

HEAVEN

- 1:** Where did the idea of Heaven come from?
- 2:** What is Heaven like?
- 3:** Who is it for?
- 4:** What difference does it make to us today?

HEAVEN

One night some years ago a woman was driving in adverse weather conditions when her car skidded on the wet road. Losing control, she veered off the highway and crashed into the darkness. Assuming that these were her last moments on earth, the woman cried out: "Heaven, here I come"!

Years before, another Christian wrote to a life-long friend. The Christian was dying and this was to be his last note to someone with whom he had corresponded all his life. He wrote: "I have raced you to Heaven – and I have won"!

And many, many years earlier still, St. Paul wrote: "Because for me, living serves Christ and dying is even better. If I continue to live in this world, I get results from my work. But I don't know what I prefer. I'm torn between the two because I want to leave this life and be with Christ, which is far better." (Phil.1v21-23). Or as the Message puts it: "Life versus even more life! I can't lose."

So what was it that gave those three Christians – separated by many years and by different cultures and traditions – what gave them that utter certainty of Heaven? What gave Paul the total conviction that to die and to be with Christ, was in fact "far better" than this life?

And what gives us that same confidence when faced with our own mortality, or with the death of someone else, or with the imperative of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ?

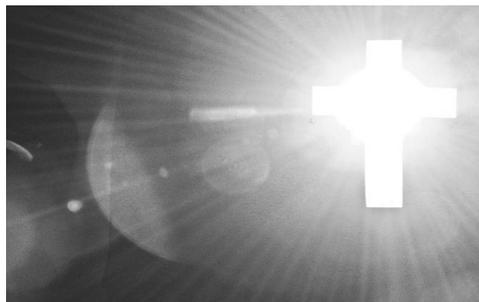
Over four studies I want us to explore together something of what Christians mean when they talk about "Heaven". Of course this is not an exhaustive study or any attempt at giving the last word on the subject. But at the end of these reflections I want us to have that same confidence as those three Christians had in the truth and utter reality of Heaven and of our place there with God.

So that at the end of our lives our last words are simply going to be -
"Heaven, here I come!"

"The dream is ended: this is the morning."

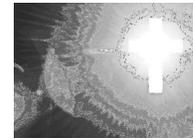
And as He spoke, He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world...had only been the cover and title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

(From: Farewell to Shadowlands; The Last Battle by CS Lewis)



STUDY 1: WHERE DID THE IDEA OF HEAVEN COME FROM?

Bible Readings: Ps.16; Mt.22v23-33



In 1 Corinthians 13v12, Paul writes about us glimpsing only “a poor reflection” of God’s truth and glory. But even so, all of Christianity and indeed all of our lives are meant to be a continuing and continuous discovery of this God whose Son became a human being and died and rose again.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Eph.3v14-21).

Sometimes there may be bolts of revelation (as with Paul on the Road to Damascus, or with Peter’s confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi) but more usually our understanding of God develops over time as we ourselves develop and grow, putting away our childish or less mature understandings of God (cf 1 Cor.13v11). (Someone once described discipleship as the continuous process of yielding as much of yourself as you know to as much of God as you know).

So it was with the Biblical understanding of Heaven and of eternal life. Not that the truth wasn’t always there but rather it took time for it to be seen and to be discovered.

The Nature of Humankind

Our Western world view is largely shaped by Greek philosophy, and to the Greeks it was the soul which was immortal, the “ghost in the machine” and the body merely its mortal vehicle. Some Jewish intellectuals adopted this same view, even calling the body “an evil and dead companion” of the soul, and maintaining like the Greeks, that death which freed the soul from its material prison was a liberation. In other words the real person was essentially an immortal soul, temporarily housed in a physical form.

However this view of human existence is fundamentally different to the Biblical view. According to the Bible, humankind is tripartite – body (material); soul (our vitality and the living human individual) and spirit (the life-giving “breath” of God, where man has his source in God Gen.2v7 cf 1 Thess.5v23). But these are facets of *one complete person*, not individual parts which could be separated one from another.

It was inconceivable to the Hebrew mind that you could divide this tripartite humanity into separate component parts, some of which might live on and some of which might die. You were either fully a person or you were not. You could not be “bits” of a person and still be considered to be “alive” in any meaningful sense. i.e. a person was essentially and indivisibly a body, a soul and a spirit.

