

GOING DEEPER

What Is Heaven Like?

September 17-23, 2023

DAY
1

WEEK 2 OF AFTERLIFE: DAY 1

Make time for some chair time this week and go deeper in learning about Heaven. Grab your Bible and a notebook to complete this lesson on your own.

MAIN POINT

The Bible gives us sufficient information for all we need to know about heaven. We do not need to turn to near-death accounts as verification of the hope of heaven.

INTRODUCTION

Why do you suppose our culture is so fascinated by near-death experiences?

Have you ever read about any of these so-called near-death experiences?
What's your acquaintance with them?

The tales of near-death experiences are intriguing to us. The phrase, "near death" is used because if people actually die, they can't come back to relate what happened to them. Many books have been published by people who claim to have died, returned, and want to report what they experienced. Documentary TV shows and based-on-a-true-story movies are also consistently released on this topic.

But what does the Bible say about these experiences? What are we to make of these claims from a Christian perspective? Today we'll investigate these so-called near-death experiences.

UNDERSTANDING

READ ACTS 1:9-11.

What directional words are used in this passage?

What does the use of these words communicate about the reality of heaven?

How do these words refute the idea that heaven is only a metaphysical state of mind?

Heaven is a real, physical, place where Jesus went. The words in Acts 1:9-11 aren't metaphorical; they're literal. The Bible speaks of a present heaven and a new or future

heaven. In fact, the Bible uses the word “heaven” in three distinct ways. The first heaven is simply the space above the earth where clouds form and birds fly. The second heaven is what we commonly refer to as outer space, where the other planets and the stars reside. The third heaven represents the presence of God, which Paul referred to when he said, “...To be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). This is the place Jesus had in mind when He promised the thief on the cross that he would be in paradise (see Luke 23:43).

READ REVELATION 21:1-5.

What will happen to the current heaven and earth?

Why should this future event concern us in the present?

What are the four things God won't allow in the new heaven?

God will replace the current heaven and earth with His new heaven and earth. No longer will there be death, mourning, crying, or pain. He will wipe out the old order and make all things new (see vv. 4-5). The new heaven will be a place that's free from the presence and effects of sin. Followers of Jesus should long for such a place.

The entire focus of the earthly city of Jerusalem was the worship of God at the temple. This is why the old Jerusalem was at the center of Jewish life. However, the new heavenly city needs no temple because we'll live forever in the presence of God. The entire city will be a temple of the Lord. No longer will there be day or night (see v. 23). The Lamb of God will be the eternal light in this city. Understanding where we're headed helps us faithfully live in the present by encouraging us to fix our gaze on the glory that awaits us.

READ JOHN 11:38-44.

What did Jesus want to teach everyone gathered at Lazarus's grave?

Why is this not a near-death experience but an actual death and resurrection?

The point of this account isn't to explain a near-death experience, but to give glory to the One who's sovereign over death. Lazarus was dead; the language used doesn't allow for another interpretation. He had been in a tomb for four days. When Jesus called him, Lazarus came out wrapped in cloth, still bound. This isn't the response of a man who was simply asleep, but of one who was dead with no expectation of rising. Christ alone is in charge of our life and death. However, some people, considering this fact insufficient, have indulged in all manners of speculation.

READ 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18.

How does the Bible teach us to have hope against the threat of death?

Why is the hope of the Bible more certain and dependable than any so-called near-death experience?

With what words are we meant to encourage one another?

Who could you encourage as they wrestle with the reality of death or with uncertainty about heaven?

Like us, the Thessalonians had lots of questions about the afterlife and the time that preceded the second coming. Paul wrote to answer their questions and to comfort them. Among the reasons people hold on to near-death tales is that they want to know for certain that their loved ones are in heaven. The problem with this thinking is that we don't need near-death experiences to explain to us what the Bible has already explained sufficiently. The inspired explanation of Scripture is more than enough to encourage us in the hope of heaven. All who have placed their trust in Christ can find their hope in heaven.

All biblical resurrections point to the power of God and seek to bring people to faith in Him. The most amazing resurrection from the dead, of course, was that of Jesus Christ. Afterward, when Jesus spent time on earth, He didn't reveal anything about heaven, likely because He had taught so much about it throughout His ministry. Instead, His focus was on the kingdom of God.

APPLICATION

Why do you suppose our culture is more likely to believe a great story—regardless of whether or not it's true—than to consider what the Bible teaches?

Why do you think the truth and power of the gospel—the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Christ—always need to stay central in the way we discern and process truth or revelation in our lives?

In light of today's teaching, how will you respond differently to these accounts in the future?

