

The Meaning of Heaven:  
An ethereal spirit world or a tangible new earth?  
by Dr. David R. Reagan



For many years I had little desire to go to Heaven. My only interest in Heaven was prompted by a desire to avoid Hell. I just couldn't get excited about being a disembodied spirit residing in an ethereal world, floating around on a cloud playing a harp.

My interest in Heaven developed slowly over a long period of time. It became a passion, not as a result of my study of prophecy, but because of my growing relationship with the Lord. The more I came to know Him, the more I desired to be with Him.

### **The New Earth**

The reason my study of prophecy did not play the key role in developing my interest in Heaven is because the Bible is strangely silent about the subject. The Bible tells us in great detail what the Millennium will be like, but it gives us almost no detailed information about the eternal state.

What it does tell us often comes as a great surprise to most Christians because the scriptures about Heaven have been so terribly spiritualized. For example, the Bible plainly says the Redeemed will spend eternity on a new earth.

Isaiah was the first to speak of this truth when he spoke of "the new heavens and the new earth" which will endure forever before the Lord (Isaiah 66:22). This truth is repeated in the book of Revelation where the apostle John says he was shown a new earth, "for the first heaven and the first earth passed away" (Revelation 21:1).

John goes on to describe the New Jerusalem descending to the new earth, "coming down out of heaven from God" (Revelation 21:2). And then he states that God Himself will come to live on the new earth:

*"Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them."* — Revelation 21:3

This truth had already been revealed to the Old Testament prophets. While being taken on a prophetic tour of the millennial Temple, Ezekiel was told by his guide (the Lord Jesus in a pre-incarnate appearance): "Son of man, this is the place of My throne and the place of the soles of My feet, where I will dwell among the sons of Israel forever" (Ezekiel 43:7).

The Redeemed are going to dwell forever in new bodies on a new earth in a New Jerusalem in the presence of Almighty God and His Son, Jesus. Heaven will come to earth!

### **The New Jerusalem**

The most detailed information which the Scriptures give about Heaven pertains to our eternal abode — the New Jerusalem. Twenty verses in Chapter 21 of Revelation are devoted to a description of it.

The information contained in Revelation 21 is not the first reference in the Bible to the New Jerusalem. It is mentioned in Hebrews 11:10 as a city "whose architect and builder is God." Jesus made a reference to it that is recorded in John 14:1-4. He called it His "Father's house," and He said He would prepare a place in it for His Church.

Jesus is currently expanding, embellishing, and beautifying this house which God the Father designed and built. Jesus is preparing it for His bride, just as in Old Testament times a bridegroom would add a room onto his father's house to accommodate himself and his bride.

The city is described in Revelation as beautifully decorated, like "a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2). Later, John actually refers to the city as the bride of the Lamb (Revelation 21:9), because the city contains the bride of Christ, His Church.

I believe this implies that at the end of the Millennium all the Redeemed will be taken off the earth and placed in the new Jerusalem which will most likely be suspended in the heavens. From that vantage point we will watch as God burns up this earth and reshapes it like a hot ball of wax into a new earth, a perfected earth like the one which God created in the beginning. Then, we will be lowered down to that new earth inside the new Jerusalem.

The city will be spectacular in both size and appearance. It will be in the form of a cube that is 1,500 miles in every direction! And it will reflect "the glory of God" (Revelation 21:11,16).

### **The Size of the City**

The incredible size means the city would stretch from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico and from the Atlantic coast of America to Colorado. It would also extend 1,500 miles into the atmosphere.

This tremendous extension of the city vertically into the air is a clue that the new earth may be considerably larger than the current earth. Otherwise, the city would not be proportional to its surroundings.

Would such a city be able to adequately accommodate all the Redeemed? That's a good question. The best answer I have ever run across is the one provided by Dr. Henry Morris in his book *The Revelation Record*.

Dr. Morris postulates the total number of Redeemed might be as many as 20 billion. He further guesses that approximately 75 percent of the new Jerusalem might be devoted to streets, parks and public buildings. Can 20 billion people be squeezed into only 25 percent of the space of this city?

The answer is yes! In fact, it can be done easily. Each person would have a cubical block with about 75 acres of surface on each face. We are talking about an immense city!

This assumes, of course, that our new glorified bodies will be immune to the current law of gravity, as are the bodies of angels. This is a safe assumption, for Philippians 3:2 says that our glorified bodies will be like the body of Jesus after His resurrection, and His body was not subject to gravity, as evidenced by His ascension into Heaven.

This is the reason the city will be so tall. We will be able to utilize and enjoy all levels of it. There will be vertical streets as well as horizontal ones.

### **The Beauty of the City**

And what streets they will be! The Bible says they will be "pure gold, like transparent glass" (Revelation 21:21). In fact, the whole city will be made of pure gold with the appearance of clear glass (Revelation 21:18).

The city will sit on a foundation made of 12 layers of precious stones (Revelation 21:19-20). Each layer will feature the name of one of the 12 apostles (Revelation 21:14). The city will be surrounded by a jasper wall over 200 feet high (Revelation 21:17). There will be 12 gates, three on each side, and each one will be named for one of the tribes of Israel (Revelation 21: 12).

