

Why Study Heaven?

Colossians 3, 1 Corinthians 2, Deuteronomy 29, Philippians 3

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Today I want to look at why we should embark upon a study of heaven. But first, we need to look at a couple of Scriptures.

The first Scripture I want you to turn to is found in Colossians 3. Then the second is in Matthew 6 - the Sermon on the Mount.

First, Colossians 3:1-4. Paul, writing to those believers, said, "*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. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*"

Then, turning to Matthew 6:19-21, we have Jesus speaking, as much to us as He was to those in the multitude on the Mount, "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*"

Now 'heaven,' as a word, is found 582 times within the Bible and has different senses and meanings. It can refer to the atmospheric heaven, the place where the clouds are, and the birds fly, but that's not the heaven we'll be considering.

Then, there's the planetary heaven, outer space. That's not the heaven we'll be considering either. Rather we'll be considering God's dwelling place, which is also called 'heaven.'

The aim of this series is that I want all of us, whoever we are, whatever age we may be, or whatever health we might have, to become more heavenly minded!

Some claim that an individual can be too heavenly minded for any earthly use. That's not true because the more a person has heaven on their mind, the more use they'll be here on earth and to heaven.

If a person is useless here on earth, I assure you it's not because they think too much about heaven, it's because they think too little of it.

This message isn't an exhaustive answer as to why we ought to study heaven, but I'm hoping it'll help us understand why it's important, and why it'll benefit us.

That's why I've come up with five reasons why it's important to study heaven. The first being: Christians are going there.

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There's a deafening silence among Christians today, and in the church at large, when it comes to the subject of heaven.

Apart from a brief mention in the odd sermon, particularly at funeral services, or in a paperback book, or in the hymns that we sing, or the prayers that we pray, we only give a wink and a nod toward the reality and the doctrine of heaven.

Many Christians who have attended church all their lives, especially those in middle age, can hardly recall ever hearing a sermon on this subject.

For almost 2000 years of our Christian history, heaven was an important, vital focal point to every believer and to the Church as a body.

But for some reason, as one author has very perceptively said, heaven has fallen off our radar screens.

That's remarkable, when you think about it. There should be no more important subject for the child of God than where we'll spend eternal life. Yet Christians pay little attention to the details concerning their eternal destiny.

One Pastor said this, *"The man who is about to move to a foreign country as a settler is naturally anxious to know something about his future home. Its climate, its employments, its inhabitants, its ways, and its customs, all these are subjects of deep interest to him. It would be strange indeed if you did not desire information about your new abode. Now surely, if we hope to dwell forever in a heavenly home, we ought to seek all the knowledge we can about it. Before we go to our eternal home, we should try to become acquainted with it"*

So, the question remains: Why are we not more heavenly minded? Well, let me suggest a few thoughts:

First: We're too earthly minded. For some, even Christians, heaven has been eclipsed by earth. Earth is bigger. Earth is brighter. It's more attractive, more intoxicating, it has more of a magnetic draw.

Someone once said: *"As the world goes, so goes the church."* Just as unbelievers are thinking less and less about God and eternal truths and realities, the same has infiltrated the church, filtering down into our hearts as we become more materialistic.

The thought of heaven doesn't draw us, woo us, or win us as it did with Christians of bygone days.

What's happening is that believers are holding the world so close to their hearts that they've stop seeing heaven.

Secondly, we're too occupied with the means, manner, and timeframe of how we're going to get to heaven. In the seminary that's known as eschatology, the study of end times and last things.

Now, there has been much written and preached about prophecy and the second coming of Jesus, yet little has been said and written about our final destination that we'll live in forever!

In fact, if you go to your local Christian bookstore and get a book on Systematic Theology, and go to the chapters on the second coming of Jesus, and the last judgement.

Do you know what you usually find, all the different views of the Lord's return – a-mil-len-ni-al-ism, post-millennialism, pre-millennialism, pan-millennialism and whatever else there might be out there.