PRAYER

Pray the following prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You for preparing a place for me as I would prepare a guest room for a friend. I'm grateful that You'll allow me to stay there with You for all eternity. Please help me let go of any fears or doubts about my future home with You in paradise. Help me trust what the Scriptures promise about my future home with You. In Your name, amen.

COMMENTARY

ACTS 1:9-11

1:9-11 Luke briefly told about Jesus' ascension in his Gospel (Lk 24:51), and now he provides a somewhat fuller account. A cloud took Him out recalls the presence of God depicted as a cloud elsewhere (e.g., Ex 13:21-22). Thus Jesus was received by the Father in fulfillment of His words in Jn 7:33-34. Jesus' final instructions and ascension to heaven provide overlap and transition between Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts. The ascension took place on the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem (Ac 1:12). Jesus' return will be in the same way as He departed—bodily and visibly.

REVELATION 21:1-5

21:1 While like the present creation in some ways, the new heaven and a new earth will be much different. For example, there will be no sea. However, some believe that "sea" is symbolic for the wickedness of the current created order.

21:2 The bride of the Lamb, introduced in 19:7-9, is now pictured as the Holy City, new Jerusalem. The expression coming down out of heaven is used in all three references to the new Jerusalem. This has been taken to imply that the new Jerusalem will be suspended in the air, slightly above the new earth. Prepared...adorned may mean that the bride will be just as beautiful—and will be for eternity—as she was during the wedding festivities (19:7-8).

21:3-4 God's presence (dwelling...with humanity) will do away with all death... grief, crying, and pain.

21:5-8 In the present creation, a Christian is a "new creation" spiritually (2Co 5:17), but in the new heaven and new earth, the Lord will make everything new. The written Word of God is faithful and true (2Tim 3:16), and the living Word of God is also faithful and true (Rev 19:11). Living water (22:17) will always be available as a gift, and this pictures the word of grace, received through saving faith, that offers eternal life even in the present.

JOHN 11:38-44

11:39 While the Jews used spices at burials, this did not prevent decomposition of the body, as Martha pointed out.

11:41-42 Jesus' prayer finds an OT antecedent in Elijah's prayer (1Ki 18:37). Compare Jn 6:11.

11:43 Jesus raised Lazarus not by magic, incantations, or spells, but by the power of His word.

11:44 John did not record Lazarus's reaction or any of the aftermath of his raising. Instead, he immediately moved (v. 45) to focus on the plot against Jesus.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

4:13 The term asleep in this context is a metaphorical reference to Christians who have died. This metaphor is particularly appropriate because of the future resurrection of the body. Just as a sleeping person expects to rise up in the morning, Christians who have died will experience a bodily resurrection and will rise up once again (v. 16, Jn 11:11). Until this happened for deceased believers, to be out of the body is to be at home with the Lord (2Co 5:8). Apparently the cause of the Thessalonians' grief was related to the misunderstanding that dead Christians would miss the events and subsequent blessings associated with the Lord's coming. Paul corrected this misunderstanding by teaching that the dead in Christ will rise first (1Th 4:16). In contrast to unbelievers who grieve over the loss of loved ones, Christians who grieve over a fellow believer can do so with hope because of the future glorious resurrection.

4:14 Jesus' resurrection revealed what resurrection will be like for those who have fallen asleep through Jesus. We can partially understand the nature of our bodily resurrection by reading about His (Lk 24:36-43).

4:15-17 The revelation (lit "word") that Paul received relates to what has been called the rapture. It refers to the event when believers who are alive at the Lord's coming are caught up (Gk *harpazo*) in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. The term "rapture" is derived from *rapturo*, the Latin translation of the Greek term. The Greek term means "to snatch or take away suddenly." Paul referred to this event as a mystery (some truth previously hidden but now known) in 1Co 15:51-52 and said it will happen in the twinkling of an eye. We who are still alive implies that Paul thought the rapture could occur at any moment, even during his lifetime. The "archangel" or chief angel is probably a reference to Michael (Dan 10:13; Jd 9).

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DAY
2

WEEK 2 OF AFTERLIFE: DAY 2

Make time for some chair time this week and go deeper in learning about Heaven. Grab your Bible and a notebook to complete this lesson on your own.

MAIN POINT

All who trust in Christ are given the promise of heaven. Those who do not trust in Him are warned of the certainty of hell. This should give believers in Jesus an urgency to share the gospel with others.

INTRODUCTION

What's one truth you've learned about heaven?

Why do you think people have a fear of death, even Christians?

The fear of death is a universal human characteristic. Even for Christians, simply the fear of the unknown—what happens after your last breath—can bring much anxiety. In addition, a variety of interpretations and opinions exist in evangelical Christian circles about what happens to believers after they die.

