

Thinking About Heaven

by Randy Alcorn

In heaven, we will see clearly, experience process and growth, and be aware of at least some of what is happening on earth, while also recalling our lives and praying to God.

Scripture: Mark 13:32, Luke 15:7, Romans 8:34, 1 Corinthians 13:12, Ephesians 2:7, James 5:16, Revelation 5:8

Topics: "Heavenly Life", "Eternal Destiny"

Description

Randy Alcorn delves into the unconventional portrayals of heaven in his novels *Deadline* and *Dominion*, challenging popular misconceptions with a foundation in Scripture. He emphasizes that in heaven, we will have clear vision but not omniscience, continuing to learn and grow in understanding of God and His creation. The sense of wonder in heaven indicates a dynamic and ever-deepening appreciation of God's greatness. Alcorn also explores the belief that in heaven, we will recognize and remember loved ones, recall our earthly lives, and be aware of events happening on earth, even potentially praying and interceding for those still on earth.

Transcript

Some of the portrayals of heaven in my novels *Deadline* and *Dominion* are surprising and unconventional. They are based on some views of heaven which, though not widely embraced, I believe are nonetheless founded on Scripture:

1. In heaven, we'll see clearly (1 Cor. 13:12), but won't know everything. If we knew everything, we'd be God. To see clearly and to see with far greater understanding is one thing, To see omnisciently is another. God alone is Creator, we are mere creatures. Only God is omniscient; we are and always will be finite. The popular notion "we'll know everything in heaven" is therefore clearly wrong. When we go to heaven we become glorified humans, we don't become God. The angels in heaven don't know everything (Mark 13:32). Neither will we.

2. In keeping with our finite natures, we will experience process in heaven. We will continually learn more of God "in the coming ages" (Eph. 2:7). As angels, also finite, strive to grow in their understanding (1 Pet. 1:12), so presumably will we. As we learn more of God, it seems likely we will also learn more of other people, angels, and the wonders of God's creation.

The sense of wonder among heaven's inhabitants shows heaven not to be stagnant, but fresh and stimulating, suggesting an ever-deepening appreciation of God's greatness (Rev. 4-5).

3. Whether or not heaven operates outside the scope of earth's time sequence, clearly the inhabitants of heaven track with events happening in time (Rev. 2-3; Luke 9:23). It is a hymn, not the Bible, which says "and time shall be no more." Revelation 8:1 speaks of "silence in heaven for about half an hour." Even the presence of music in heaven implies some sort of time duration, since meter, tempo and rests, which are intrinsic to music, are all time related.

In any case, whether there is time in heaven or not, heaven seems to enter into the sequences on earth, right down to rejoicing over and anticipating specific events there (Luke 15:7; Rev. 6:9-11). The entire book of Revelation shows a continuous interaction of heaven with the sequential events happening on earth. This contradicts the notion that those in heaven are alienated from or disinterested in what happens on earth.

4. In heaven, we will know each other, including those we knew on earth. Here's some evidence for this belief:

a. Heaven will not reduce our mental capacities, but sharpen them (1 Cor. 13:12). We will not be dumber in heaven, but smarter. Scripture gives no indication of a "memory wipe" that will cause us not to recognize our loved ones and others we've known. If we wouldn't know our loved ones, the consolation of afterlife reunion in 1 Thes. 4:14-18 would be diminished.

b. After his resurrection, Jesus was not recognized at first on a few occasions (John 20:15; Luke 24:15-16), suggesting some change in appearance. After being with him a while, his disciples suddenly recognized him (John 20:16; Luke 24:31). This suggests that despite any outer appearance change, the inner identity of the person may shine through, especially to eyes enlightened by heaven.

c. In Matt. 17:1-4, at the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah were recognized by the disciples, even though they weren't told who they were, and they couldn't have previously known what they looked like. This may suggest we could recognize instantly people we know of but have not previously met, perhaps as a result of individual personality emanating through their physical appearance.

d. Even apart from the direct indications of Scripture cited above and below, it would logically follow that we would know our loved ones in heaven. The nature of love itself is abiding in a way that transcends death (1 Cor. 13:13). While we will no doubt lose interest in and choose not to recall many things that attracted us on earth, the shared experience of loving relationships forges a camaraderie parallel to that of soldiers who have served together in the trenches, and who never forget what they experienced together in that foreign land.

