

Heaven is REAL!

Rev. 21:5

Intro. In 1952, Florence Chadwick stepped into the waters of the Pacific Ocean off Catalina Island determined to swim to the shore of mainland California. She'd already been the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways. The weather was foggy and chilly; she could hardly see the boats accompanying her on both sides. Still, she swam for 15 hours. When she begged to be taken out of the water, her mother, in a boat alongside, told her she was close and that she could make it. Finally, physically and emotionally exhausted, she stopped swimming and was pulled out. It wasn't until she was on the boat that she discovered the shore was less than half a mile away. At a news conference the next day she said, *"All I could see was the fog...I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it."*

A few Sundays back we began to think about Heaven and the life after this life. We started at the command given in **Col. 3:1, 2** where Paul wrote, **Since then, you have been raised with Christ, 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.** Among the **things above** we're urged to set our hearts and minds on is Heaven. Not an ethereal, vaporous, place enshrouded in a fog of uncertainty...but on a REAL and ACTUAL place with physical characteristics like streets / walls / rivers / trees / and fruit. The trouble is, we don't think of Heaven that way if we think about it at all. Somehow teaching and preaching about Heaven and Hell have been neglected and buried under other topics of temporal interest. To make matters worse, all sorts of misinformation has filled the void from a variety of sources. The truth about Heaven has become enshrouded in fog.

Then last Sunday, we considered the impact this neglect has on the Church corporately and individually. Because we seldom think about Heaven and our thoughts are often incorrect, we're not incentivized in any meaningful way. Without this incentive, we tend to flounder. A large part of what incentivizes a Christian is God's promises regarding our future destiny. We find this heavenly incentive clearly stated in **Heb. 11**, the Great Hall of Faith chapter. **vs.13-16** speak of believers who were incentivized by God's promises. **All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one.** These believers kept swimming because by faith, they could see the shoreline. There are many other NT examples of this incentive. For example...

- The great resurrection chapter of **I Cor. 15** ends this way...**Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. - I Cor. 15:58** Therefore at the heading of this verse reaches back to the fact of Christ's resurrection and assurance that we too will be resurrected someday. We should stand firm / be moved aside by nothing / and always give ourselves to the work of the Lord because there's so much more to life than the here and now. Christ's resurrection guarantees it. Our lives of 70 or 80 years will be followed by forever life and the glories of heaven in resurrected bodies. Focusing our hearts and minds on a Heaven that is real and substantive will incentivize us to do God's will here and now!
- Another example is **II Pet. 3:10-13 - 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. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. Once again we find that believers should be incentivized to live godly lives here and now because of what God has planned. We're currently living in Man's Day when people do their own thing. But the Day of the Lord is coming. Everything we see and touch will be melted down and renewed. Our destiny is a **new earth** where righteousness is at home.

Christians who think right and believe right will look forward to Heaven. This forward look impacts who we are and how we conduct ourselves. Sight of the distant shore will incentivize us to keep swimming. It gives us perspective in hard times / it helps us persevere in temptation / and determine what our priorities should be. It reminds us that we're not here forever, but that we're living in a temporary season of testing and preparation as we get ready for eternity.

But listen...Satan knows the impact of a Heavenly focus. As the Deceiver and enemy of God and man, the lies he perpetrates work like a fog machine. He wants to marginalize and distort whatever thoughts about Heaven people may have. He urges people to think of Heaven as myth and fantasy. He twists what the Bible says and then laughs as Heaven and Hell are mocked and viewed as nonsensical.

1. Heaven imagined in some UNREAL terms

I found an interesting article entitled, [A History of Cultural Ideas about Heaven](#). Let me share just a few entrees to illustrate a few strange and unbiblical ideas people have about Heaven. Satan loves these ideas. They come right out of his fog machine. Their influence is most effective wherever God's Word is ignored, disbelieved or not taken literally.

- In the Middle Ages, the legendary land of Cockaigne is a folk version of heaven. As reflected in a 13th century poem, Heaven is an endless feast, complete with roasted pigs that trot to the dinner table and broiled trout that jump into your hand. (early variation of "meals on wheels") Cockaigne is a place of extreme luxury and ease where physical comforts and pleasures are always immediately at hand and where the rigors and poverty of peasant life no longer exists.

Even though the ideas expressed in this poem are wild and fanciful, they were born out a longing for something better than life under the feudal system. Yet this longing in the human heart is universal. **Eccl. 3:11** says, **He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.** God put eternity and a sense of longing for something better in every heart. It's as though built into us are memories of Eden before the curse. But twisted ideas like trotting roasted pigs and flying trout are pure fantasy and make Heaven seem silly and the object of ridicule. Myths like these simply add to the fog.

