
UNDERSTANDING HEAVEN
PASSPORT

A NOTE FROM CHUCK



If you've ever traveled for extended periods of time, you know what it feels like to be homesick. I, too, have been there. Your heart just *aches* to be back in the place where you belong. Why? It's a place of love . . . peace . . . security . . . acceptance. God made us to have that longing.

We who have put our trust in Jesus know that heaven, not this earth, is our final home. We are "aliens and strangers" on the earth . . . foreigners longing for our homeland (1 Peter 2:11). I'm convinced that considering our heavenly home can give us hope and perseverance when life is tough. It makes the *now* worth it. Yet, it's surprisingly easy for God's children to give little thought to their eternal destination. Isn't that strange?

Here's the problem: most of us see heaven as an incomprehensible mystery . . . so how on earth are we supposed to hope for what we don't understand? Graciously, God has given us glimpses into heaven through His Word.

Scripture mentions *heaven* more than five hundred times. But not all of those references signify the ultimate destination of God's people. The Bible talks about three heavens:

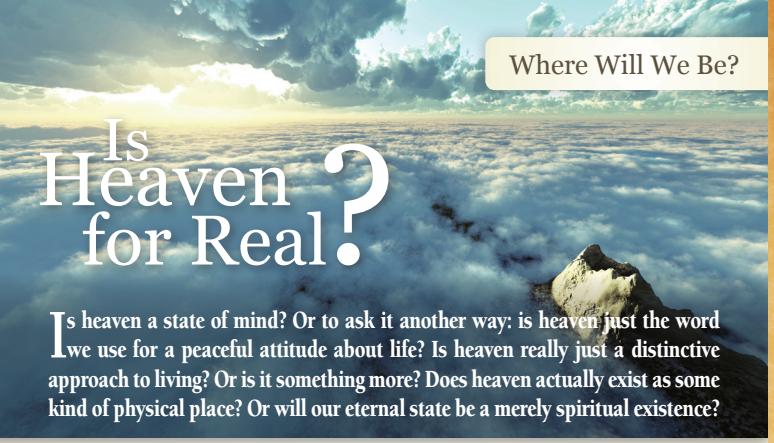
- The first heaven, the atmosphere . . . it's where birds fly.
- The second heaven, the stellar space . . . that's the vast realm in which stars and planets move and rotate.
- Finally, there's the third heaven . . . the throne room of God (2 Corinthians 12:1–6). It's His place of existence . . . His presence. That's the great hope for believers.

In this *Understanding Heaven Passport*, you will learn about the third heaven . . . *where* it is, *who* will be there, and *what* the saints will do for eternity. You'll gain clarity in the midst of a cloud of confusing and misguided opinions about heaven. As with all of Insight for Living's Passports, you'll also be equipped to speak confidently and compassionately to those who may not know the Lord.

As we travel through life, our homesickness for heaven should impact our daily lives. That's precisely *why* God revealed truth about heaven to us. To give us hope . . . to help us persevere . . . to strengthen our faith—until He returns to take us home.

Chuck

Charles R. Swindoll



Where Will We Be?

Is Heaven for Real?

Is heaven a state of mind? Or to ask it another way: is heaven just the word we use for a peaceful attitude about life? Is heaven really just a distinctive approach to living? Or is it something more? Does heaven actually exist as some kind of physical place? Or will our eternal state be a merely spiritual existence?

Before we answer these questions, let's make one thing clear: there is a difference between where Christians go immediately when we die and where we will spend eternity after Jesus returns. When we talk about heaven, we must distinguish between these two. When we die, though our bodies go to the grave, our souls go to dwell with Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:6–8), who Himself possesses a resurrected body. This intermediate state is otherwise shrouded in mystery.

The Bible is much clearer, however, about eternity after Jesus returns — what scholars call "the eternal state," the condition of our existence with God in eternity. First, we know that by the time the eternal state comes about, believers' souls will have been reunited with our resurrected bodies, an event that occurs at the rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:16).[1]

Second, those bodies will inhabit an actual, physical place — the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 21:1). The final two chapters of the Bible describe the eternal state, and in so doing, make clear the physicality of our destiny. The presence of a city, walls and gates, a river, and a tree all point to a physical existence akin to what we see in the first two chapters of the Bible.

All of this means that heaven is most certainly not a merely spiritual existence. Nor does the Bible view it as some kind of mental approach to life that attempts to bring peace and harmony today. Instead, heaven is a physical place that will be filled with physical people who will possess physical bodies.

What about the Claims of Christian Science?

Some groups loosely associated with Christianity postulate a heaven that is a non-physical extension of the mind. One such group is the heretical Christian Science. Built on the teachings of late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century teacher Mary Baker Eddy, this religion states that heaven is a state of Mind. The latter term, *Mind*, is capitalized because it is used as another word for God. In other words, according to Christian Science, heaven is not an actual place but a new state of consciousness within an immaterial, all-encompassing God.

In this thinking, the physical world becomes unreal. If that's true, we have no responsibility to be good stewards of the physical creation, since the physical is not a part of reality. Because Eddy's views are extreme and outside orthodox Christian teaching based on the Bible, we must avoid adopting her ideas and instead commit ourselves to the physical *and* spiritual nature of the new heaven and the new earth.

