

ANSWERS TO COMMON
QUESTIONS ABOUT

Heaven & Eternity

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To the memory of our fathers

Millard Nile Demy
1916–1997

Alton Desmond Ice
1922–1999

“Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of His saints.”
Psalm 116:15 KJV

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About This Series

The Answers to Common Questions series is designed to provide readers a brief summary and overview of individual topics and issues in Christian theology. For quick reference and ease in studying, the works are written in a question and answer format. The questions follow a logical progression so that those reading straight through a work will receive a greater appreciation for the topic and the issues involved. The volumes are thorough, though not exhaustive, and can be used as a set or as single volume studies. Each volume is fully documented and contains a recommended reading list for those who want to pursue the subject in greater detail.

The study of theology and the many issues within Christianity is an exciting and rewarding endeavor. For two thousand years, Christians have proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ and sought to accurately define and defend the doctrines of their faith as recorded in the Bible. In 2 Timothy 2:15, Christians are exhorted: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.” The goal of these books is to help you in your diligence and accuracy as you study God’s Word and its influence in history and thought through the centuries.

Introduction

Sometimes, the most significant news in the newspaper is found not on the front page or in the headlines but in the obituaries. If we have not already been notified by friends and loved ones, it is there that we learn of the death of friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. These brief lines and columns remind us of the brevity of life and the certainty of death. When we think about our own death or the death of a loved one or friend, theology becomes very personal.

In ages past, in the midst of suffering and death, Job asked, “If a man dies, will he live again?” (Job 14:14). Centuries passed before Jesus Christ provided the definitive answer to that question. He said in John 11:25–26, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die.” On the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus told the disciples, “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:2–3).

The place of which Jesus spoke is heaven. It is the hope of all who believe in Him. Throughout the centuries, heaven has been depicted by artists and poets, authors and preachers, and many others seeking to give impressions and insights to their audiences. Augustine,

Dante, John Milton, John Bunyan, C. S. Lewis, and scores of others have written on heaven and its glories. It is sung about in hymns, spirituals, classical music, folk music, rock music, and country and western music. It is spoken of in jokes and in sermons, in hospitals and in classrooms. Almost everyone has some vague notions about it, some of them biblical and some of them unbiblical. The promise of heaven has brought hope to the weary, comfort to the grieving, and reassurance to those struggling in spiritual battles.

Heaven is very real. In an age of fantasy, special effects, mysticism, and spiritual apathy, it's easy for heaven to be misrepresented. Yet, the Bible is very clear about the existence and purpose of heaven. Heaven and the eternal state are part of God's plan for the ages; therefore, heaven and prophecy are integrally related.

What we believe about life and death, good and evil, and heaven and hell is most significant. C. S. Lewis wrote of heaven's importance, noting, "If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. . . . It is because Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one."¹ How true that is for all of us! When we think about heaven, it is of the utmost personal and theological significance.

Eschatology is the theological study of future events based upon Bible prophecy. All of the biblical prophecies regarding the future will be fulfilled according to God's plan and timing. Eschatology is about future events and personalities. It also relates to every person who has lived, is living, or will live. The Bible's teachings about heaven and hell relate to what we might term "personal eschatology." Heaven and hell are very real and very personal. They relate to your future.

Pastor and author Steven J. Lawson has written the following about heaven:

Make no mistake about it, Heaven is a real place. It is not a state of mind. Not a figment of man's imagination. Not a

philosophical concept. Not a religious abstraction. Not a sentimental dream. Not the medieval fancy of an ancient scientist. Not the worn-out superstition of a liberal theologian. It's an actual place. A location far more real than where you presently live. . . . It is a real place where God lives. It is the real place from which Christ came into this world. And it is the real place to which Christ returned at His ascension—really!²

The Bible doesn't tell us everything we would like to know about heaven, but it does tell some things. It gives us glimpses of the future to encourage us in the present. Let's see what the Bible teaches about heaven—the glorious future that awaits all Christians.