The authors take so much time going over all these different theories about the second coming of Christ that the eternal state, the new heaven and the new earth, the place we'll be forever is only given a couple of pages.

It's as if they have to write something on it, because that's how the Bible ends.

Third, we don't think about heaven because we don't want to think about our own death. We witness it to the unbeliever, but we don't want to think about it.

And **fourthly**, we don't think or study about heaven because some of us aren't going there. Yes! Some of us may not be going there.

Let me say this, before we go into any more of our introduction: if you find that you have a lack of desire to think about heaven, and a lack of desire even to be willing to want to be with Christ forever, you should be concerned.

The Bible teaches that if you love this world more than you love God, more than you love Christ, more than you love heaven, the love of the Father does not dwell in you.

John Owen, in his book *The Glory of Christ*, wrote, “*No man shall ever behold the glory of Christ by sight in heaven who does not in some measure behold it by faith in this world.*”

Is there a lack of holiness in your life? God's process is very clear in Romans 8.

Those who are predestined, are called. Those who are called are justified, and those who are justified are sanctified, and those who are sanctified will be glorified.

If there is no semblance of holiness in your life, it's questionable whether you're travelling on your way to heaven, and that may be the reason why you don't have a desire for it.

Hebrews 12:14, “*Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.*”

That's why some in the church don't want to think, study, or even want to go to heaven because they aren't going there!

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The **second reason** why we should study heaven is simply, because we can. That might seem like an obvious statement, but *What do you actually know about heaven?*

I'm not talking about statements where you say, '*Well, I think... or I imagine...*', I'm not talking about that. What do you definitely and categorically know, that you can prove from the scriptures, about heaven?

Let me ask the question another way: Where does your knowledge, whatever it is, about heaven come from? Where is it derived?

Some of our understandings of heaven are based on sentimentalism, coming from songs, hymns, or choruses that we sing. But, many of them, regarding heaven, are distinctly un-Biblical.

Other understandings of Glory come from those near-death experiences that we read about in popular magazines or on the Internet.

We think: This is what it's going to be like - looking down a tunnel at a light and floating out of our body or being carried away and taken on a tour.

Maybe you may think heaven is a non-physical, otherworldly place about which the eastern religions teach. Or maybe you've been indoctrinated by some new-age philosophy that's so prevalent today.

You'd be surprised what a lot of people think about heaven. You might even be surprised, as we go through this series, of what you think about heaven and how wrong it may be!

Now, I may be mistaken, but I suspect that most Christians who say, '*Well, I know I'm going there, and I know it is a place where there's no more sin or pain, and Jesus and God are there,*' can't give you any idea of what heaven is going to be like.

They can't articulate what historical Christianity, down through the years, has thought and taught and reasoned about heaven. If that's the case, we've only got ourselves to blame.

The reason why there's a deficiency in our understanding and contemplation of heaven is because we've failed to explore and explain the Scriptures that deal with the teachings about heaven.

I endeavor to base everything that I say on the Scriptures. That must be our starting point. We must think biblically. We must make sure that our understanding of heaven comes from nowhere else but God's Word.

Now, many times we explain away our ignorance of heaven by saying: "*Heaven is unimaginable.*" "*Heaven is unimaginable!*" Let me tell you: heaven is not unimaginable!

But, you may say, "*Didn't Paul say in 1 Corinthians 2:9 that it has not entered into our minds, or into the heart of a human being, what heaven will be like?*"

I admit that it would be wrong to say that we can know everything that we can about heaven - but in no sense is heaven unimaginable.

Randy Alcorn said: "*We cannot anticipate or desire what we cannot imagine.*" So, let me deal with any objections to the fact that heaven is imaginable.

Turn to 1 Corinthians 2:9. Many sermons, and books about heaven will quote this verse: "*What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived*"—*the things God has prepared for those who love him.*"

Many false doctrines and misunderstandings come because people either don't take a verse in its context, or they ignore the context that it's found in by not reading the verses that come before it or after it.

