

IS HEAVEN A REAL PLACE?

The word “heaven” literally means “that which is raised up” or “that which is above.”

When discussing the concept of heaven, one must remember that the Bible refers to three realms as heaven. This seems to be implied in 2 Corinthians 12.2 where the apostle Paul says, “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.”¹

The first of these realms is the atmospheric heavens, and this includes the space that immediately surrounds the earth, the air that we breathe. This heaven is where the birds fly, where clouds are located, and where rain and snow originate. This is what Isaiah speaks about when he writes:

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isaiah 55.9-11).

The second of these realms is the celestial heavens. This refers to the vast space beyond the earth where the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars move about. Jesus refers to this heaven when he foretells with cosmic imagery the destruction of Jerusalem. He says:

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with

¹All scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (2001).

great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven (Mark 13.24-27).

The third of these realms is the spiritual abode of God. This heaven is not a physical, temporal place that can be observed by the finite senses of humans. But that this heaven is real and can be seen through faith is affirmed by many references to it in the New Testament. God is called “your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5.16), as “the throne of the Majesty” is “in heaven” (Hebrews 8.1). At the baptism of Jesus, God’s voice was heard “from heaven” (Mark 1.11), and the Holy Spirit as Comforter and Guide was “sent from heaven” (1 Peter 1.12). There are angels “in heaven” who act as messengers and servants of God (Matthew 18.10). And Satan, the slanderer, was expelled from heaven because of his rebellion against God (Revelation 12.7-8). There are rewards for the faithful “in heaven” (Matthew 5.12), and even the names of the disciples “are written in heaven” (Luke 10.20). The place of belonging, or citizenship, of the believer in Jesus is “in heaven” (Philippians 3.20), which is called “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Hebrews 12.22). This third realm called heaven, the abiding place of our living God, is real. It is expressed to us in the Bible through terminology that is on our level. Nevertheless, human comprehension of heaven often evades our finite abilities to understand. We, however, can be assured that by faith in the Creator who loves us we will enjoy salvation in heaven after this life.