

Heaven

A. Introduction: Biblical language about heaven

The biblical terms translated “heaven” are as follows: the Hebrew "shamayim" which means "the heights, lofty" and the Greek "ouranos" which means "that which is raised up." The Hebrew is always plural and the Greek is sometimes plural and there is some evidence that Scripture envisages more than one heaven. Ancient traditions held there were three, seven or ten.

- a. *The Bible speaks of "the highest heavens" (1 Kings 8:27; Nehemiah 9:6; Psalms 115:16 ; 148:4)*
- b. *Jesus passed through the heavens and is higher than the heavens (Hebrews 4:14; 7 26; Ephesians 4:10).*
- c. *Paul was caught up into the third heaven*

He writes: “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).

A common way of dividing the heavens into three is that the first heaven is the atmosphere; the second, space containing the planets and stars; and the third, the abode of God.

B. God in heaven

God is the God of heaven.

He is called: “The LORD, the God of heaven” in Genesis 24:7 and “the Lord of heaven and earth in Acts 17:24. (See also: Gen 24:3; Ezra 5:11; 6:9; Neh.1:4f; 2:4,20; Ps.136:26; Dan.2:18, 37, 44; 4:37; 5:23; Jonah 1:9; Matt.11:25; Luke 10:21).

He dwells in heaven.

The Lord’s Prayer refers to him as such (Matthew 6:9) as does 2 Chronicles 20:6. See also: Deut.4:39; 26:15; 1 Kings 8:22f; Job 16:19; 22:12; Psa.73:25; 115:3 Eccl.5:2; Lam.3:41; Dan. 2:28; Matt.5:16,45; 6:1; 7:11, 21; 10:32f; 12:50; 16:17; 18:14, 19; 23:9; Mark 11:25; Luke 11:2, 13; Eph.6:9; Col.4:1; Rev.4:1f; 13:6).

Yet heaven cannot contain him

Solomon asks: “But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). Speaking through Jeremiah the Lord declares: “Do not I fill heaven and earth?” (Jeremiah 23:24).

He created heaven

Psalms 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; Acts 4:24. See also: Gen.14:9, 22; 2 Kings 19:5; 2 Chron.2:12; Neh.9:6; Job 25:2; Psalm 146:6; Isa.37:16; Acts 14:15; Col.1:16.

He is enthroned in heaven

He is “enthroned between the cherubim” (2 Kings 19:15). He “has established his throne in heaven” (Psalms 103:19). In fact he says: “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool” (Isaiah 66:1). John sees God’s throne in his vision (Revelation 4:1; 5:13). See also: Psalm 2:4; 123:1; Isa.37:16; Matt.5:34; 23:22; Acts 7:49.

His temple is in heaven

The earthly temple “is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven” (Hebrews 8:5). The true sanctuary is in heaven where Christ appears for us in God’s presence (Hebrews 9:24). In his vision John sees God’s temple in heaven and the ark of the covenant (Revelation 11:19; 15:5)

He is served by the angels

Jacob, in his dream, saw angels ascending and descending a stairway between earth and heaven. Jesus told Nathaniel: “I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” (John 1:51). They carry out God’s will in the lives of human beings. *See Genesis 22:11; Matthew 18:10, also Gen.14:17; 22:15; Dan.4:13; Zech.6:5; Matt.24:35f; 28:2; Luke 22:43; Rev.10:1,4f; 14:17; 15:1; 18:1; 20:1.*

He is worshipped by the host of heaven

See Rev 4:10-11; 5:9-13; 7:10-12; 19:1, 4, 6. See also: Neh.9:6; Psa.69:34.

Heaven belongs to God

David prayed: “Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendour, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all” (1 Chronicles 29:11).

C. Other aspects of Heaven

God "looks down" from heaven

“The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God” (Psalms 14:2).

See also: Psa. 33:13; 53:2; 80:14; 85:11; 102:19; Isa.63:15; Lam.3:50.

He speaks from heaven

God’s voice is heard on Sinai (Exodus 20:22), at Jesus’ baptism (Matthew 3:16) at the beginning of Holy Week (John 12:28). *See also: Deut.4:36; Neh.9:13; Psa.76:8; Dan.4:3; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21; Acts 10:11,16; 11:5,9; 2 Pet.1:18.*

He hears us from heaven

God hears our prayers (2 Chronicles 7:14; 30:27).

He acts from heaven

He saves and blesses his people (Psalms 20:6; 57:3; Malachi 3:10). See also the provision of manna from heaven: Ex.16:4; Neh.9:15; Psa.78:24; 105:40; John 6:31f.

