

## **Questions About Heaven**

**Sign Title: Your Questions About Heaven**

**August 15, 2010**

I want to welcome you to Faith Evangelical Free Church. My name is Kurt. I am one of the pastors. Hebrews 6 says teachings about life after death and eternal judgment are some of the basics of our Christian faith. Unfortunately, many Christians know little about either one of these. This summer we set out to change that with our teaching series, "The Mysteries of Heaven." If you were here for earlier messages in the series, you know we adopt a no-holds-barred approach to what the Bible says about the realities of Heaven and Hell. Our goal is to keep our finger in the text and let God talk through His word.

While I have tried to keep the cookies on the bottom shelf throughout this series, I know that some of the messages could be considered challenging. As we enter August, and the series winds down, we are taking a little more interactive approach. Earlier in the series I circulated a "Build Your Own Sermon" card. I wanted to know questions you had about life after death that we had not answered. You gave me some great questions. For the next two weeks I will be answering many of them. I think you will like this so let's jump in.

### **What is Purgatory?**

The Roman Catholic church teaches about place of punishment after death called purgatory. The Protestant church doesn't teach it. Where did purgatory come from? The doctrine developed during the Middle Ages and was cemented into the official teachings of the Catholic Church during the reformation when the reformers protested its teaching because it wasn't found in the Bible.

At the council of Trent, which culminated in 1563, the Catholic church declared the existence of purgatory an official teaching of the Catholic church and those who reject the doctrine of purgatory were accursed.

What is purgatory? The Catholic church teaches that those who die at peace with the church, but who are not yet perfect, (which is everyone) must undergo a time of purifying suffering before entering heaven. Because some sins are more grievous than others, the length of time and the degree of punishment people experience in purgatory varies with each person. The Catholic church teaches that gifts to the church (Isn't that convenient!), prayers by priests, masses offered in memory of relatives or friends can shorten or eliminate time in purgatory. Of course, the pope has a "get out of purgatory free card" which he can use at any time. I don't know why he doesn't use it for everyone and just eliminate all that pain and suffering but that is beyond the scope of this message.

There is an interesting story about purgatory that took place in the middle ages. It involved a man named Johann Tetzel who went around the country side selling something called *indulgences*. These are the rough equivalent of "get out of purgatory free passes" for dead relatives. It was his way of raising money for a church building project. He had a little catch phrase he used to snooker people out of their cash and it went like this, "As soon as a coin in the coffer rings; the soul from purgatory springs." Pretty catchy!

The question to ask about purgatory is, "Does the Bible say anything about it?" and for Tetzel "Does the Bible say you can buy your way out of it?"

The answer is a resounding, “No!” Not one verse in the Bible supports teaching purgatory. The only supportive text is found in the Apocrypha, which are some extra books the Catholic church added to the Bible!

The apocryphal passage the Catholic church uses to support purgatory is 2 Maccabees 12:43-45. In the context, Judas Maccabaeus leads his Jewish army against an enemy army. A few of the Jewish soldiers were killed in the conflict. As Judas’ troops recover the bodies for burial they discover that each of the dead men concealed a small idol under his tunic. Judas believes that is the reason they lost their lives. In what looks like a noble gesture, Judas urges some of his soldiers to take an offering to Jerusalem and offer a sacrifice for their sin. The passage concludes with these words.

**This is why he had this atonement sacrifice offered for the dead, so that they might be released from their sins.” 2 Maccabees 12:45 (NJB)**

There are two serious problems. First, the book of Maccabees is not accepted as Scripture. It is only accepted in the Catholic church as Scripture and then only 1,500 years after the Bible was established. That makes it very shaky ground on which to establish such a major doctrine. Secondly, even if Maccabees was Scripture, the men killed in the battle were guilty of idolatry, which in Catholic theology is a mortal sin and sends people directly to hell, not purgatory.

Another obvious problem is the very concept of purgatory completely denies everything the Bible teaches about what Christ did for us.

**Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. Hebrews 7:25 (ESV)**

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 1 John 1:7 (ESV)

Purgatory doesn't purify, Christ's blood purifies what we could never do with our own efforts.