Now What?

Why does it matter that heaven—the eternal state consisting of the new heaven and the new earth—is an actual place with physical properties? Because what Christians believe about heaven should impact the way we live today! For instance, because heaven is a place of peace, we should be a people of peace. Because heaven is a real place bursting with life, our tending of the physical world today should always promote sustaining life. The vibrant physical reality of heaven should lead us to treat God's physical creation with care and concern. Of course, we need God's creation to sustain our own lives. We eat and drink, build shelter, and fashion clothes from materials we find in the created realm. But as we make use of God's creation, we should do so in a way that seeks to sustain its resources, rather than deplete them. Just as life will continue in the eternal state, we should promote continued life in our world today.

What Do We Know about the Eternal State?

What will the new heaven and the new earth be like? How can we describe this place that stands out before all believers as the place where all our deepest hopes for life and goodness will be fulfilled?

The Bible's final book offers a few answers. While the language of Revelation is often mysterious and far-removed from our experience, when placed in the context of all Scripture, the fog clears and certain elements appear more distinctly. Through the light of Genesis 1–2, we can see Revelation 21–22 as a bookend to biblical revelation. The new heaven and the new earth pictured in the Bible's last chapters correspond in many ways with the original creation described in the first two. Heaven is much more than just another place. We believe heaven to be a future paradise, one similar to the paradise of the past portrayed in Genesis.

In both places, God dwells with His people in some kind of bodily, or at least in the case of Eden, visible form. God walked in Eden (Genesis 3:8). Jesus will rule from the throne in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 22:3). In both the past and future paradises, we find the Tree of Life (Genesis 2:9; Revelation 22:2) as well as life-giving water (Genesis 2:10; Revelation 22:1). Finally, Eden marks the first place of one human connecting with another, while the heavenly paradise of Revelation will be an extended community of all who have believed (Genesis 2:18, 22; Revelation 21:27).

Revelation also tells about the kind of life the new heaven and earth will usher in. Since Jesus will have defeated His enemies and will dwell bodily with His people, death, mourning, crying, and pain will pass away forever (Revelation 21:4). The negative effects of sin finally will have been eliminated, leaving the world as God intended it. Such an existence will allow God's people to be exactly who He made us to be.

Will There Actually Be a New Jerusalem?



There's at least one point of contrast between the new heaven and the new earth and the paradise in Eden. In the future, temptation and the potential to sin won't be part of humanity's experience. Also, a garden will not serve as the center of God's dwelling on earth. Instead, the center of God's reign will be a city, the New Jerusalem, a holy dwelling on earth (Revelation 21:10). The New Jerusalem will require no exterior source of light, as the glory of God will illumine it (21:23). And the city will not have a temple, because people will already be in union with God and His Son, Jesus. In turn, the Son will serve as a guide to people of nations all over the world by the light of God's unmistakable glory (21:23–24).

Now What?

How should the specifics about our eternal dwelling place change the way we live? First, we must recognize that our eternal destiny will include people from all over the world and of all generations. God loves diversity, and the portrait of heaven with a variety of nations bringing glory to God gives us a blueprint for who we are and what we should look like as the body of Christ. Rather than stamping out diversity and striving for uniformity, we should live in peace with our brothers and sisters. Second, God's use of a city rather than a garden as a model for eternity illustrates His embrace of human civilization. Indeed, Revelation tells us that the glory of the earth's kings will be welcomed into the city. This implicitly blesses the glorious things we produce on this side of heaven. Products of culture such as beautiful works of art, useful tools, and just societies can glorify God; therefore, we should encourage them.

Is Purgatory a Way Station on Our Heavenly Path?

Where Will We Be?

Roman Catholic theology affirms the presence of purgatory, a place where the unpaid-for sins of the deceased will be purged in preparation for heaven. This view came into wide acceptance around the eleventh century. The term purgatory comes from the Latin word for "purify." Those who affirm purgatory turn to passages such as 1 Corinthians 3:15 and 1 Peter 1:7, which speak of our faith being purified by fire. Some also see an implied reference to purgatory in Matthew 12:31–32, where Jesus said that the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit would not be forgiven "in this age or in the age to come." Pointing to the qualifier "the age to come," Roman Catholic interpreters surmise that some people must be forgiven certain sins in the age to come, even if the sin of blasphemy is not among them. Historically, purgatory has only been for Christians who died before they sanctified their earthly sins through acts of penance, but popular theology has made purgatory a means for universal salvation.

Though purgatory is a significant and influential doctrine, the biblical evidence contradicts it. Matthew 12 need not indicate that God forgives other sins in the age to come, but simply that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (attributing Jesus's miracles to Satan) would result in Jesus's offer of the kingdom being withdrawn from that generation. The purifying fires mentioned in Scripture need not be read as taking place over extended periods of time. Rather, spiritual purification happens instantaneously upon our meeting with Jesus. The Bible also testifies to a believer's immediate presence with God upon death, which indicates that a purgatorial "way station" does not exist. Finally, purgatory rests on the notion that people contribute to their own salvation. While this view fits nicely with medieval Catholic doctrine, the Reformers showed us through Scripture that salvation depends only upon the good gifts of our gracious God. As such, we can trust that He won't route us through an extra stop between this life and the next.

