

Is Heaven A Physical Place?

Revelation 21, John 14

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Is Heaven a physical place? There is, I believe, much misconception regarding that question. In fact, most people have an un-biblical conception about heaven.

The common view is that heaven is some kind of wispy, intangible existence that is purely spiritual, non-material, and non-physical. Like a state of mind, rather than a real physical place.

Even some Evangelical scholars have cast doubt on the fact of whether or not heaven is a place.

I believe, from studying God's Word, that such views of heaven are derived more from Eastern mysticism and religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, or from ancient Greek beliefs.

Plato, a Greek philosopher, believed that we, as human beings, are merely spiritual entities that are temporarily encased in bodies. He taught that we should be desiring to get out of our body.

That's why the Greeks couldn't accept the Christian doctrine of the resurrection, where one day our physical bodies will be raised from the grave. They wanted to get out of their bodies.

Yet Christians today have adopted a type of Platonism in their understanding of heaven. In fact, many of our hymns and choruses don't help, nor do some Christian authors or theologians.

So, to put our minds at rest, let's listen to what Jesus said about this.

John 14:1-6, "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.* ⁴ *You know the way to the place where I am going. Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way? Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

These words, along with John's vision in Revelation 21, gives us a glimpse of heaven as it will be forever.

Revelation 21:1-5, "*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. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

Sometimes I'm questioned on what I say from the pulpit, and asked for a verse to prove a certain thing. Well, it's not always possible to turn to one or two verses as proof texts for some of the things I say.

That's why systematic theology is so important in Christian learning. What's that, you may ask.

Well, that's taking all the truths of God's Word, on a particular subject, and correlating it with what the rest of the Bible has to say in regard to it.

It's like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, all scattered from Genesis to Revelation.

In order to get a picture of what God's saying in His revealed truth regarding a subject, we have to put all the pieces together and hopefully the picture will become clear.

That's what we want to do today in answering the question: "Is heaven a physical place?"

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So, let me answer that question. Yes, it is. But then you may ask, *Where is the evidence to prove it?* Well, the first piece of evidence of why heaven is a physical place is: Location.

In Genesis 1:1, we read the very first declaration of God: "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*" Did you catch that. God created the "*heavens*" (plural) and the earth.

In Genesis 2:1 we read: "*Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.*"

Last week we learned that there are different uses of this word 'heaven' in the Bible. First, there's the atmospheric heaven where the clouds and the creatures of the sky fly.

Then there's the second heaven, which is the stellar heaven, outer space, the solar systems, the planets.

But the Bible talks about there being a third heaven, and that third heaven is the dwelling place of God.

Now, God's everywhere, but there's a special place where His government and His rule resides. Where His presence is. That place is called heaven.

In fact, Paul referred to it in 2 Corinthians 12:2. Think of heaven as layers of a cake. Just as the first and the second heaven are atop one another, so is the third. Which fits in with what Scripture has to say.

In Matthew 14:19, Jesus gives us an example of directional language regarding heaven when He was feeding the 5000.

Matthew 14:19, "And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people."

This is very graphic and specific directional language regarding heaven's location, and I believe we ought to take these terms literally.

Heaven is a real location, and while we can't be dogmatic on where exactly its location is, I think it is reasonable to view it, in the light of Scripture, that heaven has a location. It's as real or more real than this sanctuary?

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Secondly, as evidence to prove that heaven is a physical place, is Jesus' resurrection.

Jesus rose from the grave the third day after His crucifixion, and now lives in a physical, resurrected body in heaven awaiting His return to Earth.

The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 15 and various in other passages that we, after Jesus comes again, will be given resurrection bodies like His.

His resurrection body and our subsequent resurrection bodies all indicate that heaven is a place.

In the beginning God created us not just as spiritual beings but as physical beings, and God breathed His breath into a body, and we became a living soul. Man was not designed to live in a non-physical realm.

This is important as we lay a foundation today. Christ's resurrection body and our body in the future prove that we'll have a physical body, though it may be animated by the spirit rather than the flesh, it'll nevertheless be physical just as Christ's resurrection body is.

Which leads to the reasonable assumption that it will inhabit a physical place.

The third piece of evidence, regarding heaven being a physical place, revolves around the time when Jesus was resurrected and lived 40 days with His disciples. At the end of those 40 days he ascended into heaven.

The fact that He went into a place from a place is the entire point of the account of the Ascension of Christ in Acts 1.

Listen to the angelic annunciation at that particular moment in Acts 1:11, *“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”*

I believe this is the best example of how heaven is a location. Christ, as a real human being, moved from the real earth into the real heaven.

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And fourthly, another piece of evidence is description. There are detailed descriptions of heaven in the Bible.

It's a mistake to assume, as many Christians do, that all language that's used in the Bible to describe heaven is figurative, an allegory, or a metaphor.

Whenever we read about a garden, or a city, or a kingdom, in regard to heaven, they're often interpreted as analogies that don't correspond to the reality of what heaven is really like.

