

Heaven

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From beginning to end the Bible includes heaven as part of reality. Heaven is shown to be just as real as the earth, sun, moon, stars etc.

For Christians heaven is the next step after our death: something to be looked forward to as part of the eternal life that Jesus has given us. We know that when we die we will go to be with Jesus in heaven, and in the meantime we are waiting for *our blessed hope - the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ*. Titus 2:13.

But what is heaven like? That's what this study is about.

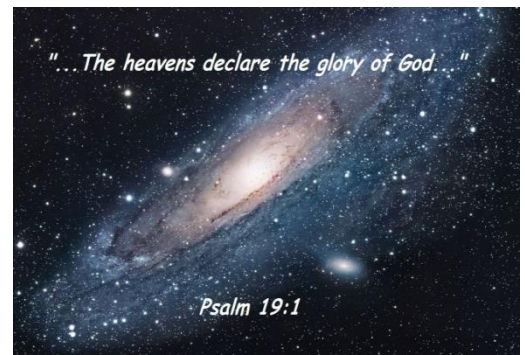
- Jesus is the best one to tell us what heaven is like because He came from heaven and is now is back in heaven. But, while Jesus told us a lot about how to get to heaven, He didn't tell us much about what it is like!
- Quite a few people in the Bible had visions of heaven but when they try to describe it they are limited by having to use words and images. e.g. In Revelation John continually says things in heaven "have the appearance of" or "look like" things that are familiar to us on earth. Words and pictures will always be limiting for us when we try to describe heaven. When we get there we will be amazed at how much greater it is than our limited earthly conceptions!
- Some people have "died" and come back to life with stories of what heaven is like. Consistently they say that heaven is a place of light, often at the end of a long tunnel.

The common image of heaven as being a place where we sit around on clouds playing harps seems far from the reality that awaits us! Heaven will be much more about worshipping the Lord together with countless other Christians. Heaven will be all about Jesus!

What is heaven?

The Hebrew word for heaven is שָׁמַיִם shamayim, and the Greek word is οὐρανός ouranos. This word is plural, indicating that it could have more than one meaning.

- The Hebrew and Greek words for heaven both refer to a **physical place** - the sky and all that's in it (the air, clouds, sun, moon, stars, galaxies and universe) and also to a **spiritual place** – heaven. *There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendour of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendour of the earthly bodies is another.* 1 Corinthians 15:40. *The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain You. ... Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You;* 1 Kings 8:7.



The **physical place** is normally called "the heavens".

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1.

You alone are the Lord. You made the skies and the heavens and all the stars. You made the earth and the seas and everything in them. You preserve and give life to everything, and all the angels of heaven worship you.

Nehemiah 9:6. (This verse is interesting because it includes both "the heavens" and "heaven").

The **spiritual place** is normally called "heaven". Consistently throughout the Bible, God is described as being in heaven, and as having His throne in heaven. Heaven is where God is!

- God is described as being "the God of heaven". *There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries.* Daniel 2:8. *Whatever the God of heaven has prescribed, let it be done with diligence for the temple of the God of heaven.* Ezra 7:23.
- God spoke from heaven and looks down on earth from heaven: *You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven.* Nehemiah 9:13. *O God of Heaven's armies. Look down from heaven and see our plight.* Psalm 80:14.
- There are angels in heaven. (which Jacob saw in his vision of heaven): *As he slept, Jacob dreamed of a stairway that reached from earth to heaven. And he saw the angels of God going up and down on it.* Genesis 28:12.
- Enoch (Genesis 5:22-24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11), went straight to heaven without dying first. They went directly from this life into God's presence.
- Jesus said His Father was in heaven: *Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name.* Matthew 6:9.
- Heaven is our eternal destiny; the place where we will spend eternity in fellowship with God; the place where we will be rewarded for what we have done during our time on earth. *Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. 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 14:1-3. *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.* Matthew 5:12. *'Well done, good and faithful servant.... Enter into the joy of your master.'* Matthew 25:21.

