

You Can't Understand Heaven, Unless...
You understand history
Gen. 1-2; Rev. 21-22
Hal Seed

Good morning everybody!

Find a Bible and open it to Col. 3:1, p. 1167.

In his book, "Heaven," Randy Alcorn writes:

The sense that we will live forever somewhere has shaped every civilization in human history. Australian aborigines pictured Heaven as a distant island beyond the western horizon. The early Finns thought it was an island in the faraway east. Mexicans, Peruvians, and Polynesians believed that they went to the sun or moon after death. Native Americans believe that in the afterlife their spirits would hunt the spirits of buffalo. The Gilgamesh epic, an ancient Babylonian legend, refers to the resting place of heroes and hints at a tree of life. In the pyramids of Egypt, the embalmed bodies had maps placed beside them as guides to the future world.... Although these depictions of the afterlife differ, the unifying testimony of the human heart... is belief in life after death. Anthropological evidence suggests that every culture has a God-given sense of the eternal – that this world is not all there is.

Col. 3:1 says, "Since, then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."

What's the place above? Heaven. Set your heart on heaven. Set your mind on heaven. After all, you're going to spend a lot more time there than here.

Suppose, during college, you knew you were going to graduate and move to Switzerland. Suppose you knew that you were going to spend the rest of your days there? Wouldn't it make sense to find out as much as you could about Switzerland?

What people are like there? What the laws are? The traditions? The values? The history?

One day you're going to graduate from this life, and spend the rest of your existence in the next. So you ought to find out about it. Study for it. Prepare for it. Anticipate it.

The Problem

Here's the problem. 1 Cor. 2:9 says:

It is written:

No eye has seen,

No ear has heard,

No mind can conceive of what God has prepared for those who love Him.

1 Cor. 2:9 is a verse quoted often at funerals and memorial services. It's about heaven, and it stops almost everyone from finding out more about heaven. It would lead you to believe that no one can know what heaven is like, wouldn't you agree? Who can conceive of what God has prepared for those He loves? Answer: No one. Unless you add v. 10: "... but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit."

The actual point Paul is making is that we CAN know about heaven:

It is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, No mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" – ... but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

One of the great misunderstandings about heaven is that no one can understand it. The Bible indicates, You can't understand heaven... on your own. You can't understand it... without help. Just like you can't understand Switzerland, without a picture, or an explanation from someone who's been there.

But someone has been there – the One who created it. Paul's point is, heaven *would* be a mystery, but it's not, because God has revealed it to us. He's told us all about it. And that's what we're going to be studying together between now and Christmas.

Heaven.

Did you know that:

1. Every civilization believes we will live somewhere forever.

So what will heaven be like?

Will we retire there?

Will we play harps?

Will we eat?

Will we have pets?

Will we have wings?

Will we have status?

Will we have bodies?

We're going to discover the answers to all of those over the next few weeks.

If you and I were both in college, getting ready for the rest of our lives and preparing for our careers, if we both wind up in Switzerland, and I spent some time learning about Switzerland and preparing to live in Switzerland and you didn't, do you think I would have an advantage when we graduated?

Conversely, if you and I were in college, getting ready to spend our lives in Switzerland, and *you* spent time learning and preparing, do you think *you* would have an advantage when we got there?

Looking Forward

I'm looking forward to Christmas this year, how about you? I'm going to take a vacation next year, I'm looking forward to that as well.

You know what the early Christians looked forward to?