5. In heaven, we will recall some-perhaps most or all-of our lives on earth. This is among the most controversial beliefs I've reflected in Deadline, yet there is clear scriptural evidence for it:

a. The martyrs in heaven clearly remember at least some of what happened on earth, including that they underwent great suffering (Rev. 6:9-11). They anticipate and look forward with strong emotion to God's coming judgment.

This shows we are incorrect in assuming remembrance of unpleasant things on earth would automatically be impossible in heaven. The change in our perspective will presumably negate any need for loss of memory.

b. In heaven, those who endured bad things on earth are comforted for them (Luke 16:25). The comfort implies memory of what happened. If there was no memory of the bad things, what would be the need for, purpose of or nature of the comfort concerning them?

c. We will give an account of our lives on earth, down to specific actions and words (2 Cor. 5:10; Matt. 12:36). Given our improved minds and clear thinking, our memories should be more, not less acute as to our past lives on earth. Certainly, we must remember the things we will give an account of.

d. The entire reality of eternal rewards points to specific acts of faithfulness done on earth that survive the believer's judgment and are brought into heaven with us (1 Cor. 3:14). We are told that in heaven the Bride of Christ's wedding dress stands for "the righteous acts of the saints" done on earth (Rev. 19:7-8). Our righteous deeds on earth will not be forgotten but will "follow" us to heaven (Rev. 14:13). The ruling positions and treasures in heaven granted to the faithful will perpetually remind heaven's inhabitants, including us, of our lives on earth, since that is what the rewards come in direct response to (Matt. 6:19-21; Mt. 19:21; Luke 12:33; 1 Tim. 6:19; Luke 19:17, 19; Rev. 2:26-28).

e. God makes a record in heaven of what is done by people on earth, both nonbelievers (Rev. 20:11-13) and believers (2 Cor. 5:10). We know that record outlasts life on earth in all cases, for the believer at least to the judgment seat of Christ, and for the unbeliever, right up to the Great White Throne, just preceding the new heavens and new earth. Whether it lasts beyond these points we don't know, but for those now in heaven these records of life on earth still exist.

f. Malachi 3:16 says "a scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name." Typically, such documents were made by the King's scribes (in heaven's case, perhaps angels), and periodically read in the King's presence, to assure worthy actions done by his subjects were remembered, and had been properly rewarded (Esther 6:1-11). The purpose of such a scroll was to keep a permanent record so that the memory of acts done to the King's glory would endure. We are told that such a scroll exists in heaven. Do we envision the God of history destroying it, or in ages to come no one in heaven making reference to it? It seems more likely that such records of the faithful works of God's people on earth will not be destroyed or set aside, but may even be read and rejoiced over in heaven before God, men and angels.

g. Memory is a basic element of personality. If it is truly us in heaven, there must be some continuity of memory from earth to heaven. We are not different people, but the same people marvelously relocated and transformed. Heaven cleanses our slate of sin and error, but does not erase it. The lessons we learned here about God's love and grace and justice surely are not lost, but carry over to heaven. They are built upon and greatly expanded, yes, but not eliminated. There seems every reason to believe that just as our earthly works done for Christ will survive this life and be brought into the next (1 Cor. 3:14), so will our Christ-centered experiences.

We tend to dismiss our lives on earth assuming that once in heaven it will be as if they never happened. This is nowhere taught in Scripture. For some reason (wishful thinking may part of it), we disassociate our lives on earth from the life to come. God, however, sees a direct connection between them. At death we are relocated, but this does not relegate our earthly lives to insignificance. On the contrary they have eternal significance. They have been recorded in the sight of all heaven, and serve as an ongoing reference point, a point of reference for eternal rewards.

Since none of us learns everything on earth that God would desire us to, rather than abandon the lessons he wanted to teach us, he might allow us once in heaven to review our lives on earth and this time learn everything he intended. This is speculation, but that there will be ongoing remembrance in heaven of some aspects of our lives on earth is not speculation, but a clear teaching of Scripture.

