

HEAVEN BOUND

Part 1: Paradise, Hell, & Heaven (7/19/26)

Lots of THEOLOGY and information in today's sermon!

Please turn to *Hebrews 12:22-24*

This sermon series is going to answer these questions:

- What is Heaven?
- Is it the same as the New Jerusalem?
- What is the New Jerusalem?
- Who gets to go there?
- Do we live there forever?
- What will it be like there?
- What's Heaven's best feature?
- Will we see our loved ones there?
- Where is Heaven located?

My first year as Gateway's Pastor, I had the following **prophetic dream**:

I was in Hell. I was walking through terrible dark caverns (although I could see clearly) carrying a baseball bat. I witnessed things I don't want to describe here. Up ahead I saw the "exit" if you want to call it that. It was a straight, long, very dark tunnel with no lighting I could see. I knew that I needed to go in there, so I did, and saw a faint but solid pinprick of light in the distance that acted like a guide for me. I knew that if I moved forward, I would eventually make it to that light. I did and everything changed for the better!

I was suddenly **standing at the summit of a really high mountain**, like Mt. Everest high. The sky was completely blue, no clouds, and the sun was shining brightly. What was even better was that, from my vantage point, I could see Heaven—the New Jerusalem.

It truly was as the Lord describes it in His Bible: **a shining city on hill!** I could see the walls made of gold more than anything, but what really stood out was that it GLOWED. It was resplendent, bright, shining, and so beautiful I couldn't stop looking at it. I realize I could simply stare at it, from a distance, and be happy forever! Never get bored, never get used to it!

There was another man with me, an older man who was attending Gateway at the time. When I saw him, he was young again. He lifted his hands in the air and began to shout, whoop, and cry out with joy! He ran Helter skelter down the side of the mountain toward the Holy City as fast as he could, eager to enter through the city gates to live there forever!

I shared his exuberance and was about to follow him, when the **Lord grabbed me by my hair** (just like He did Ezekiel 8:3) and lifted me up into the sky so that I got a birds eye view: even more spectacular! I could see the streets paved with gold, and so much more. ***All I wanted to do was go there and live with Jesus forever. END.***

The New Jerusalem and Heaven are the same...and they are a literal city. A place Jesus built where He spared no expense: pure gold, precious gems, eternal light and the largest price of all: His life.

His plan—which will happen and IS happening right now—is for **everyone in Christ to live there together, with Him, forever and ever. Amen.**

It wasn't always this way. **In the beginning, He gave us Eden** which was Heaven on earth. A Paradise where God and humanity would live together in love, worship, and harmony. You know what happened: we lost it all, got kicked out, and the way to Eden and the Tree of Life was closed. Everything else fell into corruption and death.

We have super powerful telescopes now that see millions of light years into the vast universe. First was the Hubble and now James Webb. Both confirm the cycle of life and death. In my 8th grade science class, our teacher told us about Beetlejuice and I'm not talking about the Hollywood movie. It's a red giant set to explode—go supernova—at any moment. Our teacher explained this happens to every star: it puffs up into a red giant, explodes, and forms a nebula. **Nebulas are referred to as the gravestones/cemeteries** of stars. He said it would even happen to ours one day!

Somehow the **specter of death that began in Eden reached out millions of light years** into the universe and affected everything...except Heaven. **The NJ has walls** and it kept death out, but that's for a different sermon in this series.

After Eden, not only did the gates of Paradise close but so did those of heaven. Mankind was infected with sin and corrupted by death and, to modify an old church saying, ***“when you go to heaven you can't take sin and death with you.”***

Before Christ, when a person died, you went DOWN...to the underworld. The Hebrews called it Sheol, the Greeks called it Hades, and the West calls it Hell. ALL souls went there upon death and the Bible calls it **a prison**.

It wasn't all torment, however. The souls of the unrighteous went to a place the Hebrews called "Gehenna" which translates to "place of fire." It was a symbolic reference to a physical location aboveground in a valley south of Jerusalem where the bodies of dead animals and human criminals were thrown. A perpetual fire burned there so that the air wouldn't be putrefied and smell, hence the image of the man with a pitchfork keeping the fires burning we have to this day. *It came to be known as a punishment for sinners, to extend into the afterlife.*

In his story about the **rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16**, Jesus confirms the same...that it carries into the afterlife as the rich man ends up there.

Righteous souls in covenant with Yahweh, the One True God, went to what the Hebrews called "Abraham's Bosom" or Paradise. Remember the repentant and believing thief on his own cross next to Jesus; *he asks Jesus to remember him*. Jesus famously responds:

[Luk 23:43 ESV] 43 And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Wait, **what and where is Paradise?** Is that different from Heaven/NJ?

Yes, they are different! Jesus uses the term "Heaven" 70 times in all 4 gospels and was clear: Heaven is UP. In John's Gospel, He often said:

[Jhn 6:38 ESV] 38 For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.

So where is Paradise? According to what He said to the thief, He was clearly going there right after the crucifixion and said **it would be TODAY**. The Bible is clear where Jesus went: the underworld.

Back to His story in Luke 16 of the rich man vs. Lazarus, Lazarus was a believer who found himself standing with Abraham...in Paradise. The translation of Paradise is Eden so let's ask and answer the next question: *when Eden was closed off to Adam & Eve, where did it go?*

It went down under and I don't mean Australia. The Greeks testify to the same, but they call Paradise "The Elysian Fields" also located under the earth, where their righteous dead went to whereas Hades was the place of torment.