Answers to Common Questions About Heaven and Eternity is designed to provide readers a brief summary of this prophetic topic. The theological perspective presented throughout this volume is that of premillennialism and pretribulationism. The authors recognize that this view is not the only position embraced by evangelical Christians, but we believe that it is the most widely held and prominent perspective. It is also our conviction that premillennialism, and specifically pretribulationism, best explains the prophetic plan of God as revealed in the Bible. For those wishing to know more about Bible prophecy, we encourage you to read our companion volume in this series, *Answers to Common Questions About the End Times*.

What Is Heaven?

1. Where does the Bible teach about heaven?

English translations of the Bible contain more than five hundred occurrences of the word *heaven*. Most of the verses use either the Hebrew word *shamayim*, which is literally translated “the heights,” or the Greek word *ouranos*, which is literally translated “that which is raised up.” These words are used throughout the Bible to refer to three different locations or realms: the atmosphere, the universe, and the abode of God. These three divisions have been recognized throughout history in both Christian and non-Christian sources, especially in classical Greek literature.¹ Although our concern is primarily the third usage, all three usages are common in the Bible.

The Atmospheric Heaven

Examples of this usage are seen in passages such as Deuteronomy 11:11, 17; 28:12, 24; Joshua 10:11; Psalms 18:13; 147:8; Proverbs 23:5; and Zechariah 2:6; 6:5. Verses such as these emphasize the “first heaven,” or the atmospheric realm. It is of this realm that Isaiah speaks when he records God’s words in Isaiah 55:9–11:

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from

heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

The Universe, or Celestial Skies

Examples of this usage are seen in passages such as Genesis 1:14; 15:5; Exodus 20:4; Psalm 33:6; Jeremiah 10:2; and Hebrews 1:10. Frequently, the celestial skies or heavens are used biblically in figures of speech, such as a hyperbole (Deut. 1:28; Dan. 4:11, 20, 22), or a metonymy, which emphasizes totality (Deut. 4:39; 30:19; Matt. 24:31; Col. 1:23). It is of this realm of the celestial skies and the totality of the universe that we read in Deuteronomy 30:19: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants.” It is also in this sense that we read of Jesus Christ’s authority in Matthew 28:18–20:

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

The Abode of God

Examples of this usage are the primary focus of this study and are seen in passages such as Psalm 33:13–14; Isaiah 63:15; Matthew 5:16, 45; 6:1, 9; 7:11, 21; 18:10; and Revelation 3:12; 21:10. It is the abode of God that Jesus spoke of when He stated in Matthew 10:32–33, “Therefore everyone therefore who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven.

But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.”

Jesus referred to heaven in this sense many times throughout His ministry. It is the abode of God, the “third heaven,” of which Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 12:2. It is also of this usage that Paul writes throughout his letters to the early churches.

Heaven is more than a mystical notion, an imaginary dream-land, or a philosophical concept. It is a real and present place in which God, the Creator of all things, lives. It is a place spoken of throughout the Bible. It is the true home of all Christians. It is where Jesus came from at the incarnation, where He ascended to after the resurrection, and from whence He will come again to receive all of those who truly follow Him. It is the place that the writer of Hebrews calls a “distant country” and for which those in his “hall of faith” longed:

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. (11:13–16)

2. Is there any difference between heaven and eternity?

When we talk about heaven, we are referring to a location or place. When we speak of eternity, we are talking about an era or eternal state. Heaven exists now even though we are not experiencing it. Eternity is a yet future dimension of time (without end). Heaven exists now and will continue to exist throughout eternity.

3. Where is heaven, and does it exist now?

The apostle Paul, writing to us as Christians in Philippians 3:20, declares “our citizenship is in heaven.” Heaven is somewhere beyond earth and our universe. Heaven is in existence now and has been the dwelling place of God since eternity past. Heaven is the dwelling place of God, although God is not limited spatially to heaven because He is omnipresent. His omnipresence is reflected in Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple. “Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You, how much less this house which I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27).

