

Heaven

by Dr. Manford George Gutzke

Have you ever wondered whether heaven is an actual, real place? The familiar words with which the Lord's prayer begins point up the reality of heaven: "Our Father which art in heaven." Then we may remember these words of Jesus of Nazareth:

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also (John 14:1-3).

There is no question that He knew that heaven is real.

The idea of "heaven" is common to human beings everywhere. The prospect of living after this life and continuing that existence under ideal conditions has appealed to the imagination of people all over the world. The Hindus speak of "Nirvana," and for them that's heaven. The Mohammedans seem to look forward to a "paradise" of pleasure. We know that the Teutonic tribes, the Germanic people of old time, held in their hearts the conception of "valhalla" which was a sort of gallery of the great heroes. The American Indians we remember spoke of "the happy hunting ground" that their warriors would be moving toward. And other similar ideas, words and terms in the languages of mankind would indicate that poets have been inspired everywhere to dream about ideal conditions in which a person could live in uninterrupted bliss.

But the Bible concept of heaven, common to all believers, is that of a blessed home, where God is Father, and all others are brethren. This is indicated in our songs. No doubt everyone had heard such songs as "There is a happy land, far far away;" and "When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be." Many have enjoyed singing, "Face to face shall I behold Him," or perhaps the glory song, "When all my labors and trials are o'er, and I am safe on that beautiful shore, just to be near the dear Lord I adore, will through the ages be glory for me. Oh, that will be, glory for me" – often we have sung, "There's a land that is fairer than day, and by faith we can see it afar." Perhaps all have joined in singing: "Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod?" In such songs Christians have indicated confidence which they have about heaven.

In the New Testament the impression is clear that heaven is real. Jesus of Nazareth spoke of heaven. He's the One that told us, "I go to prepare a place for you." The apostles were men who looked up into heaven and were conscious of the realities there.

Among Christians heaven is thought of as a place where God is, as well as an experience that we want all of our beloved ones to share, a destiny where we hope to be.

Actually no one knows what heaven in itself will look like. It is common to speak about the "pearly gates," and about "the streets of gold." This is the description of what was seen in a vision. The "pearly gates" would indicate a very precious entrance, and the "streets of gold" would imply very precious surroundings. But we need to remember that pearls and gold belong in this world. They are used as figures of speech. They represent something wonderful and precious. Of such heaven is composed.

Sometimes persons will say they couldn't believe in hell because they cannot conceive the flames of sulphur or the smoke of hell-fire. Actually the Bible does not say there will be sulphur there, or that anyone will see black smoke there. Here again we must recognize the language of a vision. These are figures of speech. But of this we can be sure: just as the reality of heaven will be much more precious

than pearls or gold, so the reality of hell will be much more awful than sulphur or any kind of fire one can imagine.

Heaven is a real place. In thinking about heaven as a place, one should remember that this does not limit heaven to time or space. Nowhere in the Bible is it revealed where heaven is; nor are you encouraged to determine where heaven is; but it is actual and real. As a matter of fact we can know it is now! God is there now; not some day He's going to be there. He is on the Throne now! The Bible tells us that Stephen saw Him there.

Heaven is also an experience. It's an experience of love and of friendship. Perhaps you can think of some time when you've been with someone whom you love, and you enjoyed his fellowship: you probably had the most precious delight you ever have had while you were in the presence of your loved ones. Now if you could think of raising that to the "nth degree," and continuing it forever, you'd have some idea of what heaven is like. Heaven is a fellowship of love and of mutual consideration for each other. There is light and there is gladness in heaven.

The same Bible that tells about heaven tells about hell. So far as hell is concerned, you begin to get a good idea of it when you remember that there will be no fellowship with God there. There will be no love there. Nor will there be any light there. It will be dark – the blackness of darkness forever" (Jude 1:13). There'll be no one there with whom anyone can have fellowship. It will be a matter of being in isolation. It will be a time of unbearable sadness. Cain was right when he said, "My punishment is greater than I can bear," when he was turned out to be a fugitive and a wanderer on the face of the earth, alone. Solitary confinement is the worst experience a human being can have.

Imagine falling into a bottomless pit. It is awful to be in a hole. Imagine being in a hole that has no bottom – "the bottomless pit!" Or try to think about being in such a condition in which there will no rest: "there is no rest saith God to the wicked." To be continually restless and never to be able to rest! Always hungry and never able to be satisfied. Always thirsty and never anything to drink. What shall we think about the fire? It will not be a fire of wood or of coal or of oil or of gas: it may be a fire of the soul; No one can be sure what that would be like.

Christians have always longed for heaven as a destiny. Many times doubts have been raised in people's minds about heaven and hell, as to whether or not they're real. No doubt many popular ideas are current, but of one thing you can feel absolutely sure: when you mention heaven that's where everybody wants his loved ones to go. And if you mention hell, despite everything that's said to depreciate it and to sneer at it and to make fun of it, nobody wants his loved ones to go there.

I can remember when I was a young Christian wanting to pray for my own family. As I was thinking about the promise that I could have anything I asked for in His name, I found myself wanting them never to be sick, never to have sorrow, never to be separated, never to die. While I was wondering about this and praying about it, it came to me as though the Father Himself were telling me: I understand what you have in mind. And I've got that ready for them. Just a little while, and when they put their trust in Me, that's where they will be."

This has been the common confidence of all believing people, of people with faith in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ. It has always been their sweet expectation to go into His presence when they pass out of this world. Paul expressed it, "absent from the body, present with the Lord."