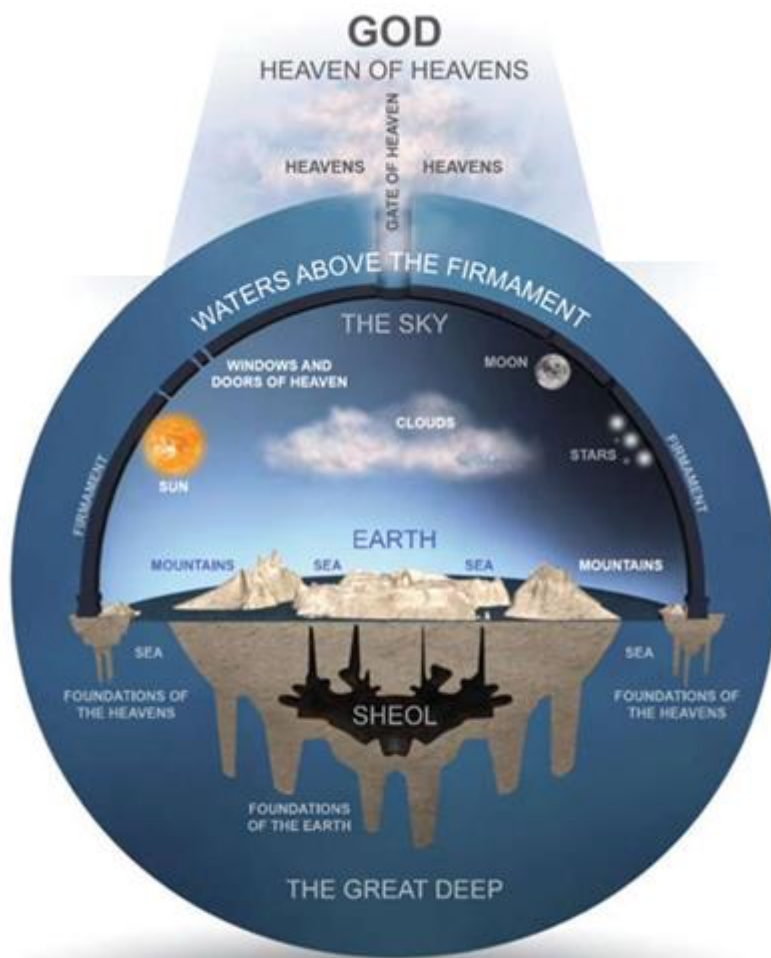
The Hebrew concept of the universe

The Bible was completed about 2000 years ago. This was well before it was discovered that the earth was just one planet surrounding a small star (the sun), and that the sun was itself part of a small solar system in an enormous galaxy making up a tiny part of the universe. The concept of the universe at the time was (predictably) that the earth was at the centre with sun, moon and stars above, seas around and a mysterious underworld under the earth. This concept is reflected right throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, and is similar to that which was held by all ancient cultures. After all, that's exactly the view of the universe that we see whenever we look upwards.

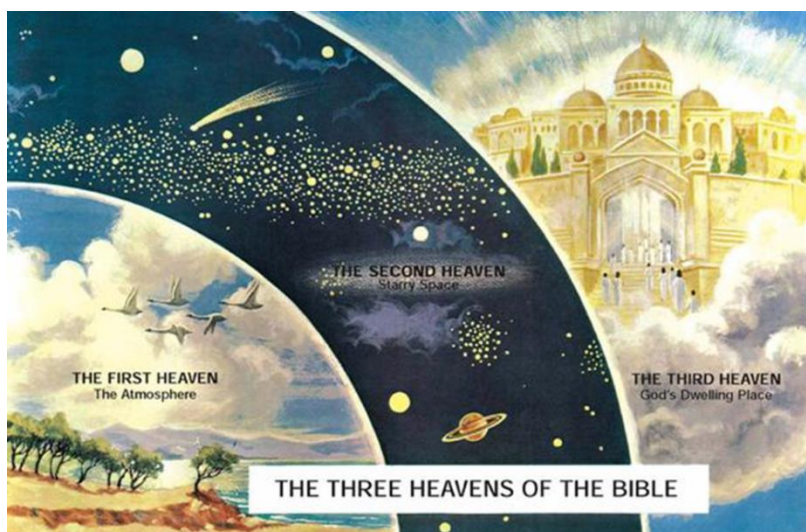
In the Hebrew concept of the universe heaven was the place where God lived and had His throne. Heaven or *the heaven of heavens* (Deuteronomy 10:14), was seen as being above the sky and what we call now call outer space with its galaxies, stars and planets. At the junction between space and heaven was thought to be a solid arc called the firmament supported by foundations and pillars. (2 Samuel 22:8). This had windows and doors that allowed rain, light and blessing through (Malachi 3:10; Psalm 78:23). Sometimes God was seen to send destructive forces through from heaven to the earth like hail (Joshua 10:11) and fire (Genesis 19:24).