When We Die,

Will We Enter Soul Sleep until the Resurrection?

Some in the broader Christian community hold to a doctrine called "soul sleep," a presumed state of unconscious slumber for our souls while we await our resurrection at judgment day. The Bible, however, makes no allowance for any kind of "soul sleep." Proponents of soul sleep make much of verses that speak of the dead being asleep (2 Kings 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 4:13). However, these verses use the image of sleep to refer to the dead body, not to the soul. In fact, Scripture never refers to sleep in reference to the soul but only to the body. As Paul notes in 2 Corinthians 5:6–8, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. Further, the Bible provides numerous examples of people who experienced consciousness during the period between their deaths and their bodily resurrections (Matthew 17:1–4; Revelation 6:9–10).

Now What?

Knowing that all believers in Christ go straight to heaven to be with Him should focus our hope. We need not wonder about existence in some mysterious, unconscious state. We need not fear a further time of testing or trial. The next life should never be an object of fear or trepidation for a believer in Christ. Instead, it should be a source of comfort and refreshment. A belief in purgatory places constraints or qualifications on that infinite joy. Purgatory also suggests that we have something to contribute to our salvation—that if we could just do enough (in either this life or the next), then we would be good enough to be in the presence of God. However, we know that no human being can ever do enough to attain true and pure goodness (Ephesians 2:8–9). We become righteous only through Jesus Christ, who offers us the good gift of His righteousness as a result of His death and resurrection.

Will We Have Wings, Harps, and Halos in Heaven?

The heaven we have to look forward to does not resemble the heaven portrayed in movies—a place where we will play harps, wear flowing white robes, and sit on individual, fluffy clouds for eternity. That sounds boring to Christians and non-Christians alike! And thankfully, that's not what God promises.

Contrary to popular belief, those who go to heaven won't receive halos like the saints pictured in medieval paintings. And no matter what Aunt Tilda says, loved ones who pass away don't become angels with wings. Human beings and angels are completely different creatures, designed by God for different purposes.

So what *does* the Bible say about harps and halos? It usually speaks of harps as a means of playing worship music to God (Psalm 71:22). God created music. In fact, He intended much of the poetry in the Old Testament to be sung. We will worship God in the eternal state, and harps will be one of the instruments used (Revelation 15:2–4). But while we will all enjoy beautiful music, not all heaven-bound believers will be full-time harpists for eternity. And the Bible never mentions halos at all.

Modern-day beliefs about heaven may stem from a desire to leave behind the pain and injustice of earth. Selfishness, greed, and sin have marred every good thing in our lives. And what could be more benign than harps and halos or eternal inactivity and solitude? But God is bigger than the corruption that has taken over earth. His plan of redemption will touch everything in the physical world—including our broken relationships, emotional dysfunctions, and physical ailments.

Rather than spending our time sitting on clouds, in our resurrected bodies we'll enjoy perfect physical health and all the God-honoring activities that bring us joy. And though halos won't float above our heads, we will bear the image of Christ, finally resembling His righteousness (Philippians 1:6).

If We Won't Become Angels When We Get to Heaven, What Will We Be Like?

In the time between our deaths and resurrections, our souls will be present with the Lord, but our physical bodies will not (2 Corinthians 5:6–8; Philippians 1:23). Human beings are composed of soul and body, and at death, these two components separate. God didn't originally intend our bodies and souls to be torn apart. That's one reason why death is such a tragedy.

Our hope is not that our souls will be liberated from our bodies at death. In fact, Paul likens a bodiless soul to an unclothed person. Our hope is our physical resurrection and the eternal perfection of our body-soul identity (2 Corinthians 5:1–6).

So, in the eternal state, following our resurrections, we will live with immortal bodies—unbound by physical restraints (John 20:19–20) and immune to disease and death (1 Corinthians 15:53–55). Believers should indeed look forward to physical resurrection!

Now What?

Christians are not Gnostics or platonic dualists. We don't believe that matter is inherently evil and the soul is intrinsically good. The truth of the incarnation debunks that myth. The fact that God the Son added humanity (including a physical body) to His deity shows that God values material things. The Lord created every physical thing, from planets and stars to bugs, plants, and cows. And He called them all very good (Genesis 1:31).

Our hope for physical resurrection should affect our lives today. Christ-followers should live holy lives, honor God with their bodies, and view other human beings as valuable in God's eyes. Christians—as good stewards—should also respect and care for the planet God created (1:26–28).

Will There Be Marriage in Heaven?



There's a reason the vow says, "Until death do us part." In Matthew 22, Jesus explained that after God raises us from the dead and we live in heaven, we will not marry or continue to be married, just like the angels. But, why not?

Marriage between a man and woman is the cornerstone of a healthy society. Within the bond of Christian marriage, children learn to love God, care for others, and contribute to society. While the lure of sin can pull children away, a Christian marriage should create an atmosphere of faith and a sanctuary from the wickedness so prevalent in our culture. But since God will redeem and perfect society in heaven, marriage will not need to play this role there.

