

Becky Bereans – Heaven – Home of the Redeemed – Session 10

Session 10

Review

Last time, we discussed the idea of “soul sleep.” We learned about three different flavors of this idea:

1. Annihilation of the Soul – Also called “Extreme” soul sleep. This is the version taught by the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists – the utter destruction of the soul with bodily death.
2. Unconscious Soul Sleep – The idea that the soul remains with the body at death, totally unaware of anything until the resurrection of the body.
3. General Soul Sleep – The idea held by most Christians that the soul separates from the body at the moment of bodily death, with the souls of believers dwelling in the presence of the Lord also known as Abraham’s bosom, and the souls of unbelievers held in torment in a place called Sheol – שְׂאוֹל *š’ôl* in the Old Testament and ᾗδης *hades* in the New.

We then discussed the idea of soul sleep within the framework of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Heaven the Home of the Redeemed

To be perfectly honest, I really don’t think very much about Heaven. This is really a pity because the hope of eternal life in Heaven (whatever that actually means) is one of the central tenets of our faith. This divine hope is a precious gem – the thing that enables me personally to face every day. I can’t imagine how people who face imminent danger day-by-day in their professional lives like soldiers and police could possibly face their daily tours of duty without this blessed assurance. Yet despite all that, I rarely think of Heaven. If I did, the joy of my salvation would be more immediate and palpable.

God’s Word speaks a great deal about Heaven. Matthew’s gospel (alone of the four gospel accounts) mentions the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven” 31 times in 30 verses recounting Jesus’ teachings about His Kingdom. The parallel accounts in the other gospels use the phrase “Kingdom of God” as does Matthew’s account in other places.

There Is a Place Called Heaven

[Dr. Lehman Strauss](#) devotes a long paragraph in this chapter of his book [Death and Afterward](#) to arguing his view that Heaven is a literal physical place. He gives several scriptural references in support of this argument, and I won’t argue with him here since I happen to hold a similar view. But we must always remember that many scriptures use familiar earthly things to symbolically describe spiritual things that are beyond our human understanding and imagination like Heaven.

Thus, I will not make any dogmatic statement about whether Dr. Strauss is correct in his analysis. I will say *this*, though. One of the arguments that Dr. Strauss makes in this paragraph is, “When Jesus went away He must have gone somewhere to a place.” Well, not necessarily. Remember what Jesus told the woman at the well of Jacob:

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God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. John 4:24 [ESV]

Spirits do not need physical dwelling places. In fact, how could God who has always been have dwelt in a physical place before He had created any physical universe in which to dwell?

I am by no means arguing that Heaven isn't a physical place. In fact, I too believe it is along with Dr. Strauss. All I'm saying is that much of Dr. Strauss' argument in support of his belief is flawed and subjective.

Where is Heaven?

Assuming (without actual proof) Heaven is in fact a physical realm, that immediately raises the question, "Where is it?" Dr. Strauss points out that the Bible refers to three heavens – the atmospheric or aerial heaven that we might also call the sky, the sidereal heaven that we know as space or outer space in which all of the so-called "heavenly bodies" exist, and the celestial heaven which is the abode of God the Father, our ascended LORD Jesus, the unfallen angels, and the souls of believers who have gone before us. Of course, it is this third heaven we are interested in for purposes of this discussion, what we most often mean when we speak of Heaven, and where we most fervently hope to live for all eternity.

The Greek word translated as "Heaven" throughout the New Testament is οὐρανός **ouranos**. It means

1. the vaulted expanse of the sky with all things visible in it
2. the universe, the world
3. the aerial heavens or sky, the region where the clouds and the tempests gather, and where thunder and lightning are produced
4. the sidereal or starry heavens
5. **the region above the sidereal heavens, the seat of order of things eternal and consummately perfect where God dwells and other heavenly beings**

Of course, this last is the sense of the word most important to us in this discussion, and what we usually mean when we speak or think of Heaven.

οὐρανός **Ouranos** is found 283 times in the New Testament. Of these, it is translated (in the KJV) 268 times as "heaven," 10 times as "air," and 5 times as "sky."

The corollary Hebrew word in the Old Testament is שָׁמַיִם **šāmayim**. It means:

1. heaven, heavens, sky
2. visible heavens, sky
3. abode of the stars
4. the visible universe, the sky, atmosphere, etc.
5. **Heaven (as the abode of God)**

שָׁמַיִם **šāmayim** is found 419 times in the Old Testament. Of these, the KJV translates it as "heaven" 398 times and as "air" 21 times.

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The first use of this word is found in Genesis 1:8:

6And God said, “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” 7And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. 8And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

Genesis 1:6-8 [ESV]

Both of these words are also translated as “heavens” in various places. In fact, both of the words are plural nouns. Neither of their singular forms are found in God’s Word. Nor are the singular forms in common usage outside the Bible.

