

The Bible and the Afterlife: 4) Glimpses of Paradise
Isaiah 2:1-5; Revelation 21:1-5, 22:1-5
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An eloquent revival preacher set out to move his listeners by graphic descriptions of heaven and the joys it offers the saved. After going on for some time in almost lyrical terms he paused, then asked dramatically, “How many of you want to go to Heaven?”

All hands were raised, save one. Reluctant to lose even a single sinner, the preacher returned to his theme and dwelt upon it with passionate intensity. Then once again he paused and asked, “Now how many of you want to go to Heaven?” Once more all the members of the congregation save one raised their hands.

Eager to bring the one lost sheep into the fold with all the others, the revivalist finished the service and hastened down into the pews for some personal evangelism.

Approaching the recalcitrant, he asked earnestly, “Don’ you want to go to Heaven when you die?”

A look of great relief swept the face of his victim. “Oh sure, Reverend, I want to go to Heaven *when I die*,” the hold out replied. “But from the way you was carryin’ on, I thought you was gettin’ up a party to leave right away.”

A 2003 Harris poll found that 82% of Americans believe in heaven. While we may believe in heaven, the exact nature of heaven remains mysterious. The scriptures give us glimpses of its nature. Literature and films prompt us to imagine additional possibilities.

One idea about heaven is paradise restored. The Garden of Eden was considered perfect, with humankind being the pinnacle of God’s creation, until humans wanted to be like God and ate the forbidden fruit. One biblical image of heaven is the garden of paradise restored to its original wholeness and beauty.

Another image is that of the reign of God’s Messiah. The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures frequently offer hope to the people Israel by pointing toward a vision of a messianic reign in which justice and righteousness will be the order of the day. Isaiah offers the idea of a peaceable kingdom in which swords will be beaten into plowshares and the wolf will live with the lamb without hurting or destroying the other. We picture heaven as a place of peace.

In the miracles of Jesus we get the sense that in heaven the blind will see, the lame walk, and the sick made well. In his multiplication of the loaves and fishes we glimpse a heavenly realm where there is no hunger or poverty. In his embrace of sinners we see a vision in which God welcomes the lost.

The early Christian church led by the apostles is meant to be a community that represents a foretaste of heaven. The believers shared all things in common so

that the needs of all were met. Holy Communion is considered a glimpse of the heavenly banquet in which all persons are gathered together at the Lord's table.

The book of Revelation gives the most detailed description of the heavenly realm. John's dream is given in a time of severe persecution of Christians. He is called to offer a message of hope that will help them sustain the faith even as brutal forces are seeking to weaken their spirits and destroy their faith. John wants to encourage his fellow Christians to keep the faith in spite of their difficulties. It's a message we need to hear in these difficult days in our state and nation.

In his dream, John sees the heavenly city descending to earth. God's presence tabernacles among the Holy City, the new Jerusalem. John envisions a new heaven and a new earth. Death will be no more, no more mourning, crying, or pain. The new city has continuity with what has gone before, symbolized by the twelve gates inscribed with the twelve tribes of Israel and the foundations inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles. The city is built of pure gold and radiant like jasper. Flowing through the city is the river of the water of life – remember Jesus calling himself the “Living Water.” A “tree of life” grows in the city, producing 12 different kinds of fruit each month and the leaves of the tree are meant for the healing of the nations. John's vision of the ultimate goal of history is a communal society of peace, wholeness, beauty, shalom.

These are all glimpses of what heaven may be like, but even this foretaste leaves us with unanswered questions. What happens to those of us who die before the new heaven comes to earth? Do we go directly to heaven upon our death? We have many questions that did not concern the biblical writers. Most of them were expecting the new heaven and new earth to arrive within their lifetimes, or at least within the first century. Our curiosities and questions are different from theirs. We will probably have to wait until we get there to have them answered!

However, we can affirm several common themes from the biblical glimpses of paradise. It is a place of beauty and peace, characterized by harmony among its inhabitants and wholeness for all its residents.

One of the most common questions about heaven is, “who is going to be there?” What are the admission requirements? Is it based upon good deeds done on earth? Is it based upon adherence to certain doctrines and beliefs? Will there be Jews, or Muslims, or Hindus in heaven? The African-American spiritual, “We Got Shoes,” has a line, “Everyone thinkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t goin’ there.”

Three persons arrived at the Pearly Gates at the same time. St. Peter came but said he had some pressing business and would they please wait. He was gone a long time, but finally he came back and called one of the new arrivals in and asked if she had minded waiting.

"No," she said, "I've looked forward to this for so long. I love God and I can't wait to meet Jesus. I didn't mind at all."

St. Peter then said, "Well, I have one more question. How do you spell 'God'?"