He judges from heaven

Paul writes that: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Romans 1:18).

He sends signs from heaven

This will happen particularly in the End Times (Luke 21:11; Acts 2:19).

Heaven rejoices over penitent sinners

Jesus said: "I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:7).

D. Jesus and heaven

Jesus came from heaven

John 3:13; 6:50. See also: John 3:31; 6:38, 41f, 58; 1 Cor.15:47ff; 1 Thess.1:10.

Jesus ascended to heaven

Acts 1:11

Jesus is enthroned in heaven

Jesus is seated "at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (Hebrews 1:3) "with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him" (1 Peter 3:22). See also: Acts 3:21; 7:55; 9:3ff; 22:6, 13, 19; Heb.8:1.

Jesus will return from heaven

One day we shall "see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matthew 26:64). "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:16). See also: Mark 14:62; Luke 2:15; 2 Thess.1:7.

E. The Holy Spirit and heaven

The Holy Spirit came from heaven (1 Peter 1:12). See also: Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21; John 1:32.

F. Conflict in heaven

Satan is described in Job 1 as presenting himself before God amongst the angels (Job 1:6). Daniel depicts archangels in fierce conflict with demonic powers (Daniel 10:13; 12:1). Paul teaches that there are spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

Revelation describes a final great battle taking place in heaven: "And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven" (Revelation 12:7-8).

Dr John Sweet comments, "The war was not military but moral and legal: Satan is the *accuser of our brethren* (v.10). *Satan* means in Hebrew 'adversary', in a legal sense, and he has his 'place in heaven' as a kind of Public Prosecutor (Zech.3:1ff) ... But because he represents justice he cannot simply be removed by military force; there is conflict in heaven itself. As long as there are sinners to be accused, he has his 'place'...His defeat

therefore is not military but forensic ... *They have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb* ... Michael is the defending barrister who pleads Christ's sacrifice 'for the sins of the whole world' (1 John 2:2) against the *deceiver of the whole world*."¹

Professor G R Beasley-Murray writes that this shows Satan, who accuses humans to God, is excluded from heaven. This indicates that the accusations no longer reach God. It also sounds the death knell to Satan's power on earth. However hard he tries he will not destroy the work of God, including in the church, and his days are numbered.²

Dr R H Charles comments, "According to Jewish tradition Satan was cast down from heaven in the beginning of time, but according to a widely attested belief he still had access to heaven. The fusion of these two beliefs could readily issue in the eschatological expectation that Satan was to be cast down from heaven in the last times ..."³

Jesus sees prophetically this casting out of Satan: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18).

G. Heaven will come to earth

1. Heaven and earth will pass away

This refers to the "destruction" of the universe by fire. Jesus teaches that "Heaven and earth will pass away" (Matthew 24:35). Peter goes into more detail: "By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men..... But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat" (2 Peter 3:7). See also Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33.

Prof E M B Green comments quoting Bo Reicke, "The solar system and the great galaxies, even space-time relationships, will be abolished ...All elements which make up the physical universe will be dissolved by heat and utterly melt away. It is as picture which in an astonishing degree corresponds to what might actually happen according to modern theories of the universe."⁴

Norman Hillyer comments, "Our contemporary world with its atomic bombs is the first generation to see one way in which the fiery destruction of heavens and earth could be feasible on such a scale."⁵

Dr Robert Mounce quotes a report that "on March 5th 1979 nine US satellites simultaneously radioed back to earth that a gamma radiation explosion occurred in a nearby galaxy known as N-49. This explosion lasted for only one-tenth of a second, but released more radiation than our sun does in 3,000 years. Doyle Evans, an astrophysicist at the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratories in New Mexico, noted that had this explosion of energy occurred in our galaxy, it would have instantly vaporized the earth!". He added, "Whether or not this will be the specific way God achieves final judgment is not known."⁶

However this will not mean total destruction but rather a cataclysmic cleansing by fire (although some think the 2 Peter passage means total destruction followed by re-creation). There will be a "renewal" [literally "regeneration"] (Matt. 19:28) or a restoration (Acts 3:21) of the universe. Jesus speaks of "the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne" (Matthew 19:28). Peter says that: "He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets" (Acts 3:21).