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, 1 Peter 3:18 (NIV)

We don't have to work off our sins to get to God; Christ's death tore down the wall that separates us from the Father.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Romans 8:1 (ESV)

No condemnation! No charge of accusation! Christ paid for all of our sin. The belief in purgatory arose when leaders in the Roman Catholic Church couldn't grasp the greatness of salvation itself. I think I feel a song coming on. Let me tell you the words. *Jesus paid it ALL. All to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain. He washed it white as snow!* Thank goodness there is no purgatory!

### **What is Soul Sleep?**

If you've had a discussion with the Jehovah's Witnesses or Seventh-day Adventists, you have probably been exposed to the concept of soul-sleep. The argument supporting soul-sleep goes like this: *A human being is a unity; the body and soul together make a person. Therefore, if the body ceases to function so does the soul.* Those who believe in soul-sleep believe that after death the body and soul sleep together until they are awakened at the resurrection when

people are either welcomed to eternal glory or they face the judgment of hell. At first glance, this feels like it makes sense.

One of the places Jehovah's Witnesses buttress soul sleep from in the Bible is Ecclesiastes.

For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing... Ecclesiastes 9:5 (ESV)

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going. Ecclesiastes 9:10 (ESV)

How are we to answer these verses? The answer comes when you *read these verses in context*. Context is the key for understanding. Solomon, the writer of Ecclesiastes says the book of Ecclesiastes is about everything he "*observed*"... "*under the sun*." The book of Ecclesiastes is what Solomon observed happens to people and it is written from that perspective. Dead people no longer function on earth. They do no work or planning. *That doesn't mean their spirit's cease to function*. In fact, the book of Ecclesiastes closes with these words.

and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Ecclesiastes 12:7 (ESV)

The book of Ecclesiastes says the spirit returns to God at death, it doesn't say the spirit sleeps in the ground with the body.

Some solid Christians have embraced beliefs similar to soul-sleep. They believe we are simply dead until Christ returns and wakes us up at the resurrection. Because we have no consciousness during that time, it *seems like*

we are immediately in Christ's presence when we die. There are some verses they use to bolster that belief. One of them is 1 Corinthians 15:51.

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 1 Corinthians 15:51 (ESV)

How are we to think about this? First, remember that *context is king*. We learn what things mean by reading them in their context. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is arguing with people who believed there was no bodily resurrection. Paul is adamant that God does not intend us to be wandering spirits but we will eventually get our self-same bodies back as honest-to-goodness resurrection bodies, just as Christ has a resurrection body, so will we when Christ returns. Paul was saying nothing about the spirit being asleep but only the body being in the grave. In other parts of the Bible, Paul says very clearly that *our souls do not sleep in the ground*.

Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 2 Corinthians 5:8 (ESV)

I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. Philippians 1:23 (ESV)

After the moment of death, we are very much awake. Either we are with Christ because of our trust in him, which secures the forgiveness of our sin, or we are in Hades, in torment, awaiting our final judgment and consignment to hell. Our souls never sleep. After death, we won't need a pillow.

### **Does it matter if I am cremated or buried?**

What do you think the answer is? "No!" That is right. Ultimately, it doesn't matter. If you want my opinion, I counsel people toward burial rather than cremation because of what it says about the body. Our bodies are precious and

they are going to be raised from the dead. I know our dead bodies decompose. I know in a hundred years buried bodies will be just as much dirt as cremated bodies. We're talking about the symbolic significance of a body stretched out in a coffin, looked at, and then laid to rest in burial. It is a horrible thought to think of a wife or child or father being incinerated in the flames.

The idea of burning a body feels out of sync with the high value God places on our body. God created us to live as a body and soul together. Death and the separation of the soul from the body is a consequence of sin. God promises he's going to push back the affects of sin and resurrect our bodies and re-unite our souls to them. There will be a continuity between what we are now and the resurrection body we will receive when Christ returns. The Bible says our resurrection body will be the self-same body we have now but restored and vastly improved.