2. Early Christians looked forward to going home. They looked forward to heaven.

In the Roman catacombs, where the bodies of many Christians were buried, you'll find tombs with inscriptions like these:

- *In Christ, Alexander is not dead, but lives.*
- *One who lives with God.*
- *He was taken up into his eternal home.*

In AD. 125, a Greek named Aristides wrote to a friend explaining why the new religion of Christianity was so successful. He said, *If any righteous man among the Christians passes from this world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God, and they escort his body with songs and thanksgiving as if he were setting out from one place to another nearby.*

In A.D. 200, Bishop Cyprian wrote, *Let us greet the day which assigns each of us to his own home, which snatches us from this place and sets us free from the snares of the world, and restores us to paradise and the kingdom. Anyone who has been in the foreign lands longs to return to his own native land... We regard paradise as our native land.*

We learned a few weeks ago that Paul looked forward to going home. He said in Phil. 1, *To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain... I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. Philippians 1:21, 23*

The Place

Jesus told His disciples, *In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you. John 14:2*

Which leads to the first thing you must understand about heaven:

3. God never gave up on His original idea for human beings to live on Earth.

God calls it a "New Earth," but it will be earth, nonetheless.

Over these next few weeks we're going to learn that there is a temporary heaven – that's where many of our loved ones are now, and there will be a permanent heaven, and God calls that permanent place, "The New Earth."

In weeks to come, I'll show you many verses that support this. But today, I want to show you *why* heaven will be the New Earth, why God is so committed to preparing a place for us.

Hearing that the new heaven will be the new earth, may sound very strange to you, I know.

The Context

Here's my premise for this morning:

4. You Can't Understand Heaven, Unless You Understand History. You can't understand heaven unless you understand what God intended originally when we made us, and what God intends to do when we are finally mature.

So let's get to our history by turning all the way back to the book of Genesis.

A. The Beginning...

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and at the end of each day of Creation He looked at what He'd done and said, "this is good."

At the very end of His creative work, in Genesis 1:31, ***God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. Genesis 1:31.*** God pronounced it very good.

1. The Earth is very good.

Genesis 1 is the description of creation from afar. Genesis 2 is the description of creation from upclose (read 2:4ff). I want to suggest to you that this is not a coincidence. The first chapter of the Bible is the big picture description of Creation. The second chapter is the "little picture" description of Creation. In just a minute, I'll show you that the last chapter of the Bible is the big picture re-creation of the original world, and the second-to-last chapter is the "little picture" re-creation. The Bible's bookends mirror each other.

So, in Genesis 2, God puts the finishing touches on the creation of the Earth, and in the middle of Eden He places the tree of life.

2. In the middle of it was the tree of life.

v. 10

3. A river ran through it.

Look at v. 15-17 (up to that time...)

4. There was no death.

And Adam and Eve lived in paradise for who knows how long. The Bible doesn't say. Fast forward to humanity's darkest day, which took place in Genesis 3, when our first parents ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Immediately following that, in Genesis 3:17, God says to Adam, "Cursed is the ground..."

5. The world gets cursed by sin.

Which means that everything has problems. Not just humans. Insects become “bugs” because they start to “bug” us. Plants grow thorns to protect themselves, viruses become not just symbiotic, but parasitic. Animals become enemies, predators and prey.

And in v. 21, death enters the world. God makes garments from animal skins for Adam and Eve. He gets them from killing the first animal ever.

6. Death enters

In vs. 22-23, God banishes humans from the Garden, so they won’t eat of the tree of life and live forever in their cursed condition.

7. People are removed from Paradise.

That’s the beginning. In the God Questions, I call this, “Act I.”

Act II is everything from Genesis 4 to Revelation 20. It’s the part of history we’re familiar with. The part with war and hatred and famine and sorrow, because we’re under the curse of our own sin. It’s also the part where God is at work, but behind the scenes, except for the one part where He comes to earth and pays for the sins of the world by giving His life on the cross.

Act III begins in Rev. 21, which starts with these words: (vs. 1-4)

B. The End...

We learn from v. 1 that, where at the end of Act I, People are removed from Paradise,

7’ People are returned to Paradise.

We learn from v. 4 that where death had entered the world,

6’ Death ends.

We learn that

5’ The world gets cleansed from sin.

And, once again,

4’ There is no death anymore.

Like Genesis 2, this is the upclose description of the end.

Now, turn to the final chapter, Rev. 22, where we get the big picture description of it.
v. 1 (read v. 1-5)

So,

3’ A river runs through it.

And, once again,

2' In the middle is the tree of life.