Dr P E Hughes, commenting on Rev.21:1, says that, on the face of it, the OT prophets foretelling of the dissolution of heaven and earth (Ps.102:26; Isa.34:4; 51:6); Peter's prophecy in 2 Peter 3:7, 10-13 and that of Jesus in Matt. 24:35 seem to say that the old earth and heaven will be destroyed and discarded. But he continues, "There are weighty considerations, however, which lead us to conclude that this is an incorrect interpretation. For one thing ... St Paul speaks of the present creation as 'waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God' when it 'will be set free from its bondage to decay' (Rom.8:19-22). This indicates that the new heaven and the new earth will be creation renewed and brought to the glorious consummation for which it was intended." He compares this with 2 Cor 5:17."

Hughes continues, "For another thing, for God to discard or annihilate the present creation would testify to the failure of his purpose in bringing it into being, and this in turn would contradict the doctrine of the being of God, whose purposes, by definition, are incapable of meeting with failure. God's purpose as Creator is seen in the fact that all things were created in the Son and for him (Col.1:16), and consequently all things have the purpose of their creation fulfilled in the Son..."⁷

2. There will be a new heaven and a new earth

The Lord says through Isaiah "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind" (Isaiah 65:17 cf 66:22) and this is reaffirmed in the New Testament: "In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Peter 3:13).

Prof E M B Green comments, "Sin, which has marred God's world, will not be permitted to have the final word. In a renewed universe the ravages of the fall will be repaired by the glory of the restoration. Paradise Lost will become Paradise Regained, and God's will shall eventually be done alike in earth and heaven."⁸

John in his vision says: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea" (Revelation 21:1).

Paul describes creation is groaning and longing for its renewal/restoration which will coincide with the bodily resurrection of the saints: "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:19-23).

Professor W Sanday and Dr A C Headlam comment, "There runs through [Paul's] words an intense sympathy with nature in and for itself. He is one of those (like St Francis of Assisi) to whom it is given to read as it were the thoughts of plants and animals. He seems to lay his ear to the earth and the confused murmur which he hears has a meaning for him: it is creation's yearning for a happier state intended for it and of which it has been defraudedwith St Paul the movement is truly cosmic. The `sons of God' are not selected for their own sakes alone, but their redemption means the redemption of a world of being besides themselves."⁹

Professor F F Bruce comments, "This doctrine of the cosmic fall is implicit in the biblical record from Genesis iii (where the ground is cursed for man's sake) to Revelation xxii (where `there shall be no more curse'); and is demanded by any world- outlook which endeavours to do justice to the biblical doctrine of creation and the facts of life as we know themIt is no accident that the redemption of nature is here seen as coinciding with the redemption of man's body - that physical part of his being which links him with the material creation. Man was put in charge of the `lower' creation and involved it with him when he fell; through the redemptive work of the `second man' the entail of the fall is broken not only for man himself but for the creation which is dependent on him."¹⁰

In all this cataclysmic renewal of the universe and of heaven itself the kingdom of God will be unshaken: "At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ``Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." The words ``once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken- that is, created things- so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe" (Hebrews 12:26-28).

3. Everything in heaven and earth will be united in Christ

Paul describes God's purpose: "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Ephesians 1:10). He will through Christ "reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Colossians 1:20).

4. The New Jerusalem will descend from heaven

John had a vision of this: "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. (Revelation 21:2 cf. 3:12; 21:10). And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

The descent of the new Jerusalem speaks of the control of heaven in the renewed universe. In this age there is tension between heaven and an earth under divine judgment. In the new age the rule of heaven will bring unity and harmony (see point G3).

Professor G R Beasley Murray comments on the height of the city (literally 1500 miles), "Such representations depict *a city which reaches from earth to heaven*. That conception accounts for John's staggeringly large measurements. The city of God and the Lamb will extend far over the territories of men and unite earth and heaven in one."¹¹

Dr Sweet points out that the idea of a heavenly Jerusalem was familiar "but there is no parallel to it coming down from heaven".¹²

Robert Mounce comments on the new Jerusalem being a perfect cube, 1500 miles x 1500 miles x 1500 miles. "This particular shape would immediately remind the Jewish reader of the inner sanctuary of the temple (a perfect cube, each dimension being 20 cubits; 1 Kings 6:20), the place of divine presence."¹³

Professor Richard Bauckham writes, "Since the whole of the New Jerusalem is a holy of holies, God's immediate presence fills it. In place of a temple. it has the unrestricted presence of god and the Lamb (21:22). Like his presence in the temple (eg Ezek.43, this eschatological presence of God entails holiness and glory. As his eschatological presence, it is also the source of the new life of the new creation."¹⁴

Professor G R Beasley-Murray comments on the appearance of the city, "Its appearance *like jasper, clear as crystal* recalls the description of the divine appearance on the throne in 4:3, which is said to be 'as jasper and carnelian', ie., both transparent and fiery red, as the light. The whole city therefore is conceived of as glowing with the glory of God, reflecting the divine nature in its every part."¹⁵

It seems that the precious stones in the city were related in the ancient world to the 12 signs of the zodiac but John lists them in the reverse order.