UNDERSTANDING

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-8.

What do you anticipate about being at home with the Lord?

How will your heavenly home be a better place?

What are the limitations of being “at home in the body”?

Paul placed the phrase, “for we walk by faith, not by sight” (v. 7) right in the middle of these contrasting ideas. Why is faith essential for embracing the hope of heaven?

Have you ever spoken with someone who believed your faith in heaven was misplaced? How did you respond?

In the language of the New Testament, the statements, “We are at home in the body” and “We are absent from the Lord” (v. 6) are in the present tense, representing continuous action. In other words, no one can be in two places at once. Being present in one setting means being absent in another. When we’re out running errands, we certainly aren’t at home. When we’re on the earth, we aren’t in the direct presence of Christ.

While this argument might seem obvious and logical, Paul was communicating something about a believer’s desire. We can be in one setting but long to be in another. When we’re traveling on business, we might long to be at home with our family. For now we must be away, but we want to be somewhere else as soon as we can. When we come to understand and comprehend the reality of what awaits us in heaven, we long to be present there, though we must remain here for a while.

All who depart from this earth before the Lord returns will be in the presence of Christ. Likewise, they will all be with Christ when He returns. All Christians—those who have died and those who are alive at the time—will receive new, incorruptible, and imperishable bodies that will last for eternity. No aging, sagging, decay, sickness, or disease. Forever young.

READ 2 PETER 2:4-9.

When we speak or think of heaven and hell, why do we tend to focus on the personal experiences of the two places, such as bliss or agony, rather than the much bigger picture of the presence or absence of God?

How can fully placing the focus of our lives on God—on the fact that we’ll be either with Him or completely separated from Him for all eternity—bring more clarity and purpose to the way we live our lives day by day?

How does the truth of God’s judgment help us as believers stand firm?

What hope is there in this passage for godly men and women?

Just as the new heaven and the new earth are the final destination for all believers, the lake of fire is the final destination for all unbelievers. Just as the third heaven is the temporary place for believers, Hades is the temporary place for unbelievers. Neither of these is simply a waiting room or a purgatory-type holding room. We know this because Scripture is clear that those who go to heaven experience immediate peace and blessing, while those who go to hell experience immediate pain and agony, as we saw in Jesus’ story of Lazarus and the rich man. There’s a definite separation between believers and nonbelievers. But we must keep in

the forefront of our minds that the true distinguishing feature is that heaven is being in the full presence of God, while hell is total separation from the presence of God and His blessing. We live in a day when everyone has the opportunity to hear and know the gospel, which proclaims that after dying for our sin, Jesus rose from the dead and then ascended to the Father. Understanding the stark, sobering reality of where unbelievers go when they die, we can share the good news of the gospel with them before they perish.

APPLICATION

How can embracing the truth that Christians immediately enter God's presence eliminate the fear and terror of death?

How can a greater knowledge of death, eternity, and heaven help us anticipate Christ's second coming?

How can grasping that nonbelievers are actually telling God that they don't need His grace and can rely on their own works on judgment day help someone better understand the gospel?

PRAYER

Pray the following prayer: Lord, thank You for the salvation, grace, and mercy You've provided. Keep reminding me that both heaven and hell are permanent destinations and that You call me to be Your ambassador of reconciliation to a lost and dying world. Thank You for trusting me with the amazing message of salvation. Help me remain faithful until the day of judgment. In Christ's name, amen.

COMMENTARY

2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-8

5:6-8 Paul drew three contrasts between this life and the intermediate state: at home in the body/out of the body; by faith/by sight; and away from the Lord/at home with the Lord. As long as the saints still live in the body, they perceive Christ only by faith. Paul's pattern is to refer to living believers as "in" Christ or the Lord but to dead believers as "with" Christ or the Lord, when faith becomes sight in conscious fellowship with the Lord.

2 PETER 2:4-9

2:4-10a In order to warn his readers and urge them to action, Peter recalled three examples of God's judgment and deliverance: (1) God judged the angels who sinned (cp. Gen 6:1-4). Tartarus is a Greek name that means a subterranean place of punishment lower than Hades and reserved for the wicked. (2) God also judged the ancient world at the time of the flood (cp. Gen 7:17-23), but protected Noah and seven others (cp. Gen 7:13-16). (3) He judged the immoral cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (cp. Gen 19:23-29), yet rescued righteous Lot, who was distressed and tormented by the immoral behavior of the ungodly (cp. Gen 19:29). Peter then pointed out to his readers that God was capable of delivering them, the godly, from the destructive false teachings of heretics in their midst. Peter further assured his readers that despite the false teachers' immorality, the unrighteous, especially those who followed the polluting desires of the flesh and despised authority, would not escape God's sovereignty or punishment.

