

# Ministry of Grace

## Study on Heaven – Speaker Notes

According to a survey taken by the Pew Research Center in 2019, only 73% of adults in America think that heaven is real. 93% of those who classify themselves as Protestant think heaven is real and 90% of those who profess to be Catholic think there is a real heaven. One admittedly pious Baptist grandmother shockingly confessed that she didn't want to go to heaven. When asked why, she responded, "Well, I think it will be rather boring just sitting around on clouds and singing hymns all day." Some people mistakenly think it'll be better to party in hell than to be stuck in a boring church service in heaven forever. First of all, there will be no partying in hell, only suffering and pain. Heaven, on the other hand, will be anything but boring! We can't even imagine how amazing heaven will be. Here's what we are told about that wonderful place.

But as it is written, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard," nor has it entered into the heart of man, "the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

When many people think of heaven, they think of Saint Peter meeting them at "the pearly gates" or they think of walking down "the streets of gold." Most Christians imagine themselves going directly to heaven when they die and being able to talk to God face-to-face. As we go through this study, we will learn that many people's conceptions of heaven are incorrect, or at least significantly distorted.

I used to have this vision in my head of what will happen when I die. I will be escorted along the tops of the clouds to the pearly gate where the gate attendant will check in his log book to verify that I am allowed in. Having found my name in the book, he will open the gate and my eyes will be met with a most spectacular sight. A city made of gold! But, as I begin walking down the golden street, the vision quickly fades away, because my mind is unable to conjure up anything wonderful enough to qualify as being heavenly.

OK, so let's get our feet out of the clouds and back on solid ground. Every human being at some time in their life wonders, "What's going to happen to me when I die?" That question is usually followed-up very quickly with, "Where do people go when they die?" According to the Bible, as strange as it sounds, before the resurrection of Jesus Christ, all people, both righteous and sinful, went to Hades when they died. How do we know that? In Luke chapter 16, we read the story about the rich man and Lazarus. This is NOT a parable since there are no words of similitude and people are mentioned by name. These are two things that are never done in a parable. In that story, Jesus tells us that both the rich man (a sinner) and Lazarus (a righteous man) went to Hades. But they went to different places in Hades. The rich man, a sinner, went to a place of torments, and Lazarus, a righteous man, went to Paradise, a place where he is in the presence of Abraham, a place of rest and peace. We will find out in just a little bit that Paradise is no longer in Hades. Instead, it is now up directly beneath the 3<sup>rd</sup> heaven, God's throne room.

So, the answer to the question, "Where do people go when they die?" is: sinners go to Hades to be tormented in flames until the Great White Throne Judgment, and righteous people (Christians) go to Paradise where they are in the presence of God. No, they can't see God just yet. But, during the rapture, Jesus will leave the throne room, stop off at Paradise to pick up everyone who has accepted Him as Savior, and head to the atmosphere of earth where he will resurrect their bodies and rapture the rest of the true church to meet Him in the air. Thus, will we ever be with the Lord. And - we will finally be able to see Him as He is!

So, Christians will go to Paradise when they die, but we won't stay there permanently. We, will actually be moving from place to place. I know, that sounds like heresy, but it's what the Bible teaches. At the end of the rapture, all Christians will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ (the Bema Seat) where we will be rewarded for the good things we've done. Then, our espoused husband, Jesus, will present us to His Father. Following that, we'll sit on our thrones in heaven. We'll spend the next seven years in the throne room of God watching all that goes on during the Tribulation. After the Tribulation, we will spend the next 1,000 years physically on earth, ruling with Christ. Finally, after the Millennium, the current heavens and earth will be destroyed and a new heavens and earth will be created. Part of that new creation will be the New Jerusalem. This is where we will spend eternity.

To some of you this probably sounds fantastical. So, let's take some time to see what the Bible has to say about heaven. We'll have to start out by going back to basics. Let's see what the word translated as "heaven" really means.

## **What does the word "Heaven" mean**

The Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew (with a few small sections written in Aramaic) and the New Testament was written in Greek, let's see what the words translated "heaven" means in those two languages.