Now this position is problematic, and here's why: if these are only analogies that do not correspond to the reality of what heaven is, we have to conclude that they are very poor analogies.

Why do I say that? Well, if they are analogies that don't correspond to reality, they have defeated the purpose of what an analogy is. An analogy is meant to bring some understanding to us of a truth.

There's no need to spiritualize the descriptions of heaven. Most of the times these descriptions are not analogies but literal realities that we can take at face value.

In John 14:2-3, Jesus referred to the place where He was going as a "place." It's easy to quickly read over that and miss that point.

John 14:2-3, "My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

He speaks of Himself moving from Earth, going to that place, and coming from the Father again to take His people home to be with Himself.

That's significant, because if it were not a place Jesus was going to, why would He be telling us that He's going to a place?

Then in Revelation 21:2 heaven is described as a holy city or having a holy city.

When we look at verse 4, we see that in that place death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more.

Then in verse 6 we read that in heaven the children of God will drink from the fountain of the water of life without payment.

As we travel into verse 16 there's a graphic description of the immense size, giving measurements. The length is 12,000 stadia, or 1400 miles. Its length and breadth and height are equal.

Then as we go into verses 18 to 21, we see how parts of the city are constructed with precious jewels of varying colors.

God's plan is to have a new heaven and a new earth; an entirely renewed creation, a new universe.

Now what I'm encouraging you to do is to take these descriptions more literally than perhaps you have done in the past.

When you begin to take them literally, it may strike you that the biblical descriptions of heaven are actually very earthly.

What am I talking about? Well, the Bible speaks of a city. You know what a city is, don't you? You're living in one. A country, we're familiar with that. River, trees, bodies: aren't these earthly symbols?

But they're more than symbols. You see, the problem in many people's understanding of heaven is that they don't understand that heaven is not as other-worldly as we have thought.

In fact, biblical teaching is far richer than just 'pie-in-the-sky when you die,' where you're just a disembodied spirit floating about. Revelation 21 and 22 are concrete proof of this.

God's plan is to have a new heaven and a new earth. God's ultimate goal in heaven is to have an entirely renewed creation, a new universe.

There will be new heavens, different than the heavens that exist now. There will be a new Jerusalem, and there will be a new Earth. This has always been God's promise through the prophets and the apostles.

In Isaiah 65:17, Isaiah prophesied, *“See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.”*

In 2 Peter 3:13 Peter says, *“But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.”*

Revelation 21:1, *“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.”*

John goes on to tell us that there will also be a new kind of unification between heaven and earth that there never has been before, as he sees a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven.

Then in Revelation 21:3, *“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.”*

So, there will be this joining, this unification of heaven and earth in a completely new creation.

We're talking about something that happen after Jesus comes again. It's called the 'eternal state.' Heaven, as an eternal dwelling place, will be more earthly than we think.

Are you confused? Am I saying heaven's like earth? Well, we're often confused because of many of the things we sing. You've heard the song, *"This world is not my home, I'm only travelling through."*

Now I know what it means, and I suppose in a sense it's true in the manner that this world system and worldly age is not our home.

But, it's wrong, and such hymns and teachings like them have caused people to fail to understand the full extent of God's redemptive plan.

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What am I talking about? This is the fifth and essentially final piece of evidence to prove that heaven is a physical place.

This entire physical universe, Genesis tells us, did not evolve but was created by God for His glory. Then man and woman disobeyed God and because of that, sin came into the world, and the consequence of sin was death.

Man, the world, the universe became a fallen, depraved existence. Now God has a plan, and I believe His plan is to redeem man to glorify Himself.

But we're mistaken if we think that God's redemptive plan is only to redeem mankind, because it isn't.

God's redemptive plan is to redeem the whole of creation, and just as God promises to make men and women new creations in Christ Jesus, He also promised to renew the whole earth and universe.

Think about it, if all God wanted to do was save your spirit, He doesn't need to create a new heaven and a new earth, does He? You can just go to be with Him now.

But God's plan in redemption is not just for a spirit. It's for the body, soul and spirit. It's for the whole man. The whole man fell, and the whole man must be redeemed. That means everything.

God pronounced in the beginning, when everything was created before the fall, that it was good.

God's plan of redemption is to restore everything that was good before sin came into the world, so that it will all be good again. That's God's redemptive plan.

God has never given up on His original creation. His redemptive plan is not just to redeem men and women, but to redeem this whole fallen universe.

Yet somehow, we've managed to overlook an entire biblical vocabulary that makes this point clear. Think of these words: 'reconcile', 'redeem', 'restore', 'return', 'renew', 'regenerate', 'resurrect'.

That little prefix 're-' suggests a return to an original condition that was ruined or lost. God could have consigned us to hell, started over again, but He's the ultimate salvage artist. He could have wiped the slate clean, but He didn't, and He won't.

This is evident in Jesus' life here on earth. He came in a body, and His ministry, as He walked among men, was to the whole man.