GOING DEEPER

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DAY
3

WEEK 2 OF AFTERLIFE: DAY 3

Make time for some chair time this week and go deeper in learning about Heaven. Grab your Bible and a notebook to complete this lesson on your own.

MAIN POINT

Heaven will not be boring and monotonous, but exciting and fulfilling as we work and worship to the glory of God.

INTRODUCTION

Share one fact about heaven or eternity that you didn't previously know.

Is there a particular Scripture or a new truth you'd like to share from yesterday's study?

Let's face it: there are a lot of misconceptions about heaven, hell, and eternal life. The majority of these exist because opinions and myths have been formed without the illumination of biblical truth. What we'll do in heaven is one of the most misunderstood and misinterpreted of all the questions about life beyond this earth.

UNDERSTANDING

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-8.

What do you anticipate about being at home with the Lord?

How will your heavenly home be a better place?

What are the limitations of being "at home in the body"?

Paul placed the phrase, "for we walk by faith, not by sight" (v. 7) right in the middle of these contrasting ideas. Why is faith essential for embracing the hope of heaven?

READ GENESIS 2:8-9, 15 AND REVELATION 5:11-14.

In what ways are our lives still similar today to the arrangement in Genesis 2, even in a fallen world?

How did sin's entrance into the world affect both worship and work?

God gave Adam a clear responsibility. In modern terms, Adam was a produce farmer, specializing in fruits and vegetables. God would cause the plants to grow as Adam cultivated and kept them all. This was a partnership from the beginning until Adam broke the agreement. When Christ returns and God establishes the new heaven and the new earth, our lives will return to this same original arrangement with our Creator and Redeemer—worshiping and working in the kingdom of God.

Worship in heaven is radically centered on Jesus. How is that both like and unlike our worship on earth? Why is such worship never boring?

If your work were made perfect in heaven, what could it look like?

Is there work you dream of doing if you weren't restricted by money or opportunity? What would it look like?

If life in the garden of Eden serves as a template of what we can expect in heaven, we can look forward to an eternity of cultivating and creating. In the beginning, God created nature and called it good, but He intended His image bearers to cultivate nature—to work and create something very good. For example, cherries are good, but cherry pie is very good; avocados are good, but guacamole is very good; tomatoes and spices are good, but salsa is very good. When God created Adam and placed him in the garden, God commissioned him both to create and to cultivate what God had begun.

READ GENESIS 1:26-28.

What was God's original plan for the proper rule over creation?

What are some ways we've drifted from God's original plan for leadership?

Why would God consider what we do in our lives on earth as qualifications for ruling in the new heaven and the new earth?

When Jesus returns and establishes His thousand-year reign on the earth—a period of time commonly referred to as the millennium—He will appoint His faithful followers to rule with Him. Men and women will be elevated to leadership positions in the new world, according to their faithfulness and service to God in the present world.

Our reign will extend beyond the thousand-year rule of Christ during the millennium into the eternal state of the new heaven and the new earth. The final stage of redemption is re-creation, in which we'll be made new and conformed to Christ's purpose for our lives, freed from sin. In heaven we'll still be ourselves, but made new. Thus, all the gifts, abilities, and service we have on earth will be very much a part of our lives in heaven.

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 13:9-12 AND REVELATION 14:13.

Have you ever realized that in heaven you'll learn about God forever?

Why should this prospect fill believers with longing and anticipation?

What's one burden you'll be glad to lay down at the feet of the risen Christ?

Paul stated that on earth, even though we live in a relationship with Christ, our view of God is like looking at a dimly lit mirror or through a dark glass. The image isn't bright and clear. We know an image is there, but the details are sketchy. Full, complete knowledge isn't yet possible. But our face-to-face view in heaven will allow us the opportunity to fully know Christ in all His glory.

In heaven, believers will finally be freed and released from the burden and struggle of living a godly lifestyle in a broken, fallen world. Hostility and persecution will be things of the past.

APPLICATION

_____ **Why do you suppose people have so many misunderstandings and misconceptions about what happens in heaven?**

If we define worship as “a continual awareness of gratitude toward and submission to God in everything we do,” how can this understanding affect our day-to-day lives outside church?

When we use this definition, what elements of our lives become worship?

How can offering people rest in heaven influence our evangelistic conversations?