[moving East-West (not West-East)]

1. Jasper	Diamond	Pisces
2. Sapphire	Blue	Aquarius
3. Chalcedony	Green	Capricorn
4. Emerald	Green	Sagittarius
5. Sardonyx	Red and white	Scorpio
6. Carnelian	Red	Libra
7. Chrysolite	Yellow-gold	Virgo
8. Beryl	Light and dark green	Leo
9. Topaz	Greenish gold	Cancer
10. Chrysoprase	Green-yellow	Gemini
11. Jacinth	Violet	Taurus
12. Amethyst	Purple	Aries

Dr R H Charles thinks this shows that John is rejecting astrological speculations.¹⁶ But Beasley-Murray says, "This is doubtful, for the connection is too striking for a rejection to be communicated in this way. It is more likely that John's listing of the jewel signs *plus his connecting them with the people of God and apostles of the Lamb* is intended to suggest that *the reality after which the pagans aspire is found in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.*"¹⁷

He also writes: "the twelve gates of the city with their twelve angels may go back to the twelve figures and divisions of the heaven in the zodiac, the city's precious stones to the twinkling stars of heaven, the river running through its street (and possibly the street itself) to the Milky Way, and the wall of jasper to the night horizon. John's employment of pagan belief should be compared with his use in chapter 12 of the widespread myth or myths of the redeemer who destroys the dragon. As in that passage John employs the myth to declare the fulfilment by Jesus of the hope of the world for redemption."¹⁸

Dr R H Charles believes that two accounts have been mixed together in Revelation 21-22. Each of them, he says, describes a different new Jerusalem. One is a millennial kingdom because the nations are still in existence outside it (Rev.21:24-26; 22:2, 14-15, 17) as is

evil (Rev.22:15; 21:27). The other is the ultimate new Jerusalem with no nations or evil still existing.¹⁹ Few commentators have followed Charles' interpretation.

Mounce mentions some alternative explanations.²⁰ Some interpret the nations as redeemed people who belong spiritually but not racially to the twelve tribes. But John is describing the redeemed as living *within* the city. Others say this speaks of universal salvation.

But Mounce and others seem to have a more convincing interpretation. Mounce writes, "John has taken over verbally from the prophets language and figures of speech which presuppose the continuance of Gentile peoples on the earth after the establishment of the eschatological era" which are not to be taken literally. He adds that imagery is "borrowed from the present state of affairs" and "carried over into the description of the eternal state. The glory of the age to come is necessarily portrayed by means of imagery belonging to the present age."²¹

H. Heaven is our home now

1. The names of the saints are written in heaven

The church is "the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven." (Hebrews 12:23).

2. The reward of the saints is in heaven

After death (the destruction of our early tent – body) "we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands" (2 Corinthians 5:1). In fact, "our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20).

3. But heaven, as the abode of God is a state as well as a place

Heaven is where God is and where Christ ascended. However the New Testament teaches that we are already "in the heavenly realms" by virtue of being "in Christ." God has already "blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6).

Similarly the writer to the Hebrews says believers "have already come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb.12:22). Professor F F Bruce comments, "the new Jerusalem has not yet come down to men, but in the spiritual realm they already have access to it."²²

Professor D A Hagner writes, "the readers already enjoy in the present the eschatological city of the future Here again we encounter the tension between realized and future eschatology Christians have experienced fulfilment, but fulfilment short of consummation."²³

We live in the physical world and yet we are seated with the risen, ascended Christ in the heavenly realms. So we are blessed with every spiritual blessing. We already have a foretaste of heaven which is primarily a personal relationship with God. It will ultimately lead us to full maturity and perfection.

This current relationship of heaven and earth, whereby we live to some degree in both, is a foreshadowing of the ultimate, perfect relationship of a fully revealed heaven intersecting with a renewed, glorified creation.

4. Saints who have died are already in heaven

Jesus promises the dying thief a place in paradise that day (Luke 23:43). Paul sees death as departing to be with Christ (Philippians 1:23).