In Psalm 139:8, the psalmist also speaks of God’s omnipresence, stating, “If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.” God’s omnipresence does not limit Him to heaven, but heaven is His habitation. John MacArthur writes,

So to say that God dwells in heaven is not to say that He is contained there. But it is uniquely His home, His center of operations, His command post. It is the place where His throne resides. And it’s where the most perfect worship of Him occurs. It is in that sense that we say heaven is His dwelling-place.²

Although heaven is a place, it is not limited by physical boundaries or boundaries of time and space. It can be experienced and inhabited by beings with material bodies, but it is not restricted to things such as height and width and breadth.³ It has physical characteristics and attributes, but it is also extraphysical. MacArthur writes of heaven’s attributes and uniqueness:

So heaven is not confined to one locality marked off by boundaries that can be seen or measured. It transcends the confines of time-space dimensions. Perhaps that is part of what Scripture means when it states that God inhabits

eternity (Isa. 57:15). His dwelling place—heaven—is not subject to normal limitations of finite dimensions. We don't need to speculate about how this can be; it is sufficient to note that this is *how* Scripture describes heaven. It is a real place where people with physical bodies will dwell in God's presence for all eternity; and it is also a realm that surpasses our finite concept of what a "place" is.⁴

Although it is very real, heaven may be nonspatial in its present intermediate state. It is the place where Christ is now, but it is also beyond our normal senses and experiences. It is truly a supernatural phenomenon.⁵

4. When does the eternal state or eternity begin?

According to Revelation 21 and 22, the eternal state will begin at the end of the millennium, the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. From our current point in history, the next event in God's prophetic plan is the rapture of the church, which will be followed by the seven-year tribulation, the second coming of Christ, the millennial kingdom, and, finally, the eternal state.

Eternity is distinct from the millennial kingdom. During the millennium, Jesus Christ will rule on earth for one thousand years. At the end of this period, there will be a series of judgments and the ushering in of the eternal state.

5. What is the eternal city?

After the judgments at the end of the millennium, Jerusalem and the rest of the earth will be destroyed by fire (Matt. 24:35; 2 Peter 3:10). However, according to Revelation 3:12 and 21–22, there will be a new city, the New Jerusalem, which will replace the destroyed city and which will continue throughout eternity. This new Jerusalem is the "eternal city" and part of heaven existing into eternity.⁶

Jesus told His disciples in John 14:2–3 that He was going away to heaven to prepare a place for believers. It appears that this place that He is preparing is the New, or heavenly, Jerusalem.

The New Jerusalem will be a heavenly city throughout eternity in that its origin is heavenly, as opposed to having been built upon this earth. However, it will be earthly, in that it will be physical and geographical, and it will be the earthly part of the new heavens and the new earth that will replace the current heavens and earth after their destruction. After this present earth has been destroyed by fire (2 Peter 3:10), then the new city will descend from the heavens. In Revelation, John states:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them.” (Rev. 21:1–3)

Revelation 21 and 22 is very specific and detailed about the city, its inhabitants, and the blessedness of the eternal state. Biblical scholars and prophecy students disagree over the location of the heavenly Jerusalem during the millennium. Some believe that it will remain in heaven until the beginning of the eternal state. Others think that it will be present during the millennium, hovering above earthly Jerusalem and will be the abode of resurrected believers.

While most agree that Revelation 21 and 22 describes the heavenly Jerusalem, some interpret the passage as descriptive of Jerusalem during the millennium. Others see it as descriptive of the heavenly Jerusalem during the eternal state. There is also

a mediating position which sees these chapters as describing the eternal habitation of resurrected saints during the millennium and continuing into the eternal state.

Following this mediating position, Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost writes:

When the occupants of the city are described it must be seen that they are in their eternal state, possessing their eternal inheritance, in eternal relationship with God who has tabernacled among them. There will be no change in their position or relation whatsoever. When the occupants of the earth are described they are seen in the millennial age. They have an established relationship to the heavenly city which is above them, in whose light they walk. Yet their position is not eternal nor unchangeable, but rather millennial.⁷

Regardless of the view taken regarding the possibility of a “heavenly Jerusalem” that hovers over the earth during the millennium and in which those individuals with resurrection bodies dwell, Scripture is clear that there will be an earthly city of Jerusalem and a new heavenly Jerusalem. All scholars agree that both are a part of God’s plan for history. Just when the heavenly Jerusalem will make its appearance in history is the question under discussion.