PRAYER

Pray the following prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for the community I'll experience in heaven, with unity and perfection being the focus of all. Thank You for the opportunity not only to be in Your presence, but also to know You more fully. Thank You for Your promise of rest for my soul. In Christ's name, amen.

COMMENTARY

GENESIS 2:8-9

2:8 The location of Eden is unknown; suggestions include Armenia, Iraq, Africa, and Arabia. Changes in geography caused by the flood in Noah's day (7:11) make it unlikely that Eden will ever be discovered. The Hebrew word "Eden" literally means "pleasantness."

2:9 God's concern for beauty is seen in the fact that the trees He caused to grow were pleasing in appearance. The Lord's love of beauty will later be extended to Israel's religion, which will make use of furnishings fashioned by expert craftsmen using expensive materials (Ex 25-40). Of course, God's beautiful created works were also practical, being good for food.

GENESIS 1:26-28

1:26 God's use of plural pronouns (Us... Our... Our) to refer to Himself has raised many questions (3:22; 11:7; Isa 6:8). At least five different suggestions have been put forward to explain them: they may be references to (1) the Trinity, (2) God and His angels, (3) God and creation, (4) God's majesty as expressed by a literary device known as the "plural of majesty," or (5) a polytheistic view of God. Since the Bible teaches elsewhere that there is only one God (Dt 6:4; Mk 12:29; 1Co 8:4), the fifth option is not tenable.

The two Hebrew words translated as image and likeness are often understood as having the same meaning. But some interpreters suggest that "image" refers to the ability to reason, with "likeness" referring to the spiritual dimension. What exactly is the "image" of God? Since the Bible teaches that God is Spirit (Jn 4:24), many commentators believe it refers to the non-material aspects of a person—our moral sensibilities, intellectual abilities, will, and emotions. Based on God's commands in Gen 1:28, others have suggested that it consists of the role humans are to play on earth—their rulership over the planet and its resources, and secondarily the physical, mental, and spiritual abilities that enable them to fulfill that role. The NT teaches that Christians will someday bear the image of Christ (1Co 15:49; 1Jn 3:2).

1:27 The creation of humanity is the crowning event of chapter 1, as shown by the fact that created is repeated three times. The verb "created" (Hb bara') is the same one used in 1:1, referring to a kind of creative activity that only God can do. The term "man" (Hb 'adam) is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to refer to humanity in general, not just males (7:21); all people, both male and female, are created in the image of God (cp. Jms 3:9). People are the only beings that are created in the image of God (Gen 9:3-6). The Bible never lumps people into the category of animals. Instead, it separates the creation of people from all other beings and attributes the most privileged roles in creation to humans alone.

1:28 In this the longest of the five blessings found in the account of creation, God gave humanity five different commands. Implicit in the first three commands is God's blessing on the institutions of marriage and the family. The final two commands, to subdue the earth and rule the animal kingdom, express God's blessing on the use of the planet's renewable and nonrenewable natural resources. Of course, only the wise use of these resources permits people to fulfill God's command to fill the earth. A similar command to the survivors of the flood is shorter, having only the first three verbs in it (9:1).

REVELATION 5:11-14

5:11-14. This scene looks ahead to the time when "every knee will bow... and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Php 2:10-11).

1 CORINTHIANS 13:9-12

13:10 The perfect refers to the next age, the eternal age when Messiah reigns.

13:11 Paul uses the analogy of infancy versus adulthood to explain the contrast between our present understanding and the understanding we will have in the next age.

13:12 Believers are granted to know truth in this age, but only indistinctly so. Our imprecise perception of Christ will be made complete in eternity, where we will know Him face to face.

REVELATION 14:13

14:12-13 Blessed marks the second beatitude in Revelation. Believers (the saints) who persevere in keeping God's commands and faith in Jesus will be blessed with the reward of their godly works (20:12; 2Co 5:10).

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DAY
4

WEEK 2 OF AFTERLIFE: DAY 4

Make time for some chair time this week and go deeper in learning about Heaven. Grab your Bible and a notebook to complete this lesson on your own.

MAIN POINT

Only those who place their faith in Jesus will be in heaven.

INTRODUCTION

As you get started, share one truth about heaven you learned during this study that may have surprised you.

Whom are you most looking forward to seeing in heaven? Why?

In your lifetime you've likely heard a lot of people say that a deceased person is looking down on them from heaven. But on what do they base their belief that this person is in heaven? Many people believe people get to heaven by doing more good than bad. Others see heaven as a generic place where people who leave us reside. However, Scripture always treats heaven as a specific place we can go to only if we place our faith in Jesus. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the road map to heaven.

UNDERSTANDING

READ JOHN 3:16-17 AND JOHN 14:6.

