

Heaven

Revelation Chapter Twenty-One

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Heaven

This morning, in responding to your invitation, I thought we should go to heaven. There is a rumour going around, a very strong rumour, that heaven is going to last for a very long time. It seems to me, therefore, that it is prudent for us to look ahead and get used to what heaven will be like.

I don't know about you, but one of the most frequent questions that I get asked about heaven and what it will be like is, 'Shall we know one another in heaven?' Being half an Irishman, having lived in Ireland for thirty years, my reply to that question is 'Shall we know *ourselves* when we get home to heaven?'

Shall we remember who we were on earth when we get to heaven?

Let's start with ourselves. Will you know who you are when you get home to heaven? Will you have a memory—for knowing who we are depends on memory, doesn't it? Therefore, the question 'shall we know ourselves when we get home to heaven' means, 'shall we remember who we were when we were here on earth? And what we did? And what our experiences were like? Or will it be that, when we get home to heaven, we shall start afresh and not remember a thing at all about what happened to us when we were here on earth?' And the answer to that question is quite clear—of course we shall remember.

The blessed Lord Jesus himself remembers what it was like to be here on earth. That is why he is such a faithful and merciful and compassionate high priest. He remembers what it was to be tempted. He remembers the groanings and the tears of Gethsemane; not for all eternity will he forget them. He remembers what it was like being entertained by Martha and by Mary in their home. He knows life's experiences. Indeed, holy Scripture tells us that it was by his experiences here on earth, and by his sufferings, that he has become qualified to be our high priest (see Heb 4:15; 5:6–10). He knows what it is like to live here on earth.

And we too shall remember ourselves. We shall remember how we came to know the Lord and what conversion meant. We shall remember that we were born again, and all the wonderful times of fellowship we had with the Lord on our journey home. Otherwise, God might as well have started with completely new creatures in heaven, who had never existed on earth. Earth's experience is the necessary preparation for heaven, and what a time we shall have.

In Israel once a year they had a festival called the *Feast of Tabernacles*, or Booths (Lev 23:33–43). They would make themselves booths out of the leafy trees and bushes, and camp out in them in their gardens or in the country, to remember the time when their forefathers were travelling from Egypt to Canaan. For those many years, as they were on their pilgrimage, they had lived in tents. Scripture says that when those later generations went for a week to live in their leafy booths and tents, they were to remember the pathway by which God had led their nation.

My brothers and my sisters, when we get home to glory what will it be like to remember all the way that the Lord led us? There shall be times of joy, times of understanding. Things that we cannot know or understand now—nor are we called upon to understand—we shall understand then, and we shall have nothing but unqualified praise for the way that God has led us.

Will God remember our sins?

Says somebody, 'I don't know whether I want to remember. There are so many things I should prefer to forget. Shall we remember everything? What about our sins? Hasn't God himself promised that he will remember our sins and iniquities no more? He will completely forget our sins; he'll forget even that we were sinners. Isn't that his promise?'

I mustn't shock you, but that isn't his promise. No, no. Let me show it to you. When you see the Lord Jesus and the wound marks in his hands, in his side, and in his feet, will you find yourself saying, 'What are those wounds in his hands and his feet and side? What are they there for? I can't begin to think why he was wounded?'

And if some angel comes along and tells you, 'These are the wounds that he received on Calvary when he died for sin,' shall you respond, 'Sin? Whose sin?' Shall we ever forget, my dear brothers and my sisters, that it was our sins that wounded him? Surely, we shall never forget it.

Nor will God, of course. As he surveys his beloved Son, the Lamb as though it had been slain (Rev 5:6), God won't find himself saying, 'I can't make out now what those wounds are that my Son carries. What are they for? When did he receive them? And why did he receive them?' God shall vividly remember why he received them, and whose sins they were that caused them. Indeed, we are told that the joy and the wellspring of the music of heaven is going to be:

Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. (v. 9)

It will not be a time of destructive remorse, but a source of praise, that the blessed Lord loved us while we were sinners. It will comfort us then, as it comforts us now, to remember that, if he loved us while we were sinners, there'll never come a time, not through all eternity, when he will not love us any more.

