

More About Heaven

Perhaps this article would be more accurately titled "More Questions About Heaven," for it may offer nothing more definitive than my previous "Locating Heaven." I hope you will continue to consider these thoughts as explorations rather than definitions.

Greg Rasaka, of nearby Newberg, Oregon, is a student of the Bible who dares to peek behind our traditional concepts to see if there is sufficient support for them. He wrote a response to my last essay, offering some fresh viewpoints, not with any sense of dogmatism, but to add clues to our investigation. I copy his observations below. They were not written as a treatise but as a personal note which he allows me to share with you.

"I enjoyed your article on heaven. Your comments are good and well taken. I quit thinking of heaven as a "place" some time ago. I perceive heaven as a state of being, in other words, the unseen spiritual realm which occupies perhaps the same location as the physical, only without matter, time or distance. I really cannot grasp it at all, but I know it is nothing like we are capable of imagining.

"It is interesting to note that in Greek, there is but one word for heaven and sky, "ouranos." How can we truly determine if sky or heaven is being meant? The same is true with Hebrew, one word for both sky and heaven. Maybe the two are not meant to be distinguished from one another. If God is said to live in heaven, he could be said to live in sky. Either way it is what we cannot see, we are just told that is where God is. He also dwells with his people, so that means God is here, all in all. So if we are in God's presence and are members of this kingdom of heaven (sky), then our spirits are where God is also. If our spirits are not separated from our bodies, (as the case would be at physical death) yet our spirits are in heaven, then the unseen spiritual realm (heaven) must be so close as to intermingle with the physical. Wow! Pretty hard stuff to grasp isn't it? I'm not sure what I am saying! The infinite is impossible for the finite mind to grasp.

"It is just like a man who is born blind cannot begin to grasp what sight is. He also cannot understand what blindness is, because both are needed to understand either. No matter how we might explain sight to this man, he will never comprehend in the slightest sense. It is impossible! We could explain and describe for a hundred years, but it would not be a concept at all to the man born blind. Now, think about what would happen if this man were to suddenly receive sight. He would be frightened to say the least, but from that point on, he would understand both sight and blindness. Extraordinary! That is why the metaphors of sight and blindness are so profound.

"Spiritual sight and blindness are the same way I guess. If you are blind, you are blind, until you are made to see. Even then, today, we can only "see" these truths by using physical analogies. That is exactly what Jesus taught.

“I think this same concept of opposites is behind the account of the fall of man in the garden. Without knowing the difference between good and evil, we could not know what good is either. The fall was no accident or doing on man's part, but actually God's perfect plan for mankind from the start. How else could we appreciate God's love unless we had experienced evil as well. God created all things and that includes evil. (See Proverbs 16:4 and Isaiah 45:7.) Evil is a tool by which God brings us to understand and love him. Without the knowledge of evil, we would have no knowledge of good either, but would be living puppets.” - Love, Greg <logos@ViaFamily.com>.

Letting Greg's observations stand without any comment, I will let you factor them into your concepts as you may wish. The points that I make now are not intended as a response to his thoughts but a further projection of my own.

Let us review a few of Paul's many teachings about God's Spirit within us as disciples. “Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you” (Rom. 8:10-11). There is some mystical meaning for them to be alive in spirit while in dead bodies. Let us read further.

You are familiar with these passages: “But he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. . . . Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God..” (1 Cor. 6:17, 19). This speaks of our bodies being temples of God's Spirit, that is, where he dwells, lives. Yet, it is because of the close affinity of body and spirit that the fleshly body is said to be indwelled. His prayer for the Ephesian disciples was the “he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith ..” (Eph. 3:16-17). Our fleshly concepts still influence intelligent persons to pat the chest with the hand when speaking of the heart. That, however, is not the dwelling place of the Spirit. That “dwelling place” is the “inner man” of the heart. It is the inner man, not the fleshly man, that is united with God and is given immortality when the fleshly body dies.

Look at this angle. Since God's Spirit is our life, will it be necessary for him to withdraw from the believer so that the person's body may die and the inner man sleep in hades awaiting a reunion and judgment? Before atonement was made for sins and the Spirit was given, it was necessary for all the righteous to sleep in death awaiting that appointed time. With us it is different. When each disciple indwelled by the Spirit responds to his trumpet call of physical death, the inner man, which until that time was mortal, will put on immortality and continue in union with the Eternal Spirit forever. Thus, the church is “heaven begun.”

Speaking to disciples collectively, Paul probed, “Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16). Again, “For we are the

temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people’” (2 Cor. 6:16). This connects us with the imagery of Revelation 21:1-3, “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 great voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be my people, and God himself will be with them...’”

When the first heaven and earth (the fleshly system of Israel) passed away, it was succeeded by the new order of which believers are a part. Being currently united with God in the Spirit, already we are citizens of the heavenly kingdom only awaiting the transition brought by physical death. So Revelation 21 and 22 describe in dramatic imagery our present state as the “called out ones,” the church, with its projection into eternity. (Cecil Hook, June 2001) []