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A Portrait of Heaven

Psalm 73 contains the incredible words of Asaph.

Psalm 73:25-26, "Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

The writer of these words was a man by the name of Asaph who had gone through an incredible experience and lived to write about it:

Psalm 73:2, "But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling; my steps had almost slipped."

Asaph almost fell because of the perplexing manner in which God's providence was operating (Psalm

73:3ff). Instead of the righteous prospering and the wicked being afflicted, the exact opposite was occurring again and again and again! In his frustration and bewilderment, Asaph essentially said, "It's not fair the way that God is running this world" (cf. Psalm 73:3-14). But then we read of the turning point:

Psalm 73:16-17, "When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end."

As one continues to read this Psalm you come to this realization, Asaph's faith was strengthened when he boldly and confidently affirmed, "Whom have I in heaven besides Thee?" When Asaph considered eternity and the final destiny of the righteous and the wicked his faith was strengthened (e.g. Psalm 73:23-24). William Hendriksen put it this way:

This present life can never be properly evaluated unless it be seen in the light of the eternity that awaits the children of men. (Hendriksen, 1971, p. 16)

Bible prophecy uses a device known as telescoping. A telescope is made up of two lenses; a near lens and a far lens. If one removes either lens to look at the world, the image will be blurred. But if you look through the near lens at the image on the far lens, you will behold things which never could be seen with the unaided eye. And so we are exhorted in prophetic literature to look through our current trials and difficulties upon the heaven the eternity that awaits us! I want you to focus on the eternity that awaits us.

Heaven Defined

2 Corinthians 12:2, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago- whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows- such a man was caught up to the third heaven."

Paul is speaking in this passage of heaven in a way that corresponds to the Biblical usage of this term. The Hebrew word for *heaven* literally means the heights. The Greek word for *heaven* is the word from which Uranus is derived, both can be used in reference to three spheres.

- The Atmospheric Heaven— which is the sky, or the troposphere. It is the region of breathable atmosphere that blankets the earth. It is where the birds fly! The Bible speaks heaven in this way:

Genesis 7:11b-12, "...the fountains of the great deep burst open, and the floodgates of the sky [lit. "heaven"] were opened. And the rain fell upon the earth for forty days and forty nights."

The word *heaven* refers to the sky/atmosphere that encompasses the world.

Psalm 147:8, "[God]...covers the heavens with clouds, [and] provides rain for the earth..."

- The Planetary Heaven— the stars, the moon, and the planets. We use the designation “outer space” to reference this:

Genesis 1:14-17, “Then God said, ‘Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years; and let them be for lights in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth’; and it was so. And God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. And God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth.”

- The last heaven references the dwelling place of God. For example:

Psalm 33:13-14, “The Lord looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men; from His dwelling place He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth.”

It is this third sphere, what Paul called the “third heaven,” that is in reference when we speak in this series of heaven and the believer. And so with that, notice that heaven represents nothing less than the dwelling place of God. Isaiah calls upon God to:

Isaiah 63:15a, “Look down from heaven, and see from Thy holy and glorious habitation; where are Thy zeal and Thy mighty deeds?”

Christ described Himself as:

John 6:33, “...the bread of God... which came down out of heaven...”

The disciples were instructed to pray this way:

Matthew 6:9, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name...”

Heaven is where God reigns in majesty (Isaiah 6:1), rules authoritatively (Revelation 20:11-15), and is worshipped unendingly (Revelation 4:11). It is where the angelic host worships God with a holy fear (Isaiah 6:3) and the believer beholds God face to face (2 Corinthians 5:8). Truly, it is the dwelling place of God!¹

Now this is not to say that God is confined to heaven (cf. 1 Kings 8:27; Psalm 139:8). Rather, it is to say that heaven is uniquely the place of God’s dwelling. To understand this, think of the Temple. Just as at one point in redemptive history, God’s Shekinah glory indwelt the temple so that it could be said that “God resided in the temple.”

Heaven is the dwelling place of the Almighty! While,

- “The heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain” God (1 Kings 8:27).
- It is impossible to flee from the presence of God (Psalm 139:7)

- “Heaven is God’s throne” and “the earth is His footstool” (Isaiah 66:1)
- God is present in all places at all times (Proverbs 15:3; Amos 9:23; Jeremiah 23:23-24)

Nevertheless we can speak of a location as the unique dwelling place of God and that is what we mean when we speak of heaven!

Now at this point, there is need for clarification. As we read the Bible, we discover that there are two ways in which this “third heaven” can be understood. We use it in reference to the place where the souls of those who have died in Christ have gone (2 Corinthians 5:8) which generally is called the intermediate state (2 Corinthians 12:2). We also use it in reference to the final state where the bride of Christ, the Church will someday worship God face to face (Revelation 19:7-10; 21-22; 1 Thessalonians 4:17).

From the perspective of what heaven essentially is — the dwelling place of God — I am referencing both states. Both the intermediate state and the final state are defined as the “dwelling place of God.” However from the perspective of the physical properties described of the New Heavens and the New Earth, I am referencing the final state!

Now with this, notice the description of heaven as given in the Bible. Heaven is a physical place.

Heaven is a Physical Place

Acts 1:9-11, “And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was departing, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them; and they also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.’”