You say, 'What does the Scripture mean, then, when it says "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more"?' (Heb 10:17).

To understand that, we must understand the term *remember* in the Bible. In the ancient world the kings in their palaces had a number of officials. There was the commander-in-chief of the army; there was the major-domo, the man who was in charge of the palace. Then there were the scribes, and the Old Testament tells us that there was one official who was called the *remembrancer*, or the *recorder*. His job was to keep the records of everything that went on in the realm, so that the king could summon the remembrancer at any time and find out what had happened.

So if a king had a sleepless night, like old Ahasuerus did (Esther 6:1), he would get up and call for the remembrancer to bring the books and to start reading. If he came to the name of someone who had done terrible things, the king would ask if he had been sentenced and punished. If the remembrancer said, 'No, your Majesty, he hasn't been dealt with yet,' the king would say, 'Now that you've brought it to my mind, please carry out my sentence on him.'

That is what the Bible means by remembering somebody's sins. It means to haul them up in court for the judge to pronounce the sentence of *guilty* and prescribe the penalty. That is what God has said he will never do with us: he will never drag us into his judicial court, never rake up the guilt of our sins. He will never again pronounce the sentence, nor have the penalty executed. Why won't he? Because he's already done it once and for all, when our blessed Lord Jesus died at Calvary.

Is heaven a place or an experience?

The great seer calls our attention to the city (Rev 21:2). Some people ask me, 'Is heaven going to be a place, or an experience?' This new Jerusalem—is it literally a place, like the Gold Coast, or is it just a lot of metaphors describing an experience?

Certainly, heaven goes beyond our best imaginations, and God has to talk to us in figurative language so that we can begin to get some idea. I assure you, heaven will be far more wonderful than we have conceived of it, even though we have been helped by Scripture.

Heaven is a place

We know it is, because when the Lord Jesus ascended to heaven he had a human body. After his resurrection he ate with his disciples, and invited them to touch him: 'See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have' (Luke 24:39). He had a real, substantial, human body. He still has, of course, for he is still human.

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul talks about being 'at home with the Lord' (v. 8). Now our earthly body is like a tent, but then we shall have 'a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens' (v. 1). Tents are only temporary things, easily collapsible, and after they've been through the storms they begin to get thin on the top, and the canvas flaps a little bit. The old guy ropes get a little bit loose, and some of the pegs come out. You can't help that with tents; even the best and most expensive tents are like that. Keep them in repair for as long as you can, but do remember that they're only tents. They were only meant to be temporary, and one day they'll be taken down.

But even tents take up a certain amount of room; they demand a place to be in. And if our tents imply a place to be in, so our glorified bodies—bodies like the body of the Lord Jesus—imply *space*, as the scientists would say; they imply *extension*. There will be a place. Our blessed Lord called it his Father's house, and told us that in it there are many rooms (John 14:2).

Heaven is also an experience

The great new Jerusalem is not merely a place; it surely will be an *experience*. I mean, if the Gold Coast were simply a place, it would be no different from any other place, would it? ‘Come to the Gold Coast’, they say, ‘and you’ll have a marvellous experience.’ So the heavenly Jerusalem is not just a place, it is going to be a most wonderful and eternal experience.

When you come to think about it, it will be an experience not merely because it’s a place, but supremely because the city stands for the people who make their homes there. In other words, what makes a city? If you came to Belfast today, right across the City Hall you’d see a big banner, which reads, ‘Belfast Says No’. I won’t stop to tell you what Belfast is saying no to; that would blow us off course. It doesn’t mean that the city of streets and buildings says no. When it says, ‘Belfast Says No,’ it means that the *people* of Belfast say no.