In heaven, we will focus our energy wholly on serving the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 7, the apostle Paul explained that although marriage is good, it can distract us from complete devotion to God. When we get married and have children, we spend time thinking about and serving our spouse and children. But individuals who remain single can spend all their time and energy serving the Lord and His people. While God created marriage between a man and a woman and then called it "very good" in Genesis 1:31, it is a relationship intended for earth. In heaven, not being tied to each other as husbands and wives will allow us to dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly to serving God.

Believers won't be married to our earthly spouses in heaven, but we will be married to the Lord. The Bible calls the church the bride of the Lamb (Revelation 21:1–11). And during the millennial kingdom, the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth (20:2–3, 7), the marriage feast of the Lamb will take place (19:7–9). And our marriage to our Lord will last forever.

But What if We *Want* to Be Married in Heaven?

The Bible teaches that our marriages end at death and that the church will be married to the Lord in heaven. But many of our brothers and sisters in Christ hold different beliefs.

The Roman Catholic Church views marriage as a sacrament and teaches that, although marriage will change in heaven, people will remain married to their earthly spouses. Roman Catholic teaching says, "Marriage does not come to a complete end at death but is transfigured, spiritualized, freed from the limits that mark life on earth."[2] The Eastern Orthodox Church believes that while marriage will not continue in heaven, we will still have unique relationships with our spouses[3] and special bonds with family and friends we knew on earth.

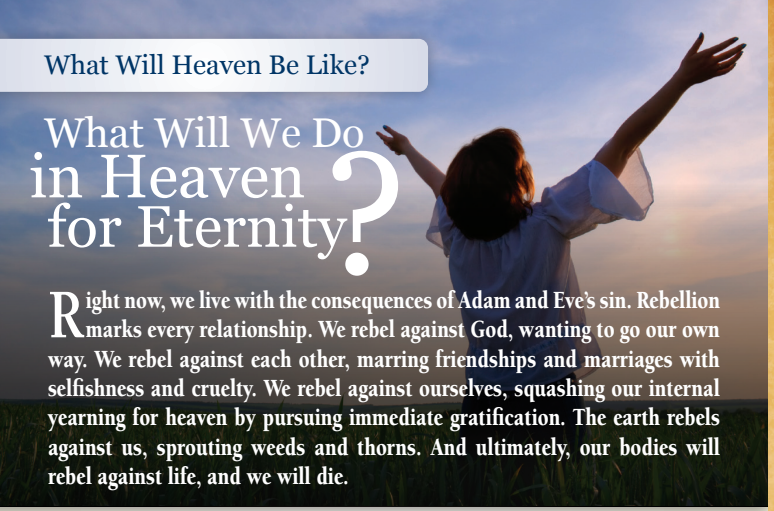
Often our desires drive our theology. If we have happy marriages or are single and longing for companionship, we may *want* to believe that the institution of marriage will last forever. If our earthly marriages have caused nothing but pain, we may hope for eternal singleness. But our desires shouldn't drive our interpretation of the Bible.

Now What?

Within the Trinity, perfect love, care, generosity, and selflessness exist. Our triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit—fashioned Adam and Eve to individually and jointly bear His image. When a man and woman come together in marriage, they retain their individuality but become one flesh. Marriage—the loving unity of two individuals—should portray to the world our triune God—the perfect unity of three divine persons.

Christian marriages on earth should also point to our relationships with the Lord Jesus. In Ephesians 5:22–33, Paul drew an analogy between the marriage relationship and Christ's relationship with His church. Jesus cares for, nurtures, and leads His church with perfect love. And His church should respond with humility, love, and obedience. When husbands and wives put each other's needs above their own and exercise mutual grace and respect, the watching world will notice.

What Will We Do in Heaven for Eternity?



Right now, we live with the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin. Rebellion marks every relationship. We rebel against God, wanting to go our own way. We rebel against each other, marring friendships and marriages with selfishness and cruelty. We rebel against ourselves, squashing our internal yearning for heaven by pursuing immediate gratification. The earth rebels against us, sprouting weeds and thorns. And ultimately, our bodies will rebel against life, and we will die.

But in the new heaven and the new earth, God will reverse sin's curse. Love and humility will replace rebellion. Harmony will replace strife, and life will not end. And finally, we will serve God and worship Him with wholehearted devotion as we were always intended to.

Revelation 22:3–4 says: "There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads." But what does that mean? It means that we will dedicate our hearts, our minds, and our entire beings to glorifying our triune God. We will do everything for Him, finally, with pure motivation (Colossians 3:23). We will worship Him with our voices, our thoughts, and our actions. The Lord's concerns will be our concerns, His joys will be our joys, and our highest privilege will be to carry out His will forever. That's the least we can do for the God who created us, loved us, redeemed us, and included us in His heavenly family.

One of the important ways we will serve the Lord is by reigning with Christ (2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 5:10; 20:4–6). Though humans failed in our first attempt to act as stewards and vice-regents in Eden, God will graciously give us a second chance to fulfill this role. In the eternal state, we will serve the Lord by governing with Him, finally bearing His image perfectly.

But Eternity Is a Long Time! Won't That Get Boring?

Worship will make up a huge part of serving God in heaven. An eternal celebration of God's grace, love, and kindness *hardly* sounds boring!

