throne, angelic courtiers and princes, and a sea of glass
- A city with pearly gates, streets of gold, and a garden with a river flowing through it
- A place of mansions or large rooms

The reason for these earth-like descriptions is that that's the only way God can describe it to us in a way we can grasp. The truth is, *heaven is nothing like this earth*. It is a spiritual place or state, not physical. It is simply indescribable, and it is like nothing we have ever seen or imagined. So let us quit demoting heaven and making it like our earth.

SECOND MYTH: HEAVEN WILL BE A PLACE OF ENDLESS FUN

This misconception is closely akin to the first one. One of our highest priorities on earth is having fun. We often ask, "Are we having fun yet?" To some, heaven is just an endless day at the mall or Disney World with no lines. The truth is, we will "enjoy" heaven, but not in the same way we "enjoy" things here on earth. In heaven we won't need endless stimulation or amusement. Our every spiritual and emotional need will be met. There will be no unfulfilled urges or desires.

THIRD MYTH: IN HEAVEN, HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS WILL CONTINUE JUST AS ON EARTH

The prevailing view is, if I am a member of a family on earth, I will be in that family in heaven. I will relate to my wife, or my husband, or my children, etc., just as I do here. The truth is, we will NOT continue our earthly human relationships in heaven--we will each stand before God as complete, fulfilled individuals.

The question is often asked, will we know each other in heaven?¹ A church member once asked me, "Will we have to wear name tags in heaven?" The Bible makes it clear that yes, we will know each other there. Paul expected to meet and

¹ See Biblical Insights #48 for an extended discussion of this subject.

to recognize his converts after his resurrection. He told the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 2:19, “For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?” In Revelation 6, there is a scene of early Christian martyrs crying out to God. These martyrs are enjoying a foretaste of heaven, and they are crying out to God to avenge their deaths. They are dead, yet:

- They know who they are;
- They know where they are;
- And they remember their earthly circumstances and how they died.

As a matter of fact, in heaven we will not only know people we have known here, but we will also know people we have never seen: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Peter, Paul, Dorcas, etc. But here’s the thing: I will know my wife, but not as my wife. Why? Because my wife will stand before God as a complete, fulfilled, perfected individual in her own right. I will know my children, but I will not relate to them as my children. Marriage, families, procreation, and generation are all needful for our existence and happiness here, but not in heaven. Jesus made it plain: “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Matthew 22:30). Heaven will be populated not by procreation, but by propitiation!

FOURTH MYTH: HEAVEN IS OUR ETERNAL HOME, AND ETERNITY CONSISTS OF A WHOLE LOT OF TIME

If asked what eternity is, 99% of people will reply, “vast amounts or eons of time.” We even sing “When we’ve been there ten thousand years....” The truth is, time is a dimension or construct belonging to this physical state of existence. Eternity is not a vast amount of time; it is the *absence* of time. God does not exist in time. He is the all-continuing, everlasting “I Am.” In heaven there will be no time. Revelation 21:25 says, “There shall be no night there.” No clocks...no Daylight Saving Time!

FIFTH MYTH: EVERYBODY GOES TO HEAVEN

Have you noticed that anymore, nobody goes to hell? I have attended many funerals, and one thing is invariably true: the deceased always goes to heaven. No

matter how irreligious or immoral the person may have been, no matter whether he or she ever went to church or not, their ticket to glory is punched.

Now, I realize that we don't have a right to judge (pronounce sentence) as to who will and who will not be lost. It would be highly inappropriate for me to "preach someone into hell" at a funeral. But the sad truth is, some (in fact, many) will go to hell (Matthew 7:13-14). In our zeal to be kind or politically correct or non-judgmental, we might be giving people a false sense of security and neglecting to tell them the truth about eternity.

In the case of a faithful Christian, we might be pretty sure of his or her eternal destiny, and it would be appropriate to comfort each other with that assurance. But if we do not have a clear reason to believe in a favorable outcome, it would be better to emphasize how to get on the train, and leave the punching of the ticket to God.

SIXTH MYTH: IN HEAVEN, WE WILL ALL BE ISSUED WINGS AND BECOME ANGELS

The truth is, angels are a separate class of beings from humans. But didn't Jesus say we will be angels? No, he said, "In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are *like* angels of God" (Matthew 22:30). Even in the praise scenes of Revelation, angels and glorified humans are pictured as two separate classes of beings (see Revelation 4 and 7).

SEVENTH MYTH: HEAVEN HAS GOLDEN GATES AND PETER IS THE GATEKEEPER

There are probably more jokes about this supposed scenario than any other aspect of heaven. The idea came from Matthew 16:19, where Jesus told Peter He would give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven. But two things show the idea of Peter as the gatekeeper of heaven to be false:

- The gatekeeping Jesus spoke of was to be done on earth, not in heaven. The latter part of verse 19 says, "And whatever you bind *on earth* will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." The true meaning is that Peter would have the authority to retain or

remit men's sins by preaching the terms of salvation to them. When the Jews on Pentecost cried out to Peter what to do to be forgiven, Peter told them to "repent and be baptized for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38). That was the exact moment Peter began to exercise his authority as "gatekeeper."

- Also, two chapters later, the Lord gave all the apostles the same authority He had given Peter. Matthew 18:18 reads, "Assuredly, I say to you [*you* is plural in Greek], whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

The "keys" the apostles possessed were their authority through their preaching to open the door to the church, not to heaven.

EIGHTH MYTH: PEOPLE GO TO HEAVEN IMMEDIATELY WHEN THEY DIE

The Bible teaches that when people die, they do not go immediately to their final, eternal state. The rich man of Luke 16 upon his death went to Hades (Luke 16:22b-23), a Biblical term for an intermediate state between death and the resurrection. Just as the wicked dead are not yet in hell, the righteous are not yet in heaven.² Acts 2:34 says that David has not yet ascended into heaven. Jesus affirmed that only after the resurrection and the judgment will we go to our final destinations (Matthew 25:46).

CONCLUSION

I don't believe we must completely refrain from all levity when we speak of heaven; we ought to contemplate it with joy. But let us be careful not to perpetuate these myths about heaven, and let us kindly correct folks' misunderstanding about it whenever we can. Heaven is not anything like earth. Let us not fall into the trap of literalizing or trivializing it. It will totally transcend anything we know here in this life, and that even includes the closest human relationships. God will provide for every need we have for happiness and fulfillment. Our main goal should be to labor to make sure we are there to see exactly what heaven is like. --John Temples

² Even Jesus Himself did not ascend to heaven immediately upon His death. Acts 2:31 says that He (His spirit) was in Hades, the intermediate state. Also, three days after His death, when He had risen, He told Mary "I have not yet ascended to My Father" (John 20:17).