And so the most important thing about the new Jerusalem is the people, because it is going to be the tabernacle of the transcendent Lord God himself, and of the Lamb of God, and of the Holy Spirit, and of the redeemed of all ages and climes. ‘What will it be to dwell above, and with the Lord of glory reign?’¹ It will be the people who will make heaven, heaven, won’t it? The divine persons themselves, they are heaven; and it will be the behaviour of the people who are there that will be our constant joy and delight. Oh, I’m looking forward to it.

Our Lord painted some vivid pictures of it. He said on one occasion, ‘Make sure you get in by the narrow door, for there will be many who shall stand outside when the door is closed. And you shall see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob come and take their seats at the banquet table, but you yourselves cast out’ (see Luke 13:24–28).

The word our Lord used was based on Oriental custom; not sitting on seats so much as reclining at the banquet table. In those days, when they had a great feast they didn’t sit on seats, they lay down on their sides, supporting themselves with one elbow and reaching for the dainties on the table with the other. When John was at the Last Supper he was next to the Lord Jesus, and they were reclining on their left sides, using their right hands to pass the dishes and eat the food, so all John had to do was to lean back and look up into the face of Christ.

‘And you shall see Abraham and Isaac’—I’m itching to see them, aren’t you? I’ve got questions to ask Abraham and, in particular, Sarah when I get home to glory. Of course, I want to see the Lord first of all, but eternity’s going to last a long time and I hope I’m somewhere near Abraham. I don’t know where you’re hoping to be in glory, with all those multi-millions, and how long it will take you to get around to where Abraham is, if ever you get around to it. Well, I hope I do, because I’ve got some questions to ask him and Sarah.

And as for Jacob’s wives, I do want to know what it was like for them, living in a tent with Jacob. I think they’ll have some stories to tell. Yes, to meet these lovely men and women of God, to look back upon their experiences, and share with them what they learned of the Lord here in this life.

¹ Joseph Swain (1761-1796).

The new Jerusalem

The gates of the city

‘And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl’ (Rev 21:21). One pearl making up one gate. Do you know, when it comes to jewels, size is not a very reliable guide to value. A stack of hay is very large and a diamond very small, but we’ve no hesitation in saying that the diamond is far more valuable than the haystack.

But here, surely, the size of the gates is exceedingly interesting. Did you see what it said? Each gate is not a collection of pearls—thousands and thousands and thousands of pearls, all studded into the gate, eventually to make a big city gate. Each city gate is simply one pearl. Can you measure the depth of the wall, and ask yourself what is the colossal size of the gate? Some pearl, if it is the size of a city gate. They tell us that pearls are produced when a grain of sand or something gets into the shell and irritates the oyster, and the oyster meets the irritation by secreting the fluid that turns itself into the pearl. Therefore, the pearl is a result of the oyster’s reaction to suffering. If that is so, what a marvellous metaphor we have here. The way into the eternal city is through twelve gates, each being one pearl which was produced by suffering. Some pearl and some suffering.

The Lord Jesus’ reaction to suffering and pain

That talks to us at once about the sufferings of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. Who shall measure his reaction to life’s pain? We think of Calvary in the sense of his atoning sufferings. They are immeasurable, and we could almost say that they are the most important. But what a marvellous thing it is to contemplate our Lord’s reaction to pain. It never made him bitter. Think of the night when he had to expose Judas as the traitor, and he did it by offering him the sop of his friendship (John 13:26 KJV). When Judas refused his friendship and went out into the night, the Lord Jesus spoke to him and the apostles couldn’t hear what the Lord said. They thought he said that Judas should give something to the poor. Can you imagine the tone of voice in which our Lord would have said, ‘Give something to the poor’? But he was in fact telling Judas to get on with his dastardly work—‘What you are going to do, do quickly’ (John 13:21–30).

Pain never made him selfish. In the midst of his agonies on Calvary he had time to think about his mother and her need for comfort and solace and sustenance (John 19:26–27). He had time to convert the dying thief and prepare him for Paradise (Luke 23:42–43). Our Lord’s reaction to pain never did make him sinful, it only enhanced his glory, and we shall enter that glorious city through the sufferings of the Lord Jesus.

