

# What Is Heaven Really Like?

By Jimmy Akin



Wings and halos. Robes and harps. Sitting on clouds. Being greeted by St. Peter at the pearly gates: These are the images of heaven we get from movies, TV, and newspaper cartoons. Silly as they are, the ideas behind these images can seep into our consciousness and affect the way we think of heaven.

For example, it's commonly believed that we will have no bodies in heaven. That's only partly true. People in heaven do not have bodies (with rare exceptions such as Jesus and Mary), but that's a temporary state of affairs. At the end of time, we will be raised from the dead and reunited with our bodies (cf. 1 Cor. 15:16–18).

The idea that we will spend eternity as disembodied ghosts is one of the most widespread myths about the afterlife. God created men to be embodied spirits, and while death may temporarily interrupt that, death is not the final word. Our ultimate destiny is to be the embodied spirits that God always intended us to be.

Of course, ordinary bodies are not able to survive for all eternity. Paul explains that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable" (1 Cor. 15:50).

Our bodies will be modified somehow when we are reunited with them after the resurrection. What these modifications will be even Paul did not claim to understand, though he compared the difference between our bodies now and our bodies then to the difference between a seed and the plant that is grown from the seed (1 Cor. 15:35–44).

Elsewhere he states that Jesus "will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body" (Phil. 3:21), raising the possibility that in our resurrected bodies we will be able to do many of the things that Christ was able to do in his resurrected form, such as appear or disappear from places at will, without locked doors or other barriers obstructing us.

## Winging It

The other images our culture gives us of heaven are also problematic. The idea that we will have wings has absolutely no basis in Scripture or Tradition.

Neither does the idea that we will become angels. Angels are created beings that are pure spirit and have no bodies (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 328–330). They are a different order of being than we are, and humans and angels don't turn into each other.

Halos are simply an artistic way of representing holiness, and while we will be holy in heaven, we have no reason to think that this will manifest itself in halos as we see in illustrations.

Robes are something people wore in biblical days, so it is common to picture people in heaven wearing robes, but we have no idea what clothes (if any) we may wear.

The image of harps in heaven is drawn from Scripture (Rev. 5:8), though not everyone in heaven is depicted as playing a harp.

Scripture does not picture those in heaven sitting around on clouds, but it does picture heaven as being "up" from an earth-bound perspective, so clouds are a natural image for artists to supply.

The image of St. Peter in charge of "the pearly gates" is not taken directly from Scripture but is based on two things that Scripture does say. The first is that Peter was given the "keys of the kingdom" and the power to "bind" and "loose" by Christ (Matt. 16:18–19). Indeed, one cannot knowingly and deliberately cut off communion with Peter and his successors without committing schism and denying oneself heaven, so Peter has been portrayed as admitting or barring people from heaven. In reality, Peter does not (so far as we know) personally approve each person's admission to heaven.

The image of the pearly gates is taken from Scripture as well. We typically see this pictured as a set of golden gates framed by two large white (pearly?) structures, but the image in Scripture is somewhat different. There, the heavenly city is described as having twelve gates, "and the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl" (Rev. 21:21).

## Paved in Gold

Scripture employs far more images of heaven in addition to the handful our culture has latched onto. One of the most common New Testament depictions of heaven is a feast (Matt. 8:11; Luke 13:29; 14:15–24), in particular a wedding feast (Matt. 22:1–14; 25:1–13; Rev. 19:7–9) understood as a first-century Jewish wedding feast, not a modern wedding reception.

Another notable image is heaven as a temple. Heaven was understood as the dwelling place of God. Earthly temples were in some sense modeled on heaven. Much of the book of Revelation takes place in heaven, so it's not surprising that it describes God's temple in heaven (Rev. 11:19) and heavenly worshipers with censers (8:3), incense (8:4), trumpets (8:7), bowls (16:2), harps (5:8), and other trappings of the kind of worship given to God in the Jerusalem temple.

Heaven also is depicted as a city of the righteous named New Jerusalem. It is mentioned in various New Testament passages (e.g., Gal. 4:25–26; Heb. 11:22), but it receives its fullest description in Revelation 21, where the image of the streets being paved with gold comes from (21:21), though what the text says is that "the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass."

These images are meant to convey a sense of wonder at what God has in store, but we must be careful of how literally we take them. Paul warns us that "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor

the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9; cf. CCC 1027). In a weekly catechesis, Pope John Paul II wrote:

*In the context of Revelation, we know that the "heaven" or "happiness" in which we will find ourselves is neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds but a living, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity. It is our meeting with the Father that takes place in the risen Christ through the communion of the Holy Spirit. It is always necessary to maintain a certain restraint in describing these "ultimate realities" since their depiction is always unsatisfactory (July 21, 1999).*

The images Scripture gives us of heaven point to the realities that God has in store for his people. When we experience the realities that these symbols point to, we will find them more amazing, not less, than what human language could express.

### **Deepest Longings**

The fundamental essence of heaven is union with God. The *Catechism* explains that "perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity . . . is called 'heaven.' Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness" (CCC 1024). It also states that "heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ" (CCC 1026).