We don't want to symbolically destroy the body. We want to symbolically put the body to rest while it waits for the resurrection. There is interesting history in the early church over this issue. Roman society practiced cremation as a means of disposing of the dead. The early church placed a high value on the body because our bodies will be resurrected, just as Christ's body. Cremation symbolically pictured hell, not resurrection and restoration. As a desire to honor the body, early Christians followed the Jewish custom of burial rather than cremation. Since Christians were generally poor, they couldn't buy large portions of real estate for graveyards. In an effort to conserve land, rather than bury the

dead just below the surface of the ground, the Christians dug deep making burial chambers. The catacombs were created!

The idea of honoring the body and burying it as if it was sleeping has its roots in Scripture.

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Daniel 12:2 (ESV)

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 1 Corinthians 15:51 (ESV)

So the picture in the New Testament is the dead are asleep in the ground while their spirits are with Christ. When Christ returns our self-same bodies will be resurrected from the dead and transformed into our glorious bodies and reunited with our spirit.

I have probably overstated my case and made anyone who had a loved one cremated feel guilty. That was not my intention. Let's go back where we started. It is not ultimately an issue that matters. God can resurrect a body if it is cremated or if it is buried. It is a matter of symbolism. It is a way of communicating the ultra-cool reality of the real bodily resurrection through Christ. We will be in the new heavens and earth eternally in our resurrected and glorified body. That is the good news the Bible wants us to use our funerals to proclaim; forgiveness and resurrection through Jesus!

**How can I desire heaven when I know I won't be married to my wife there?**

I understand this question. I have thought about it myself. There are times when affections for Cindy are so strong that the thought of not being married to her in heaven is actually painful. I can't imagine happiness in heaven



without being married to her. But the Bible is clear, we will not be married in heaven.

And Jesus said to them, “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, Luke 20:34–35 (ESV)

How are we to imagine happiness in heaven without marriage to the spouse we love? The Bible tells us that the delights of our marriage are just appetizers of a much greater intimacy that will exist between us and Christ in heaven. The intimacy and delight we find so pleasing in marital happiness is to whet our appetite for the much greater intimacy and joy that will exist between us and Christ for eternity. You are wondering where I am getting this from. The Bible, of course! Look how Paul summarizes his teachings on marriage in Ephesians 5.

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. Ephesians 5:31–32 (ESV)

Of course that does not mean we won’t know our spouse in heaven. We will have our memories together. We will still have relational intimacy but the institution of marriage and the perks that go with it will not exist. That is hard for me to imagine but the Bible says that having Christ will be better than the intimacy and satisfaction of having sex. If having Christ is that good, It is definitely something we can look forward to!

I think something else we need to remember is that Christ is the fountainhead of all joy. Occasionally, I talk to people who attend church as if it was some type of obligation to get out of the way so they can get to the real joy

on the weekend. That is warped thinking. We don't *have to* attend church, we *get to* attend church. We *get to* come together and get our joy filled up by enjoying the source of all joy, Christ. The most refreshing thing we can do is come to church and enjoy ourselves by exploring, thinking and relating around Christ. Other joys are good, but they are, by definition, secondary and the enjoyment of them is better when we enjoy Christ first.

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Psalm 73:25–26 (ESV)

So back to our thoughts about marriage in heaven. We won't have marriage as we know it now in heaven. We will be married to Christ. But everything we love about marriage will still be there, just that it will be better than anything earthly marriage can offer.

### **Will there be animals in the new heavens and earth?**

I am sure this question came from one of our children. We have been asking the kids this week if “Pudding”, our cat or one like her, will be in heaven. Let's find out. A picture of God's future judgment was seen in the past with God's judgment upon sin with the Flood and Noah's ark. When God saved Noah's family from the destruction of the Flood, he also saved some animals.

And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female. Genesis 6:19 (ESV)

God's plan for the earth after the Flood involved animals. It seems reasonable to conclude that God's plan for the renewed earth after the future judgment may include animals. The apostle Peter saw God's judgment and

rescue with the ark as a picture of God's future judgment and rescue. If it included animals in the past, might it not include animals in the future?

For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. 2 Peter 3:5–7 (ESV)

Peter sees a direct parallel between God's past judgment with water and his future judgment with fire.