In Greek, the word translated **heaven** is *ouranos*, from which the planet Uranus is named. To the Greeks, this was originally the name of the god of the sky, but eventually became the word used for his entire domain. In Greek writings the word appears almost interchangeably in the singular and the plural. It basically refers to everything above the earth. Because of this, it is sometimes translated as "sky."

In Hebrew, **heaven** is translated from the word *shamayim* (plural, meaning three or more). It refers to all that is above the earth. In the Hebrew belief system, heaven is closely associated with both the Garden of Eden and Paradise.

The next thing we need to determine is, "How many heavens are there?" Some eastern religions claim that there are seven different levels in heaven, but that's not what the Bible teaches. Nowhere in the Bible is there a reference to a 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, or 7<sup>th</sup> heaven.

## **How many heavens are there?**

First of all, remember that the Hebrew word for heaven, *shamayim*, is a plural word. That is, it means three or more heavens. Next, look at what the Apostle Paul, said in his second letter to the church in Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 12, he refers to an event in which he was transported up to the third heaven.

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

It follows, therefore, that there must be a first heaven and a second heaven as well. So, if there are three heavens, what are they? Let's take a look.

### **The First Heaven – Earth's Atmosphere (where the birds fly)**

There are several places in the Bible (both Old Testament and New) that refer to the birds of the heavens. This indicates that the atmosphere of the earth, where the birds fly, is considered heaven. (1 Kings 21:24, Jeremiah 15:3, Matthew 13:32) In some translations, the words for "heaven" are translated as "the air." However, in each case it is either the Hebrew word *shamayim* or the Greek word *ouranos*.

### **The Second Heaven – Universe (where the stars are)**

There are also a number of places in the Bible where *shamayim* and *ouranos* are translated as "heaven" when referring to the domain of the stars, what we would call "the universe." (Deuteronomy 1:10,

**Matthew 24:29**). Again, some translations use the word “skies” instead of “heaven.”

### **The Third Heaven - God’s Dwelling Place / Throne Room**

Finally, there are a number of references to the dwelling place of God or His throne room. These, again, are the result of translating the Hebrew and Greek words for “heaven.”

And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive. (**1 Kings 8:30**)

But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, (**Matthew 5:34**)

However, in the New Testament, the third heaven is sometimes expressed by a different Greek word, *epouranios*, meaning “the over heaven.” In both **Ephesians 1:3** and **1:20**, it is translated as “the heavenly places.”

Now, in order to get a better understanding of the Biblical perspective of heaven, we will look at the places in the Bible that are associated with heaven.

### **Places associated with "Heaven" in the Bible**

There are three places that are generally associated with heaven in the Bible. They are Abraham’s Bosom, Paradise, and Jerusalem.

#### **Abraham's Bosom or Abraham’s Side**

In the King James Version of the Bible, **Luke 16:22** is translated as:

And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried;

The words “**Abraham’s bosom**,” are a literal translation of the Greek text. The word translated “bosom” is *kolpon*, which means, “the front of the body between the arms.” To be in someone’s bosom indicates a closeness of feeling or relationship symbolized by an embrace.

If you go through **Luke 16:19-31**, you will see that the place where Lazarus was is actually a compartment in Hades. The other two compartments mentioned are “a place of torments” and “a great gulf.” Abraham’s bosom is also referred to as Paradise, as we will see in this next section.

### **Paradise**

Paradise is where the righteous believers, both Old Testament and New Testament, go when they die physically. It is a place of comfort and rest.

#### **Formerly in the heart of the earth**

Christ told one of the thieves crucified with him that he (the thief) would be with Jesus in Paradise on that very day. Thus, it follows that when they died physically, they were transported to Paradise.

And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (**Luke 23:42-43**)

We also see from a passage in **Matthew 12** that Jesus went to the heart of the earth when he died. Therefore, at the time of Jesus’ death on the cross, Paradise was in the heart of the earth.

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. (**Matthew 12:40**)

The logical conclusion is, therefore, that at the time of Jesus crucifixion, Paradise and, therefore Hades as well, were in the heart of the earth.