Albert Volter put it like this: *"It's striking that all of Jesus' miracles, with the exception of the cursing of the fig tree, are miracles of restoration - restoration to health, restoration to life, restoration to freedom from demonic possession."*

Jesus' miracles provide us with a sample of the meaning of redemption. It's a freeing of creation from the shackles of sin and evil, and a reinstatement of creaturely living as intended by God."

God's redemptive plan is not just to save our souls, but to save our body, to save our world, to save our universe. What we're yearning for, the Bible says, is a heaven that's like Eden, a paradise.

We long for a perfect world, a world without corruption of sin where God walks with us and talks with us just as He did with Adam and Eve.

We desire something tangible, something physical that won't fade away, and that's exactly what God promises mankind!

A home that will never be destroyed, a kingdom that will not fade, a city with unshakable foundations, an incorruptible inheritance.

God's redemptive plan is to give us a new heaven, a physical heaven and a physical earth that will never fade.

One of the questions I brought up last week was: *Will there be animals in heaven?* If you think about it for a moment, ask yourself the question: *Why did God lead animals into the ark?*

Now, you could say: "Well, He wanted to replenish the earth," and that's true. But couldn't He have done that by recreating animals?

Of course He could, but He chose to save the animals along with man, because the animals, along with man's creation, were good.

Now, when Noah came out of the ark in Genesis 9, God made a covenant with him which included animals. God's plan in the ark, I believe, is a picture of His desire to redeem all creation.

Romans 8:22-23 says, *“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 to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.”*

The redemption of our body is collectively assumed in this whole regeneration of all creation. God's plan was for a renewed earth after the flood, therefore I believe that God's plan involves animals, too.

It's helpful to point out that Christ's emphasis is not on making new things but on making old things new. He could have made a new race of men. He could have made a whole new creation, but He choose not to.

He has chosen to redeem the old and make the old new. It's not about inventing the unfamiliar but restoring and enhancing the familiar.

That's why heaven has an earthly feel to it in the descriptions that we're given in Scripture. Heaven's more like earth than we imagine, because it's the redeemed universe!

John Wesley said, *'Something remains after death for these poor creatures, that these likewise shall one day be delivered from this bondage of corruption, and shall then receive an ample amends for all their present sufferings.'*

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Another question I brought up last week was: Is there time and space in heaven? Again, I believe we're misled by hymnology.

For example the hymn that goes: *'When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound, and time shall be no more.'* That's wrong!

Time shall not be no more - excuse the grammar! The Bible teaches us not what Buddhism teaches, that there is no resurrection, therefore time will be extinguished.

No! The weight of the body of evidence in the Bible shows us that our eternal existence will be an unending succession of moments and it's described in such language.

All the pictures of heavenly worship that we're given in the book of Revelation, such as falling down before God's throne, casting crowns before His throne - all of those involve sequences of events.

It's not a suspension of time. Things are described to us in such a way as we understand time and space and physicality today.

John Newton was correct when he wrote: *'When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun; we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun.'*

There won't be a sun in the sense that we have a sun here, because the Lamb shall be the light, but that doesn't mean that there will be no time; that there will be no space.

You might say: 'Well, if that's the case, what am I going to do with my time in heaven? Well, that's a study for another day.'

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Conclusion

So, let me sum up everything that I've said concerning the physical nature of heaven. We've looked at the location, the resurrection, the ascension, the description, and redemption.

Maybe you're sitting here thinking: 'Well, so what? What does it matter whether heaven is a physical place or a spiritual place?'

Does it matter? Yes, it does! It matters because of our anticipation of that place.

It's possible that much of our Christian spiritualizing of heaven has robbed us of our anticipation of it. Remember what Randy Alcorn said: *'We cannot anticipate or desire what we cannot imagine.'*

God has used these descriptions in the Bible to cause us to imagine what heaven is like. I know it can't give us the full extent, but these are descriptions were given in order to cause us to anticipate.

They're hints of heaven. They are a wonderful jigsaw that we put together. While it may not correspond exactly to the reality, it does give us an idea, a picture of it.

The clues are scattered throughout the Bible and when we see these earthly descriptions of heaven, we ought to look around at the corresponding realities here on earth.

We need to try and imagine what this place would be like, what this creation would be if it was not for sin, if it was not for depravity, if it was not for fallenness.

This earth is our point of reference to imagine, through the Bible's descriptions, a new heaven and a new earth.

Now we shouldn't read into the new earth anything that's wrong with this old earth, but have you ever looked around you and imagined that all is perfect?

Abraham did. The Bible says he was looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God. Was he thinking only in spiritual terms? No! Physical and spiritual.

Again, it tells us in Hebrews that he imagined it, and his descendants too. They were longing for a better country, a heavenly one.

We as Christ's followers are meant to anticipate this heaven as well. The problem is not that the Bible doesn't tell us much about heaven, it's that we don't pay attention to what it does say about heaven.

Heaven is a physical place - are you going there? Jesus said to Thomas: *"I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me."* Are you sure? Are you on your way?