Paul sees the scope of God's redemption extended to the whole earth, that would include animals.

that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Romans 8:21 (ESV)

Not just mankind but all of creation is linked together in the destructive curse of sin and they are linked together in Christ's blessing and restoration. I expect to see animals in heaven. I won't go to the wall on this one, but it is possible.

### **Will we eat meat in heaven?**

Does anyone love to fire up the grill and throw some steaks on it? I tried the vegan thing for a while, it just didn't fit. I love my meat. If we love steak, will we still have it on the new heavens and earth where there is no more death?

Let's start by looking at how God originally designed the food chain to function.

And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to

everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. Genesis 1:29–30 (ESV)

Originally, did God provide steak? No! God didn’t provide meat as an option for food until after the flood.

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Genesis 9:3 (ESV)

Did animals die between Adam’s fall and Noah’s ark. Yes, they did. The Bible tells us that Abel, the second child of Adam and Eve, sacrificed an animal in his worship to God. Even though animals died before the flood, the Bible doesn’t tell us people were given meat to eat until after the flood. So the real bummer for the carnivores among us is that God created us to be herbavores. If the new heavens and earth are like our current earth was originally designed to be, I believe we will go back to the way things were. Sorry, no more steak!

That being said, we must remember that everything God remakes, he vastly improves. So while I believe the tomatoes, cucumbers, and corn from our gardens in the new creation will taste better than anything we ever grew on this earth, I don’t think God will eliminate the taste of steak. If steak is a product of the fall, and it tastes so good, perhaps God will somehow create new and vastly improved steak for us to eat that won’t require death. I don’t know the answer. I just know I like meat and I think God will have a way of bringing that taste to the new creation.

## Will we learn in heaven?

I sometimes hear people say, “I don’t understand how that works so I will have to wait till I get to heaven to figure it out because when I get there *I will know everything*.” Is it true? Will we really know everything in heaven?

The simple answer, “No!” When we die, we will see things much more clearly and we will know much more than we do now but we will not know *everything* in Heaven. God alone knows everything, it is a function of his omniscience. If we knew everything in heaven, we would be God!

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I *know* in part; then I shall *know* fully, even as I have been fully *known*. 1 Corinthians 13:12 (ESV)

In Paul’s day, mirrors were nothing like what we have today. Mirrors in the ancient world were just polished pieces of metal that gave a poor reflection. He is contrasting a fuzzy picture with a much clearer picture. In heaven we will have a much clearer picture, not an omniscient picture. The words “know” and “known” in this verse use a Greek word for knowledge that never means absolute knowledge. This verse does not mean we will know everything but it means we will know things in a much fuller way, without errors and misconceptions. It doesn’t mean we will know everything.

It is a good thing we won’t know everything in heaven. One of the things I love to do is learn something new. Every one of us likes new things. At Faith EFC, we like to explore the Bible and learn *new things* about God every weekend rather than contenting ourselves with the spiritual doggie bags of our childhood.

Many people do not realize that, in heaven, we will continue to learn. A Gallop poll asked people if we would learn things in heaven and only 18% of the

responders thought we would.<sup>1</sup> One of the new things we will continually learn is more about God.

and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:6–7 (ESV)

For all eternity we will continue to expand our knowledge of just how incredible God's grace and kindness to us through Jesus actually is. Go to church every weekend for eternity and we will keep learning more about God and his life for us through Christ. Nothing needs to be recycled. Remember, it was God who designed us to be learners. God does not want us to stop learning!

Something important to remember is called the *doctrine of continuity*. What we learn on earth, we will carry over into heaven. Just like we will have our earthly memories in heaven, we will have our earthly knowledge. What we learn about God now and what you learn in life will carry over to eternity where we can build on it!

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<sup>1</sup> Colleen McDannell and Benhard Lang. *Heaven: A History*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. pg. 307.

## Conclusion

I love learning more and more about God's love for us through Christ. My prayer for us as a church is that we would be continually learning more about God's love for us through Christ and as we do, we would become more satisfied and secure in him. Before I close in prayer I want you to know that next week we are continuing our little mini-series on inside of this series called "Questions About Heaven". We will start off next week with a question many of you asked. "Can we trust near-death experiences?" Let's pray.



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