Revelation 4:7–8 reveals our heavenly choir leaders—four majestic creatures resembling a lion, a calf, a man, and an eagle, who constantly fly around God's throne and worship Him, saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come." And we will join a magnificent chorus comprised of angels (Revelation 5:11–12), the redeemed from every language and people group (7:9), and even Jesus (Hebrews 2:12). That sight alone could hold our fascination indefinitely!

Also, enjoying the fellowship of godly people doesn't get boring on earth, so why would it get boring in heaven? Our perfect love for God will allow us to fully know Him, just as He fully knows us. As we understand new things about God, we'll discover new reasons to praise Him for eternity!

Now What?

What does serving God in heaven have to do with our lives right now? Let's answer that question with another: What did Jesus Christ's identity as the Son of God and His glorious destiny back at the Father's right hand have to do with His ministry on earth?

In John 13:3–5, we learn the secret of godly service. Knowing who He was, where He came from, where He was going, and His purpose, Jesus served His disciples by washing their feet. Likewise, when Christians know who we are in Jesus Christ, that we're on earth to proclaim God's glory to others, and that we have an eternal home in heaven, we have the freedom to serve God and others.

So our future service to God in heaven has everything to do with our lives now! Servant-hearted love forms the core of Christ's character (Philippians 2). If we're being made into His likeness, we will look for opportunities to serve God and others, now and forever.



Will There Be Animals and Food in Heaven?

Animals will certainly be present in the millennial kingdom (Isaiah 11:6), the thousand-year reign of Jesus on earth that precedes the eternal state. But will they dwell in the new heaven and the new earth?

The Bible makes no direct statements about animals existing in the eternal state. However, two pieces of evidence lead us to believe that they will. First, when Jesus returns at the second coming, He and His army will come from heaven riding horses (Revelation 19:11–14). This event suggests the presence of horses in heaven, from which we can infer that other animals will be there as well. Second, the New Jerusalem will have both a river and the Tree of Life (22:2). These images evoke the original creation in the garden of Eden (Genesis 2:10; 3:22), which also had rivers and trees. While it is possible that the Lord won't retain anything else from His original creation, the echoes of Eden in the New Jerusalem suggest the possibility of other elements of the original creation in heaven as well, including animals.

We can utilize a similar line of thinking when we consider the presence of food in the eternal state. God told Adam and Eve they could eat from the plants and fruit trees that grew in the garden (1:29). If the new heaven and new earth contain echoes of the garden of Eden—including at least one fruit-bearing tree (Revelation 22:2)—then it makes sense that the people living in the paradise to come will live as those created for the paradise in Eden. Further, Jesus made mention of drinking the fruit of the vine again only when the kingdom comes (Mark 14:25). While this verse refers to the millennial kingdom rather than the eternal state, the fact that our resurrected bodies will be able to consume suggests we will, in fact, eat and drink in eternity. It's interesting to note that Jesus ate fish while in His resurrection body (Luke 24:42–43). This suggests we can as well.

Will We Have Mansions in Glory?

Not long before the crucifixion, Jesus warned the disciples that He was going away. However, He promised that while He was gone, He would prepare a place for them and they would one day have the privilege of joining Him there (John 14:2–3). While the NASB translates verse 2, "In My Father's house are many dwelling places," the King James Version uses "mansions" instead of "dwelling places." "Mansions" gives the impression of heavenly streets lined with extravagant homes, while newer translations like the NASB's "dwelling places" or the NIV's "rooms" give impressions of smaller areas within the large scope of God's dwelling place. Certainly, these could be individual homes—we will live somewhere—but any picture of sprawling heavenly estates needs to be held with an excess of caution. Further, the overriding language in this passage is familial. As children of God, we should see our future as dwelling *with* Him, rather than emphasizing individual dwellings constructed just for us.

Now What?



At times, we have an overly-mystical view of what heavenly life will be like—that it will stand apart from life as we know it in every way possible. No doubt there will be dramatic differences between life as we experience it now and life as we will experience it then. However, the likely presence of food, homes, and animals reminds us that life in the new heaven and new earth will not be completely different from life right now. This reality should motivate us to act as we will act in heaven, especially in areas of life we know will be similar—treating animals with respect, taking care of our homes, and eating in ways that please the Lord. When we abuse God's gifts of creation, we reveal an attitude of disdain for God and His command to us through Adam and Eve to care for His created world.



What about Infants and Mentally Disabled Individuals?

Can infants and mentally disabled individuals be saved and go to heaven? To answer that question, we have to go back to Adam in the garden. The Bible affirms humanity's physical and spiritual connection to Adam; he sinned, therefore, "all sinned" (Romans 5:12). Without God's gracious intervention, all humanity—including infants, born and unborn—would be condemned forever. The Bible upholds this view with the words of King David, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5 NIV). After his newborn son died, David also said, "Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me" (2 Samuel 12:23 NIV). David's words go beyond affirming the permanence of death to show his expectation of future fellowship with his son. David revealed that although babies are sinful from the womb, God has a place for them in heaven. But how?