Why do you suppose our culture has become so consumed with the concept of love while losing the standards and accountability that come with true love?

How does the truth of John 3:16 depend on the reality of John 14:6?

Why do so many people see John 14:6 as a limitation rather than a gift?

In our diverse and choice-crazed culture, claiming that there's only one way to heaven provokes a riot these days. Suddenly God's love and desire to save are overshadowed by a restrictive qualification.

The Bible clearly says only people who've trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins

will reside in the new heaven and the new earth. When people argue against the exclusivity of Christ for salvation by saying, “No one but God can decide who will be in heaven,” they miss a crucial truth: God has already decided the standard by which people will be admitted into His presence. When we declare that faith in Christ offers the only path to heaven, we aren’t creating our own criterion but simply articulating the requirement God established.

READ ROMANS 3:10-12 AND HABAKKUK 1:13.

Why is it often difficult for us to acknowledge our sin?

How would the unbelieving people you know define the word righteous?

To be righteous means to be in right standing with God. And how many people are naturally in a right relationship with God? Zilch, zero, nada—or as Paul said, “There is none righteous, not even one” (v. 10). We’re all sinners. Admittedly, we can always point to people who are worse than we are, such as drug dealers, murderers, and child pornographers. We may not be as bad as we could be, but we’re just as bad off as we can be. All of us have sinned, creating an eternal gulf between God and ourselves.

What does it mean for God to be holy?

Why does God’s holiness present a problem for us?

The Bible says if we’re to make it to heaven, our spiritual tank needs to be filled with perfection. The only problem is that none of us can do enough good things to get to heaven. While some people may think of themselves as better than others, the truth is that even our good acts aren’t enough (see Isa. 64:6). God demands that our spiritual gas tanks be full and running over if we’re going to make it into His presence. We have no righteousness apart from Christ.

READ 2 CORINTHIANS 5:21 AND ROMANS 10:9.

What made Jesus the only person qualified to provide a sacrifice for our sins?

What made Him unique?

If Jesus was the only person qualified, why do we often try to save ourselves and others?

Jesus was the only person qualified to bear the punishment for our sins and offer us complete perfection because He was uniquely different from any other person who ever walked on this planet. In fact, in John 3:16 “only begotten Son” could have been translated “unique Son.” He alone is the Son of God. The signpost declaring Jesus to be our sin substitute is the one that causes many people to stop, stumble, and begin searching for an alternative road to heaven.

According to these verses, what must a person do to accept Christ’s offer of forgiveness?

Why is it important to realize that Jesus forgives without qualification or distinction—that His offer is for everyone?

Accepting Christ’s offer of forgiveness means confessing your sins and believing in His sacrifice on your behalf: “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved” (v. 13). God doesn’t care what kind of life you’ve lived. He doesn’t care whether you’ve been in church every time the doors were open or whether you’ve never been inside a church building in your life. All people need forgiveness and can find it in Jesus Christ. His grace is unconditional.

APPLICATION

Why are so many people reluctant to admit they’re sinners?

Why is that a difficult confession, even though we all know in our hearts that it’s true?

Why is Jesus the answer to every problem with sin that we experience?

Read Romans 10:13. What are some ways we might struggle with the teaching that whoever calls on the name of the Lord can be saved?

PRAYER

Thank You, Father, for loving me. I realize that I’ve failed You in many ways, and I’m truly sorry for the sin in my life. But I believe You loved me so much that You sent Your Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for me. I believe Jesus took the punishment I deserve for my sins. So right now I’m trusting in what Jesus did for me—not my own good works—to save me from my sins. Thank You for forgiving me and allowing me to spend the rest of my life serving You. In Christ’s name, amen.

COMMENTARY

JOHN 3:16-17

3:16-18 God, out of love, gave His One and Only Son (cp. 1:14,18), so that everyone who believes in Him will have eternal life (see note at 14:6). John's favorite designation for Jesus is the Son sent by the Father (3:34-36; 5:19-26; 6:40; 8:35-36; 14:13; 17:1), imagery taken from the Jewish concept of the shaliach (messenger), according to which the sent one is like the sender himself and faithfully pursues the sender's interests (13:16,20). Jesus is that "Sent One" par excellence (9:7), and He in turn sends His disciples. Being sent implies that the commission, charge, and message are issued by the sender rather than originating with the ones sent. The messengers' role is to fulfill their commission according to their sender's will.

JOHN 14:6

14:6 Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him. Jesus alone is able to provide access to God because He alone paid the penalty for our sins (Isa 53:5; Heb 1:3). He is the truth (Jn 1:14,17; 5:33; 18:37; cp. 8:40,45-46), and all contrary claims are false. He alone is the life (1:4), having life in Himself (5:26). He is thus able to confer eternal life on all those who believe in Him (3:16). Jesus is truth and life, and He is the one and only way of salvation.