There was a general recognition, though, that God was the creator of the heavens and that *the heavens declare the glory of God*. See Psalm 8 and Psalm 19:1-6.



This led to a concept of three heavens, paralleling the classical Greek idea of three heavens. In Medieval times the Roman Catholic church adopted this way of thinking: the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2) is the place where Christians go when they die; the second heaven is space and the first heaven is what we see in the sky.



Heaven in the Old Testament

There is little detail given for what heaven is like in the Old Testament. It is assumed that God's throne is in heaven and that He dwells in heaven. Sometimes references in the Old Testament are unclear as to whether they are referring to heaven itself or to pictures or visions God gave to people in specific situations, or to visions of God who lives in heaven. e.g. Genesis 1:1-2:4; 3:8; 12:7; 28:13; Exodus 3:2; 14:24; Numbers 22:28; Joshua 5:13; Judges 6:11; 13:3; 1 Kings 22:19; 2 Chronicles 18:18; Job 1:6; 19:26; Psalm 16:9-11; 49:15; 73:23-26; Isaiah 6:1-13; 25:8; 26:19; 53:12; Ezekiel 1:1-28; Daniel 5:5; 7:9; 12:1-3, 13; Hosea 13:14. Also, we know that Abraham was looking *for a city . . . whose builder and maker is God* (Hebrews 11:10) which may be the New Jerusalem. Revelation 3:12.

Jesus talked a lot about heaven.

Jesus referred to heaven many times throughout His ministry. He said that He came from heaven, was going back to heaven, and that He had come so that we too might go to heaven. Much of Jesus' teaching was about heaven, especially what He referred to as the "kingdom of heaven".

- **Jesus said He came from heaven.**

Jesus often had to validate His credentials as the Son of God, especially to the Jewish religious leaders. One of the main ways He did this was by saying that He came from heaven.

No-one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven - the Son of Man. John 3:13.

For the true bread is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. I am the bread of life ... John 6:33-51.

At Jesus' baptism His credentials as the Son of God were strongly validated when the Holy Spirit came on Him when *heaven was opened* and the Father spoke *from heaven* saying *This is my Son, whom I love. With Him I am well pleased.* Matthew 3:16,17.



- **Jesus said heaven is where the Father lives.**

Jesus' teaching about heaven followed the traditional Jewish view that heaven was the place where God lived and had His throne. Jesus said that His Father was in heaven: *Our Father who art in heaven ...* Mathew 9:6, and called heaven His Father's "house": *Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. 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 14:1-3. Identifying Himself with the Father and with heaven like this seriously angered the religious authorities (even though what Jesus said was true!



- **Jesus said heaven is a Kingdom.**

Jesus' central message was about the Kingdom of heaven/Kingdom of God.

He taught about the kingdom; modelled the kingdom, described the kingdom,

and showed us how we can enter the kingdom. If we accept Jesus' Lordship He will welcome us into His

eternal kingdom. *Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world'.* Matthew 25:34.

The Kingdom of heaven.