Verse 10 completes the thought begun in verse 9, "*these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.*" Those things that cannot be known through mere human wisdom, as believers God has revealed them to us.

In fact, verse 13 shows us how God reveals these things to us by His Spirit, *"This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words."*

So, don't use verse 9 the wrong way. These things can be conceived when we take what God's Spirit has revealed to us in the Bible.

I'm talking about the analogies, the figures, the pictures, and the literal things that God has described about heaven.

We must allow the Holy Spirit to reveal them to our minds and to our hearts. I admit, we won't know the full extent of it all, but God, by His Spirit, has revealed these things to us.

Then, you might argue, what about 2 Corinthians 12? This is where Paul says he was taken up to the third heaven, the dwelling place of God, where God revealed things to him.

Paul admits that he was unable to speak of his visit, but that doesn't mean that it was an indescribable experience.

You must understand that 2 Corinthians 12 doesn't say he wasn't allowed to share his experience because heaven was indescribable. No. It only says he couldn't say what he had seen, for whatever reason.

But I'll tell you this much: John the apostle, on the Isle of Patmos, was told expressly to write down the things that he saw! His last chapters are specifically about heaven.

Ezekiel describes, in his opening chapters, and throughout his book, visions of heaven; as does Isaiah.

Isaiah 6, “*I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.*” They’re describing what they saw for our understanding.

Here's another example of using just a part of a verse. People only read the first few words of Deuteronomy 29:29 where it says, “*The secret things belong to the LORD our God,*” and then tell us that we're delving into things that we can't know.

That we can't see into heaven, we can't hear what's going on in heaven, therefore we should just keep the book closed regarding it. It's a secret mystery of God.

Well, the foolishness comes from not finishing Deuteronomy 29:29, “*The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.*”

God has revealed a great deal of material regarding heaven. We just need to study it. We to grapple with it.

I agree that we can't have an exhaustive knowledge about heaven, but I'll tell you this: we can have accurate knowledge when we study the scriptures God has given.

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The third reason why we should study heaven is because of misconceptions and unanswered questions. What am I talking about? Well, questions like: Where do the dead go, now?

Have you ever thought about that? The last couple of chapters of Revelation talk about an eternal state, which isn't yet created, so where do the dead go now?

Another question: Is heaven a physical place or is it a state of mind where we just float about like disembodied spirits, and have no consciousness.

Another: what will our bodies be like? Will we have a body when we die and go to heaven, or will we have to wait for our resurrection body - and when we get it, what will it be like?

Which leads to an obvious question: Will we look like ourselves? Now, I know some of you are praying that you won't! But will we look like how we are here on earth?

What comes out of that question is: Will we know one another in heaven? Will we know that loved one who has gone on to Glory before us?

Flowing out of that question is another: How will we relate to those loved ones, whether a husband or a wife, a son or a daughter, a mother or father, a brother or sister, a best friend?

These are real questions and let me say: it's not enough just to say, "*We'll find out well and good when the time comes!*" That's not good enough, because God has revealed many things that instruct us regarding these truths.

What about this one: what will we do in heaven? Will we become bored singing every day? Although the Pentecostals will enjoy that.

Do you think that's what we're going to do? String a harp, sit on a cloud and sing praises unto God: 'Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Worthy is the Lamb' over and over again and again?

Or will we work? Will there be art? Will there be music? Will there be learning? Will we eat and drink?

Here's one that will interest you to find the answer: will there be animals? I'm not suggesting your pet poodle has gone to Glory or anything like that, but the Bible talks about a new heaven and a new earth.

The Bible talks about a creation that's being redeemed and one-day will be burned up and a new earth will be formed, a new creation! Will there be animals? Will there be time and space?

Perhaps the greatest question of all is: will we see God? Does the Bible say anything about that? You might have your misconceptions, but we must be very careful not to speculate.

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The fourth reason we need to study about heaven is because it ought to be our focus here on earth. That's what Paul tells us in Colossians 3:2, "*Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.*" In fact, Jesus said the same in Matthew 6.