And yes, the gates will be "pearly gates," each one consisting of one huge pearl (Revelation 21:21).

Best of all, God the Father and Jesus will both reside in the city with us (Revelation 21:22). The Shekinah glory of God will illuminate the city constantly, and thus there will be no night nor will there ever be any need for any type of artificial light or the light of the sun (Revelation 22:5).

The throne of God and His Son will be in the city, and "a river of the water of life, clear as crystal" will flow down the middle of the city's main street with the tree of life growing on both sides of the river, yielding 12 kinds of fruit — a different fruit each month (Revelation 22:1-2).

That's it. God's Word only gives us a glimpse of Heaven. But what a tantalizing glimpse it is! It's a glimpse of perfect peace and joy and beauty.

### **The Activities of Heaven**

What will we do for eternity? Again, the Word is strangely silent. All it says is that we "shall serve Him" (Revelation 22:3).

I have fantasized a lot about our Heavenly activities. I can imagine us spending a great deal of our time in worship, singing the psalms of King David, with him directing us. I think it is likely that our talents will be magnified, and we will be able to sing or paint or write with a majesty and scope we never imagined possible — and all to the glory of God!

Surely we will spend considerable time in the study of God's Word. Think of studying the gospel of John with the apostle John as the teacher! I thrill to the thought of Jesus teaching the Old Testament, even as He did to His disciples following His resurrection (Luke 24:44-45). The Word of God is infinite in its depth, and I believe we will continue learning from it forever.

As we study the Word, I believe we will grow in spiritual maturity in the likeness of Jesus. And since God is infinite, no matter how much we grow in His likeness, there will just be that much more growing ahead of us. In this regard, I suspect that our spiritual growth will pick up where it left off in this life.

Sometimes, I really get far out in my thinking about Heaven. For example, I can imagine the Lord giving us the opportunity to see "instant video replays" of great events in Bible history. I hope so. I would like to see the dividing of the Red Sea, the destruction of Jericho, and the resurrection of Lazarus.

And what about tours of the universe? Surely we will be able to travel through space in our glorified bodies and see the miracles of God's creation up close. Imagine visiting all the planets in our galaxy as well as touring thousands of other galaxies!

But what does it mean in Revelation 22:3 where it says we will serve God as His "bond-servants"? I'm not sure. I suppose it means we will be given productive work to do. What that work will be I can't say for sure. But there is a hint in Revelation 22:5 where it says we will reign with the Lord "forever and ever."

To reign implies, of necessity, that we must reign over someone. Who will that be? Again, there is an intriguing clue. Revelation 21:24-27 refers to "nations" that will live on the new earth outside the New Jerusalem. Revelation 22:2 indicates that the people composing these nations will be in fleshly bodies, for it says that the leaves of the tree of life will be used for "the healing of the nations."

Who are these "nations"? This is one of the greatest mysteries of Bible prophecy. There are as many different guesses as there are commentaries on the book of Revelation.

Could they be the Redeemed who accept Jesus during the Millennium? Nothing is said about the ultimate destiny of those who are saved during the Millennium. No promises are made to them of glorified bodies.

I don't know the answer. It is one of those areas where we look into a dimly lit mirror and will not understand fully until we stand "face to face" with the Lord (1 Corinthians 13:12).

### **Heavenly Fellowship**

This brings me to the greatest blessing of Heaven. Revelation 22:4 says we shall see the face of God!

The Word says in Exodus 33:20 that no man has ever seen the face of God. But we will be given that privilege when we fellowship with Him in Heaven.

And that is really what Heaven is all about. We will experience an intimacy with the Lord that transcends anything possible in this life. We were created for fellowship with God (John 4:23), and that purpose will reach its zenith in the eternal state as we live in God's presence.

That is why Paul wrote, "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). He went on to explain that to continue living in the flesh meant the opportunity for fruitful labor in the Lord's kingdom. But he still had a desire to depart this life, for that departure would open the door for sweet, intimate, personal fellowship with the Lord (Philippians 1:22-23).

What about you? Are you clinging to this world, or do you yearn for Heaven?

The more you come to know the Lord, the more you will love Him. And the more you love Him, the more You will desire to be with Him.

That's only natural. We always desire to be with those whom we love.

### **Longing for Heaven**

I love my wife dearly. We have been married for more than thirty years. I have to travel a lot. I call her every night I'm on the road to tell her that I love her. I send her mushy love cards. And when I have to be gone for an extended period, I send her gifts like bouquets of flowers.

I love to talk with my wife by phone. I love to send her love notes. I love to surprise her with gifts. But none of these are substitutes for being with her! When you love someone you want to be with them.

In like manner, I love to fellowship with the Lord in worship, in Bible study, and in prayer. But these spiritual activities are no substitute for actually being with the Lord.

Because I love Him, I want to be with Him. Personal, intimate fellowship with the Lord — that is the essence of Heaven. May it become a reality very soon!