In summary, for the Greek (and often in our own thinking), to be a person is to be or is to have an *immortal soul*, whereas for the Hebrew, to be a person is to be an *animated body*.

In the Beginning...

There was no clear idea of any real existence after death, or of any sort of immortality as we would understand it. This life here and now was what constituted life and anything afterwards was to be feared; nothing more than some shadowy non-existence (Ps.6v5; 30v9; 88v10-12; 115v17; Isa.14v9-11). Immortality was gained by having a good name and by one’s descendants living on after one’s death (Deut.25v5-6; Ps.9v5-6; 41v5). And indeed this sense of the “now” as opposed to any real sense of an after life is still very much part of modern Judaism today.

And Yet...

A more robust view of life after death developed, as people reflected on the nature of God. Could death be the last word on a life created by God, the Author of Life? Could death really break a relationship with a loving God? How could the last word from a God who had said, “Let there be Light”, be an unending darkness? And what did the Psalmist mean when he confidently asserted that “I will dwell in the house of the Lord – *forever*”? (Ps.23v6). Glimpses of a deeper reality began to shine through (Ps.16v9-11; 49v12-15; 73v24; 139v8).

And because to be a person was to be soul, spirit and *body*, there came the realisation that life after death must include bodily existence (Ps.16v9-11; Isa.25v6-9 cf Rev.21v3-5; Dan.12v2). Even prophecies of national revival began to use resurrection language (Ezek.37v1-14; Hos.6v1-2).

And see the words of Job 19v23-27:

Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock for ever! I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes— I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!

The Bible places hope for life after death in a body resurrected, not in an immortal soul.

This deeper understanding of eternal life did not go unchallenged – most famously by the Sadducees who rejected the notion of immortality because for them it was not found in what they held to be the most authoritative books of the Bible – the Pentateuch, (the five books of the O.T.). And it was precisely for that reason that Jesus used the Pentateuch to demonstrate the truth of eternal life and of Heaven (Mt.22v23-33; Mk.12v18-27; Lk.20v27-38).

Jesus and the New Testament

In spite of the Sadducees, much more common in Jesus day was the belief in resurrection and in eternal life (e.g. Mt.19v16; Lk.10v25; Jn.5v39; 11v21-24).

Jesus clearly taught the reality of Heaven and of eternal life, a life that in John's Gospel is based upon faith in Jesus; love of Jesus; and obedience to Jesus (Jn.3v15ff, 36; 4v14,36; 5v24,39-40; 6v27,40,47,54,68; 10v27-29; 12v25,50; 17v2f).

So Jesus promises eternal life in bodily form to those who believe in Him (Jn.5v21-29; 6v37-40,51,54): He is the Resurrection and the Life (Jn.11v25-26; 14v6; - and see also e.g. Mt.25v31-32, 46; Mk.10v29-30; Lk.16v9).

Following His resurrection and ascension, the apostles continued to proclaim the reality of an eternal life in Heaven for every believer, whereby because Jesus had been raised, we too would be raised (1 Cor.15v20-23): death was defeated (Rom.14v9; 1 Cor.15v26; 54; 2 Tim.1v10): the Christian did not die but fell asleep, clearly to "awaken" (Acts7v59-60; 1 Cor.15v51f; 1 Thess.4v13-18): and our frail human earthly bodies would be gloriously transformed, ready for the life of Heaven (1 Cor.15v35-53).

FOR REFLECTION

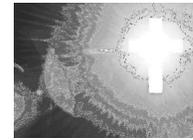
1. Do you think that the Greek and Western view of human existence – that we are an immortal soul in a physical and mortal vehicle – has contributed to a very vague notion of the three-dimensional life of Heaven and has encouraged people to put their energies into this life alone?

Do you think that it has also contributed to peoples' uncertainty about what happens after death and tends to reduce our view of an afterlife either to one that is less of an existence than the one we have on earth, or to some sort of caricature – "Uncle Bob up there with his mates and a pint..."?

2. Why do you think that the Christian woman and Christian man and St. Paul mentioned in the Introduction had such an immense confidence in their eternal destination and saw Heaven as being better than this life?
3. What is your view of eternal life and on what are your thoughts based?

STUDY 2: WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

Bible Readings: Rev.21v1-7; Jn.14v1-6



In 1 Cor.2v9, Paul writes: *No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him...* And he's talking primarily about a life in Christ in this earth! So how much more do we come up against limits of language, imagination (and personal experience!) when we seek to talk about Heaven.