### Now at the edge of the 3rd heaven

However, when we read of the Apostle Paul's description of his being transported into Paradise, we learn that he was transported **into** Paradise but up **to** the third heaven.

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up **to** the third heaven--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. 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 12:2-3)

To get the full impact of this, we need to look at a couple of Greek words. The word translated "to" is *eōs*, which means "to the edge of" or "as far as." The word translated "into" is *eis*, which indicates movement from the outside of something to the inside of it. Thus, we see that Paul was transported to the edge of the third heaven, but not into it, yet he was transported into Paradise. It logically follows that Paradise is up there at the edge of the third heaven.

### How did it get there?

Since Paradise used to be part of Hades, in the heart of the earth, but is now up directly beneath the third heaven, it must have been moved. According to the passages below, when Jesus was resurrected, he ascended on high and "led captivity captive." This is a military expression that is a picture of a conquering army rescuing those who had been held captive by the enemy, thus freeing them from their captor(s).

Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? (Ephesians 4:8, 9) [KJV]

You have gone up on high; You have led captivity captive... (Psalms 68:18) [MKJV]

To add further to this idea that those in Paradise before the resurrection were captives, let's look at a couple of other verses. Before Christ's resurrection, the devil had the power of death. He was able to take a person's life and hold him or her in death.

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him **who had the power of death, that is, the devil**, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.... (Hebrews 2:14,15) [NASB]

As evidence of this, look at Job 2:6 where God gave Satan permission to test Job, but not to take his life. If Satan had not had power over death, God would not have had to give him this command to spare Job's life.

And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life." (Job 2:6)

Then, in the first chapter of the book of Revelation, we read about the Apostle John falling at the feet of Christ who informs John that He, Jesus, now has the keys to death and Hades. Having the keys indicates authority over what they keys unlock.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and **I have the keys of Death and Hades.** (Revelation 1:17, 18)

Therefore, Jesus is saying that *He* now has authority over death and Hades, not Satan. This is why Jesus was able to take captivity captive, to carry Paradise away from Hades and take it up to the third heaven.

### And, how about this?

When we read the description of the 5<sup>th</sup> Seal Judgment, we find a reference to the souls who are under the altar.

When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. (Revelation 6:9)

John was able to see the ones who had been slain for the word of God and for their testimony. But, they were all under the altar. How could John see them?

The first part of Revelation 4:6 gives us the answer to that question: In this verse, John is describing the Throne Room of God:

and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal. (Revelation 4:6)

The word “glass” is from the Greek word *hualinos*, which means “glassy or transparent.”

We just learned that the righteous are in Paradise and Paradise is up next to, that is, directly beneath God’s Throne Room. Therefore, John was able to see through the clear floor (sea of glass) into Paradise where those who were slain during the Tribulation will be waiting for the end of the Tribulation when they will be resurrected for the Sheep and Goat judgment (see the study on The Judgments).

### **Paradise is the temporary abode of believers**

We’ve already seen that Old Testament saints went to be with Abraham, and Jesus told the thief next to him that they would be together in Paradise, but what about us New Testament believers? Is there scriptural evidence that we go to Paradise when we die? Yes, there is! In the second and third chapters of Revelation, John is writing messages to the seven churches in Asia. In these messages, he gives each of them promises for “those who overcome” or “those who conquer.” We need to look at John’s first general epistle to understand who the overcomers (conquerors) are.

For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world--our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:4, 5)

From these verses we see that *Christians are the overcomers*, therefore, each of the messages to the overcomers in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 are messages given to Christians. In his message to the church at Ephesus, John says that the overcomers will have access to the Tree of Life which is in the Paradise of God.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God. (Revelation 2:7) [NIV]

The Apostle Paul also tells us something about what happens to us when we leave this physical body. He says that we will be at home with the Lord.

So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:6-8)

Let’s look at a couple of these words. The word translated “at home” is *endēmeō*, which means “to be in one’s home, in one’s own country, or among one’s own people.” The word translated “with” is *pros*, which means “toward, by the side of, near, with, or in the vicinity of.”