- By the 18th century, celestial luxury had become more refined, but it was no less extravagant. The popular essay called, [Friendship in Death](#), imagined Heaven as "*bright cascades and crystal rivulets rolling over orient pearls and sands of gold.*" According to this writer, Heaven is a shiny metallic place with hard surfaces everywhere. Ideas like these reflected the opulence and wealth of the nobility the common people could only envy. While the Bible speaks of golden streets and walls decorated with gemstones, this 18th century depiction makes Heaven seem unreal, fictitious and impersonal. More fog.

- If these ideas seem odd and out of touch, John Calvin had some strange ideas too. He felt Heaven was like a library or temple where talking isn't allowed. *"To be in paradise,"* Calvin reminded his followers, *"is not to speak to each other and be heard by each other, but only to enjoy God."* Calvin seems to have overlooked so much prophesied in the OT, mentioned in the Gospels and described in the book of Revelation. He overlooked how highly God values human relationships. What sort of relationships could there be if Heaven's residents aren't allowed to speak to each other? What would the Marriage supper of the Lamb be like if there's no conversation at the table? More fog.
- *Then too,* at some point in his spiritual journey from atheism to faith, C.S. Lewis expressed his own peculiar views about heaven. He wrote, *"(Heaven) is totally un-spatial and non-temporal (having neither space nor time); it gives our minds no basis for forming images, gives us nothing even to imagine."* At some point Lewis believed heaven was not material but a feeling and something to be sensed...he called it, *"the closest thing we can get to true reality."*

Now I'm not the brightest crayon in the box, but I struggle to understand how something that is un-spatial can have dimensions and be measured? Yet we're given the dimensions of the Heavenly city in **Rev. 21:15-17**. I also struggle to understand how something non-temporal and unimaginable could possibly be the *closest thing to true reality*? This seems like dense fog.

- A more contemporary author, Anthony DeStefano, wrote a book called [A Travel guide to Heaven](#). In it he says paradise is *"Disney World, Hawaii, Paris, Rome and New York all rolled up into one—the ultimate playground, created purely for our enjoyment."* In DeStefano's view, I suppose salvation would be your ticket in and a church preaching the Gospel would be sort of like "Ticket-master." But his view of how to get in is entirely humanistic and non-biblical.

The notion that Heaven is a pleasure palace for human pleasure directly contradicts verses like **Col. 1:16** which says, **For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him.** The Bible says Heaven was created **by God and for God** and His glory. In **Rev. 4:11** the 24 elders praise God for creating everything by His will and for His pleasure. DeStefano's heaven reflects a worldview that revolves around man, while the Bible presents the worldview that revolves around God.

- For modern authors, Mitch Albom and Alice Sebold, Heaven is therapeutic. It has nothing to do with pleasure. Instead, it's the place where you'll listen to your inner child, repair your self-esteem and finally reach closure with regard to life's disappointments and suffering. In other words, Heaven is all about you...it's a fixer upper kind of place. Yet each of these false ideas illustrate what we said last time. Though 78% claim to believe in heaven, most people don't know or accept what the Bible says about it. They suffer from no information and false information. And here's what's interesting...as Bible believing Christians we have sometimes added some fog of our own. Here's what I mean...

When talking about Heaven we sometimes quote **I Cor. 2:9** which says, **No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.** We interpret this verse to mean that Heaven is too amazing and too far outside the limit of our finite minds to conceive. So there you have it. The Bible says Heaven is unknowable. We might as well give up thinking about it. This, by the way, is what the poet Dante believed. At the conclusion of his work entitled [Paradiso](#), he said he was unable to write down what he claims to have seen. He wrote, *"From that moment my vision was greater than our speech."* Yet don't you think it's strange and incongruous that God would command us to set our hearts and minds on something entirely unknowable?

He might as well have urged us to concentrate our affection and attention on sub-atomic particles! It would be like Him saying, “set your hearts and minds on gluons, quarks and anti-quarks.” But God hasn’t done that...He wouldn’t do that.

There are two flaws with our interpretation of **I Cor. 2:9**. First, we failed to read the next verse. May I respectfully urge you not to do that! **v.10** says, **but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.** Yes, it’s true...things exist that can’t be seen / heard / or conceived by the human mind. **BUT**, Paul wrote, **God has revealed it to us by His Spirit.** The second flaw is that we failed to interpret **v.9** in its context. We forgot to ask what Paul was talking about in this chapter. In context Paul explained how human beings may come to see, hear and conceive of things that can’t be observed or known the normal way...by sensory perception or the scientific method. He was talking about matters of faith. Influenced by Greek culture, the Corinthians were card-carrying rationalists. Reason and logic was their final arbiter. They only believed what they could see, hear and reason with their minds. In the language of Jesus, the Corinthians were trying to live their Christian lives by the **bread** of reason or common sense when they needed to be taught to live by **every word that comes from the mouth of God. (Matt. 4:4)** And let me insert this, every Christian needs to learn to live by the truths of God’s Word. It’s learning to apply God’s truth to every life situation. It’s what **teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you** means. It’s the discipleship aspect of the Great Commission.