The Book of Revelation paints the big picture in large and colourful language and most especially in the last two chapters, as John describes the final coming of the Kingdom of God. It is wonderfully summarised in the following terms:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, I am making everything new! Then he said, Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true. (Rev.21v3-5).

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes about resurrection and reflects on the nature of the resurrection body. But perhaps it is in John's Gospel and from the lips of Jesus that we find the most detailed description of what Heaven will be like. It comes in the context of His beginning to prepare His disciples both for His death but also for His resurrection and for what lies beyond this life. Typically for the master story teller, Jesus places profound truths into a simple illustration – "In my Father's house..." In other words, "In Heaven..." (Jn.14v2) (see e.g. 2 Chron.6v21,30,33; 30v27 for references to Heaven being where God dwells).

John 14:1-6

- 1 *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me.*
- 2 *In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.*
- 3 *And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*
- 4 *You know the way to the place where I am going.*
- 5 *Thomas said to him, Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?*
- 6 *Jesus answered, I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.*

Jesus recognises that at times we are all "troubled" by the prospect of dying and of death. Specifically here of course the disciples are deeply disturbed by the fact that Jesus has told them that He is about to be betrayed (Jn.13v21); that Peter will deny Him (13v38); that He is about to leave them and where He is going they cannot follow (13v33,36). We and they are invited to put faith in the place of fear (14v1).

We may not go beyond the details that Jesus gives but those six verses contain seven truths about Heaven.

1. **Jesus assures them and us that Heaven is an absolute fact.**

It is He who is telling them these things and He only speaks the truth, speaking God's words in God's ways (Jn.12v49-50; 14v6).

If Heaven was not a reality, then Jesus would have told them so (14v2).

He is certain that He is going there (14v2-3).

He is equally certain that He will return to take the disciples there (14v3).

2. **Heaven is not immaterial nor insubstantial, rather it is "place" i.e. in some way it has location and substance and form (14v2,3,4).**

Although it does not exist in our time and space, the disciples know how to get there (14v4).

3. **Heaven is a place of community, for it has "many rooms" i.e. room and to spare for all the redeemed (14v2 cf Rev.7v9-10).**

("Rooms" is a better translation than the A.V. "mansions" which translation derived from a Latin word meaning a "lodging place").

4. Heaven is a place of personal identity and of personhood.

Jesus goes to prepare a place “for you”, so that “you” may be with “Me” (14v2-3). If the “Me” who is Jesus is truly and fully *Jesus*, then the “you” who is you, must also be the true and full “*you*.” This is what Job sees in chapter 19v23-27 and what Paul refers to in 1 Cor.15v35-55, where our human bodies are gloriously transformed but still remain truly “us.” The model is the resurrection body of Jesus, like and yet unlike His mortal body. A picture which is sometimes used is of the caterpillar changing into the butterfly, where there is continuity but also a most glorious transformation.

The Christian view of Heaven knows nothing of anonymity nor of an eternal life where each individual is like a drop of water simply absorbed into the great ocean of eternity.

A person is not diminished in Heaven nor by Heaven. Rather they are enlarged truly to become who they really are and were made to be – someone created in the very image of God!

5. Heaven will be perfect for you and for me, because it has been personally prepared for us by Jesus Himself (14v3).

Sometimes we guiltily wonder if we might be bored in Heaven – an eternity of praising God! However the Biblical view of eternal life is one not simply about *Quantity* of Life but about *Quality* of Life, that “life in all its fullness” of Jn.10v10. The word translated “eternal,” gives us the word “eon” and means “age”. So rather than think of a long (endless) period of time, think of ages upon ages of glory, full of the imagination and of the life of God! (cf 1 Cor.2v9). But in a sense it is also true to think of Heaven as being an Eternal “Now,” in the presence of the One who is eternally “I AM” and thus where notions of time passing are irrelevant.

6. Heaven is Heaven because it is where Jesus is. That is what makes it Heaven.

He takes us to be with Him and no-one can enter Heaven except through Him (14v3,6 cf 1 Thess.4v17 – *and so we will be with the Lord forever*; 1 Cor.13v9-12 – *face to face*; Rev.21v22-23; 22v3-5).

7. We know with certainty how to get to Heaven – it is through faith and trust in Jesus (14v1,6; Jn.1v4, 12-13; 5v24). Thomas was probably more concerned with getting an immediate answer to the question of how could they follow Jesus if He was leaving them and they couldn’t follow and yet later on they were expected to follow Him (13v33,36). But Jesus answers the big question – we follow Jesus and that journey leads all the way to Heaven!

