

## Let's Go Deeper...

Wednesday, April 20, 2016

In enjoyed participating in Sunday's Roundabout Sunday, rotating pulpits with five of my Disciple colleagues. We all focused on the same theme, "A New Heaven and Earth," and took as our text **Revelation 21:1-6**.

Let's go deeper on the theme of heaven.

**A disclaimer is in order:** whatever I say about the afterlife must be done with all

humility. After all, we're treading into territory where there are few solid details and much sheer speculation. Sixty-five years ago, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "It is unwise for Christians to claim any knowledge of either the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell; or to be too certain about any details of the kingdom of God in which history is consummated."<sup>1</sup>

That being said, there are some things that can be said about heaven that are grounded in Scripture, Christian tradition, and thoughtful, theological reasoning.

In **Hebrew**, the word for *heaven* is always plural. *Shamayim* = the heavens. In Genesis 1, God says, "**Let there be a dome (shamayim) in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters...God called the dome (shamayim) Sky**" (Gen 1:6-8). When we speak of "the heavens above," we're echoing the Hebrew word *shamayim*.

There is also in the Hebrew Scriptures the concept of heaven as the abode of God. Psalm 14 says, "**The LORD looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God** (Ps 14:2).

In the New Testament, the **Greek word** for heaven, *ouranos*, echoes the Hebrew Scriptures' connotation of God's abode on high. **Revelation** has more references to heaven than any book of the Bible including what are perhaps the most familiar images of heaven such as angels surrounding the throne of God (**Revelation 4**), harps and singing (**Rev 5:8-10**), and multitudes of people from every race and nation raised from death to new life, robed in white (**Rev 7:9-17**), offering up a Hallelujah Chorus to the Risen Lord Jesus Christ (**19:6-8**). It's from Revelation we get heaven described in terms of "pearly gates" and "streets of gold" (**Rev 21:21**)

**In sum:** The word *heaven* connotes several things across the pages of Scripture from the sky above to the dwelling place of God to a place of eternal bliss where the redeemed and resurrected of God live blessedly ever after.

**How shall we understand heaven?** Does one have to take the Bible's images of heaven literally? Take for instance, the notion that heaven is literally "up there" somewhere. In 1961, Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first person to reach outer space and promptly announced he didn't see God up there. Atheists said, "Told ya!," to which some believers said, "You just haven't gone up far enough," to which yet other believers said, "For heaven's sake, you don't have to take the Bible's imagery as to *where* heaven is literally to believe that it is."



<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol 2 (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949) p 294

Do you remember what it was that bothered Huckleberry Finn so much about Miss Watson's depiction of heaven? In Huck's words, "She said all a body would have to do was go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever."

To which Huck said, "If that's all it is, I don't want to go there."

A woman asked me in her dying days, "David, is heaven really a place of eternal rest?" To which I put on my best pastoral assurance voice and said, "Oh yes, Allene, absolutely." To which she said, "Well, I hope not because I can't bear the thought of lying around in a hammock forever twiddling my thumbs. I've been sick so long that I'm looking forward to being able to *do* things again. There are so many things I haven't had a chance to try yet in this life. I don't want eternal rest. I want eternal life!"

Taking the Bible's images of heaven seriously rather than merely literally, what may we look forward to with some assurance "beyond the pearly gates?"

**Reconciliation.** Someone said, "If you want to know how God will act in the future, all you have to do is notice how God acted in the past." Well, the God we know in Scripture and in Jesus has always been about reconciliation. If it's true that God at long last reconciled Esau and his conniving brother Jacob, then heaven surely means reconciliation. For nations, too! Says Isaiah: **"They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore"** (Isa 2:4). Heaven means reconciliation.

**Healing** is front and center in the Bible's promise of heaven. God has always been about healing. In each of Jesus' miracles, we glimpse a foretaste of heaven – the blind see, the lame walk, the sick are made well. Says John, **"God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. And death will be more, neither will there be suffering, nor sorrow, nor pain anymore."** Society will be healed, too. Says John upon seeing the Tree of Life in the center of the New Jerusalem as it was at the center of the Garden of Eden: **"And the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations"** (Rev 22:2). Justice for *all*. Hunger satisfied. Thirst quenched. All creation healed and redeemed.

**Reunion.** Who among us does not yearn to be assured that whatever else heaven promises, surely it promises reunion with loved ones who have gone before us? And above all else, full and complete (re)union with God. Though locked up behind bars in Rome, Paul longed for when he could at long last **"be with Christ"** (Phil 1:23).

What's beyond the pearly gates? Reconciliation. Healing. Reunion.

**"Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."** (1 Corinthians 2:9)

*"When we've been there ten thousand years bright shining as the sun,  
we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun"*

**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."**

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Let all the people say, AMEN.