From this it is obvious that heaven is a place, a location! Think of it as the corporal existence of Christ was proof to Thomas that His Lord truly had risen from the dead (John 20:27). So also Christ’s ascension into heaven as a corporal being indicates that heaven is a place, and as such has physical properties.

Some have the notion that heaven is wholly ethereal, spiritual, and unreal; a wispy existence in a dreamlike spiritual dimension. And yet, this is not the case at all! In fact notice the final state:

Philippians 3:20-21, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.”

Far from the notion that heaven is a dreamlike spiritual dimension, Scripture not only says that it is a physical place, but that we will be physical beings there!

Romans 8:23, "And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body."

2 Corinthians 5:2, "For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven."

And yet, what will be the nature of our body; will it look the same as it does now, or will it be different? To answer that, notice the words of John:

1 John 3:2, "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He Isaiah"

Philippians 3:21, "...who will transform the body of our humble estate into conformity with the body of His glory..."

From these passages it should be obvious that in heaven our bodies will be as Christ's! Now the obvious question is, "What is the nature of Christ's glorified body?" First, notice that Christ's resurrection body was the same body that He lived in while He walked the earth.

- The wounds from His crucifixion were still visible, John 20:27.
- He could be touched and handled, Luke 24:39.
- He looked human in every regard, Luke 24:13-18. In fact the disciples on the road to Emmaus never questioned His humanity.
- He ate real, earthly food, Luke 24:42-43.
- He was identifiable by sight as "Jesus," John 20:18, 19-20.

And yet, His body also had/has other-worldly properties.

- Christ could pass through walls, John 20:19.
- He could suddenly appear out of nowhere, Luke 24:36.
- He could ascend directly into heaven in bodily form, Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9.
- And in the New Heavens and New Earth Christ's glorified body is described as shining like the sun in its strength, Revelation 1:16.

And this will be the case when it comes to our bodies in heaven! When we enter the final state we will enter it in the same bodies that we have today, yet our bodies will be conformed to the image of Christ and thus they will be quite different.

1 Corinthians 15:35, "But someone will say, 'How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?'"

To answer this Paul begins by drawing an analogy from farming (vv. 36-38) pointing out that in the material realm God has provided a physical essence which complements the purpose of each item of

creation (vv. 39-41). And then he writes this:

1 Corinthians 15:42-44, "So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body."

While there are a variety of truths that we can learn from this text, notice the character of our bodies in glory. According to this passage, they are

- Imperishable (v. 42b): that is they know no sickness, decay, deterioration, or death.
- Glorious (v. 43a): they are perfected for pleasing, praising, and enjoying God.
- Powerful (v. 43b): that is, no longer will they dwell in weakness. Whatever our heavenly spirits determine to do our heavenly bodies will be able to accomplish.
- Spiritual (v. 44): that is, they will be fit for a heavenly existence. Just as a "natural body" is a body fit for life on this earth, so also a "spiritual body" is a body fit for life in heaven...

A. A. Hodge put it this way:

Every body, as an organism, ...must be constructed of matter, and must be adjusted in every case to the appetites, instincts, and passions of the soul to which it is united, and to the physical conditions of the environment in which it exists. It is plain that the soul of a sheep never could exist in the body of a lion, nor the soul of a lion in the body of a sheep [imagine a sheep stalking a wildebeest?]. It is just as plain that if a body is to inhabit any element, it must be physically adjusted to its conditions. Thus, if it is to inhabit the water, it must have the body of a fish; or if it is to inhabit the air, the body of a bird. So our new body must be transformed into complete adjustment to the glorified spirit and to the glorified world it is to inhabit, and in which it is to set. (Hodge, 1976, p. 378)²

And so truly we will spend eternity in a physical state with physical bodies fitted to work in a perfect/glorious world in the presence of our Lord and Savior! Now from this we must not conclude that we will inhabit completely different bodies. Truly as we'll see, they will be the same bodies we have today, yet modified to fit the world in which they will exist. Thomas Boston put it this way:

At the resurrection, men shall not appear with other bodies, as to substance, than those which they now have, and which are laid down in the grave; but with the self-same bodies, endowed with other qualities. The very notion of a resurrection implies this, since nothing can be said to rise again, but that which falls. (Boston, 2000, p. 380)

Eternity will be spent in physical/corporeal bodies. Now when you gaze upon this, looking through the providences of this life, we see things so clearly. Rather than looking upon God's workings and bemoaning His wisdom or questioning His goodness, we are able to see that all we encounter today is designed by God to "fit us" for heaven. The focus isn't therefore on receiving in the here and now, but on preparing for the day of consummation when we shall love God untainted by sin in a body fit for a perfect world! Truly, may God give us the grace so to set our minds on the things above in and through all things. To do so is to make all current affliction seem "momentary and light!"

End Notes

¹ And so we must see that heaven is not simply streets of gold, pearly gates, angelic choirs, white garments, a tree of life, or streams of water. Rather heaven is nothing less than the dwelling place of God. As A.A. Hodge wrote, “The word ‘heaven’ always designates in the Old Testament the dwelling-place of God. Heaven is his throne, while the earth is his footstool. He is always represented as reigning, looking, hearing, answering, acting, coming from heaven.” (*Evangelical Theology*, pg. 373)

² This is borne out in such passages as 1 Corinthians 15:47-48.

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About the Preacher

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