And,

1' The new Earth is very good.

Can you see what God is doing?

Put this all together, and it looks like this:

A. The Beginning...

1. The Earth is _____. (Gen. 1:31)
2. In the middle of it was _____. (Gen. 2:9)
3. A river _____. (Gen. 2:10)
4. There was no _____. (Gen. 2:17)
5. The world gets _____ by sin. (Gen. 3:17)
6. Death _____. (Gen. 3:21)
7. People are _____ from Paradise. (Gen. 3:23)

B. The End...

- 7' People are _____ to Paradise. (Rev. 21:1)
- 6' Death _____. (Rev. 21:4)
- 5' The world gets _____ from sin. (Rev. 21:4)
- 4' There is no _____. (Rev. 21:4)
- 3' A river _____. (Rev. 22:1)
- 2' In the middle is _____. (Rev. 22:2)
- 1' The new Earth is _____. (Rev. 22:5)

In the beginning, God created a perfect world. That world was called, "Earth." God has never given up on His original idea of human beings living on the Earth. Since we polluted the first Earth, He's going to unpollute it. He's going to re-created it. Just like God doesn't give up on humans when we mess up, He doesn't give up on the earth either. Instead of trashing it (or us) and starting over, He reclaims, rebuilds, restores.

This world seems bad. Bad things happen here. We like some of the things that go on here, but not all of them. This place needs to get fixed. – God is in the process of fixing it. And when He fixes it, it will be very good.

5. Applications:

A. Don't judge God's plan until it's complete.

We're in Act II. The crisis portion of every drama is intense and painful. But the resolve, the conclusion, the end, is coming. And

B. The best is yet to come.

The conclusion of the story will end so well that when you close the book, you'll say, "that was so good!" Only instead of actually closing the book, you'll live in it. That's heaven.

But, before *that* heaven, there will be an intermediate heaven.

C. There is an intermediate heaven. We'll learn about that either next week, or the week to follow, depending on how we pace things out next week. I haven't decided yet.

But, make no mistake, God says that in the future

D. There will be a new heaven and a new earth.

In 1952, Florence Chadwick waded into the waters of Catalina Island. She intended to become the first woman to swim from Catalina to California.

The weather was foggy, so she could barely see the boats that were accompanying her. Her mom, in the boat beside her kept saying, "Florence, you're close, you can make it." But after 15 hours, Florence was physically and emotionally spent. She stopped swimming and asked to be pulled out of the water.

As she stood up in the boat, she could see above the fog that see was just ½ mile from shore. At the news conference the next day she said, "All I could see was the fog... I think, if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it."

Friends, the shore of your life, the thing you're swimming towards every day of your life, is the God who made you. He resides in heaven. If you are feeling like you don't want to go on, like you can't make it, what you need is a glimpse of the shore. That's what we'll be seeing for the next four weeks.

A Better Country

The Bible says that God's children are... *...longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Hebrews 11:16*

I want to show you that country this Christmas season. It's where Jesus came from, and where those who put their trust in Him will spend eternity.

The great author C.S. Lewis observed that *"If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next."*

The Apostles changed to Roman Empire, because they set their sights on a better country. Men like William Wilberforce abolished slavery, because they were thinking about a better country.

We need a new generation of people fixated with heaven who will change our world, who understand what God is up to, and where that will lead one day.

On Thanksgiving morning, my daughter Amy and I ran the Oceanside Turkey Trot. At about the 2 mile mark, I thought I was completely winded. I said to Amy, "I'm going to walk a little." She said, "No dad, you can make it!"

So I slowed my pace a little bit, but I kept running. And you know what? I'm really glad I did. I didn't run the perfect race, I didn't run the fastest race, but I now live on the other side of that race, and will be able to say forever that I *ran* the whole race, I did not quit.

***It is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard,
No mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"***

But we can see it, we can hear of it, and we can conceive it, because...

– God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. – 1 Corinthians 2:9-10

We're going to discover all that He's revealed together over the next four weeks.

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