

## The Cutting Room Floor

More Thoughts about Heaven and Eternity

### *“Heaven(s)” in the Bible*

The Hebrew and Greek words translated “heaven” can mean 3 things (Millard Erickson):

Sky: Gen. 1:1, 8, 30 (“heaven and earth”). Start here.

If the sentence makes sense with “sky,” then go with that!

Synonym for “God”: in Jewish custom, using the word “God” or names for God were minimized so as not to use them “in vein.” The “Kingdom of Heaven” is really “The Kingdom of God.”

“Abode of God”: metaphorically, the “sky” became an image for where a God who couldn’t be contained by earth might live. Here, “heaven” is defined by the “place” where God’s heart is perfectly lived out.

### *The Heaven Promise*

With all of the unknowns, Scot McKnight offers 6 things the Bible makes clear about heaven:

1. God Will Be God: “God shapes Heaven for those who delight in him so much they want to dwell in his presence and gaze upon his ever-expanding beauty all eternity long.”
2. Jesus Will Be Jesus: “Everything about heaven—and I mean absolutely nothing gets left out—is based on Jesus’s resurrection.”
3. Heaven Will Be the Utopia of Pleasures: “I make this claim: all contemporary pleasures are designed by God to point us toward the final Heaven.”
4. Heaven Will Be Eternal Life: “If God’s assignment for us is to be image bearers, then the final Heaven will be when we live out that divine summons to be image bearers.”
5. Heaven Will Be an Eternal Global Fellowship: “we will know one and all as friends. We will know people for who they are and for what they have done, the formerly ignored and invisible will be highly visible and impossible to ignore, and the anonymous will be famous figures impossible to overlook.”
6. Heaven Will Be an Eternal Beloved Community: “If in Heaven God will fully and finally establish justice on every corner, in every shop, and in each home, he can do so only by removing injustice.”

### *Life after Life after Death*

NT Wright has refocused Christians on the hope of the Bible. It is not about getting away from earth and into heaven, but the final reunion of heaven (the realm of God) and earth (the realm of humanity). Most future-looking Scripture is focused on this, what Wright calls “Life after life after death” or what McKnight calls “the Final Heaven.” The Bible is sparse, to say the least, about what happens between an individual’s death and the cosmic reunion of heaven/earth.

### *The Intermediate State*

“The early Christian future hope centered on resurrection. The first Christians did not simply believe in life after death; they virtually never spoke simply of going to heaven when they died...When they did speak of heaven as a postmortem destination, they seemed to regard this heavenly life as a temporary stage on the way to the eventual resurrection of the body.”

NT Wright

John Calvin thought it “neither lawful nor expedient to inquire too curiously concerning our souls’ intermediate state. Many torment themselves overmuch with disputing as to what place the souls occupy.”

There is a much to suggest that there is an intermediate state after death separates us from our bodies, but before we receive new resurrection bodies (though any talk of “time” in all of this may be just a human limitation). What is difficult for me (Pastor Jon) is to consider what it even means to be human apart from our bodies. Almost everything we experience of God and the world is mediated through our bodies and brains, so what does it look like to be human apart from those? I don’t know. Perhaps our souls sleep in the warmth of God’s loving presence. Perhaps God makes a way for us apart from our bodies. There is also some indication that we do experience joy immediately upon death. As Paul says, “I would rather depart and be with Christ.” But for all of this, the reminder is that the Bible spends very little time on this, and too much speculation may not be helpful.

### *Our Ultimate, Eternal Purpose*

The heart of the matter is that heaven and eternity are not divorced from God’s original intent for creation. In the words of Steve North, “God has invited humans into that narrative by both creation intent and redemptive reconciliation. Therefore, the full restoration of the lost *imago dei* is on God’s agenda for human beings.” In other words, God has never given up on God’s original plan to have human beings reign—in God-like fashion—over God’s creation. We will have purpose in the “final Heaven” or the “New Heavens and the New Earth,” which is in continuity with God’s purpose for us all along.

“We are saved from our sin and the world’s systems, and this salvation heals, restores, and reconciles us with God so we can accomplish our calling as image bearers. This makes all the difference for the subject at hand. If God’s assignment for us is to be image bearers, then the final Heaven will be when we live out that divine summons to be image bearers. Which means Heaven is not an escape from this world but the renewal of this world and our glorious opportunity to participate in and enjoy the created order as God designed it to be.”

Scot McKnight