We may expect to experience tribulation

But there’s another side to it, isn’t there? When Paul revisited the converts that he had made earlier in Asia Minor, he warned them from the start that it is through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom (Acts 14:21–23). Salvation is a gift, but for some people, receiving the gift of salvation can involve them in the loss of everything else. For a Muslim coming to faith in Christ, it is a gift that may cost him everything he has. And all of us are warned that in the world we shall have tribulation.

Focal points of administration

And there's yet another side to it. The *gate* of an eastern city was not merely the way in; it was the place where the elders sat to administer the city. In Jacob's vision of the ladder with God at the side of it and the angels of God—the great civil service of heaven—ascending and descending on it, Jacob's comment was: 'This is the gate of heaven' (see Gen 28:12–17). At that time, he wasn't thinking of the way into heaven; he'd got to get married first, and have a career.

It's like some of us in our youth; we don't want to go to heaven too quickly. Isn't it funny how people talk? They'll say, 'I came within an inch of a fatal accident the other day. I would have gone home to heaven, but the Lord had mercy on me!' Well, Jacob felt like that. He wasn't thinking of going to heaven at once. When he said, 'This is the gate of heaven' he meant, 'I have discovered the very centre of heaven's government.' The gates of the city will be the focal points of its administration.

'It was not to angels that God subjected the world to come', but man (see Heb 2:5–8). The church, we're told, shall judge angels (1 Cor 6:3), and the church will judge the world (v. 2). It is written that we shall reign with him. When at last we get home to glory we shall reign with him, if we suffer with him (see 2 Tim 2:12 KJV).

The street of the city

Just as it is in any ancient town, you come through the gate and there's the main street, leading on to the centre of the city. This street was 'pure gold, transparent as glass' (Rev 21:21). So what does that tell us? It tells us that the way into the city's deeper experiences, into its centre, is a street of gold.

You say, 'Will it be literal gold?'

It would be nice to drive your 'heavenly Mercedes Benz' on gold instead of tarmac, but you'd soon get used to that. Surely it is a metaphor, and our dear brother Peter helps us to understand it: 'so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ' (1 Pet 1:7). Gold so pure that is like transparent glass—absolutely pure, no dross in it whatsoever. When we get home at last to heaven, that's how our faith shall be—the tested genuineness of our faith.

Shall we still need faith when we get to heaven?

'Wait a minute,' says somebody, 'you've got that bit wrong. When we get home to heaven we shan't need faith anymore. The Bible says, "for we walk by faith, not by sight"' (2 Cor 5:7). That's now, but when we get home to heaven we shan't need the faith. When we see the Lord we shall have it all by sight.'

Well, yes, that's perfectly true. 'Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him . . .' (1 Pet 1:8). One day, we shall see him.

'So, faith will give place to sight.'

But when you get home to heaven, will you then be free at last to disbelieve the Lord? When the Lord tells you something, will you still have to believe him? I have an idea that you will. When you get home to heaven, will you understand everything equally as God does?

Are you going to be omniscient? No, I think not. There'll always be new things that God is telling us, and of course we shall have to believe him.

Faith will still be necessary, surely it will. Tell me, will you have to depend on the Lord when you get home to glory, or will you be so secure that you'll be absolutely independent and not have to trust the Lord any more? Of course not. You can't please the Lord without believing him: 'And without faith it is impossible to please him' (Heb 11:6). That's why we shall still need faith in many areas; we shall still trust the Lord. Incidentally, that's why God spends such a large part of our time here on earth purifying our faith.

God will not waste our pain

It's not a waste of time, you know — all the pain and anguish that the blessed Lord has allowed you to go through, my sister, my brother, for the purifying of your faith. God will not waste one drop of your pain. Pain is the most expensive, the costliest thing in the world, and we can't afford to lose the lessons we have learned through pain. God won't waste it. But our faith and trust in the Lord, our very enjoyment of heaven, will depend on our faith being absolutely spotless and free of all dross and false ingredients. It is more valuable than gold, and that's why God doesn't spare us here. He can't afford to; he has an eternity to prepare for.