(We also are to let go those who are dead. Attempts to make contact with the departed (spiritualism, séances etc) are expressly forbidden by God, as being dangerous and misleading, a deception and a sin (Lev.19v31; Deut.18v9-13). Nor are ideas such as reincarnation in any sense Biblical (cf Heb. 9v27).

FOR REFLECTION

1. What are the things that strike you most about this passage in John 14?

Are there any things that you find difficult to comprehend or to agree with in what Jesus says? (Do be free to be open and honest about any difficulties but do remember that in a competition between you and me and the Son of God about what Heaven is like, I know who the clever money is on!)

2. If someone were to ask you, what words and pictures would you use to describe Heaven?

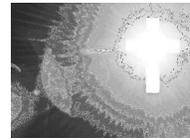
3. What are you most looking forward to in Heaven and what will be best about it?

*I am going home with you, to your home, to your home;
I am going home with you, to your home of mercy.
I am going home with you, to your home, to your home;
I am going home with you, to the place of all the blessings*

(From: Carmina Gadelica, a collection of Celtic prayers, hymns and stories)

STUDY 3: WHO IS HEAVEN FOR?

Bible Readings: 1 Thess.4v13-18; John 5v19-30



On one level the answer to *How* we get to Heaven is very straightforward and clear: Jesus said: 'You know the way to the place where I am going'. Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me'. (Jn.14v4-6)...Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (Jn.17v3). Peter said: 'Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.' (Acts 4v12).

These verses begin to tell us *how* someone enters into Heaven but we need to look a little more deeply at *who* gets into Heaven, although the *how* and the *who* are inextricably linked.

Heaven – a Right, a Reward or a Gift?

...God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no-one has seen or can see. To him be honour and might for ever. Amen. (1 Tim.6v15-16). (Or see e.g. Isa.6v1-4).

In the presence of such a God, we ask ourselves does anyone have a **Right** to be in Heaven? Bearing in mind that goodness, kindness, mercy etc. are God's basic requirements of any person who has ever lived (Mic.6v8), what especial goodness or moral quality does anyone possess that means they have a cast iron right to be admitted into the presence of the Holy One and that God has actually no choice but to let them in to Heaven? Or is entry into God's presence guaranteed automatically for everyone, regardless of how they have lived or what they have believed? You go to Heaven simply because you were born?

In the presence of such a God, we ask ourselves has anyone been so exceptionally holy, righteous and good that God would feel obligated to **Reward** their achievements by giving them a place in Heaven? And if it is the case that Heaven is a Reward for outstanding goodness, what chance the rest of us!?

In the presence of such a God, we ask ourselves what does God say is the requirement for entry into Heaven and how may we fulfil that requirement? And the answer is given in e.g. Jn.3v16; Rom.3v23-26; 6v23. **Eternal life and the certainty of Heaven is a Gift**, based solely and entirely on Jesus' atoning death for our sins at Calvary and upon His resurrection and upon our personal acceptance of that gift (e.g. Rom.5v6-11; 2 Cor.5v17-21; Mt.26v27-28; Heb.9v27-28; Jn.17v1-3). Logically, only those who are "in Christ" can be where Christ is (2 Cor.5v17-19, 21).

Let there be no mistake about this. We cannot enter the purity and sinlessness of Heaven; we cannot see God "face to face" by right or reward *because we are all sinners* (Rom.3v10-11,23). If Heaven is for the "good", then the truth is that we are simply not good enough and anybody who thinks that they are is simply deluding themselves. And anyway, Heaven is not for the good but for the forgiven (cf Rom.3v24).

Remember that the heart of Heaven and what makes Heaven to be Heaven is that Jesus is at its centre. And the life of faith is not morality or assent to certain propositions about God, it is rather a life orientated towards Jesus. Remember the words of Paul in 2 Tim.4v8 about the "crown of righteousness" bestowed on those "who have longed for His [Jesus] appearing"? If in this life a person has never made time for Jesus, haven't they already chosen not to be with Him – forever?

What this also means is that eternal life does not begin when we die but rather eternal life is given to the believer the moment that they put their faith and trust in Jesus (Jn.5v24). And because it is the *gift* of God based objectively on the death and resurrection of Jesus, Heaven is absolutely secure and certain for the Christian (Jn.6v37-40).