So, when **I Cor. 2:9** is applied to Heaven, it doesn’t mean Heaven is unknowable. It means we can’t learn what Heaven is like from things that can be seen / heard / or imagined. No one can discover or imagine what Heaven is like unaided by God who speaks through His Word taught by His Spirit. But that’s what each of the authors I cited earlier has tried to do. They each tried to grasp what Heaven is like by sensory perception / imagination / and fantasy. They’ve relied on limited resources like reason and common sense. They’ve tried to imagine Heaven apart from what God says about it. **I Cor. 2:9** says, you can’t do that. **But...**as **v.10** insists, there’s more to the discussion. With eyes of faith, we can see, hear and conceive of things God has **revealed to us by His Spirit.** The Bible clears away the fog and provides the answers to most of our questions.

2. Heaven revealed in some REAL terms

You might be surprised how much the Bible has to say about Heaven and the life after this life. The word **Heaven** is found 551 x’s in the Bible. Aligning with Jewish tradition, Heaven has 3 distinct realms. That’s why **heavens** is plural 127 x’s in the Bible. In Hebrew, the word translated **Heaven** is **shamayim** which means *the heights*. In Greek the word is **ouranos** or *that which is raised up*.

The **first** of Heaven’s 3 realms is the atmospheric heavens...or the **terrestrial heavens**. When Heaven is spoken of this way it refers to the atmosphere that surrounds the earth...the air above. Heaven in this sense includes the clouds / the Perseid Meteor Shower / as well as satellites and all sorts of space junk endlessly orbiting the earth. It’s the heavens referred to in **Gen. 1:1** and the heaven most often spoken of when the Bible uses the phrase, **heaven and earth**. It’s the realm where birds and airplanes fly and the realm inhabited by Satan who is called, **the ruler of the kingdom of the air. - Eph. 2:2**

The **second** Heaven is the universe or the **celestial heavens**. The second Heaven includes the planets, moons, stars and galaxies. It’s the universe above earth’s atmosphere...the starry heavens. It’s where the total solar eclipse will happen tomorrow. God created the 2nd heavens on the fourth day according to **Gen.1:14-19**. When the Lord said, "**Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth – Isa. 65:17**, He spoke of **heavens**, plural because He was referring to the first and second heaven...the atmospheric heaven and the starry heaven. It is these realms He will destroy and renew.

The **third Heaven** is the dwelling place of God. It was to this exalted place Satan aspired to ascend when he rebelled against God. **Isa. 14:13** says, **You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.** In **I Kings 8:27** Solomon called this place the **highest Heaven**. When Stephen was martyred **Acts 7:55** says, **But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.** Stephen saw God's dwelling place. Paul was **caught up** to this same realm for a brief visit. In **II Cor. 12:2** he 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.** Notice, Paul specifically referred to God's dwelling place as **the third Heaven**. He wasn't **caught up** to the atmosphere surrounding the earth or the Star Trek Heaven. He was air-lifted to the dwelling place of God!

Now once again, and I can't overstate this, God's dwelling place and our eternal home is a **REAL PLACE**. It's not ethereal, vaporous or enshrouded in a fog of uncertainty. It was an actual location to Satan / Stephen / and Paul. Satan wished to ascend there, Stephen looked up and saw Heaven, and Paul was transported there for a visit. The fact is...Heaven is more real than our thoughts about it.

I'm sure none of us here doubts the existence of the atmosphere that surrounds the earth. And no one doubts the existence of planets, moons, stars and galaxies above and beyond earth's atmosphere. The Bible describes both heavens in factual terms that are too accurate for astronomers to challenge or refute. So why are thoughts about the third heaven so sketchy and ambiguous? What causes us to think the first two heavens are real, but the third isn't? Well, the problem is obvious...we can't see the third Heaven. We can't find it with our most powerful telescopes. That's what **I Cor. 2:9** means when it says **no eye has seen**. But isn't it true...we believe in many things we can't see? We can't see electricity or germs, but we believe they exist and affect our lives. Our response to what is revealed by God but invisible to our eyes is what faith is and what faith does. **Heb. 11:1- Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.** So faith in what God has revealed is what makes Heaven real for us. That's why we're doing this study. A fantasy heaven does nothing for anybody. I mean, whose life was changed by a cartoon? But a heaven that is real and certain offers powerful incentive and hope.