In the New Testament there is also a similar Greek word - **παράδεισος** *paradeisos*. It can mean an earthly enclosed garden or hunting ground, but for our purposes it has more apropos meanings:

1. the part of Hades which was thought by the later Jews to be the abode of the souls of the pious until the resurrection: but some understand this to be a heavenly paradise
2. the upper regions of the heavens. According to the early church Fathers, the paradise in which our first parents dwelt before the fall still exists, neither on the earth or in the heavens, but above and beyond the world
3. heaven

This word used interchangeably with **οὐρανός** *ouranos* is found three times in the New Testament translated as “paradise”...

...by Jesus in His reassurance to the thief hanging on the cross beside Him

And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Luke 23:43 [ESV]

...by Paul in describing a spiritual journey that Paul himself or someone he had spoken with

And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 2 Corinthians 12:3 [ESV]

...by Jesus in His Revelation letter to the church at Ephesus

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’ Revelation 2:7 [ESV]

So exactly where is the celestial Heaven? The short answer is that the Bible is silent on the matter. But Dr. Strauss makes an argument that I found quite amusing. He points to the fact that if we ask little children where Heaven is they will invariably point upward, and that most people think of Heaven as being “above.” He goes on to say that if “up” and “above” mean away from the surface of the Earth, then Heaven might be in any direction. Of course, that can’t possibly be right because he had already postulated that Heaven is a physical place. Therefore, he mysteriously concludes that “up” must mean North. This strikes me as being extremely Northern Hemisphere chauvinistic.

It reminded me of a radio program I listened to in Kuwait one evening called “Popular Fatwahs” (I kid you not). On that program a Muslim cleric explained that the reason Muslims on the hadj circle the

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Khaba in Mecca counterclockwise (when viewed from above) is that the Earth revolves counterclockwise and travels around the Sun counterclockwise. In turn, the Sun goes around the Milky Way galaxy counterclockwise. All the time I was listening to this cleric, I was thinking that the people who live in “the land down under” might take exception to this clockwise point of view. They might do the same with Dr. Strauss’ conclusion that “up” must mean North – where Heaven is.

In fact, in the ancient Hebrew language there are no words for the four cardinal directions. Instead, East is thought of as ahead or before, West as behind, South as on the right hand, and North as on the left hand. Thus an ancient Hebrew might conclude that if Dr. Strauss is correct and “up” does actually mean North, then the occupants of Heaven must be a bunch of gauche, sinister leftists!

But I digress...

Christians Are Citizens of Heaven?

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul contrasted the expected behaviors of those of us who have been redeemed to Christ and called out of earthly pursuits with those who have not and remain focused on earthly sins and pleasures.

¹⁷Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Philippians 3:17-21 [ESV]

Citizenship in any nation or kingdom brings with it certain privileges. As citizens of Heaven, foremost among these privileges are our redemption out of death and our adoption as sons and daughters of the living God.

But along with its privileges, citizenship carries certain responsibilities. As citizens of Heaven temporarily dwelling in the dominion of the evil one, our allegiance is to our LORD and King in Heaven not to the temporary master of this fallen world and his minions – both demonic and human.

Is the Present Heaven the Final Abode of the Saints?

Once again, I must take exception to Dr. Strauss’ analysis. He argues that the many scriptures that speak of Heaven and Earth being destroyed and re-created are speaking symbolically of a cleansing of their contents rather than the utter destruction and re-creation of Heaven and Earth themselves. He compares the wording of the prophecies about future destruction of Earth and Heaven with the

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wording of the account of the destruction of the Earth in the flood in Noah's time. Certainly, Dr. Strauss has a point here in that the description of the flood speaks of the destruction of the Earth when in fact the flood only destroyed Earth's occupants, not the entire Earth itself. However, since we don't have the benefit of hindsight in rightly dividing the Word of Truth with regard to prophecies not yet fulfilled, the wisest approach calls for us to rely on the Golden Rule of Hermeneutics, taking these prophecies at their literal meaning wherever possible. In the end of course, the answer to this question isn't really that important. A more relevant question might be, what happens to the souls of believers while all this destruction and re-creation is going on? Of course, the Bible is silent on all these matters, so it might be wise for us to remain silent as well.

ASIDE – The Gap Theory

Before we move on, I would like to take a quick look at one of Dr. Strauss' statements in this section –

We encounter no problem here when we think how the primitive earth which was made void by Satan (Genesis 1:2) was restored again by God, and made new in the time of Adam and Eve

What Dr. Strauss is speaking of here is an idea (which Dr. Strauss apparently believes) known as the Gap Theory. It postulates that God created a perfect universe in Genesis 1:1, but that the rebellion in Heaven by Lucifer and one third of Heaven's angels caused the perfect creation to be sullied when Satan was cast out of Heaven to Earth. The Gap Theory holds that the Genesis 1:2 statement – ***“The earth was without form and void...”*** – is more correctly translated as ***“The earth became without form and void...”*** since the Hebrew word **הָיָא** *hāyâ* can mean either “was” or “became.” Then after some indeterminate period of time (the “gap”) God recreated the Earth (or at least the Garden of Eden) in perfection and created Adam and Eve as its occupants. We don't have time to fully explore the Gap Theory in this discussion. It does have some Biblical validity. After all, we know for certain that Satan the serpent was present in the Garden with Adam and Eve before the Fall. In fact, God's entire plan of salvation hinges upon Satan's presence at that time with them. But the Gap Theory certainly doesn't answer all the questions that arise when we truly meditate deeply on the first three chapters of Genesis. Perhaps that's a discussion for some other time.