To summarize: **before Jesus died and rose from the dead, all souls went to the underworld.**

- If you had no covenant with God, you went to Gehenna.
- If you were in covenant with God, you went to Paradise.
- No one went to Heaven.

Jesus rose from the dead then did what: **He ascended to...HEAVEN.**

[Acts 1:9-11 ESV] 9 And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, 11 and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, **who was taken up from you into heaven**, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Jesus was called the firstfruits because He was the first human being, ever, to be raised from the dead in the new Heavenly body. What kind of body? Others were raised back into their old earthly bodies, but as Paul said, "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of Heaven."

Jesus was also the first Person, born as a man, to enter the gates of Heaven in this new body. The souls of the righteous dead—all those in covenant with Him—were freed from the prison of the underworld and followed Him:

[Eph 4:8-9 ESV] 8 Therefore it says, "***When he ascended on high he led a host of captives***, and he gave gifts to men." 9 (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?

After He died on the Cross, Jesus descended into the underworld and revealed Himself to all the dead human spirits there; that He was Messiah yeah, God! He was the only way to salvation and eternal life! He offered His covenant to all and, for any who chose to believe in Him, He led them UP to and through the pearly gates of the NJ where they live to this day.

He is King there, and **that is His heavenly kingdom the Scriptures refer to often.**

Let's keep it simple because it is: **The NJ, the Holy City, is the Kingdom of God**. Every time we pray "*thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*" we're asking God to fulfill His promise to **send the NJ down here to earth**.

God told Abraham to **look up at the stars** and promised Him this:

[Gen 15:5-6 ESV] 5 And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 6 **And he believed the LORD**, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Before I continue, let me share an aspect of interpreting Biblical prophecy: ***there are sometimes dual-levels of fulfillment***: 1) an earthly one and 2) a heavenly one. This is one of those cases.

EARTHLY. Abe & Sarah were being led out of their own country to the land of Canaan, the Promised Land where covenant would be made between Abe, Isaac, then Jacob and the LORD. The land would be theirs, God would live with them there, and they would be His people. The purpose was to have a place—like Eden once was—for God and His people to live together.

ISRAEL was the earthly fulfillment of this. Abe's son of inheritance was Isaac, Isaac's son of inheritance was Jacob, who was renamed Israel. Israel then had 13 sons, 12 of whom formed the 12 tribes and the 13th were the Levites, the Priests.

Yet the writer of Hebrews received **a further revelation** from Jesus Himself. As I quoted to you last Sunday, when Abe looked up into the night sky ***he saw something more than stars that inspired him to believe***:

[Heb 11:8-10 ESV] 8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. 10 **For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations**, whose designer and builder is God.

God didn't just show Abe his descendants the nation of Israel...God revealed THE Plan: **all faithful living together with Jesus in the New Jerusalem!** THAT is what motivated Abraham because He saw both Messiah Jesus as God, and the beautiful city He built for all who believe in Him. ***Abe saw the Kingdom of heaven coming to earth and restoring all that had been lost...and he believed.***

Yes, Abraham saw Jesus and Jesus saw Abraham. Now you understand the context of the mysterious statement Jesus made to a hostile crowd, sending them into a murderous rage:

[Jhn 8:56-58 ESV] 56 Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." 57 So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" 58 Jesus said to them, "**Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.**"

Now I bring you to one of my favorite verses in the Bible! The same writer of Hebrews who just revealed in chapter 11 that Abe saw both Jesus and the NJ, says this in the very next chapter:

[Heb 12:22-24 ESV] 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the **city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem**, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The Hebrews author is speaking to a Jewish audience ***who entered into covenant with God at Mt. Sinai***, the OC. He's trying to get them **to leave the OC and enter the new one** under Christ, symbolized by Mt. Zion.

Both Sinai and Zion are actual mountains here on earth and look at the symbolism:

- Mt. Sinai is located in Egypt.
- Mt. Zion is located in Israel.

Remember the rule of dual fulfillment where it applies and it doesn't apply everywhere. It does here.

- The Hebrew people were freed from Egypt—Sinai—which represented slavery.
- They were eventually delivered to Israel—Zion—which represented living with God and freedom.

According to the verses in Hebrews 12, **let's look at the Who's-Who of Mt. Zion:**

- God the Father
- God the Son Jesus
- The Holy Spirit.
- The New Jerusalem, Heaven.
- The angels,
- All those (human) in Christ both dead and alive.
- Look what it also says: they're all in a festive mood. Other translations say "joyful" and "joyous."

Why is everyone in such a good mood? *Because the plan is done*...they've finally arrived. Like when this new sanctuary was finished and now we're here—gathered together—glorifying Jesus!

In Hebrews 12, it is finished. We're all gathered together God, with His angels, in the NJ. God lives with us, we are His people, and it's this way forever.

I know that life is hard right now, here in this world. We all face problems, issues, fears, and calamities that steal our hope and joy.

This is not Jesus' Plan. It's not going to last forever. It's not the destiny He has written for us.

This life is a flash in the pan compared to eternity. We will spend eternity gazing at the majesty of the Holy City and all its wonders. Will have forever with our Lord Jesus, our Father, and the Holy Spirit. We'll get to see the angels face to face. We'll be reunited with our loved ones in Christ, and never separated from them again.

We're heaven bound...destined for God's Kingdom.