Stephen J. Lawson writes, *"Make no mistake about it, Heaven is a real place. It's not a state of mind. Not a figment of man's imagination. Not a philosophical concept. Not a religious abstraction. Not the medieval fancy of an ancient poet or scientist. Not the worn-out superstition of a liberal theologian. It's an actual place. A location far more real than where you presently live...It is a real place where God lives. It is the real place from which Christ came into this world. And it is the real place to which Christ returned at His ascension – really!"*

This seems too obvious to mention, but not only is Heaven a real place, but Heaven exists today. In fact, like God who is eternal, His place in Heaven is an eternal place that will always exist. As Lawson points out, it's the place Jesus came from / the place Jesus ascended to / the place He will come from when He raptures the Church / and the place He will take us to. The only hints we have about where Heaven is located are the many times when Heaven is said to be up or above us. It seems to be beyond the second heaven and the reaches of outer space. Or it may exist in a dimension we can't see. Science suspect there are 10 and maybe 11 dimensions. Have you ever used 3D glasses at a theater? What did they do? They enabled you to see depth when looking at a flat screen. So like Jesus who appeared and then disappeared, heaven may exist in a dimension we can't see. It was that way for Elisha's servant when Israel was surrounded and outnumbered by enemies. He couldn't see the armies of God that surrounded Elisha until God opened his eyes. **II Kings 6:17** The angelic army was there all the while and Elisha saw them with eyes of faith. But his servant didn't see them until God opened his eyes.

As one author has written, *“Perhaps God has intentionally covered heaven’s location in mystery, for it is more important for us to focus on the God of heaven than the description or location of it.”* But whatever the case may be...Heaven is real...it’s God’s place and the true home of every Christian. As Paul wrote in **Phil. 3:20 - our citizenship** is there.

And remember, Jesus said, **In my Father’s house are many rooms...I am going there to prepare a place for you...** Now when Jesus made that promise He didn’t intend for us to think He would ascend to build Heaven for us. He didn’t intend for us to think that the Father’s house is presently under construction with building materials and sawdust spread everywhere. At times we may have misrepresented His meaning. Jesus said, **In my Father’s house are many rooms...** The verb, **are**, is present tense which tells us the rooms, like the Father’s house were there already when He made this promise. Instead, Jesus is preparing these rooms for each of us who believe. And I don’t think it’s too far out to suggest that because He knows each one of us intimately...even our tastes. He knows how to customize / furnish / and decorate each room in advance of our arrival! We need to base our thoughts about Heaven on what God has revealed. But having done that, I think we have liberty to fill in the blanks with some details that aren’t included in what God has told us. You might call it sanctified imagination.

For example, what I can’t imagine is a room in Heaven with no furniture. We’ll live for eternity in heaven in real bodies. After His resurrection, Jesus said to His disciples, **Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.” - Lk. 24:39.** Furniture has functionality, right. What I can’t imagine is an empty room without a table, chair or bed and having to stand for eternity. What I can imagine is a room in Heaven that corresponds to rooms down here. And that’s a point I want to leave you with this morning. Just as there will be continuity between Eden and the New Earth and some continuity between this present environment and the one to come. And just as there was continuity between the touchable body of Jesus before and after His resurrection...there will be continuity between our earthly body and our heavenly body. Nothing about Heaven or Heaven’s inhabitants will be ethereal, vaporous, or enshrouded in fog. Heaven will be much like earth only new and infinitely better.

Now these ideas need to carry over to our thoughts about Heaven. So here’s an assignment for you. Next week...every time you touch something...I want you to think or say something like this...”Heaven is just as real as this table / this refrigerator / this recliner / this Bible / this tool / this car...and it’s my true home.” It’s not the unknowable fantasy place poets and writers have falsely imagined...it’s a real place God has truthfully revealed.

But as we finish, I want you to remember the swimmer, Florence Chadwick. She said, *“All I could see was the fog...I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it.”* That’s what God wants for you and me. His word gives light. By faith in His Word, He wants to lift the fog and show us Heaven’s shoreline. He wants to fill us with confidence that says, *“no matter what may come, by His grace, I can make it.”* He wants to incentivize each one of us as we claim His promises by faith.

Here’s a closing passage. **II Cor. 4:16-18** says, **Therefore we do not lose heart.** (we don’t quit swimming) **Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.**

Say it with me...”Heaven is REAL and Heaven is my true home!”