



## WHAT IS YOUR PICTURE OF HEAVEN?

**W**hat is your view of heaven? Do you believe that there is such a place? If so, is it a place of ethereal light and music with choirs worshipping God in settings of awe-inspiring beauty and elaborate architecture? Do you envisage dazzling displays of gold and silver with an array of innumerable precious stones? Doubtless this is true in a measure, but it is not the complete picture.

Perhaps you see heaven as the inner surface of a vast, concave dome that stretches out over the whole earth. As the edge of the dome approaches the horizon, it some-

times gives the impression that it will fall short. But it never does! It always covers the earth beneath it.

Almost all of earth's inhabitants have some impression of heaven. As we contemplate the vast possibilities, we need to bear in mind that various terms are used to describe heaven. There is the single noun, *heaven*, which emphasizes its overall unity; other expressions apparently refer to its different aspects or parts. For instance, the terms *heavenlies* or *heavenly places* suggest a number of different locations all combined under the heading *heaven*. These places may be given over at various times to different beings and different activities.

In 2 Corinthians 12:2–4 Paul writes:

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful [or not possible] for a man to utter.

This passage indicates that there are altogether three heavens, one immediately above the other. The topmost is what Paul describes as the “third heaven.” It is the location of Paradise and the place of God's personal dwelling, the most sacred place in the universe. It is passages such as this one that give us the concept often associated with heaven—purity or holiness. The words spoken there are so sacred that they may not be repeated outside.

*Paradeisos* (paradise) is the Greek word for a “garden.” It describes God’s garden in heaven. Paradise is the ultimate destination of all sinners who have truly repented and who have persevered in the life of faith. On the cross, Jesus promised the penitent thief that the two of them

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would be together that day in Paradise: “And Jesus said to him, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in *Paradise*’” (Luke 23:43, emphasis added).

The book of Revelation introduces us to an area referred to as the “mid-heaven” or “the midst of heaven.” To my understanding, this describes some kind of large expanse with different types of beings coming and going. The following verses describe various powerful beings who make proclamations from the mid-heaven.

And I looked, and I heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven [literally, *mid-heaven*], saying with a loud voice, “Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the remaining blasts of the trumpet of the three angels who are about to sound!”

8:13

Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven [literally, *mid-heaven*], having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people.

14:6

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven [literally, *mid-heaven*], “Come and gather together for the supper of the great God.”

19:17

The Greek word used for the mid-heaven is *mesouranema*, which means precisely that, the mid-heaven. This could be the second heaven.

We might assume, finally, that the visible heaven—the heaven that is visible to our natural eyesight—is the first heaven. All earth’s inhabitants are familiar to some degree with this heaven.

What about the denizens of heaven? What kind of creatures are they? The name most commonly given to them is *angels*. The word *angel* is derived from the Greek noun *angelos*, which is the standard word for “messenger.” Angels, therefore, are viewed as messengers sent from heaven.

Not all angels, however, are messengers. They have various other potential functions. Whatever their tasks, they are sent forth by God for His purposes. But Scripture makes it clear that there are also evil angels sent forth by Satan for his purposes. At times, opposition or conflicts may occur between the angels of God and the angels of

Satan. Some of these conflicts are depicted in Scripture, particularly in the book of Daniel.

We are thus confronted by the inescapable fact that our world as we know it today is a scene of conflict. Furthermore, this conflict is not restricted to earth. It is also a vital factor in all that takes place in heaven.

The angels sent forth by God have three main tasks. First, as already stated, they are God's messengers. Secondly, they are God's agents sent forth to protect those who may be in danger. These are normally described as

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“guardian angels.” In Matthew 18:10 Jesus speaks about children who have angels in heaven who continually see the face of the Father. By implication, the Father's watchful eye directs those angels to potentially vulnerable children. In the third category are warrior angels who are engaged in conflict with opposing angels.

Many Christians assume that heaven is a place of unbroken peace and harmony, beauty and worship. This may well be true of the third heaven, but it does not apply to the first and second heavens. Some Scriptures paint a

very different picture of what is currently going on in the second heaven. As already stated, it is at times the scene of great conflict between warring angels—some serving God and others serving Satan. It is primarily in the heavenly regions that such conflict takes place.

It is here, too, that Satan pours out a stream of slanderous accusations against the Christians on earth who are serving the Lord. In Revelation 12:10, he is described by an angel as the “accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night.”

This Scripture goes on to predict that Satan will be cast down from heaven. But until this happens, it is clear that he still continues to occupy a place somewhere in the heavenlies and that he is filling the air with malicious accusations against God’s people.

A verse that follows is a warning to earth’s inhabitants as to what they may expect when the devil is ultimately cast down from heaven to earth: “Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time” (Revelation 12:12).

These verses look forward to a period when Satan has but “a short time.” They may well be close at hand, but they have not yet been fulfilled. Certainly the events described have not been fulfilled by anything that has happened in heaven up to this time.

We need, therefore, to be realistic about Satan’s current activities. Many Christians habitually speak as if Satan were confined in hell, but this is not true. There are two satanic princes called Death and Hades that rule in hell (see Revelation 20:13), but Satan himself roams freely

throughout the universe. This is plainly depicted in Job 1:6–7:

Now there was a day when the sons of God [i.e., the angels] came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. And the LORD said to Satan, “From where do you come?” So Satan answered the LORD and said, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it.”

This passage indicates that Satan may even come before God’s presence in company with righteous angels who are serving the Lord. It seems, however, that in this instance the Lord was the only one who actually identified him

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as Satan. The other angels did not recognize who he was. This would agree with Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 11:14: “For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light.”

In the next chapter we will begin to analyze how this conflict in the heavenlies affects our daily lives.