Although we might have many questions about eternity, John’s vision leaves no doubt that citizens of this New Jerusalem, *the* eternal city, will exist in conditions unlike any that this world has known.

6. What is the relationship between the millennium and heaven?

The millennium and the eternal state are two separate phases of the kingdom of God. The millennium precedes the eternal state. Arnold Fruchtenbaum writes:

The millennium itself is only one thousand years long. However, according to the promises of the Davidic Covenant, there was to be an eternal dynasty, an eternal kingdom and an eternal throne. The eternal existence of the dynasty is assured because it culminates in an eternal person: the Lord Jesus Christ. But the eternal existence of the throne and kingdom must also be assured. The millennial form of the kingdom of God will end after one thousand years. But the kingdom of God in the sense of God's rule will continue into the Eternal Order. Christ will continue His position of authority on the Davidic throne into the Eternal Order.⁸

The millennium is the precursor of the eternal state. It will be different than life as we know it today, but it will still fall short of the absolute perfection of the eternal state. We read in Revelation 21–22:5 that the eternal state will entail the passing away of the old order and the arrival of the New Jerusalem and new heavens and earth.

When studying the two periods of time, we observe the following contrasts:

- The millennium is associated with the continuum of human history; the eternal state is not.
- The millennium is the apex of human history because sin is still present, though restrained through Christ's rule; heaven in the eternal state is totally void of all sin.
- The millennium will focus worship on Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity; during the eternal state, direct fellowship with God the Father, the first person of the Trinity, will be a reality for the first time in history since the fall.
- The millennium will be a time during which resurrected believers and nonresurrected humans will routinely commingle in history; the eternal state will consist of only resurrected believers.

- The millennium will still be a time in history when humans come into existence and will trust or reject Christ as their Savior; the eternal state will be a time during which no one else will ever be added to the human race and everyone's destiny will be frozen, locked into their condition as saved or lost for eternity.

The millennium and the eternal state will have many differences, but both of them will differ greatly from our current historical era.

7. What happens at the end of the millennium?

At the end of the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, there will be one final rebellion by Satan and his forces. Just as is prophesied in Revelation 20, Satan will be loosed at the end of the millennium and will rebel against the millennial reign of Christ:

When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, and will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war; the number of them is like the sand of the seashore. And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. (Revelation 20:7–10)

In one final grasp for power and human allegiance, Satan will manifest his true nature (as he has done throughout all of history) and attempt to seize the throne of God.⁹ John Walvoord writes of this attempted coup d'état:

The thousand years of confinement will not change Satan's nature, and he will attempt to take the place of God and receive the worship and obedience that is due God alone. He will find a ready response on the part of those who have made a profession of following Christ in the Millennium but who now show their true colors. They will surround Jerusalem in an attempt to capture the capital city of the kingdom of David as well as of the entire world. The Scriptures report briefly, "But fire came down from heaven and devoured them."¹⁰

According to Revelation 20:10, Satan's termination will be swift but everlasting. He will be cast into the lake of fire, joining the Antichrist and the False Prophet, who is the Antichrist's lieutenant (Rev. 13:11–18).

The fact that the Antichrist and the False Prophet are placed into the lake of fire at the second coming of Christ, before the millennium, demonstrates the fact that they are finished in history. The lake of fire is the final form of hell from which no one, once placed there, ever leaves. This is why Satan is bound in the bottomless pit at the start of the millennium, because he will make one more appearance upon the stage of history before he is once and for all consigned to the lake of fire.

The judgment of Satan is then followed by the judgment of the unbelieving dead, known as the great white throne judgment (Rev. 20:11–15). These judgments form the bridge between the millennium and the eternal state as described in Revelation 21–22. They are the final events of the millennium and conclude with the passing away of the present heavens and earth (Matt. 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 16:17; 21:33; 2 Peter 3:10). John writes: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea" (Rev. 21:1).