What about those who have not heard of Jesus?

1. We cannot teach God anything about love or compassion for the world. It was He who gave His only Son so that we might be reconciled to Him and it is He who longs for all people to be saved (Ezek.18v32; Jn.3v16). Hell was meant for the devil; humankind was never meant to go there (Mt.25v41).

2. God acts absolutely rightly and righteously with and for every single human being. The Judge of the earth will always do what is right (cf Gn.18v25).

3. There are those in other parts of the world who are seeking God and who love Jesus, even if they have not explicitly heard of Him. God will do what is right for them (Rom.2v12-16; cf Acts 10v34-35). In his book "The Last Battle" CS Lewis puts these words into the mouth of Aslan, the "Glorious One" who represents Jesus and who is in conversation with a man who all his life had worshipped and served a different God (called Tash).

"Yet I have been seeking Tash all my days." [the man says to Aslan].

"Beloved," said the Glorious One, "unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek."

Tony Campolo the evangelist, tells a story of a Christian who was invited to talk about Jesus to a group of Buddhist monks. One monk in particular was clearly deeply moved by what the Christian was saying and at the end of the meeting the evangelist asked the monk if he wanted to ask Jesus into his life. To which the monk replied: "Invite Him into my life? You don't understand. He is already in me. He has been in me for many years. I did not know His name but even as you were reading from your book, His Spirit was speaking to my spirit and assuring me that everything you were saying was true. When you told me how Jesus died on the cross to take the punishment for my sins, His Spirit affirmed that truth. I would accept Him and gladly receive Him into my life, but He is already there. I am grateful for you because I did not know His name, nor did I have the details of His story until you came." [From: Stories that feed your soul]

4. Over 2,000 years ago the Church was given the God-given mandate to "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mk.16v15). It seems strange that we apparently care enough about people to want them to go to Heaven but don't care enough about them actually to share the good news of Jesus with them in order to ensure that they get to Heaven!

5. In Jn.3v36 Jesus speaks of those who "reject" Him. Now this rejection does and will take many forms, including indifference, pride and life-style choices. But God alone knows when innocence or ignorance, or unbelief (1 Tim.1v12-17) turn into rejection. Does this verse suggest that there needs to be a deliberate choice to turn away from God even if that person may not know from Whom they are turning (cf Jn.1v10-13; 3v19-21; Isa.7v16)? But choices in this life have eternal consequences in the next.

7. However in our communities how true is it there are people who have never heard of Jesus? Isn't it the case that people have heard the Good News but have chosen to harden their hearts rather than submit to God? And that is a bad, bad place to be in (Heb.10v26-31).

What about those who are not in Heaven?

The Bible uses some very strong imagery to denote the fate of those who have turned away from Christ and we may be familiar with some of the old paintings which showed in graphic detail the everlasting torments of the unrighteous in Hell.

But a number of points need to be made in connection with Hell and with what it is like and how long it lasts

1. Most of the images which make up popular ideas of Hell come from the imagination of medieval painters and writers and not from Scripture. In fact the Bible uses pictures that are contradictory if they are to be taken literally e.g. "darkness" (Mt.8v12) and yet also fire (Mt.13v42); "destruction" (Mt.10v28) and yet "endless torment" (Rev.14v11). Unless we hold to degrees of punishment in Hell, surely there cannot be darkness where there is also fire and thus light, and destruction and yet an apparent eternity of suffering?

2. A key question - is humankind an eternal being outside of Christ? If we believe that every person is immortal simply by virtue of their being human, then the problem immediately arises of what happens to those immortal souls who are not in Heaven. They have to be somewhere and that somewhere is Hell and because they are immortal, they have to be everlastingly imprisoned and / or punished and / or tormented because they are indestructible.

But is humankind immortal outside of Jesus? Before the Fall and thus before sin and death entered the world (Rom 5v12), Adam and Eve lived in a sinless relationship with God. Yet they needed to eat from the Tree of Life to remain eternally alive (Gn.2v7-9). And after the Fall the situation was exactly the same – if they ate from the Tree of Life they would still live forever, but only if they ate from that Tree (Gn.3v22). But because they were banished from Eden they were unable so to eat and so died (Gn.3v22-23,19). So Adam and Eve, the prototype of all humanity, were not immortal. Their ability to live forever derived from God, via the Tree of Life and did not reside within themselves as an inherent part of their humanity.

