

WHO ART IN HEAVEN THE DWELLING PLACE OF GOD

What is heaven? Where is it?

Heaven is “a living, personal relationship with the Holy Trinity. It is our meeting with the Father which takes place in the risen Christ through the communion of the Holy Spirit.”¹ It is the fulfillment of God’s desire to be one with each man as God is one with Himself in the Trinity (cf. Jn. 17:20–24).

The Church does not identify a specific place for heaven, such as in the clouds, but does affirm that heaven is union with God, face to face, without the mediation of any creature (cf. Catechism, nos. 1023–29).

Because of our limited understanding, no amount of description will provide a satisfying understanding of the sublime reality of heaven. Historically, various theologians have described heaven as both a place and a state of being. However, no one can capture the reality and essence of heaven until he has experienced it personally. As Saint Paul wrote, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

Time and Space: The First Frontiers

Time and space are created things. As noted in Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” There was a moment at which time began. This moment was an act of creation by God, Who is not bound by time. At that moment, God also created space, namely the heavens and the

¹ Pope John Paul II, General Audience (July 21, 1999), no. 4.

earth. Though they are two separate creatures, time and space complement each other. Space was created within time, and creatures of space (e.g., sun, moon, and stars) provide a telling of time.

When considering the topic of heaven, we should remember that during our earthly lives, we experience time and space simultaneously. However, as separate and distinct created realities, they need not exist together.

God created man within the limits of time and space. These limits have their benefits. When we sin, we have time to repent and turn to God for mercy. Because of time, we have the opportunity to change our ways. We depend on the experiences of time and space to grow in knowledge and understanding. We do not simply know things; we learn them by experiences with other creatures. When we express our knowledge and thoughts, we do so according to the limits of our experience.

Say What?

Language is a powerful symbol that man uses in order to express himself. By use of language, other signs and symbols are explained. Yet language falls short of expressing realities we do not fully understand. Everyone experiences this lack of comprehension: On one occasion or another, we grapple with the right words to use when describing an experience or idea. We simply do not know what to say.

Heaven is one of those realities we do not fully understand. It is not limited to time and space as we are. As a result, none of our experiences with other creatures on earth can fully reveal the nature of heaven, nor can our languages or imaginations describe it perfectly (cf. 1 Cor. 2:9).

When describing heaven, man traditionally has taken one of two approaches: He describes heaven either as a state of being or as a place, depending upon whether he considers the characteristics of God or the characteristics of man.

Where Are You Going?

God is eternal and omnipresent. He is not bound by time or space. He existed before their creation. Because heaven existed as the dwelling place of God before time began, it

must be eternal as well. This leaves us with two possibilities. If we consider heaven as a created space, it must be a space “eternally created” by the very presence of God. This concept of “eternal creation” makes no sense to our human understanding.² If heaven is not a creature, then it is simply God’s eternal presence. In either case, heaven would be both eternal and omnipresent, bound by neither time nor space. If heaven is omnipresent, can we really call it a place? With this line of reasoning, it is easy to see that heaven is far different from any place comprehensible to man on earth.

Explaining heaven as a state of being eliminates the confusion between created space bound by time, and created space apart from time. Explaining heaven as a state of being appeals to the characteristics of God, particularly His eternal and omnipresent nature. Our inheritance of heaven as a state of being, and not a place per se, is understood as our fullness of communion with God. Traditionally, this fullness of communion is known as the *beatific vision*, the contemplation of God in His heavenly glory.

Heaven, however, must contain space because it contains the glorified body of Christ (cf. Mk. 16:19; Lk. 24:51), as well as the bodies of Enoch (cf. Gen. 5:24), Moses (cf. Jude 9), Elijah (cf. 2 Kings 2:9–12), and the Blessed Virgin Mary (cf. Rev. 12:1). At the end of time, it will contain the glorified bodies of all the saints (cf. Catechism, nos. 988–1019). Its reality, however, is not a place bound by time and space as we know it, and this kind of reality is incomprehensible to us. Its spatial reality is a reality of God’s glory, not a reality of the created world.

Union with God

In magisterial documents, the Church neither states where heaven is nor defines it solely as a state of being. The Church does describe what happens in heaven, namely, union with God and with all His angels and saints (cf. Jn. 17:20–26; Catechism, nos. 1023–24). Though in union with God, man does not lose

² Some theologians use the term “aeviternal” to explain this concept. Cf. Frank Sheed, *Theology and Sanity* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1946), 115–16, 297–99.

his distinct nature and identity (cf. Catechism, no. 1025). He remains human, but becomes fully human in Christ, as intended by God. This perfect union with God and transformation in Christ is what is most important, not arguments about whether heaven is a place or state of being.