Our faith is the key to the enjoyment of heaven, so God now spends his time and ours purifying it, so that it ceases to be just cupboard love, or simply something that is exciting. God had blessed Job with prosperity, but in the end God had to allow his faith to be tested to show that it was real, and not cupboard love. God treats us similarly, so that by the time we get home to glory our faith will be as clear as crystal, leading us into the deeper things of that wonderful city.

The temple of the city

When you enter any big city, like Brisbane or Melbourne, or somewhere, it's generally the city centre that has all the important buildings.

'Come,' they say, 'let's show you the centre of our city.'

That's their pride and joy. It's where all the big buildings are, and the cathedrals generally, and houses of parliament and so forth. When you get home to heaven, will you enter in the city gates and go down the golden street, saying to yourself, 'Let's have a look at the temple in this great city. Surely it will be a magnificent temple. In Solomon's time the most marvellous building in the city of Jerusalem was the temple. So, let's go down the street and look at every temple, and see the temple of God'?

Says John, 'And I saw no temple in the city' (v. 22).

I wonder if he felt a twinge of disappointment. But it wasn't for long, for suddenly he realized, 'for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.' The moment he got inside the gate he was in the temple. The temple is not made of bricks and mortar; it is formed of the divine persons themselves.

At home with the Lord

Oh, to wake up to the wonderful experience and realization that you are with the Lord and in the Lord — you are at home. It's what Paul talked about, when he said that to be present in the

body is to be absent from the Lord (see 2 Cor 5:8 KJV). He didn't say 'absent from heaven,' did he? The Lord is with us, yet in another sense, as long as we are in this body, we are 'away' in a foreign country. We're not at home, we are but pilgrims and strangers. We're absent from the Lord.

To be 'away from the body', says Paul, is to be not simply in heaven, but to be 'at home with the Lord'. What a magnificent thing that will be: that will be heaven. To be in his presence, the old distinction between sacred and secular gone forever, there'll be nothing but unmitigated sacredness in the presence of the Lord forever. 'Never shall he go out of it' (Rev 3:12); no more a-wandering, no occasional lapses from the Lord's presence. Forever and ever and ever, to be 'with the Lord' (1 Thess 4:17).

The light of the city

'And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light' (Rev 21:23).

From time to time, like you do in Australia, I get visitors who come to stay with me in Northern Ireland. It's my pride and joy, of course, to show them the wonders of our scenery. But very often it's raining like cats and dogs, the sky is as dark and black as it could be, and when we get to a beautifully scenic place I have to say, 'You'll have to take my word for it today, but over there, there's a beautiful view!' Ireland has a lot of beauty, but you'll only see it when the sun shines. It needs the light of the sun to bring out the beauty of the country; the green of the leaves, the yellow of the gorse, the brown of the peat, the lovely colours of the moorlands, the purples and indigos of the sea. But, you don't see it unless the sun shines on it.

If you put people in a dark room, completely pitch black, you won't be able to tell the difference between the pretty and the ugly. And they won't know whether it's a palace or a cottage. In fact, if we were in the dark completely, we should be disorientated, life would become insignificant and we should be lost. How will God bring out the beauty of this glorious city, so that all may see it? We are told, '... the glory of God gives it light' (v. 23). The very presence of God in all his glory shining upon that city brings out the glory of it.

And you say, 'Well, what is the city, then? Is it simply the literal streets and walls?'

No, it's not just as literal as that. The new Jerusalem is made up of the redeemed people of God. You're going to look beautiful then, my dear sister. You do now, of course! But perhaps there are things in your character and personality that have not always been appreciated, because somehow they didn't come out like you'd have liked them to. In that day, every glistening part of your redeemed personality will be on view, brought out for all to see by the glory of the presence of God. You'll be conformed to the Lord Jesus, your personality not lost in the other multi-millions of personalities, but unique in its own right and redeemed by the Lord, as the glory of God shines on you, bringing out your heavenly loveliness. And you, sir, as well.