It fact is only God who is eternal and immortal and who possesses eternal life (1 Tim.6v15-16; Jn.1v4; 5v26). And the Christian believer *receives the gift of eternal life* only because they have trusted in Christ and consequently share in the eternal life of God through the gift of the Holy Spirit of God who indwells every Christian (Jn.3v16; 5v21; 6v51-57; Rom.8v15-16; Gal.4v6). i.e. they have received God's own life.

3. Jesus clearly preached about the reality of "Hell" and used powerful images like fire and darkness to describe what it was like to be excluded from God's presence. But whereas the consequences for the sinner are eternal (and thus the punishment is in that sense "eternal"), Jesus did not teach that the sinner was continually punished or tormented for eternity. (The only exception possibly being Lk.16v19-31).

4. Is an eternity of suffering compatible not just with the love of God but also with the justice of God? Would it be just that even people like Hitler or Stalin suffered for ever? In what sense would the punishment fit even their crimes?

The "burning sulphur" of Rev.20v10,14-15 ("fire and brimstone"), is used in the O.T. to signify destruction and judgement, not torment (Gn.19v13,24-25,28-29; Deut.29v23; Job 18v5,15-18; Isa.30v27-28,33; 34v8-10). The endless "smoke of their torment" of Rev.14v9-11; 20v10, clearly parallels Isa.34v8-10, where it means complete and utter extinction but not a literal unending eternal fire. "Day and night" (Rev.14v11; 20v10), meaning that there is no respite, not necessarily that it is forever. Indeed how can two abstracts like Death and Hell be tormented at all, let alone forever, or false religion (the false prophet) and ungodly civil power (the beast)? The "second death" is the final end of the ungodly, after death and God's judgement.

6. Heaven is eternal life, a tripartite life lived in all its fullness in deep relationship with God. Hell is the total, complete and permanent absence of God - the absence of light, the absence of love and the absence of life. Ultimately only life will exist for ever because even Death and Hell will have been destroyed (1 Cor.15v25-26,54; Rev.20v14; 21v4; Isa.25v8).

Therefore how can a person go on living or existing in any sense of the word, if they are permanently and irrevocably separated from the eternal God who is the source of all life? And how can a person be consciously in a permanent state of death, when ultimately Death no longer exists? And how can a person be in Hell forever when Hell is also no more? Surely what Revelation and the New Testament are saying is that at the end of all time, annihilation is itself annihilated.

So does this not lead us to understand that the final fate of those who have turned their back on the love and grace of God is not endless torment but is oblivion (Mt.10v28; 2 Ptr.3v7 NB "*destroy*")? Having rejected the source of all life, they cease to be. Hell is eternal in terms of its consequences which last for eternity, but Hell does not exist forever nor is it a perpetual place of torment.

FOR REFLECTION

1. Why is it do you think that so many people apparently just assume that if there is a Heaven then they are guaranteed to go there?

Do you tend to think of Heaven as Right, a Reward, or a Gift and why?

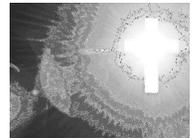
2. What do you think is the situation of people of other faiths and none in terms of Heaven and of eternal life? Is the fact that someone is basically moral, is sincere and well meaning enough for that person to enter into Heaven and why do you think that?

3. Do you think that preaching on resurrection and eternal judgement (part of the foundational teachings of the Early Church Heb.6v1-2), has a part to play in today's Church and if so, what part?

4. What do you think about Hell and upon what are your opinions based?

STUDY 4: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES HEAVEN MAKE TO US TODAY?

Bible Readings: Phil.3v10-21; Mt.22v1-14



Some people like to caricature Heaven as “pie in the sky when you die”, or as “fire insurance”. In other words either a comforting delusion with no relevance to the here and now: a belief that may be helpful in the future but is not for now.

How far from a Biblical understanding of Heaven! Instead of Heaven being something that has no relevance to how we live this life, it is absolutely key to how we live here and now.

1. **Preparation** (2 Ptr.3v10-14,18)

Heaven will be that moment when we see fully and completely this wonderful God who has loved us from eternity (1 Cor.13v12)! This will not be a fearful meeting, where we wait in dread for all our failings to be publicly rehearsed, or where we wait in anguish for the judge’s verdict, because we know that we have already passed from death to life when we gave our lives to Jesus (Jn.5v24). Rather this is the child and the parent running towards each other: this is the bride getting ready for her big day: this is hearing the words “well done, good and faithful servant...Come and share your master’s happiness!” (Mt.25v23).

