

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Number:	93		Gary L.W. Johnson
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...As It Is In Heaven

Lords Day 49

Question 124. Which is the third petition?

Answer: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"; that is, grant that we and all men may renounce our own will, (a) and without murmuring obey thy will, which is only good; (b) that every one may attend to, and perform the duties of his station and calling, (c) as willingly and faithfully as the angels do in heaven. (d)

(a) Matt.16:24 Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. Tit.2:11 For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Tit.2:12 Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; (b) Luke 22:42 Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. Eph.5:10 Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord. Rom.12:2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (c) 1 Cor.7:24 Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God. (d) Ps.103:20 Bless the LORD, ye his angels, that excel in strength, that do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word. Ps.103:21 Bless ye the LORD, all ye his hosts; ye ministers of his, that do his pleasure.

Over the last few years, we have been hearing a lot about heaven and hell. Rob Bell's perfectly wretched book *Love Wins* constituted a full-fledged assault on the orthodox understanding of eternal punishment. Then we have a recent book *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back* is currently number one on the *New York Times* Best Seller List for nonfiction. It details a four-year-old's near-death experience as told to his pastor father. Wait! There's more. Another book *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven: A Remarkable Account of Miracles, Angels, and Life beyond this World* describes the similar experiences of a six-year-old after he awoke from a two-month coma caused by a car accident. Don Piper (no relation to John Piper) and Cecil Murphy co-wrote *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death and Life*. All of these books, like the Mormon Betty Eadie's *NY Times* No. 1 Best Seller of a few years back, *Embraced by the Light*, claim to have gone to heaven and returned to tell about it. Believe it or not, this is just the tip of the iceberg. There are dozens and dozens of books like these – all claiming visits to heaven. But we also have the flip side. Stephen Hawking, the highly acclaimed cosmologist gave an interview recently in which he declared "There is no heaven; it's a fairy story." In a dismissal that underlines his firm rejection of religious comforts, Britain's most eminent scientist said there was nothing beyond the moment when the brain flickers for the final time. Hawking, who was diagnosed with motor neuron disease at the age of 21, shares his thoughts on death, human purpose and our chance existence in an exclusive interview with *The Guardian* today. The incurable illness was expected to kill Hawking within a few years of its symptoms arising, an outlook that turned the young scientist to Wagner, but ultimately led him to

enjoy life more, he has said, despite the cloud hanging over his future. “I have lived with the prospect of an early death for the last 49 years. I’m not afraid of death, but I’m in no hurry to die. I have so much I want to do first,” he said. “I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark,” he added¹. The cover story for the March 1997 issue of *Time* was “Does Heaven Exist?” The article’s polling data reveals that over 80% of the American public believes in the concept of “heaven” (life after death in some pleasant place). And yet, in a curious fashion, as the article goes on to report from one end of the spectrum to the other churches have grown increasingly silent about the subject. It seems that the majority of people claiming to be Christian (even among professing evangelicals) are too preoccupied with the things of this world to be distracted by thoughts of heaven.² The oddity about this situation is that on the one hand, people are willing to affirm their belief in a religious concept like heaven while, on the other hand, we have been so impacted by the developments of our modern age that people find it increasingly difficult to reconcile their beliefs with our enlightened, scientific age. Highly respected people like the late Carl Sagan dismiss religion with a wave of the hand. The noted mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said, “As for Christian theology, can you imagine anything more appallingly idiotic than the Christian idea of heaven?” The verdict of H.J. Paton, one time Professor of Philosophy at Oxford, sums up the matter this way: “The gradual spread of the scientific outlook—and we are all affected by it – has tended not so much to refute religious belief, but rather to make it fade and wither.”³ As Christians we are admonished by the Apostle Paul to set our hearts and minds on the things above (where Christ is), not on earthly things (Colossians 3:1, 2) the biblical doctrine of heaven (and not these ridiculous claims by Eadie and company) should have a telling effect on how we live.

“David said, ‘Show me, O Lord, my life’s end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life. You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man’s life is but a breath’ (Psalm 39:4-5). Picture a single breath escaping your mouth on a cold day and dissipating into the air. Such is the brevity of life here. The wise will consider what awaits us on the other side of this life that so quickly ends.

“God uses suffering and impending death to unfasten us from this earth and to set our minds on what lies beyond. I’ve lost people close to me. (Actually, I haven’t *lost* them, because I know where they are – rather, I’ve lost *contact* with them.) I’ve spent a lot of time talking to people who’ve been diagnosed with terminal diseases. These people, and their loved ones, have a sudden and insatiable interest in the afterlife. Most people live unprepared for death. But those who are wise will go to a reliable source to investigate what’s on the other side. And if they discover that the choices they make during their brief stay in this world will matter in the world to come, they’ll want to adjust those choices accordingly.

“Ancient merchants often wrote the words *memento mori* – ‘think of death’ – in large letters on the first page of their accounting books. Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great, commissioned a servant to stand in his presence each day and say, ‘Philip, you will die.’ In contrast, France’s Louis XIV decreed that the word *death* not be uttered in his presence. Most of us are more like Louis than Philip, denying death and avoiding the thought of it except when it’s forced upon us. We live under the fear of death.

“Jesus came to deliver us from the fear of death, ‘so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those whose lives were held in slavery by their fear of death’ (Hebrews 2:14-15).”⁴

I. HEAVEN: THE HABITATION OF GOD

I Kings 8:30 declares that heaven is God’s dwelling place. It is where God has His throne (I Kings 22:19; Isaiah 6:1; Job 1:6; Psalm 82:1; Daniel 7:9). This language is not meant to imply that God is not omnipresent or that He is somehow confined in one particular place (I Kings 8:27). The language used here in Scripture is figurative and anthropomorphic.⁵ Note how the Gospels in particular speak of God the Father as being in heaven. In the Lord’s Prayer, beginning with the words “Our Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:9), Jesus speaks of “My Father

in heaven” a number of times (Matthew 7:21; 10:32, 33; 12:50; 16:17; 18:10, 19) and uses the expression “your Father in heaven” as well (Matthew 5:16, 45; 6:1; 7:11; 18:14).