By this Constitution which is to remain in force forever, we, with apostolic authority, define the following: According to the general disposition of God, the souls of all the saints . . . have been, are and will be with Christ in heaven, in the heavenly kingdom and paradise, joined to the company of the holy angels. Since the passion and death of the Lord Jesus Christ, these souls have seen and see the divine essence with an intuitive vision and even face to face, without the mediation of any creature by way of object of vision; rather the divine essence immediately manifests itself to them, plainly, clearly and openly, and in this vision they enjoy the divine essence. Moreover, by this vision and enjoyment the souls of those who have already died are truly blessed and have eternal life and rest . . . and will continue without any interruption and without end until the last Judgment and from then on forever.³

The Magisterium does not favor one theological approach over another. However, it does emphasize what happens in heaven, and uses common language to help describe different characteristics of heaven. In his edict *Benedictus Deus* (quoted above), Pope Benedict XII uses the phrase “will be with Christ in heaven” to describe the destiny of the faithful departed. “In” can refer to a place or a state of being without favoring one over the other. More recently, Pope John Paul II stated, “Today, personalist language is better suited to describing the state of happiness and peace we will enjoy in our definitive communion with God.”⁴ While he uses the term “state,” he does not limit the term to “state of being,” “state of mind,” or “state of body.”

³ Pope Benedict XII, Constitution on the Beatific Vision of God *Benedictus Deus* (January 29, 1336), in J. Neuner and J. Dupuis, ed., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1975), 623–24.

⁴ Pope John Paul II, General Audience (July 21, 1999), no. 4.

To explain the concept further, he quotes the Catechism: “The life of the blessed consists in the full and perfect possession of the fruits of the redemption accomplished by Christ. He makes partners in his heavenly glorification those who have believed in him and remained faithful to his will. Heaven is the blessed community of all who are perfectly incorporated into Christ” (no. 1026).

As Saint Augustine wrote, “You made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”⁵ Heaven fulfills the desire of our hearts for God. Our lives on earth must be directed to seeking that perfect union with God that He meant for us from the beginning. When we reach that heavenly beatitude, our hearts will be filled with an intense love and joy that can only be described as God Himself.

Heaven on Earth

Many have tried to compare earthly experiences to heavenly realities. In Sacred Scripture, one of the most compelling signs of heaven’s glory is marriage, the union of a man and woman in a covenant of love with God (cf. Gen. 1:26–27; Rev. 21:1–4). As intended from the beginning, marriage involves a total and free sacrifice of self for love of the other in the love of God. When this love is returned by the spouse, the mutual love of both brings unspeakable joy for life and hope for the future. The ecstasies shared by the couple in their love foreshadow the ecstasies of heaven and our union with God. For this reason, Saint Paul, when writing about marriage, could say, “This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32).

In addition to marriage, the liturgies of the Church and the other sacraments foreshadow the realities of heaven’s glories. This is particularly true of the celebration of the Mass and the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. The liturgy of the Mass draws from the elaborate and beautiful images given to us in the Book of Revelation, where Saint John describes heaven and

⁵ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, bk. 1, chap. 1, no. 1, in William A. Jurgens, trans., *Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 3 (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1979), 56.

the praises of the angels and saints before God (cf. Rev. 4–5). When we participate in the celebration of the Mass, we are mysteriously drawn into the unending praises of God in heaven. We participate in temporary worship that is outside of time. Because the Holy Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Jesus, our Lord and God, when we receive this Sacrament, we experience the greatest physical and spiritual union with God on earth. Thus we mysteriously receive a foretaste of the union God intends for us in heaven (cf. Catechism, nos. 1000, 1402–05).

Our participation in the liturgies and sacraments of the Church are nothing less than our participation in the communion of saints. As the saints and angels worship before God in heaven, we participate on earth in their glorious praise of His name. The glory given the saints in heaven is our hope as we yearn for God during our earthly exile. God has given us on earth a glimpse of heavenly realities so that we may not lose heart. Let us find in our marriages, families, and daily work the encouragement to keep our focus on God, until that day when we shall see Him face to face.

SideBar

One Day in the Life of a Saint in Heaven

For by reason of the fact that those in heaven are more closely united with Christ, they establish the whole Church more firmly in holiness, lend nobility to the worship which the Church offers to God here on earth and in many ways contribute to its greater edification. For after they have been received into their heavenly home and are present to the Lord, through Him and with Him and in Him they do not cease to intercede with the Father for us, showing forth the merits which they won on earth through the one Mediator between God and man, serving God in all things and filling up in their flesh those things which are lacking of the sufferings of Christ for His Body which is the Church. Thus by their brotherly interest our weakness is greatly strengthened.⁶

⁶ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), no. 49.

Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. How is heaven described in the Bible?
2. What makes heaven a difficult reality to understand?
3. How can I live my life in anticipation of heaven's glories?
4. What circumstances and events do I encounter every day that remind me of heaven?