But if we bother to get ourselves ready for a particular occasion here on earth, aren’t we anxious and eager to get ourselves ready to meet with God? To be those “holy and godly” people, living “holy and godly lives,” and who will ultimately make a “good death”?

2. **Perspective** (2 Ptr.3v10-13)

Those who know that their life is measured not in “three score years and ten” but in the measureless glory of God, have a right view on who and what is important. They have a balanced view on their material possessions and are “rich towards God” (cf Lk.12v13-21). They do not put their trust in transitory things nor are disturbed by the ebb and flow of this life. They live securely as citizens of Heaven (Phil.3v20).

They also understand that every human being has an eternal value and significance.

3. **Perseverance** (Heb.12v1-3)

Because we know that there is more than this life and because our eyes are fixed on Jesus, we persevere during dark and difficult times (Heb.11v1; Phil.3v12-14,20-21; 2 Tim.4v7-8; 1 Cor.15v54-58).

4. **Praise** (Rev.7v9-12)

Heaven is full of praise, not because God needs it but because Heaven just can’t keep quiet as it gazes on this amazing Saviour! Just as it would be strange and even unnatural to be confronted by something of great beauty – a sunset over the sea; a great painting; a profound piece of music and not to express that sense of awe and wonder, or to see someone whom we love deeply and not to express our love, so praise is just the natural expression of someone face to face with love and with glory. And we begin to express that praise life of Heaven here and now.

And of course praise is not just what we say or sing, it is about our whole life. Is my life today bringing glory to God as I grow in my knowledge and love of Him (2 Ptr.3v18)?

5. **Proclamation** (Rom.10v8-15)

There is only one thing that the Church does on earth that it won’t do better in Heaven. There we will know God better: we shall praise Him better: we shall love better: we shall be truly holy, and so on. But the one thing that we not only *won’t* do better in Heaven but actually *won’t be able to do* in Heaven is to share the Good News of Jesus with our friends and neighbours. So there is an awesome responsibility to make the Good News known and to ensure that we are presenting a full and a true witness to Jesus (Mt.28v18-20).

6. **Prayer** (1 Thess.5v16-24)

Extraordinarily Peter even suggests that we can speed the coming of the Kingdom of God (2 Ptr.3v11-12; cf Rev.22v17)! But we are to be prayerful, praying for our lives to become more Christ-like; praying for the lost; praying for the coming of God’s Kingdom. Praying at all times and in every way.

Remember that the only way a person can enter into eternal life is through the Holy Spirit of Jesus entering into their life and we need fervently and passionately to be praying for this to happen.

7. **Paradise People!** (Phil.3v12-21)

We are citizens of Heaven, experiencing and sharing the very life of Heaven here and now. This is how John Bunyan, the author of "Pilgrim's Progress" described an encounter with some Christian women:

"...I came where there were three or four poor women sitting at the door in the sun, and talking about the things of God...And methought they spake as if joy did make them speak...with such appearance of grace in all they said, that they were to me as if they had found a new world,. As if they were people that dwelt alone, and were not to be reckoned among their neighbours." (from: Grace abounding to the chief of sinners)

Because we are citizens of Heaven, our conversation, our behaviour, our values, our worship, our relationships etc. are to be qualitatively different to those of the world. We are to be noticeably different, as people who have found (and inhabit) a "new world".

FOR REFLECTION

1. What would a godly and holy person be like, do you think? Have you come across such people?
In what ways is godliness different from goodness and morality?
2. What does it mean to live as a citizen of Heaven, when inevitably we are so much involved in this world and in this life?
3. How much does praise play in your Christian living and why do you praise?
4. Hell is just as much a reality as Heaven. How may a belief not just in Heaven but also in the fearful reality of Hell inform and motivate our praying, our sharing of our faith and our compassion and love for those who do not know Jesus?

AND FINALLY...

In the light of the fact that eternal life and the life of Heaven is a gift of God, based on what Jesus accomplished on the Cross when He died to take away all our sins and to reconcile us to God...

In the light of the fact that this gift is received simply by faith and by the commitment of our lives to Jesus...

In the light of the fact that Jesus Himself promised that this gift was secure...

IF you and I have sincerely taken those simple steps...

THEN you and I can be certain of our of our place in Heaven, that perfect place,
prepared for us by Jesus Himself.