6. In heaven, we will be aware of at least some of what is happening on earth. Another controversial concept, yet again the Bible confirms it:

a. The martyrs in heaven appear to know what is still happening on earth (Rev. 6:9-11).

b. When Babylon is brought down, an angel points to events happening on earth and says "Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets! God has judged her for the way she treated you" (Rev. 18:20). Since he specifically addresses them, the clear implication is that the saints in heaven are watching and listening to what is happening on earth.

c. There is "the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting Hallelujah" and praising God for specific events of judgment that have just taken place (Rev. 19:1-5). Again, the saints in heaven are clearly observing what is happening on earth.

d. When heaven's saints return with Christ to set up his millennial kingdom (Rev. 19:11-14), it seems strange to think they would have been ignorant of the culmination of human history taking place on earth. The picture of saints in heaven blissfully unaware of what is transpiring on earth, where God and his angels (and they themselves) are about to return for the ultimate battle in the history of the universe, after which Christ will be crowned king, contradicts clear indications in the context. But even apart from such indications, this notion of heavenly ignorance seems ludicrous.

e. When brought back to earth from heaven, Samuel was aware of what Saul had been doing and what he'd failed to do on earth (1 Sam. 28:18). Unless he was specially "briefed" on this, it follows he must have been already aware of it.

f. When called from heaven to the transfiguration on earth, Moses and Elijah talked with Jesus about his death about to happen in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). They seem aware of the context they stepped into, of what was transpiring on earth.

g. Hebrews 12:1 tells us to "run the race marked out for us," creating the mental picture of the Greek competitions which were watched intently by throngs of engrossed fans, sitting high up in the ancient stadiums. The "great cloud of witnesses" he speaks of are clearly the saints who've gone before us, whose accomplishments (some of them recorded in the previous chapter) on the playing field are now past. The imagery seems to suggest those saints, the spiritual "athletes" of old, are now watching us and cheering us on from the stands of heaven. (The witnesses are said to "surround" us, not merely to have preceded us.)

h. The unfolding drama of redemption, awaiting Christ's return, is currently happening on earth. Earth is center court, center stage, awaiting the consummation of Christ's return and the setting up of his kingdom. Logically, this seems a compelling reason to think those in heaven might see what is happening on the earth. If in heaven we will be concerned with what God is concerned with, and his focus is on the spiritual battle on earth, why would we not witness his works there?

i. Christ, in heaven, watches closely what transpires on earth, especially in the lives of God's people (Rev. 2-3). If the Sovereign God's attentions are on earth, why wouldn't those of his heavenly subjects be? When a great war is transpiring, is anyone in the home country uninformed and unaware of it? When a great drama is taking place, do those who know the writer, producer and cast-and have great interest in the outcome-refrain from watching?

j. Angels saw Christ on earth (1 Tim. 3:16). There are clear indications angels know what is happening on earth (Luke 1:26; 1 Cor. 11:10). If angels, why not saints? Don't the people of God in heaven have as much vested interests in the spiritual events happening on earth as do angels?

k. Christ said "there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine who do not need to" (Luke 15:7). Similarly, "there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10). Who is doing this rejoicing in heaven, in the presence of angels? Doesn't it logically include the saints in heaven, who would of all people appreciate the joy and wonder of human conversion? (If they rejoice over conversions happening on earth, then obviously they must be aware of what is happening on earth.)

7. In heaven, saints will pray to God and ask things of him, and perhaps intercede for those on earth.

a. Christ, the God-man, is in heaven interceding for people on earth (Rom. 8:34). In at least one case, then, a person who has died and gone to heaven is now praying for those on earth. The martyrs in heaven in Rev. 6:10 pray to God, asking him to take specific action on earth. They are praying for God's justice on the earth, which may have intercessory implications for their brethren now suffering on earth. The sense of connection and loyalty to and concern for the body of Christ of which saints in heaven are part with the saints on earth, would likely be enhanced by being in heaven, not eliminated by it (Eph. 3:15). In any case, we know these are saints who have died, now in God's presence, actively praying concerning what is happening on earth.

b. Prayer is simply talking to God. Angels can talk to God, and therefore angels pray. We will communicate with God in heaven, and therefore we will pray in heaven, presumably more than we do now, not less. Our prayers will be effective given our righteous state (James 5:16).

c. The burden of proof lies on those who would argue saints in heaven cannot or do not pray for those on earth. On what biblical basis would we conclude this?

Rev. 5:8 speaks of the "prayers of the saints" in a context that may include saints in heaven, not just on earth. In any case, if saints are allowed to see some of what transpires on earth, and clearly they are, then it would seem strange for them not to intercede for them. (While we are not told angels pray for people, neither are we told they do not.)

It's a question of assumptions. If we assume heaven is a place of ignorance of or disinterest in earth, then we will naturally assume those in heaven couldn't or wouldn't pray for people here. In contrast, if we believe it is a place of interest in and observation of God's program and people on earth, and where the saints and angels talk to God, then we would naturally assume they do pray to God for those on earth. This is my assumption.

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