Scripture doesn't explicitly teach an "age of accountability," a time when children become responsible to actively repent and receive the gift of salvation. Rather, Scripture indicates that only those who have a knowledge of good and evil—regardless of age—have the responsibility to repent (Genesis 2:17; Deuteronomy 1:39; Isaiah 7:15). As Christians, we know that Christ's death paid for all sins and that God extends forgiveness to all who believe in His Son. But what about those—like infants and mentally disabled individuals—who *cannot* believe in Jesus? God's merciful and compassionate character suggests that grace is applied to them as well (Matthew 18:14; Romans 5:18–19). In fact, Jesus called the children to Himself, actively taking a role in their well-being (Matthew 19:14). With these factors in mind, we can affirm that an infant's or mentally disabled person's inability to articulate faith in Jesus does not prevent God from saving him or her, and that God, in His compassion and mercy, would draw these individuals to Himself in heaven based on the sacrifice of Christ for all sins.

Does Salvation Require Understanding?



The issue of God saving infants and mentally disabled individuals takes us to the heart of God's character and to what salvation means. The apostle Paul taught that salvation comes by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). Salvation is not a gift we give ourselves but a gift we receive from God. Prior to their conversion to Christ, most people go through a process of illumination regarding the ugliness of sin and the contrasting beauty of God's redemptive work in Jesus. However, for those who cannot go through such a process because of their limited mental faculties, the character of God suggests that He would make provision for them. As a result, while we recognize that most saved people have at least some understanding of sin, repentance, redemption through Christ, and eternal life, we also recognize that those of limited mental capacity—such as infants and individuals who are mentally disabled—may be saved by grace without such understanding.

Now What?

Any believer who has lost a child has considered the issue of infant salvation. Any believer with a mentally disabled relative has wondered about the possibility of salvation for him or her. God saves. People do not. God's gift of faith comes not as a result of human understanding but as a result of His grace. Therefore, we can find comfort in the knowledge that God saves whomever He chooses, regardless of an individual's mental limitations. Such an understanding of salvation places the onus on our good and merciful God, rather than on some manufactured and imperfect act we have to perform. Recognizing God as the only author of our salvation takes us far beyond the issue of infants and mentally disabled persons and informs our own approach to salvation. This perspective frees us from bondage to made-up standards and self-focused notions of salvation, while opening the way to receive, rather than work for, the gift of God's redemption.

Can Those Who Commit Suicide Go to Heaven?

Speaking judgment upon those who choose to end their own lives has become something of a foregone conclusion in certain Christian circles. The reasoning usually goes something like this: when a person's final moment involves taking his or her own life, that individual cannot repent of that sinful act because he or she is no longer living. As a result, the person who commits suicide will go to hell.

Such teaching is often attributed to the Roman Catholic Church, which for generations would not offer burial to those who ended their own lives. However, the official catechism, or teaching, of the Roman Catholic Church makes no such link between suicide and hell. Instead, it exhorts the living to avoid despairing for those who have committed suicide and to trust God to provide the opportunity for repentance. The view that suicide leads directly to hell, then, is a complete misconception.

The Bible—while making clear that taking human life is sinful—never makes a connection between suicide and the fires of hell. However, the Bible *does* make a persuasive case for the trustworthiness of God and for the truth that when He saves, He saves eternally. Scripture makes an unmistakable link between faith and assurance: to be a person of faith is to be a person who has assurance (Hebrews 11:1). We can have assurance of our salvation and that of others who profess Christ because when God saves, He does it Himself (1 John 5:11–13). Seeking assurance within ourselves makes little sense, for it would mean that faith comes by works, and the Bible is clear that it does not (Romans 10:17; Ephesians 2:8–9). If we cannot receive faith by our works, we cannot lose faith by our works. If God has truly saved a person, then *nothing* that person does, even committing suicide, can prevent that individual from spending eternity with God. Jesus died for all of our sins before we committed even one of them.

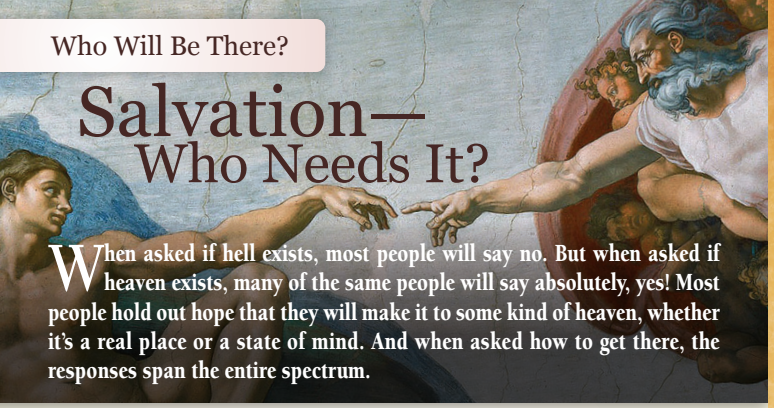
Is Christian Martyrdom Considered Suicide?