II. HEAVEN: ITS INHABITANTS

The Bible makes repeated references to “the angels in heaven”(Matthew 22:30; 24:36; Mark 12:25; 13:32) These beings seem to be innumerable (Hebrews 12:22). The OT speaks of “the hosts of the LORD” (I Samuel 17:45; Daniel 4:35; Joel 3:11).⁶ They are described in Revelation 19:14 as following the glorified Christ into the battle of Armageddon. In addition to angels, there are “saints” in heaven (Revelation 5:8; 11:17, 18; 19:1-4) – as it is used elsewhere in the NT, the term “saints” refers to redeemed sinners (II Corinthians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Revelation 13:7, 19; 19:8; 22:21).

III. HEAVEN: HOW TO GET THERE

In Revelation 21:27 we read these sober words: “But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.” Later in the same chapter we read: “Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life,” (v. 27). According to the *Time* article I referred to in the introduction, over half of those polled believed that their good works are grounds for getting them to heaven. In a poll conducted by the Barna Group, an amazing 77% of those who identified themselves as Christians believed that human beings are basically good and that good people go to heaven regardless of their religious beliefs.⁷ The Bible emphatically declares otherwise. Only those (read the text) whose names are recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life gain entry into heaven (Revelation 20:15; 12:27).

IV. HEAVEN: ITS GLORY

Everything in heaven is holy and the glory of heaven is inexpressible. It is a place of perfection. Long ago the Dutch Puritan Wilhelms à Brakel wrote: “No darkness will stupefy the mind and no sinfulness will pollute the soul. Souls will no longer be deserted, and there will no longer be any battle against the flesh, the world and the devil. All sorrow, grief, heartache, anxiety and fear will have been eliminated. There will be no poverty, opposition, oppression, pain, hunger, or anything else that would grieve soul and body.”⁸ The saints in heaven will know joy like never before. All the saints from Adam on will know the joy of fellowship – and they will continually know the joy of worship (Revelation 7:15) and will experience joy in its fullness (Psalm 16:11; Matthew 25:21). They will see the glory of Christ (John 17:24) and they will delight to serve Him throughout eternity (Revelation 7:13-17).

CONCLUSION: Michael Horton makes this important point. “Heaven and hell appear together, affirmed side by side, in the New Testament as well (Mt 25:31-46; 1 Pe 3:22; 2 Pe 3:13; Rev 20:11-21:3). As we have seen, the most detailed and frequent references to the reality of hell come from the mouth of Jesus himself. Even in John’s vision Jesus announces, ‘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’ (Rev 1:17-18). Christ gives Death and Hades the power to devour a fourth of the earth (Rev 6:8). ‘Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire’ (Rev 20:14-15). The term that Jesus often used, *Gehenna*, has its origins in the perpetually burning fire of the Ben Hinnom valley, where Israel imitated the pagan practices of its neighbors in child sacrifice (Jer 19:5; 32:35). The wicked will find themselves facing the same fate.”⁹

Finally, listen to these texts of Scripture: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him,

for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure” (I John 3:2, 3). “So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him” (II Peter 3:14).

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/may/15/stephen-hawking-interview-there-is-no-h...>

² The phrase “eternal life” is used forty-three times in the NT, with twenty-three occurring in the gospel of John and I John. “Its literal translation is ‘the life of the age’, that is, of the age to come. Jews thought not so much in terms of two worlds, the earthly and the heavenly, as in terms of two ages: the present, imperfect one, and the future one, here or elsewhere, in which all would be according to God’s will. Jesus taught that the quality of life expected in that future age could be realized through Him here and now. That is why the translation ‘eternal life’ is better than ‘everlasting life’. It is, of course, everlasting, but it is its nature, rather than its duration, that Jesus emphasizes.” H. Moulton, *The Challenge of the Concordance: Some New Testament Words Studied in Depth* (Bagster, 1977), p. 45. B.F. Westcott likewise takes note of this and warns that we must “guard against all conclusions which rest upon the notions of succession and duration... It is not an endless duration of being in time, but being of which time is not a measure. We have indeed no powers to grasp the idea except through forms and images of sense. These must be used; but we must not transfer them as realities to another order.” *The Epistles of St. John* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 215.

³ As cited by Wilbur M. Smith, *The Biblical Doctrine of Heaven* (Moody, 1968), p. 21.

⁴ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Tyndale, 2004), p. xxi.

⁵ Anthropomorphisms are poetic symbols or, more particularly, metaphors for divine attributes which would otherwise be indescribable. The Bible uses speech like this in order to communicate to us God’s nature and ways. We should never press this kind of speech literally (something that Mormonism, for example, does constantly; e.g., God has a body like a man.). “It is wrong to ascribe space or whereness to God. Space is a mode of existence pertaining to finite beings; immensity pertains to God, to him alone; not to any creature, not even to the human nature of Christ. Immensity implies first of all that God is transcendent above all space and whereness.” H. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 161.

⁶ The Hebrew word for “hosts,” SAHBA, has a military connotation (see I Samuel 17:45). It refers to rendering service.

⁷ G. Barna, *What Americans Believe* (Regal, 1991), pp. 27-35.

⁸ W. à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service IV* (Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), p. 364.

⁹ M.S. Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 974.