The lamp of the city

‘Its lamp is the Lamb . . . and there will be no night there’ (vv. 23, 25). In the tabernacle behind the veil was the glory of God. Outside the veil there was a lamp, and during the night-time on earth there was a lamp burning perpetually in the tabernacle. The tabernacle was a copy of heavenly things (Heb 8:5)—there was never any night in the tabernacle, and there’ll be no night in heaven.

I’m not talking about the daily round of light and dark, day and night. There shall be no *night* in the other sense of nothing to becloud. There is sometimes on earth. We are redeemed men and women, but sometimes it’s difficult for us to see even good things, because of the clouds, the darkness, and the storms that brew up. The shadows of misunderstanding shall all be gone then. What shall banish them? It is not only God in his uncreated glory that will shine upon us; the Lamb, the great redeemer, will shed his eternal light upon us, and we shall appear not merely as glorified creatures of almighty God, but as the redeemed of the Lord.

The occupants of the city

‘By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it’ (v. 24). Without distortion we shall reflect his glory, and the nations shall bring their honour and glory into it—they shall bring their wealth. Oh, what excitement that’s going to be.

‘What kind of wealth?’ you say.

Well, I suppose it could be ‘little bars of gold’ from Western Australia, or ‘diamond meteorites’ from the Nullarbor that they tell me you’ve just explored. I think heaven will have enough diamonds, by the time you get there. What wealth shall they bring? The wealth of experience, surely, and what a treasure it’s going to be.

When Solomon was king, it was an age of peace and plenty. Many kings and wise men came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and they each brought some beautiful, expensive presents. When the Queen of Sheba came, she brought gold, and a very great quantity of spices and precious stones. The fleet of Hiram brought from Ophir a very great amount of almug wood and precious stones (1 Kgs 10:10–11).

Almug trees didn’t grow in Palestine, and they thought that they would make marvellous musical instruments. So from this wood that came from the ends of the earth, came these exotic instruments, making their contribution to the music of Solomon’s court.

What it will be in glory, as they come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, sit down in the kingdom of God, and bring their treasures. There shall be music up in heaven, such as you’ve never heard before, as they bring this piece of exotic ‘wood’ (excuse the metaphor) from the Outback of Australia and make music out of it. However exotic and far off we once were, so far distant from glory on planet earth, as we’re brought in what music there shall be; what enrichment of heaven from your experience and from mine, and from the experience of the redeemed of all the ages.

What glory can we bring to heaven?

I end by putting a question to you. When God is infinite, and has everything there is, how could we possibly increase his glory? And the wonderful thing is that that's going to be done, as the redeemed come and bring their honour and glory to the praise of almighty God (v. 26).

In his great venture of creating planet earth and putting creatures like us on it, God ran the risk of us using our free will to disobey and defy him, and cause moral chaos. Yet in the end God is going to have the victory through Jesus Christ his Son. Out of the sorrows of earth, and the sorrows of Calvary itself, God is going to bring a great harvest of glory to his name. It includes the glory of your experience that you bring from your homeland, home to the magnifying of the name of God for all eternity.

There's a lot more to be said about heaven. But this isn't heaven, this is the Gold Coast on earth, and were I to try to say the rest I should most certainly keep you too long. It's been a joy talking to you, and the wonderful thing about it all is that the reality of heaven is going to be multi-million times more real than anything we have thought about this morning.

'These are the true words of God' (Rev 19:9). May God by his Spirit work in us what he worked in Paul (Eph 1:14). Having given us the *earnest* (KJV) of our great inheritance, may he increase within us the longing and the desire that, as soon as God can release us from our duties here, he will take us home to his wonderful home on high.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019) was Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.