Philippians 3:20 says, "*But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.*"

That's why we ought to be focusing on heaven down here, but how can we focus on it if we don't know a lot about it and we never study it?

Our eyes should be heavenward constantly. Heaven should help keep us from sinning. It should guide us, direct us, and draw us day by day to live and breathe close to her shores.

That's why our focus ought to be on heaven, for in death heaven is our hope. It's our hope for the loved ones who've fallen asleep in Jesus, it's our own hope when it comes our day to travel through the valley of the shadow of death.

But here's the point: we ought to, as believers, focus on heaven here on earth because everything that's precious to us as Christians is in heaven! Our citizenship is in heaven because our Savior is in heaven.

Hebrews 11 tells us about a great cloud of witnesses urging us on, the dead in Christ who have gone before, brothers and sisters in heaven.

Jesus said to His own disciples in Luke 10:20: "*However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*"

Our names are in heaven. Our inheritance, the Bible says, is in heaven, incorruptible and undefiled, that doesn't fade away.

Our citizenship is there, our eternal reward is there, and our treasure - if we are building it up in heaven - will be there waiting for us. That's why we should focus on heaven here on earth!

Jonathan Edwards often spoke about heaven. This is what he said concerning heaven as the focus of our earthly existence, "*It becomes us to spend this life only as a journey toward heaven, to which we should subordinate all other concerns of life. Why should we labor for, or set our hearts on, anything else but that which is our proper end and true happiness?*"

In his early twenties Jonathan Edwards made a set of resolutions to live a more godly life.

One of them said, "*I am resolved to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness in the other world as I possibly can.*"

But, what do we do? We seek after as much happiness as we can in this world. That means that if we're trying to save our lives down here, we're going to lose it up there!

That's why we need to study heaven in detail, because it makes a difference to our lives when we focus on heaven here on earth. It motivates us to live for Christ.

This study will only benefit us if it gives us glimpses of His glory. In Matthew 6, Jesus told us to, "*Build up treasures in heaven.*" He didn't say build up treasures on earth.

C. S. Lewis said, "*If you read history, you'll find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. It's since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven and you'll get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you'll get neither.*"

What do you focus on, here on earth, as a believer? That's why we need to study heaven; it ought to be our focus.

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Lastly, we ought to study heaven because Jesus is there.

An old Roman Catholic missionary to China in the 16th century by the name of Matthew Ricci, said a profound thing. It's a warning to all of us as we embark on this study.

Father Ricci said, "*Those that adore heaven instead of the Lord of heaven, are like a man who, desiring to pay the emperor homage, prostrates himself before the Imperial Palace at Peking and venerates its beauty.*"

There's a danger that we can get so taken up with heaven, that we forget that the reason for being taken up to heaven is that Christ is there. We must never think of heaven apart from Christ.

That's what happens to people who study prophecy. They think about all the different systems and what's going to happen.

The scrolls and the bowls and this and that, when the greatest book in the Bible on prophecy is the revelation of Jesus Christ! This study will only benefit us if it gives us glimpses of His glory.

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Conclusion

In 1952 there was a young girl called Florence Chadwick who stepped into the waters of the Pacific Ocean off Catalina Island determined to swim to the shore of mainland California. She was the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways.

On the day she decided to swim from Catalina Island to California not only was it freezing cold, it was very foggy. In fact, she could hardly see the boats that were accompanying her on that journey.

She swam and swam and swam for 15 hours, and eventually she had had enough. She couldn't take it anymore and begged to be taken out of the water.

Her mother was in the boat beside her, and she said, "*Mother, get me out!*" Her mother told her that she was very close to the shore, and that she could make it if she just kept going.

Finally, physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted, she stopped swimming, and had to be winched out of the water.

It wasn't until she got onto that boat that she discovered that the shore was less than half a mile away.

At the 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.*"

Do you see the shore? Have you a glimpse of glory? Just one glimpse of Jesus in Glory will get you through the fog.

Just one glimpse of Jesus in Glory will keep us on the road and take us to the end of our journey.