However, believers can’t see Jesus now. And we won’t be able to see Him until He appears at the Rapture when we will become like Him:

who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. (1 Timothy 6:16)

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

Remember, Paradise is up there, directly beneath God’s throne room, and Christians will be in Paradise when we die. Thus, we will be “with” or “near” God while we are in Paradise, but we won’t be able to see

Him until the Rapture. Those who “sleep in Jesus” will come with him (Jesus) and their bodies will be resurrected and made perfect before the living Christians are raptured from the earth. At that point, we will finally be able to see him because we will be like him. In other words, when Jesus comes at the Rapture, He will bring with Him the souls of Christians who are temporarily in Paradise.

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. (I Thessalonians 4:14-17)

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. (I John 3:2)

Consider this: believers in Paradise do not yet have their "perfect" bodies because they won't get them until the rapture. So, until then, while they are in Paradise waiting for the rapture, they must have some kind of temporary bodies.

### **Jerusalem (lit. “dwelling place of peace”)**

Of all the descriptions of heaven, New Jerusalem most closely describes where the righteous will spend eternity. Jerusalem means “dwelling place of peace.”

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the **new Jerusalem**, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:1-4) [NIV]

In addition to the earthly city of Jerusalem, the Bible makes three other references to a Jerusalem not of this earth. It is called, “Jerusalem above (Galatians 4:25-26), the “heavenly Jerusalem” (Hebrews 12:22), and the “new Jerusalem” (Revelation 21:1-4).

It appears that all three of these are references to the New Jerusalem spoken of in Revelation chapters 21 and 22. This is the final home of believers. Therefore, when we refer to going to “Heaven,” in the final analysis it is a reference to New Jerusalem where we will spend eternity.

In chapters 21 and 22 of Revelation we will be talking about the New Jerusalem and we will be getting a detailed description of our home in the heavens.

### **So What?**

In the beginning of this study, we observed some misconceptions that people have about heaven.

When most people think of heaven, they think of Saint Peter meeting them at “the pearly gates” or walking down “the streets of gold.” Most Christians imagine themselves going directly to heaven when they die and being able to talk to God face-to-face.

Let's talk about how much of this is true and how much of it isn't. As we've gone through this look at heaven, we've determined that Christians will spend eternity there. But the place where we will spend eternity doesn't yet exist. It will be part of the new heaven and new earth, it is called New Jerusalem. It does, indeed, have pearly gates since each of the 12 gates of the city is made of a single pearl. But there

is no mention of the Apostle Peter. In fact, we are told that each gate has an angel assigned to it. So, the part about St. Peter is fiction.

There will NOT be streets of gold in heaven, but there will be “a street” of gold. It will have a river running down the middle of it and it will be lined with trees on both sides of the river. And, not just any ol’ tree. The river will be lined with the tree of life. The same kind of tree that was in the Garden of Eden.

Next – when a Christian dies, he or she will NOT go directly to heaven. Christians will go to a place called Paradise. We don’t know very much about what Paradise is like, but we know that there we will be “with” or “in the vicinity of” our Lord. It appears that Paradise is just below God’s throne room, which has a glass floor. But we won’t be able to see the Lord when we are in Paradise. We will not be able to see Him until the Rapture where we will “be like Him because we will see Him as He is.”

Another thing that many people want to know is, “Will we remember our life on earth?” I think the best answer is Yes, sort of. If we go back to the story of the rich man and Lazarus, we learn that the rich man was aware of his family who were still alive. He even asked Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his brothers about the place of torments.

And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ (Luke 16:27-28)

Here’s how Abraham responded:

But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’” (Luke 16:29-31)

The rich man was convinced that if someone were to come back from the dead and warn his brothers, they would change the way they believed. But Abraham told them that they wouldn’t be convinced even if someone were to rise from the dead. And someone did rise from the dead! Jesus, our Lord and Savior rose from the dead and there are still millions of people who want to go to heaven, but they refuse to believe the truth that God has given us. That’s the truth Paul gave us in his letter to the Romans:

because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

We only get one life to live on this earth. And, if you want to experience heaven after this life, you’ve got to believe the Gospel message! There is no back door into heaven.

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