He adds that to be away from the body is to be with Christ. This implies an intermediate disembodied state in heaven, awaiting the resurrection body: "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:1-10)

Professor C K Barrett regards Paul as referring to the disembodied intermediate state between death and the resurrection of the body at the parousia. He comments, "It is precisely bodilessness that makes this period of waiting undesirable in Paul's eyes. Already in this life we are waiting; we do not wish to do this in a bodiless state. 1 Cor.xv. 35ff shows that bodilessness was for Paul undesirable, and a condition that could not last for ever, but it does not show it was unthinkable."²⁴

P E Hughes considers the interpretation that "house" in verse 1 refers, not to the resurrection body, but to the heavenly home for believers. But he points out that eternal house must mean the same as earthly house (meaning body) when they occur in the same sentence.²⁵

Similarly he dismisses the interpretation which says the eternal body is received in baptism. "This interpretation must be rejected, firstly, because it would be entirely incongruous for the Apostle to long to be clothed with his habitation which is from heaven ... if in fact he already possess that habitation."

He also disputes²⁶ the interpretation that makes the nakedness mean unbelievers who have no covering for sin. He points out that the passage is concerning believers only.

Hughes holds that Paul is speaking about a disembodied intermediate state and says, "The nakedness which his soul experiences through being divested of the body at death in no sense implies an interruption of his incorporation into Christ."

He adds,²⁷ "True though it is that for the Christian the sting of death has been removed (1 Cor. 15:55ff), yet death in itself is not something in which he takes pleasure. It still means a state of nakedness and a period of waiting until he is clothed with his resurrection body....Death, although no longer feared, is still repulsive to the Christian."

Professor R P Martin argues against the view that the believer receives the resurrection body at death or, alternatively experiences "soul sleep" between death and the resurrection. He writes, "For Paul the interim period is a bodiless one (1 Cor 15:35-38). It is, to be sure, a period which is temporary (1 Cor 15:42-44). But there *is* an interval....But why does he seek to avoid this interim period unless this time of nakedness offered something less than the ultimate realization of hope (5:4)? If death results in the receiving of the resurrection body, why look forward to the Parousia?....What need was there for God to redeem creation (Rom 8:23-27) if the salvation of the Christian was consummated at death? If death were the answer to all hope, we would think that Paul would desire death, but this is not what we find. Rather he considers it still an enemy (1 Cor 15:26)...."

"Paul believes that the spiritual body is not available to the Christian until the Parousia. The idea that those who die do not consciously experience an interval between death and the Parousia ... also apparently misses the point. Paul has spoken twice of his desire to 'put on over', to have his resurrection body without losing his earthly body. This would not be necessary unless Paul wanted to avoid the result of death....The point is that Paul's fear of the result of death can best be understood and with less problems if we see the interim state as a state which Paul fears, namely a period of nakedness."²⁸

Similarly the writer to the Hebrews speaks in the present tense of the spirits of righteous men made perfect (Hebrews 12:23).

Paul also teaches that not even death can separate us from the love of Christ (Rom.8:38). As to be in Christ is to be in the heavenly realms this indicates that saints who have died are in heaven.

The Protestant reformers were against the concept of "soul sleep" (psychopannychia), namely that the departed are unconscious until the resurrection of the body at the parousia.

I. Heaven is our ultimate consummation

Paul refers to the final state of the saints: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

But here are some characteristics we can learn from Scripture. The final state of believers will include:

i. A beatific vision

The dominant reality in the new heavens and new earth will be heaven: the majestic, awe-inspiring presence of God. The holy or pure in heart will see God face to face, as he is. Since God is spirit, what does this mean? Calvin said that this would be through seeing Christ, for to see him is to see God. Others speak of our "seeing" God intuitively with our whole being. Jesus said the pure in heart will see God (Matthew 5:8 cf Hebrews 12:14). John affirms: "what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Similarly Paul writes: "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

ii. A worshipping community

The descriptions of heaven in John's vision are wonderfully inspiring:

"The twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: '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 4:10-11).

"And they sang a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.... Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!' Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!'" (Revelation 5:9-13).

"And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' All the angels were standing round the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying: 'Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!'" (Revelation 7:10-12).

"After this I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God'" (Revelation 19:1).

"The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshipped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried: 'Amen, Hallelujah!' Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: 'Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns'" (Revelation 19:4, 6).

iii. A transformed body

Like the resurrection body of Jesus it will be an imperishable, glorious, powerful, spiritual body (1 Cor.15:42-44). The creed speaks of the "resurrection of the body" (literally "flesh") ie. it is the self-same body as the pre-death one. This is the witness of the patristic, medieval and reformation theologians.