ROMANS 3:10-12

3:10-18 In these verses Paul linked seven OT passages to demonstrate that all of mankind is under sin's dominion. No one is righteous; no one understands (Jn 8:43-44; 1Co 2:14), and no one... seeks God. Since Adam and Eve's fall, people have hidden from God, but God sent His Son "to seek and to save the lost" (Lk 19:10). All have gone astray (Isa 1:2-4; 53:6), and in God's sight none are right. Paul cited Bible passages that show the extent of corruption. As Jesus taught, "from within, out of people's hearts" (Mk 7:21) come all sorts of evil. Man is quick to shed blood. During the last century over 39 million people lost their lives in wars. And by conservative estimates, human governments killed an additional 125 million people—led by Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Hitler, and others. The root problem is that humans are often practical atheists even when they profess belief in God. They choose against God's will and show no fear for it.

HABAKKUK 1:13

1:13 Habakkuk complained that rewarding the more wicked in order to punish the less wicked seemed inconsistent with God's pure goodness. As bad as the Jews were, they were more righteous than the wicked Babylonian invaders.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:21

5:19-21 What Christ did, God did. Christ's death mainly affected the world, that is, human sinners (rather than evil supernatural beings, for whom no divine provision for reconciliation has been made). Christ's death upholds God's righteousness. Trespasses were placed on the One who did not know sin. In return, the righteousness of God is credited (imputed) to all who are in Him. The message of reconciliation is known to others only when ambassadors for Christ spread it. The Great Commission is the responsibility of reconciled human beings, not angels (Mt 28:18-20).

ROMANS 10:9

10:9-10 Jesus is Lord is a confession of faith. "Lord" is the translation of the Greek word kurios. This is the regular way of translating the Hebrew name for God (Yahweh) in the Greek OT (the LXX). Jesus is not only the Messiah (Gk Christ = Hb Messiah), but He is also Yahweh. Not only do we believe that the man Jesus was raised... from the dead, but we also believe that He shares the same nature with God. This is the start of the understanding of Christ's two natures, as articulated at the Council of Chalcedon (a.d. 451). Jesus is fully human and fully God. Christians by definition believe and confess this truth.

GOING DEEPER

What Is Heaven Like?

September 17-23, 2023

DAY
5

WEEK 2 OF AFTERLIFE: DAY 5

Make time for some chair time this week and go deeper in learning about Heaven. Grab your Bible and a notebook to complete this lesson on your own.

MAIN POINT

Followers of Christ are to make the most of their time on earth, as they move toward the promise of heaven.

INTRODUCTION

Based on all you've learned this week, what do you expect heaven to be like?

What's one feature of heaven you're looking forward to?

It doesn't matter how many Scriptures you've read, how many sermons you've heard, or how many facts about eternity you understand if you discover that you aren't ready to experience heaven. Being prepared for heaven is the primary goal.

Regardless of how much you may know about the gospel or how many years you've been a Christian, this final week of study will provide you with more to consider about heaven and new ways to deepen your faith as you anticipate your future in eternity. If you've decided at any point during this study that you don't yet know Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, this will be the time to place your faith in Him.

UNDERSTANDING

READ REVELATION 20:11-15 AND 2 CORINTHIANS 5:10.

How does understanding the reality of judgment for both believers and unbelievers affect you as a Christian?

How have explanations of events in the Book of Revelation made these often difficult passages more personal for you?

This judgment, called the judgment seat of Christ, is strictly reserved for believers. Jesus will evaluate our works not for our eternal destiny but for the purpose of our rewards in heaven.

At the great white throne judgment, those who've rejected Jesus Christ will receive condemnation. At the judgment seat of Christ, followers of Jesus will receive commendation,

for “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

To be ready for the great white throne judgment, be certain you have a relationship with Christ. To be ready for the judgment seat of Christ, become a wise trustee, carefully choose your building materials each day, and constantly let go of the baggage that can slow you down in running your race.

READ PSALM 27:1.

Are you afraid of death? If so, identify the primary reason.

What reasons does Psalm 27:1 give to trust God more than you fear death?

If you fear death on any level, how could focusing on the truths of God’s Word about the realities of heaven help you minimize that fear?

The reality is that even strong, committed Christians will still fear the unknown of death and will regret what they’ll miss on the earth, while others will face death with courage and anticipation of their new home. Regardless, we can be assured that what awaits all believers will be far better and far more glorious than anything this earth could ever offer.