Our Home Over There?

So, after asserting that the prophecies of utter future destruction of Heaven and Earth must be taken symbolically, Dr. Strauss goes on in this section to say that the prophecies about the creation of the new Heaven, Earth, and Jerusalem, and Jesus's statement to His apostles that He was going to prepare a place for us with many mansions must all be taken literally. It seems to me that Dr. Strauss wants to have his cake and eat it too. But it's really not that important, and perhaps I should just let it go.

But I do want to take particular exception to something Dr. Strauss says in this section as well.

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In Revelation 4:10-11 we are clearly shown that in Heaven, we will worship our Lord and cast our crowns before His throne.

So once again, Dr. Strauss has flip-flopped between a literal and a figurative interpretation. The only mention in all of God's Word of anyone casting a crown before anyone's throne is indeed right here in Revelation 4:10 where the twenty-four elders described by John do so. Therefore, logically Dr. Strauss must believe (as could indeed be true) that the twenty-four elders symbolically represent all of the saints. While that may certainly be a valid interpretation, there is no solid Biblical explanation of exactly who these twenty-four elders might be, and the Golden Rule of Hermeneutics tells us that we should not stray into speculation on symbolism unless a text is absolutely clearly symbolic.

Babies In Heaven?

This question is closely related to what I like to call "The Pygmy Problem." The real question is how God deals with those who die without professing a saving faith in the Gospel simply because they either never heard it, or were intellectually incapable of understanding it or communicating a response. I hope to devote an entire session to discussing this question under the umbrella of our planned series of "Yeah Buts," so I'd like to defer detailed discussion of the topic until then. For today though, let's just look briefly at a few of the things Dr. Strauss has to say about it, and look forward to revisiting those ideas at a later time.

For the time being let's confine our discussion to a subset of the larger question – babies who die in infancy. The idea that God would condemn these little ones to eternal torment apart from Him strikes us as profoundly unjust. We must assume that since we inherited this sense of justice from the One who created us in His own image, that He too would find such a thing unjust, and has made some provision for such cases in His plan of salvation. Dr. Strauss points to a particular teaching from Jesus with regard to children in Matthew 18:1-14 culminating thus...

14 So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. Matthew 18:14 [ESV]

Upon reading this, I was immediately reminded of what Peter wrote in his second epistle regarding the apparent delay in Jesus' promised return.

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. 2 Peter 3:9 [ESV]

Certainly, it is not God's will that anyone should perish (another issue for our upcoming Yeah But series), but He is unwilling to force His salvation upon anyone either. Out of His immeasurable love, He has ceded the power to choose or reject Him to us individually. Furthermore, Jesus' teaching on the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25:31-46, and John's description of the final judgment in Revelation 20 make it clear that one day God will make a discerning judgment between those who have accepted salvation in Christ and those who have rejected it. So, I don't think that Matthew 18:14 quite solves the dilemma.

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We *must* simply trust that God has this issue handled in His plan of salvation some way that we here haven't yet discovered. Is God able to communicate His offer of salvation to infants in some manner that we don't understand? Are they able to respond in some way that we also know nothing about? Only God and the little babies know the answer to that, and the babies apparently forget that answer by the time they can speak to us.

My Day-Old Child

Carol Lynn Pearson

***My day-old child lay in my arms
with my lips against his ear.
I whispered strongly "How I wish,
I wish that you could hear.***

***I've a hundred wonderful things to say.
(A tiny cough and nod)
Hurry, hurry, hurry and grow
so I can tell you about God."***

***My day-old baby's mouth was still,
and my words only tickled his ear.
But a kind of light passed through his eyes,
and I saw this thought appear -***

***"How I wish I had a voice and words.
I've a hundred things to say.
Before I forget, I'd tell you of God.
I left Him yesterday."***

I must tell you that this gulf of separation between living individuals, the piercing nature of Jesus' Gospel and God's Word that fragments families, and the final insuperable chasm between us due to death weighs heavily on my soul day-by-day. So, Dr. Strauss' closing remark in this chapter struck a deep and ominous chord in me.

***The thought of my being in Heaven while my children are lost in Hell
would make me tremble.***

What *would* make Dr. Strauss tremble surely *does* make *me* shudder and brings a chill to the depths of my heart daily.



<https://youtu.be/SagXdu7oyF4>

Discussion Questions

1. Is Heaven a physical place, or a symbolic description of a state of being beyond our human imagination? What is your Biblical basis for your answer?
2. Am I too harsh in my ridicule of Dr. Strauss' analysis of the physical location of Heaven? What are your ideas on the location of Heaven? If so, which of Dr. Strauss' points are valid (Biblically)?
3. Should the prophecies of the future utter destruction of the old Heaven and Earth be taken literally or figuratively (or both)? What about the creation of the new Heaven, Earth, and Jerusalem?
4. Do all very young children who die go to Heaven? Do they all NOT go to Heaven?
5. **Time Allowing** – What about that Gap Theory anyway?