In Matthew's gospel the kingdom is called "the Kingdom of heaven" while in the other three gospels it is called "the Kingdom of God". That's because Matthew's gospel was written primarily for Jews who thought writing or saying the word "God" violated the first two commandments. They used the term "G-d" or replaced it with the word "heaven". As a result the word "heaven" became a synonym for God Himself. e.g. Matthew 23:22; Luke 15:18.

Jesus taught that the Kingdom of heaven is an eternal relationship in which God is central in everything. He is the King, and we are His subjects. He is Lord! If we are in the Kingdom we will be what He wants us to be, and do what He wants us to do. This applies during our life on earth, and also in eternity in heaven.

- **Jesus said heaven is a community.**

Jesus showed us that all who believe in Him and are saved will be part of a *great multitude* in heaven (Revelation 19:1. We will be like the angels, in fellowship with one another and ultimately, with God.

Those who attain the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; for they cannot even die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. Luke 20:35,36.

What a future we have to look forward to! Eternal life forever in heaven with Jesus and with all Christians who have ever lived!



- **After His resurrection Jesus returned to heaven and one day He will come again from heaven.**

Acts 1 describes Jesus' return to heaven. During His ascension Jesus was *taken up* and two angels said *This same Jesus, who has been taken from you to heaven, will come back the same way you have seen Him go to heaven.* Acts 1:9-11. Jesus is now at the right hand of God in heaven and will return from heaven at His second coming. *You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.* Mark 14:62.

In the New Testament Paul, Peter and John all had visions of heaven.

Paul wrote *I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know--God knows.* 2 Corinthians 12:2. Most commentators think that this person was probably Paul himself, and that this vision of heaven occurred when he was saved on the road to Damascus. Acts 9:1-19.

- **Paul told us what we would be like in heaven.**

At present we have a natural body: *soma psuchicon* – literally a soulish body; or a body that houses our soul. This body is perishable, without honour, weak and can only live for a limited time. When we are resurrected we will have a spiritual body: *soma pneumaticon*. Our new body will be spiritual, imperishable, glorious and powerful. This will take place when Jesus comes again and *the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.* Death will be *swallowed up in victory.* We will be made into the likeness of Jesus and then we will spend eternity with Jesus in heaven! See 1 Corinthians 15:35-57.



- **Paul showed that believers already have access to heaven.**

God has *blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ*. Ephesians 1:3. We are to focus our lives around these heavenly blessings. *Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things*. Colossians 3:1,2.

- **Paul also explained how heaven is part of God's eternal purposes.**

He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment - to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. Ephesians 1:9,10.



Peter also had a vision of heaven. He saw *heaven opened* and the Lord revealed to Him that His purposes had been extended to all people, not just to the Jewish people. Acts 10:9-43. This was a very important revelation as it meant that the Gospel was for everyone, and that *everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved*. Romans 10:13.

- **Peter showed us that the current heavens and earth will be destroyed and replaced.**

We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. Because of this we need to make every effort to be found *spotless, blameless and at peace with Him*. 2 Peter 3:1-13.

- **Peter told us that heaven is our inheritance in Christ .**

We have an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade, kept in heaven for you. 1 Peter 1:4

John had an extensive *revelation of Jesus Christ* which included many visions of heaven. He recorded this in the Book of Revelation and it is here that we get our best insight into what heaven is like.

- **John struggled to put what he saw into words.** e.g. Revelation 4: 1-11 The overwhelming picture that we get of heaven in Revelation that of God's people together giving the Lord the honour, worship and praise that He is due:

You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for You created all things, and by Your will they were created and have their being. Revelation 4:11.

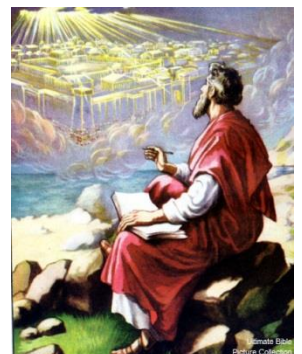
Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!

Revelation 7:12.



- **In his vision John was invited to see into heaven.**

An angel invited him to *Come up here* and found himself in Heaven in the Spirit. It was an overwhelming sight and John uses highly pictorial language to describe what he saw. The table below lists what John saw in heaven. (Revelation Chapters 4 and 5).



