

THE GREENWOOD BULLETIN

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VOLUME 9 NO. 28

September 9, 2012

What Can We Know About Heaven?

By Robert Turner

"Now my idea about heaven is. . ." and then the writer or speaker reveals himself far more than he tells us about heaven. The materialist, sensual, mystical, aesthetic, and surrealist all have a field day with heaven. It is "pie in the sky" to those who ridicule its reality; and an extremely plush "paid vacation" for those who equate "real" with earthly literalism.

"Heaven" is a divinely revealed place, state, or condition; and we can know only that which is revealed about it in God's word. We say "place" with some hesitation, using accommodative language; for "location" is space related, and may lose its literal significance when applied to eternity. But God's word is directed to time and space related beings, and

information about deity and eternity are necessarily couched in terms that translate into mental images. We cannot truly imagine "eternity" or things eternal in nature, so we must expect the Bible to use anthropomorphisms: whereby things of God, totally incomprehensible to mortal man, are described in the time and space terms of man.

Jewish typology finds its final usage here. God built a literal people, a literal nation, through whom His Son would put on flesh and dwell among men. He used these people, a distinct advantage to them, as His vehicle for demonstrating God-to-man dealings (**Rom. 3:1f; 9:4-5**). Then, as His eternal purpose began to reach its fruition in Christ, the literal kingdom of Israel is seen as a type of His spiritual rule over whosoever will. Christ reigns on "David's throne," and is our High Priest "after the order of Melchizedek" (**Acts 2:30f; Heb. 6:20f**). Scattered Israel finds a

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"highway" and "returns. . . in righteousness" (**Isa. 10:20f; 35:8f**); and all Christians are "Abraham's seed" or "the Israel of God" (**Gal. 3:29; 6:16**). It should come as no surprise that heaven is called "New Jerusalem"; and praise to God there is described in Jewish terms: "golden vials full of odors, which are the prayers of saints" (**Rev. 5:8**).

The apocalyptic description of heaven (**Rev. 21:1f**) speaks of the "Holy City" Jerusalem, with its walls of jasper, and other precious stones; its street (singular) of gold; twelve gates, each made of a single pearl, named after the twelve tribes of Israel. The tabernacle (KJV) of God is there, but this is the true abode of Jehovah - not a "tent" in which the "presence" of God is indicated by a cloud of glory. In fact, we are told "I saw no temple therein, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it" (**21:22**). God is on His throne - for the authority of God is eternal. There is plenty of water, and trees, including the "tree of life" (restoring that which was lost when man was separated from Eden). The high imagery is further indicated by the measuring of the city "the

length and the breadth and the height of it are equal" - a perfect cube (**21:16b**).

Materialists may literalize heaven to a point of absurdity: as though heaven will be the fulfillment of their most covetous and lustful appetites. We sing, "I want a gold (mansion) that's silver lined" - forgetting that the street is made of gold. It seems we should realize that Bible descriptions of heaven which emphasize its beauty, its value, the peace and lack of pain that prevails, etc., are relating heaven's wonders to the human realm. We cannot improve on God's way of describing heaven, and would be foolish to try it. But there is ample evidence God is telling us that holiness, righteousness, purity, and praise of God find perfection there. This means little to worldly people, but is given its true significance by the genuine child of God.

Paul wrote: "Our citizenship is in heaven: whence also we wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (**Phil. 3:20**). Philippi was a Roman colony, where citizens were mostly retired soldiers, given full citizenship in the "mother" city Rome. Though far from that city, they dressed Roman, spoke

Latin, observed Roman morals, were governed by Roman magistrates, "remained unshakably and unalterably Roman" (cf. Barclay). Paul was saying the Christian, no matter where he is, must never forget he is a citizen of heaven; and his conduct must match his citizenship. To this kind of people, heaven is "going home." Oh what a wonderful thought to those who have practiced heavenly citizenship, longing for the day when they will dwell in God's presence. "Home to heaven" will be a happy trip for those who, on earth, hunger and thirst after righteousness (**Matt. 5:6**). But what of those who have no such taste? Can we expect them to long for a life totally different from what they now pursue?

The passage in Philippians continues: "(Christ) who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory. . . ." In Romans 7 the body, with its fleshly appetites, is seen as a "law" (force) which wars against the inward man or mind desirous of doing God's will. The conflict results in a "wretched man," captive to sin in his members, and delivered only by forgiveness through Christ

(**7:18f**). The Christian must strive to "put to death the deeds of the body" (**8:13**). Paul then promises that though we "groan and travail in pain... now" (**8:22**); we wait for our adoption, to wit, "the redemption of our body" (**v. 23**). This body, with appetites which war against our desire to serve God, will be changed in heaven - the conflict will be over. How wonderful for those who war against the flesh here! But what of those who "let themselves go," and revel in appetites of the flesh? Do they long for a body change, with fleshly appetites removed?

I am persuaded heaven is not for everyone. It is a prepared place for a prepared people. Heaven's invitation is not limited; its glories are available to all. But many are ill prepared for heaven, and I cannot believe God would force heaven upon anyone. There is an old story about a slave whose "Massa" had died, and who was asked if he thought the Master had gone to heaven. He said the "Massa" always talked about places he planned to visit, and made great preparation for going there. But "Massa" never talked about heaven, and made no preparation for that destination.

"Chances are he ain't makin' dat trip!"

Sorry - I can't tell you any more about heaven than what you can read in the Scriptures; and I can tell that only in terms used by the Holy Spirit to give us some idea of its wonders. But God's word clearly warns us of an ultimate "last day" when judgment shall be declared, and we shall face one of two eternal destinies. The righteous dead shall be there (**1 Thess. 4:16**), and so shall the wicked. "Marvel not at this: for the hour cometh, in which all that are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of judgment" (**Jn. 5:28-29**). Christ makes it clear that the destinies are the same duration: saying, "And these shall go away into eternal punishment: but the righteous into eternal life" (**Matt. 25:46**).

Whatever heaven will be like, it will be "home" for the Christian, and an end to the struggles of this life. Those who are striving to serve God in the here and now, are going to love it. I doubt that those who ridicule the godly life would be happy there. And that is doubly sad, for

it is highly unlikely they will like the other place.