If we fear the day of death as it draws near, we can be comforted by recalling Jesus’ words to the thief who was also enduring the pain of crucifixion: “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). We too are dying, but soon we’ll be with our Savior in our heavenly home.

READ JOHN 10:9-10 AND EPHESIANS 5:15-16.

Record a few ways your life became abundant or full after you entered a relationship with Jesus.

In light of Jesus’ words, what might He want to write on your bucket list?

The younger we are, the more slowly time seems to go by. Waiting to get our driver’s license seems like decades. Waiting to graduate from high school feels like far more than four years. The same is true of a college education. Once engaged, the wedding day can feel like an eternity away. But as the years go by, oddly, their speed seems to increase. When we know Jesus, all of our days can be filled with abundance and meaning.

What wasted opportunities do you imagine people might regret on their deathbeds?

What's one step you can take to make wise decisions with the limited time you have so that you don't end life with regrets?

In Ephesians 5:15-16 Paul contrasted wise and unwise ways of living. As a smart buyer or a sharp merchant must make the best of every opportunity in the marketplace, Paul encourages believers to make the best possible use of our resources. Literally, the phrase "making the most of your time" (v. 16) means to buy up the time you need. The days are wicked, so don't be unwise and waste your opportunities.

As we've thought about our journey to heaven, hopefully you've been challenged and encouraged. All the Bible teaches about heaven is meant to cause us to think differently about our lives on earth. Learning about heaven is a worthy endeavor, but allowing our thoughts of heaven to shape the way we live is the goal of our study together. In the coming weeks and months, look for ways you can put into practice all you've learned about a place called heaven.

APPLICATION

How can the judgment seat of Christ become a positive, inspiring motivator for the way we live the rest of our lives?

Why do we tend to stay focused on our own lives even though we realize that heaven is at stake for others around us?

How do you need to let the certainty of judgment give you urgency to share the gospel with others?

PRAYER

Father God, thank You for the days You've given me. Help me make the most of them with the limited time I have. All of my time is Your time, and all of my life is open to Your will and guidance. In Christ's name, amen.

COMMENTARY

REVELATION 20:11-15

20:11-15 The phrase great white throne emphasizes God's purity and holiness in judging and His sovereign right to both rule and judge the earth. The phrases earth and heaven fled and no place was found for them apparently refer to "the first heaven and the first earth" giving way at the final judgment to "a new heaven and a new earth" (21:1). The dead... standing before the throne come to life in the "second resurrection" (implied in v. 5). There are two sets of books at this judgment. The names of all believers are in the book of life. The names of the "earth dwellers" are not in the book of life (13:8; 17:8). They are judged according to their works, which are recorded in the other books. No one can ever be saved by works, because that would leave room for human boasting (Eph 2:8-9). The eternal dwelling place of all unbelievers is the lake of fire. As part of the present creation, Death and Hades are also thrown into the lake of fire.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:10

5:9-10 At home or away refers to either earthly bodily existence or away from bodily existence (disembodied).

The main way in which the righteous dead may be pleasing to Him is by receiving a positive verdict before the tribunal of Christ. See Rm 14:10 for the other NT instance of “tribunal” (Gk *beyma*) as a future event for believers. The biblical teaching is that Christians are saved by faith, but they will be judged according to the good or worthless deeds they have done. This is a judgment to determine rewards, not eternal destination. See especially 1Co 3:10-15.

PSALM 27:1

27:1 Light is parallel to salvation, which in this context refers to rescue from danger. Darkness represents danger (23:4), but light dispels darkness, eliminating the immediate danger (18:28). With God’s protection, there is no need to be afraid regardless of the danger (v. 3; Rm 8:31).

JOHN 10:9-10

10:9 Jesus is the door to salvation (cp. 14:6). The NT elsewhere speaks of “entering” God’s kingdom as through a door (Mt 7:7,13; 25:10; Ac 14:22). Will come in and go out echoes covenant terminology, especially blessings for obedience (Dt 28:6; cp. Ps 121:8). It is also reminiscent of Moses’ description of Joshua, who led Israel into the promised land (Num 27:16-17). Find pasture depicts the assurance of God’s provision (1Ch 4:40; Ps 23:2; Isa 49:9-10; Ezek 34:12-15).

10:10 Jesus’ promise of abundant life in the here and now brings to mind OT prophetic passages such as Ezek 34:12-15,25-31.

EPHESIANS 5:15-16

5:15-16 These words provide a solemn warning that Christians should be wise and careful in all things, including their use of time. Our use of time is not neutral; it can be evil if it is not invested for good (Ps 90).