

## **Is There a Heaven?** **Psalm 139, Revelation 21: 1-3**

Question:     What really happens to our souls when we die? Is there a heaven and, if so, who goes?

The young baseball catcher stepped out onto the field of dreams. The farmer gasped, “That’s my father with his whole life before him, before years had worn him down -- before he died angry and embittered.” The young ballplayer looked unknowing at adult son and asked, “Mister, is this heaven?” You probably know that the answer was, “No, it’s Iowa.” In ways that truly mattered to that young man, however, yes it was heaven. We have met to worship today in this beautiful outdoor location, at a literal *field of dreams*. Looking around, I can say, “Yes, this is heaven. Its not all of heaven. It doesn’t exhaust my ideas of heaven, but this could be heaven.”

Heaven needs a thick description. I hope and believe that there is more than we can see, something we perceive in the deepest depths of our spirits. Is this self-deception? That’s possible -- or maybe there’s at least an element of insight and sacred imagination at work as well. Heaven is the reality that illuminates all the rest of existence, but is there a heaven where our souls go when we die? That’s the question for today.

I’m guessing that each of you has some ideas and some images about heaven. So, what do you think about heaven? Is there heaven after we die? What images of heaven are meaningful for you? One image that touches me is the song called Graceland by composer Paul Simon. The image is of heaven as a place of reconciliation and healing. Simon wrote the song in the wake of the end of his marriage. Following are some quotations from *Graceland*.

I'm going to Graceland, Graceland in Memphis, Tennessee  
Poor boys and pilgrims with families  
and we are going to Graceland  
My traveling companion is nine years old  
He is the child of my first marriage  
But I've reason to believe  
we both will be received in Graceland  
She comes back to tell me she's gone  
As if I didn't know that, as if I didn't know my own bed  
As if I'd never noticed the way she brushed her hair from her forehead  
And she said losing love is like a window in your heart  
Everybody sees you're blown apart  
Everybody sees the wind blow  
I'm going to Graceland, going to Graceland  
And my traveling companions are ghosts & empty sockets  
I'm looking at ghosts and empties  
But I've reason to believe we all will be received in Graceland  
For reasons I cannot explain,  
there's some part of me wants to see Graceland  
And I may be obliged to defend every love, every ending  
Or maybe there's no obligation now  
Maybe I've a reason to believe we all will be received in Graceland

So, is there a heaven? What really happens to our souls when we die? Is there a heaven and, if so, who goes? If there's a heaven, everyone goes though I'm not sure everyone has the ability to recognize heaven. Our ability to see heaven in this life I think affects the ability to recognize heaven after we die. Everyone goes, but I'm not sure everyone knows -- not at first, but we can grow to know.

This question about heaven, prompts two questions for me. Why do you want to know? The second question is "why are you asking me?" Seriously, why!? Why do you want to know what happens to our souls when we die? Why do we want to know who goes to heaven and if there is a heaven? It's important why we want to know. Is it to ease own fears -- that no matter what happens here, we'll ultimately be safe and okay? There's no shame in feeling that way or in admitting that's why, but I think Jesus would have said that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a person to enter the kingdom of heaven out of fear. That's just a guess, of course. Jesus always called people, and calls us, to step out of our fear -- to live from a sense of possibility, hope, courage, and abundance. Jesus calls us to not be looking out for #1!

If we want to know out of a sense of possibility and the prospect of continuing the journey in God, moving more fully into the Oneness we have begun in our present experience in the Spirit, that could be different. If we want to know out of desire to know the oneness that Jesus experienced in God, that could make all the difference in what heaven will be for you.

So, the second question -- why are you asking me? I mean that seriously. This is an honest answer, I don't know -- not really. I can tell you what the Bible says about heaven. Curiously, it talks about heaven, but doesn't reveal much new and groundbreaking about heaven. The biblical descriptions of heaven tend to reflect the cultural and religious understandings of the time. The Bible does not focus on the nature of heaven. In fact, heaven seems to be synonymous with God. The biblical focus tends to be that of how an awareness of the afterlife affects this life and how we live. What scripture tells us clearly is how God relates to life on earth.

The psalmists (Psalm 139: 7-10) tells us that God is everywhere. In life and in death, we cannot hide from God and we will never be lost from God. This same idea is echoed later by the apostle Paul (Romans 8):

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (NRSV)

We proclaim a "God in whom we live and move and have our being." This also suggests that God is the one "in whom we die through eternity and have our being and our non-being." To live is God and to die is God.

The psalmist and the apostle agree that there is no place where God is not. Our relationship is not only with God but also in God and it is unbreakable.

The Bible ends with a new creation. In Revelation 21: 1-3, we read: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth." Heaven and earth appear to be a matched set -- both created together and both re-created together. The new creation story reflects the old creation story from Genesis 1: "God created the heavens and the earth." These two concepts are distinct but closely related. Heaven reflects the presence of God that we perceive here and now -- what we see in ourselves and our relationships as we seek the deep meaning life

I seriously do not know for sure what happens to our souls after we die. I've never died and have no first-hand knowledge and no experience after death. I have experienced losing loved-ones to death and being with several people approaching death. I have experienced officiating for many funerals and standing at many gravesides. As human beings, know we will someday die. Science tells us that matter is never lost to the universe. It is only transformed -- moved around. That may be a good starting place for theology. What happens after death may well be transformation, maybe moving around? But we are always in the hand of God, always within God. Is that good enough? Is that enough to know? That's up to you.

I'm convinced that the God who calls us through Jesus to step into new patterns of living. God calls each of us, and all of us, to value justice and peace, to put our money where our faith is, to find solidarity with the powerless, and to bring reconciliation to rich and poor together here and now in our lives. And God continues to work for our growth always, eternally.

There is more to life than what we see. I believe in what is infinite and eternal. I long for it. This year, I stood at my father's graveside. I found that I was profoundly grateful for his life and for his continued life in my family and in me. I found that I was not at all concerned about what would become of his soul. It is in the hands of God. I was not concerned about ever being with him again because his (presence is always with me. I was aware of how our relationship had changed. I think we are much more like brothers now than like father and son.

I suspect heaven is a process of letting go familiar patterns of relationship. Heaven means that we find in God's Spirit the deeper forms of those relationships -- a deeper sense of my own life in that Spirit. The legendary wise man Nasrudin was hanging out at the local teahouse with his friends. The discussion turned to the question of life after death and Nasrudin was strangely quiet. They finally turned to him and said, "you're hotshot philosopher and wise man. Tell us, "Is there life after death." Nasrudin said two things for us to remember. He said, "It's people who don't know what to do with this life who want another that will last forever." So figure out what to do with your life here and now. He then said, the real question remains, "Is there life before death?"

I invite you to journey with us at Crossroads Church like many of you journeyed to this field of dreams. We are seeking to live life before death with joy, meaning, courage, and generosity. Learn with us to see heaven around you, within you, and between us. It is our calling as a faith community to shine the light of faith on the journey of our lives and on the world so that others will find hope through us, through you. I invite you join that journey with us or to deepen your committee to that journey. When people come to Crossroads, whether here at the field of dreams or down at 79<sup>th</sup> and Main, and ask "Is this heaven?" we can honestly say, "Oh yes. Come join us on the journey."