One interesting aspect of the issue of suicide and faith involves this question: *do Christian martyrs court suicide by offering their lives to God?* The welcoming of martyrdom has deep roots, going all the way back to the second-century church father Ignatius of Antioch. In history, we often find Christians joyful over the prospect of giving up their lives for their faith. But is this willingness to turn oneself over to anti-Christian authorities evidence of a suicidal impulse? If we answer yes, we also have to label the actions of Jesus Himself as *suicidal*. Refusing to resist those who mean to do one harm is a far cry from actively taking one's own life. Jesus understood His destiny and humbled Himself (Philippians 2:8), accepting the death that would ultimately put an end to all death. Far from a selfish act, Jesus's death provided salvation for humanity. Christ's faithful martyrs follow in His mold of sacrifice on someone else's behalf.

Now What?



Many people have known someone near and dear who victimized him or herself by suicide. The pain and suffering that comes from such a loss is nothing less than devastating. We can mitigate that pain with a proper understanding of the relationship between suicide and salvation. Since people are not denied salvation by a single act, we have reason to hope for that friend or family member lost to suicide. Because suicide is not an automatic ticket to hell, we can take solace in an individual's previous profession of faith. God Himself is responsible for salvation, and when He saves, nothing we do can remove us from the grip of His love (John 10:29). More importantly, if you are struggling with suicidal thoughts, please reach out to a trusted friend, a family member, a church leader, or a licensed, Christian professional counselor. There are many people in this world who want to help and who can help.



Salvation—Who Needs It?

When asked if hell exists, most people will say no. But when asked if heaven exists, many of the same people will say absolutely, yes! Most people hold out hope that they will make it to some kind of heaven, whether it's a real place or a state of mind. And when asked how to get there, the responses span the entire spectrum.

A naturalist says heaven is *now*! It's how people live their lives—making the most of every day, achieving their goals, meeting their desires, and minimizing pain. A New Ager might say one can get to a heaven of his or her own creation by attaining his or her self-determined standards. And most people, including some Christians, say that as long as our good works outweigh the bad, we're in!

Resounding over the noisy confusion of beliefs, the Bible speaks with full authority. It says:

> *"There is none righteous, not even one . . .*
> *There is none who seeks for God;*
> *All have turned aside, together they have become useless;*
> *There is none who does good."* (Romans 3:10–12)

In other words, nothing any of us can do can earn us a ticket to heaven.

Look around. Our world, filled with brokenness, is no heaven. Everything bears the mark of sin. And even when things seem to be getting better, we realize that one day, each person will face death, sin's ultimate consequence (Romans 6:23).

So what can *we* do about our sin-stained, death-bound, judgment-deserving situation? Nothing! God is infinitely holy and perfect in justice. "God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Imperfect human beings can't have a right relationship with a perfect God. And a righteous God cannot ignore sin.

How Do We Get to Heaven?

How can intelligent, modern humans *still* cling to such an archaic story? *God is good, people are bad, and we need a Savior to rescue us from hell.* Well, either this story is true or it's not—and if it is, humanity would be in deep trouble without Christ.

The Bible explains that God the Father has rescued humanity from the punishment we deserve by sending His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins (1 John 4:9–10). Jesus is fully human and fully divine (John 1:1, 14). He understands our weaknesses, and as the only sinless human, Jesus alone can bridge the chasm between an infinite God and finite people (Romans 5:6–11). God the Father justifies (declares righteous) all who believe in His Son's death, burial, and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1–5). And God redeems us through Jesus, who bore the punishment for our sin (Romans 3:24).

If you respond in faith to this gift, you will have fellowship with God both now and in heaven.[4]

Now What?

So what does our future destination have to do with our lives now?

After Jesus Christ returns, He will reverse sin's death penalty (Revelation 20:11–15). Just as Christ rose from the dead, so will we! And one day believers will live in our resurrected bodies on a re-created earth under the rule of the just and benevolent Lord. No longer will we experience pain, sickness, or death. The apostle Paul said: "Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed . . . for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:51–53).

With that in mind, Christians should live each day with hope, infusing a little bit of heaven into our relationships, thoughts, jobs, and world. And we should share the gospel with others so they, too, can live with hope!

Facts about Heaven

- The Bible mentions heaven more than six hundred times and about seventy times in the book of Matthew alone.
- Almost 80 percent of the books in the Bible mention heaven.
- The Bible refers to *three* heavens: the atmosphere, the stellar space, and the place where God dwells.
- The Bible uses some synonyms for the third heaven: God's dwelling place (Deuteronomy 26:15 NIV), God's throne (Isaiah 66:1), the temple (6:1), paradise (2 Corinthians 12:4), the Father's house (John 14:1–6), a better country (Hebrews 11:16), the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 21:1), and others.
- Stephen, the first martyr, caught a glimpse of heaven and saw Jesus Christ standing at the Father's right hand (Acts 7:56).

Promises about Heaven

- Heaven will be beautiful (Revelation 21:2, 11, 18, 19, 21).
- God will reign from the New Jerusalem, which will have foundations of precious stones, pearl gates, and a wall of jasper and will be illuminated by God's glory (21:10, 18–23).
- Heaven will be a place of great joy and satisfaction (Psalm 16:11; Hebrews 12:22–23).
- Heaven will last forever (Psalm 23:6; John 10:28; 1 Peter 1:4; 2 Peter 1:11; Revelation 22:5).
- Mourning, crying, and death will have no place in heaven (Revelation 21:4).
- In heaven, we will see God (Matthew 5:8).
- People of every ethnicity and language will inhabit heaven (Revelation 5:9; 7:9).
- Old Testament saints, who were also saved by grace through faith in God's revelation, will inhabit heaven (Genesis 15:6; Psalm 32:1–2; Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 3:23–25; Galatians 3:11).