Robertson and Plummer write that the Talmud shows that the Rabbis believed that the particles of the body which died would reunite at the resurrection and form the same body again. So gross a conception could easily be held up to ridicule then, and is even less credible than ever now that we know the particles form several bodies in succession and may pass in time from one body to another."²⁹

That is, of course, true. But it does not rule out God using whatever is left of a body (bones etc.) in the resurrection. (The risen Christ had flesh and bones).

To say it is "spiritual" does not mean it is non-material but rather that it is fully open to the Holy Spirit.

Robertson and Plummer³⁰ write that the natural body is "by nature subject to the laws and conditions of physical life (psuche), the [spiritual body] will be controlled by the spirit (pneuma) and this spirit will be in harmony with the Spirit of God. In the material body the spirit has been limited and hampered in its action; in the future body it will have perfect freedom of action and consequently complete control, and man will at last be, what God created him to be, a being in which the higher self is supreme."

Professor C K Barrett comments on 1 Cor.15:44, "*Spiritual* describe a higher aspect of man's life; the noun spirit (pneuma) on which it is based refers to the Spirit of God, and the *spiritual body* is the new body, animated by the Spirit of God, with which the same man will be clothed and equipped in the age to come."³¹

Professor Gordon Fee comments, "The transformed body... is not composed of 'spirit'; it is a *body* adapted to the eschatological existence that is under the ultimate domination of the Spirit."³²

The analogy with Jesus' post-resurrection body is instructive. He had flesh and bones (Luke 24:39) and could be touched (the implication of Luke 24:39 and John 20:27); he could break bread (Luke 24:30) and make breakfast for the disciples (John 21:9, 12-13); he could eat food (Luke 24:42f).

Yet he could appear and disappear at will (Luke 24:31,36; John 20:19,26; 21:1); he could pass through solid objects (John 20:19, 26).

iv. *A loving fellowship*

Since God is love and calls us to love, the final state of believers will involve a perfectly loving fellowship. This will include acts of self-giving and service.

Robert Mounce commenting on the new Jerusalem says, "Kiddle writes that the heart of the symbol is a community of men: `It is a city which is a family. The ideal of perfect community, unrealizable on earth because of the curse of sin which vitiated the first creation, is now embodied in the redeemed from all nations."³³

v. *A beautiful environment*

John describes the beauty of the new Jerusalem: "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband..... It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal..... The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass" (Revelation 21:2-21).

The city John saw was made of pure gold with gates of pearl. It was based on a foundation which was shining blue, green, red, yellow, violet and purple.

John also describes how "the glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it" (Rev.21:26). It seems likely that this would include the (redeemed) art, culture and creativity of humanity.

vi. *A purposeful lifestyle*

The saints will enjoy eternal *life* and, in John's vision, the tree of life is present in the new Jerusalem "yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (Revelation 22:2).

This must involve a purposeful existence. Just as God's sabbath rest is not inactivity so the final state will be characterised by vitality and creativity. There will be challenges to overcome and achievements to reach.

vii. *A governmental authority*

Jesus foretells that the saints will judge (ie, govern, rule) "the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19:28).

F D Bruner comments, "Along with the marvellous transformation of Israel and the whole world, there will be breathtaking responsibilities given to God's people, a teaching corroborated often in Jesus' eschatological teaching (cf...24:47... 25:21, 23...). The future holds out exciting responsibilities to those who live their discipleships responsibly now. The fellowship that Jesus began with his disciples will not end with this world but will continue in the New World, where disciples will collaborate with the Son in his new work..."³⁴

Paul adds that the saints will judge angels (1 Corinthians 6:3). This sharing in the governmental authority of Christ is also taught in the following passages: "If we endure, we will also reign with him" (2 Timothy 2:12). Jesus says: "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne" (Revelation 3:21).

John writes: "I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years..... This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years" (Revelation 20:4-6).

Professor Richard Bauckham comments that Christ's kingdom "finds its fulfilment not in the subjection of God's 'servants' (22:3) to his rule, but in their reigning with him. (22:5). The point is not that they reign over anyone: the point is that God's rule over them is for them a participation in his rule. The image expresses the eschatological reconciliation of God's rule and human freedom, which is also expressed in the paradox that God's service is perfect freedom..."³⁵

viii. *An absence of evil*

Sin and its consequences (suffering, curse and fear) will be totally absent from the new Jerusalem: "Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful

or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life” (Revelation 19:27). “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” (Revelation 21:4). “No longer will there be any curse” (Revelation 22:3).

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