She said, "Capital-G-o-d."

St. Peter said, "Go right on in."

He went outside and got another new arrival, told him to come on inside, and said, "Did you mind waiting?"

The man said, "Oh, no. I have been a Christian for fifty years, and I'll spend eternity here. I didn't mind at all."

So St. Peter said, "Just one more thing. How do you spell 'God'?"

He said, "G-o-d. No, I mean capital-G."

St. Peter said that was good and sent him into heaven.

St. Peter went back out and invited the third person in and asked her if she minded waiting.

"As a matter of fact, I did," she replied. "I've had to stand in line all my life - at the supermarket, when I went to school, when I registered my children for school, when I went to the movies - everywhere - and I resent having to wait in line for heaven now!"

St. Peter said, "Well, that's all right for you to feel that way. It won't be held against you, but there is just one more question. How do you spell 'Czechoslovakia'?"

That's one suggestion of the admission process! Few questions are as thorny, or as likely to highlight the differences in theology among Christians.

One answer is that the only persons admitted to heaven are those who have personally accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. No Jews, no Hindus, no Muslims, no nonbelievers will be found in heaven. The only exception may be nonbelievers who have had no opportunity to receive Christ. They might be admitted according to how they responded to whatever "light" they could access. This view is known as Christian exclusivism or particularism.

The opposite pole of the theological spectrum holds that all persons will ultimately be welcomed to heaven. There are likely a few exceptions, such as people who have done terrible and atrocious things and who seem to incarnate evil. This view is known as Christian universalism.

There is a middle way in between these two views called inclusivism. Rev. Adam Hamilton speaks of this view, thinking of "hundreds of millions of people who long to know God, who follow [God] according to what they know of his will, who pray daily—often putting most Christians to shame when it comes to their prayer life—and who earnestly seek to please God by doing what is just and right." Is it gospel truth that God stands by and watches them perish, or worse, condemns

them to eternal torment? This seems out of character for a God who is known as love and who continually calls people to justice and righteousness.ⁱ

The Bible gives some clues as to how God views nonbelievers. The Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, tells the story of God's relationship to one particular people: the descendants of Israel. Yet the story doesn't begin with Israel, but with the creation of humankind. Following the story of the flood, God enters into a covenant with all of humanity and creation.

Throughout Israel's story, God's concern for others nations is revealed. God calls Abraham so that "all the nations of the earth" will be blessed through him. God promises Hagar that her son, Ishmael, will become a great nation. Rahab, a Canaanite, and Ruth, a Moabite, are both heroines. As we heard in Isaiah, God frequently proclaims the desire that all nations come to him and peacefully unite. Isaiah clearly demonstrates God's universal concern for humanity. Although the Old Testament is primarily the story of one people, it does not mean that they are the exclusive circle of God's concern.

When Jesus comes, he extends the outreach of God's grace beyond the Jews to include Gentiles, incorporating them into the family of God. The magi from Persia journey a long distance to pay homage to Jesus and do not betray his identity or location to King Herod, who is threatened by this newborn king. In the book of Acts, Peter and Paul continue this ministry of reaching out to non-Jews to incorporate them into the family of God. The vision of John that we heard from Revelation visualizes the "healing of the nations." All of these are signs of God's concern for the welfare of persons beyond God's own covenant people.

The middle way of inclusivism holds that God, who is loving and just, sees the heart of those of other faiths who are earnest in their faith, deeply desirous of God, and who live according to the demands of God as they understand those demands. For Christians, Jesus is the way that we have come to know God and to live as God demands. It is possible that others come to know God in ways beyond our own.

In review, there are three ways of considering who is admitted to heaven. One way is Christian exclusivism, which holds that only those who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior receive admittance. A second way is Christian universalism, which holds that ultimately all persons, with a few exceptions, will enter heaven. A middle way is Christian inclusivism, which holds that all persons who are faithful to God, even though they may not know God through Jesus Christ, are welcomed into heaven.

Personally I don't believe that it is possible for us to be specific or exclusive. God's love and grace extend far beyond our limited imaginations. I don't feel qualified to "second guess" God, but I am willing to affirm the embracing, inclusive nature of the God I know in Jesus Christ.

Kathleen Norris says that her favorite definition of heaven comes from a Benedictine sister, who told her that as her mother lay dying in a hospital bed she had ventured to reassure her by saying, “In heaven, everyone we love is there.” The older woman had replied, “No, in heaven I will love everyone who’s there.”ⁱⁱ A

This, I believe, is the most apt description of the heavenly paradise: a peaceful community in which we will love everyone who is there. May we await that community with great hope and deep faith.

ⁱ Adam Hamilton, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), pp. 97-98.

ⁱⁱ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), p. 367.

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