The Father	The Father sat on the throne, encircled by a rainbow. He had the appearance of jasper and carnelian and was accompanied by lightning and thunder. The Father was carrying a scroll in His right hand.
Jesus, the Lamb of God	Jesus is called the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David. He has triumphed! He looked like a lamb that had been slain, and was standing in the centre of the throne. Jesus was the only one who was able to open up the scroll and its 7 seals.
The 7 Spirits	Jesus had 7 horns and 7 eyes which are the 7 Spirits of God sent out into all the earth.
The 4 living creatures	The living creatures were like a lion, an ox, a man and an eagle. They had 6 wings and many eyes and glorified God day and night saying <i>Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.</i> 4:8
The 24 elders	The 24 elders were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads and harps. They were on thrones surrounding the Father and were holding golden bowls of incense, which were the prayers of the saints. They were continually worshipping Him saying <i>You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for You created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.</i> 4:11
The angels	Countless thousands of angels encircled the throne and sang <i>Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise.</i> 5:12
All other creatures	Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them sang <i>To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever.</i> 5:13
The environment	Like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

- **John was also given a vision of what heaven will be like after God's purposes are finally fulfilled.**

See Revelation Chapters 21 and 22. God will make *everything new*. The *first heaven and earth will pass away* and be replaced by a *new heaven and earth*. The Holy City, New Jerusalem will come out of heaven like a beautiful Bride. There will be no temple in the city because the Lord will be its temple, and there is no need for light as the Lamb (Jesus) will be its light. Nothing impure will be there, for all sinners will have been sent to the lake of fire. The river of life will flow through the city bringing ongoing life. Everyone will worship the Lord, and see His face. God will then be able to have the kind of relationship with His creation that He had when He created the earth. The effects of the Fall will have been removed (sin, sickness, death etc.) and everything will be *made new* - for eternity.

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. 21:3,4



Heaven is a central part of God's overall plan for the ages.

God in heaven (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) wanted a people with whom He could fellowship; a people who would love and honour Him as their God. To achieve this God created a time-bound universe and placed human beings on planet earth. God gave the first people a choice as to whether they would love and follow Him or choose their own way. When Adam and Eve chose to disobey God sin entered into the world, breaking the relationship between God and His created people. God then sought to redeem His people – to bring them back into relationship with Himself. He did this by sending His Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross, taking on Himself the punishment that all people deserved because of their sin. Jesus' death and resurrection provided a way by which anyone could have fellowship with God – simply by accepting Christ as Saviour and Lord. After His resurrection Jesus returned to heaven and His offer of salvation still stands for anyone who will accept Christ. One day Jesus will return to the earth. This will signal the end of God's time-bound universe and it will be replaced by a new heavens and a new earth which will last for eternity. God's plan for the ages will then become a reality. God will be able to fellowship with a great body of people who will love, honour and worship Him in heaven forever.

Everything in heaven will then be under one head: Jesus Christ. *He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment - to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.* Ephesians 1:9,10.

Ultimately all believers will live in heaven in their resurrection bodies, which they will receive when the Lord comes for them from heaven (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). That's when we shall see Jesus face to face and live with Him for eternity. What a wonderful future! What a wonderful hope!

That's when *The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever.* Revelation 11:7.

But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him".

1 Corinthians 2:9.

Hallelujah!



Discussion questions

How was heaven pictured in the Old Testament? What did Jesus say heaven was like? What did Paul, Peter and John say heaven was like? What do you think heaven will be like?

Who will be in heaven? What will everyone be doing there? How do you ensure you get there?

The ancient Hebrew view of the universe is different from the modern scientific view. How do you reconcile this? How does this affect your understanding and interpretation of the Bible? Is either view "right"?

Describe why God created the heavens and the earth, and placed people on the earth. How does heaven fit in with this plan? Where are we at right now in the fulfilment of this plan?

How prepared are you for heaven? What can you do to be better prepared?

What have you learned from your study of heaven? How will this affect the way you live in the future?