What We'll Do in Heaven

- We will serve God (Revelation 22:3) and continually worship Him (Nehemiah 9:6; Psalm 103:20–21; Ezekiel 3:12; Luke 2:13–14).
- We will live with God, as part of His eternal family (John 14:2–3; Revelation 21:3).
- We will have a greater capacity to know God and other people (1 Corinthians 13:12).
- We will have rest in heaven (2 Thessalonians 1:7; Hebrews 4:9; Revelation 14:13).
- We will have physical bodies that won't experience pain or death (1 Corinthians 15:50–57).
- We will enjoy treasures that are not susceptible to decay (Matthew 5:12; 6:20).

How to Read Books about Experiencing the Afterlife

90 Minutes in Heaven. Heaven Is for Real. A Divine Revelation of Hell. To Heaven and Back. The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven. 23 Minutes in Hell. Proof of Heaven.

This list of titles could go on. It seems every couple years, another "I-experienced-the-afterlife-and-lived-to-tell-about-it" book shows up with much fanfare. Readers flock to these books for encouragement or assurance. Many find just that. Others walk away disappointed or, worse, troubled.

Along with acclaim, "afterlife" books produce difficult questions that leave believers wrestling with just how to process the claims they've read. While most of us know that Scripture is our primary authority and all other Christian teaching should measure up to the Bible's standard, people respond to "afterlife" books in a variety of ways. Many believers reject them immediately, judging their authors misguided at best, shysters at worst. Others accept these books with little questioning, implicitly trusting the published word. In between these two poles, lies a middle group wondering what to make of such striking claims. Knowing that similar questions will arise no matter which of these books we read, let's outline three talking points that can help us evaluate and discuss books on visiting the afterlife.

First, *no one can ever prove or disprove the reality of an afterlife experience*. Much conversation about "afterlife" books gets caught up in the question of whether or not the experience really happened. However, such a question is impossible to answer definitively—one way or the other. A person's individual visitation, dream, or vision cannot be replicated. When the apostle Paul mentioned a visit to the heavens (2 Corinthians 12:2), we implicitly trust him because his biblical writings were inspired by God. Paul's experience is, therefore, different from any other potential experience. Any other account of heavenly (or hellacious) visitation should bring with it concerns about its truth and reliability.

Second, *the search for supernatural experience often misdirects our faith*. Paul famously taught that God's people live by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). People often seek the "tangible" evidence of someone having seen and experienced the afterlife—someone besides those who testified in Scripture. (See Isaiah 6:1–6.) And yet, for as much effort as we put into reading about or going to hear someone speak about a visit to the afterlife, the account doesn't solve the problem—we still need faith! We have to decide whether or not to trust *the individual*. So, we must ask where the supernatural experience of another leads us to put our faith—is the focus on the Lord, or is it on the individual offering the account?

Finally, *some search for assurance in the wrong place*. Many people who struggle with assurance, come to "afterlife" books to receive a sense that heaven (or hell) is really there. People's stories on all manner of topics provide us some sense of assurance in our faith. However, many suggest that these stories of afterlife visitations are *necessary* to give them confirmation. This perspective calls into question Scripture's sufficiency. In other words, *is God's Word enough* for His people to be saved and to do His will? Scripture's answer is a firm and confident *yes!* Paul testified to Scripture's sufficiency in 2 Timothy 3:15–17. For us to suggest that we *need* stories of supernatural visitations suggests that Scripture actually isn't enough for salvation and doing God's will.

Books on supernatural visitations are growing increasingly common. Most of us have come across one or more in the past several years. As you pick up these books to read or discuss with others, keep these talking points in mind and your Bible at the ready. Scripture is our ultimate standard for what we believe and how we live, no matter what the latest best-seller claims.

Resources for Probing Further

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Endnotes

1. These and other events related to the end times are discussed in more detail in another Insight for Living Passport: *End Times Prophecy Passport* (Plano, Tex.: IFL Publishing House, 2011).
2. Father Raniero Cantalamessa, "Father Cantalamessa on Marriage in Heaven," *Catholic Online*, http://www.catholic.org/featured/headline.php?ID=3793 (accessed Feb. 27, 2013).
3. Father Laurent Cleenewerck, ed., Orthodox Answers, http://www.orthodoxanswers.org/answer/824/ (accessed Feb. 27, 2013).
4. To find out more about God's plan of salvation, please visit our "How to Know God" page at www.insight.org/resources/topics/how-to-know-god.



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Understanding Heaven Passport

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Charles R. Swindoll has devoted his life to the accurate, practical teaching and application of God's Word. Since 1998, he has served as the senior pastor-teacher of Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas, but Chuck's listening audience extends beyond a local church body. As a leading program in Christian broadcasting since 1979, *Insight for Living* airs around the world. Chuck's leadership as president and now chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary has helped prepare and equip a new generation for ministry.

The text was developed collaboratively by the Creative Ministries Department of Insight for Living Ministries.

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"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 14:3

