

Session #3 - What is Heaven Like?

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Revelation 20:11-15

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death." Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

Revelation 21:1-11

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Revelation 21:22-27

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

Revelation 22:1-5

The revelation to St. John gives images of wonder that captivated audiences 2,000 years ago. They seem a bit strange to us today. Most cultures and people have had ideas of the next life after death. The Romans believed in Elysium, Vikings believed in Valhalla, First Nations in North America believed in the Happy Hunting Ground. What would you like to have heaven be like?

Suicide bombers are inspired by visions of sensual pleasures for eternity [men will be served by many virgins - although a new translation of the Koran gives an alternate meaning of raisins]. Some share stories of Christians seeing Jesus or family members as they are dying. But does this prove anything? NO! People of other religions have the same near death experiences but see their family and their gods.

Most ideas of heaven are based on the culture and religion of the people. Bible uses concepts of wedding banquets and mansions. So where does that leave us? What is heaven like?

People expect the Church to speak of the “life beyond.” So the Church listens to words from beyond its borders. But the Church does not listen to the dead or the near dead. Rather the Church listens to the Living One, Jesus Christ.

Before we try to grasp heaven we must first try to understand death. Physical death is the lose of earthly existence. Earthly existence for people is a totality of what God has made us to be. The Bible speaks in terms of body & soul, flesh & spirit, mind & flesh, spirit & soul & body. We are in creation only by the means of the totality of our existence. The Bible does not teach of an immortal soul or part of us that can exist on its own. The Athanasian Creed confesses that soul and flesh are one person. Just as God describes Himself as “I am who I am” so each of us is who we are as we exist, we cannot be separated. That is why death is so serious. Physical death is an act of God’s judgment. Death is the penalty for sin.

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Genesis 3:19

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— Romans 5:12

The Lutheran Confessions reminds us that the Bible teaches that death is destructive not a peaceful experience. Body, soul, and spirit are all judged in death. The Bible does not teach that death frees the soul/spirit from the body. The soul/spirit is also infected with sin and must die [cease to exist].

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Matthew 10:28

The Church confesses that only Jesus Christ brings life. That is why the focus of the Church must be on Christ. Life is truly determined by a relationship with Jesus Christ, no other. The Bible does not clearly describe what happens after death. What lies beyond death is beyond our observation so the Bible gives some words linked to earth conceptions but cannot describe the glories because we cannot understand.

Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. Genesis 25:8

‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” Matthew 22:32

and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Ecclesiastes 12:7

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Philippians 1:21-24

Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 2 Corinthians 5:8

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. Revelation 6:9-11

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 1 Thessalonians 4:13

Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last. Luke 23:46

And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Luke 23:43

And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Acts 7:59

And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!” Revelation 14:13

Christianity does not teach the immortality of the soul, that is a Greek philosophical concept. However, there is a type of conscious realization of Christ after physical death for He promises “you will never die.” We do not speculate much about the time after death but look forward to the resurrection and all that promises to bring.

Resurrection is a new beginning; a new creative act of God.

Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.
John 5:28-29

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.
Philippians 3:20-21

But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.
2 Peter 3:13

Heaven is the spiritual realm of God, not a place you will exist in forever. God will create new things and our existence will be whole again. People cannot exist in heaven without a connection to Christ and His death and resurrection. It is only the connection that gives life. And one day you will be resurrected and you will [body, soul, spirit] experience something similar, yet also different, to this life again.

SO, at death we comfort one another with the hope of life in Christ and the promise of more exciting things to come. It is more than you can imagine. So dream what you like but the reality will be even more. The Church proclaims this faith - not cute stories of what we hope heaven might be like.