Traditionally theology has explained the chief blessing or "beatitude" of heaven as "the beatific vision"—an insight into the wonder of God's inner, invisible essence. "Because of his transcendence, God cannot be seen as he is, unless he himself opens up his mystery to man's immediate contemplation and gives him the capacity for it. The Church calls this contemplation of God in his heavenly glory 'the beatific vision'" (CCC 1028).

Because humans are made for having a conscious relationship with God, the beatific vision corresponds to the greatest human happiness possible.

Many people wonder how our relationships with others will work in heaven. Some have even wondered whether we will retain our own identities. The answer is that we will. The Christian faith assures us that those in heaven "retain, or rather find, their true identity" (CCC 1025). We do not become anonymous, interchangeable entities in heaven. Rather, we each receive our own reward (cf. 1 Cor. 3:11–15).

This does not mean that there will be no changes in our relationships. Jesus was clear in teaching that we will not be married in the next life (Matt. 22:30). But because we retain our identities, we will continue to know and love those we were close to in earthly life. Indeed, in heaven our love for them and our spiritual intimacy with them will be truer, purer, and stronger than it was in this life.

### **Pain in Heaven?**

A special problem that has been raised by some is the question of pain in heaven. Some have wondered how it would be possible for individuals to enjoy the beatitude of heaven if they knew that some people—perhaps some they were close to in earthly life—are in hell. Others have wondered about apparitions of Mary and other saints in which they are crying over what is

happening or may happen on earth. These problems have made people question whether there is pain in heaven.

The answer is that there is not. Scripture assures us that for those in heaven God in the end "will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

How we will be able to know of the existence of the damned without being pained by it is a mystery, but we can only conclude that the glorified human mind will be configured in such a way that it is able—without pain—to recognize both God's justice and the free choices of men that led to damnation. God's own beatitude is not damaged by the existence of hell, and he will not allow our ultimate beatitude to be damaged, either.

As far as weeping apparitions, the tears in these cases perhaps are best understood as an expression of the gravity of man's sins and of what one in a non-glorified state would be justified in feeling rather than what literally is being felt in heaven.

### **Is It a Place?**

Disembodied spirits are not extended in space. They don't have shape or take up space. As a result, some have wondered whether heaven is a "place." This is a difficult question. Heaven is not a location in the physical universe. One could never travel far enough in any direction in space to arrive in heaven.

But it does seem that heaven has something corresponding to space. It may not be anything remotely like space as we experience it, but heaven does seem to have the ability to receive bodies into it. Christ took his body with him to heaven when he ascended. Mary took her body when she was assumed. A few others—such as Enoch, Elijah, and perhaps Moses—also seem to have their bodies with them in heaven.

We cannot say what the present state of these bodies is. They may not be extended in space at the moment—or they may. We don't know.

### **What Time Is It?**

Related to the problem of space in heaven is the problem of time. We often hear of heaven being described as "eternal" or "timeless." God himself, in his divine essence, is completely outside of time. For him, all of history exists in an "eternal now" without past or future. But it is not clear that created beings in union with God are completely drawn outside of time.

Medieval thinkers proposed that departed souls, such as those being purified in purgatory, exist in a state that shares some properties in common with time and some with eternity. They called this state "aeviternity." Whether this speculation is correct, or what properties such a middle state might have, are open to question. We ultimately don't know how time—or whatever might replace time—works in the afterlife.

It does seem, though, that just as heaven can receive bodies into it, it also has some kind of sequentiality. Thus there can be a point before a soul is in heaven, a point during which it is disembodied in heaven, a point after this when it is reunited with its body at the resurrection, and a point at which it exists in the eternal order in body and soul.

## Will It Be Boring?

A question many have is: "Won't we get bored in heaven?" Some descriptions make it sound as if heaven will be like being in church all the time, and we get bored in church down here. While worship is central to heaven, the worship that takes place there is far deeper and richer than anything we experience on earth, for there we have the beatific vision that corresponds to the greatest human happiness. The fact that time may not work the same way there may also play a role in us not getting bored. We can be certain, though, that we will not be bored, for boredom is a form of suffering, and we have seen already that heaven excludes suffering.

It is also not clear that we will do nothing besides exclusively praising God every moment. Scripture and the *Catechism* both speak of us "reigning" with Christ (Rev. 22:5; CCC 1029). This suggests that we will have authority over and responsibility for things.

Where we may undertake those tasks may come as a surprise for some. Many have the idea that after the resurrection we will return to a celestial realm, leaving the physical world deserted.

But Scripture speaks of a new heaven and a new earth and seems to locate the dwelling place of man on the new earth. In Revelation, John sees "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming *down* out of heaven from God" (21:2, emphasis added) and then hears: "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them" (21:3).

This suggests that heaven and earth may not be separated in the way they presently are. The *Catechism* thus states that "the visible universe, then, is itself destined to be transformed, so that the world itself, restored to its original state, facing no further obstacles, should be at the service of the just" (CCC 1047).

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