

THE GREATEST HOPE OF ALL 03: HEAVEN'S ABOVE STUDY GUIDE

I think Heaven is one of those things that there is so much tradition about, that when you start teaching what the Bible says, people can be shocked. So, please go through this study prayerfully and look at what the Scripture reveals to us.

Remember, we are going to Heaven if we are saved. If we have believed in Jesus, we are saved. Salvation is never based on our behaviour and never based on our ability, but it is always based on His behaviour and ability. One day the rapture will happen and then we will have our reward day. Even if you get zero rewards that will not eclipse the grace of God – we are going to Heaven and it will be glorious.

When we talk about Heaven mainly in the church, we give the impression that we are going to be in Heaven forever, it is going to be our home forever. But Heaven is not actually our eternal home. Do not let that statement put you off, stay with us as we look at Scripture.

Everything starts with how we preach the good news to people. Often, the gospel is presented as “believing in Jesus, and you will go to Heaven when you die”. That is true, but it is not how preaching the good news happens in the Bible. The gospel is not a ticket to a trip you can one day take, in ten, twenty, fifty years’ time when you die. No, the gospel is that right now today you can be totally transformed from the inside out and become a new creation and have all the righteousness and power of God inside you immediately.

John 6.47 does not say “believe in Jesus and go to Heaven one day”. It says believe in Jesus and have everlasting life. Everlasting life is not a ticket to Heaven, it is a brand-new spirit right now. It is becoming a new creation. What is everlasting life? Read John 17.3.

Eternal life is being transformed into a new creation that can know God. That is better than going to Heaven when you die! Right now, you can become a Christian and transform into a new species of being, a kind of being that can walk with God and commune with Him! That is the gospel. Yes, there is a ticket to Heaven thrown in, but that is not the main thrust of gospel preaching in the Bible.

Jesus never said anything like “Believe on me and spend forever in heaven”. What He said was something else entirely: “Heaven and Earth will pass away” (Matthew 24.35).

Heaven is going to pass away. Jesus said it. So, if Heaven is going to pass away, we need to rethink if we are going to live there forever when we die!

Now it may be some of you became Christians because someone told you “if you believe in Jesus, then you will have eternal life and you will be with Him in Heaven for ever and ever”. You might have told other people that before. Now I am going to tell you the truth – the first part of that sentence is true, but the second is not. We are going to look at the Scripture and find out what is true. I think the truth will encourage you, and will make you a stronger witness to Christ too.

If we are going to look at Heaven from the Bible, the first thing we need to know is that there are three heavens.

The first heaven is the sky. The Greek word for heaven is Ouranos. Often it is used in Greek to refer to the sky, or the atmosphere, where you are when you are on a plane. Ten times in the New Testament we have the phrase “birds of the air”, which in the Greek is

literally “birds of the heaven” (for example, Mark 4.4). In James 5.18, Elijah prayed and the heavens gave rain – a reference to the sky again.

The second heaven is space. This is the Heaven where the stars and planets live! Once we have left the atmosphere, left the sky and are in space, we leave the first heaven and enter the second heaven. There are people today who have visited the second heaven and come back, we call them astronauts. Some people have even lived in the second heaven for a while!

The third heaven is paradise, where Jesus lives. Read 2 Cor. 12.2. You cannot get there on a plane! I have been on many planes as I travel to preach the good news, and none of them have ever gone to paradise. None of them have been paradise! I think if we spoke to an astronaut about their experiences in space, they would say it was remarkable, but it was not Paradise. The third heaven is where Jesus is sitting on a throne, it is where Moses is and Elijah is, and everyone who has fallen asleep in Christ is. The instant you pass away you are immediately in Heaven. Read 2 Cor. 5.8 and Phil. 1.23. Paul saw the third heaven, and he really wanted to go back – it was that good. But he stayed to continue ministering to people.

Paul took a trip there. God took him there on a trip. It might have been when he was stoned to death. It might have been during a great prayer time. But Paul was caught up – past the first, second and taken to the third heaven. That must have been amazing. Sadly, Paul describes it as inexpressible, so we do not get much information about what it is like from there. But what we all need to know is that if you passed away today, or tomorrow, or any day before the rapture, your spirit and soul, the real you, your personality, would go straight to Heaven and be with Jesus. If you have a precious friend or family member who passed away in Christ, they are in Heaven right now. With Jesus!

We need to know that before Jesus rose from the dead Heaven was locked for humanity. No human could get in. Read Luke 16.19-26. This is not a parable, it has names in it, it does not start with “the kingdom of God is like”. This is a true story. Now this happens before Jesus died and is an accurate picture of what happened before Jesus died and was resurrection and before people could be born again.

No one went to Heaven before Jesus died. No one is good enough to get in before Jesus. So, everyone went to Hades. But there was a part of Hades separated off – an air-conditioned part so to speak. But Abraham was not in paradise and nor was Lazarus. When Moses died and when Joshua died and when David died, they did not go to Heaven. They did not go to Paradise. They went to the nice part of Hades.

But then Jesus came, Jesus died on the cross, paid the full price for all their sins, gave them complete forgiveness, and then rose again as a life-giving spirit, giving life not just to believers on earth, but those who died believing.

Read Ephesians 4.7-10. Jesus led captivity captive. Before Jesus died, if you trusted God and His goodness, you got to go to the nicer part of Hades, but it was not paradise. This is where Abraham and Lazarus were. But when Jesus died and rose again, all those people who died believing got their passports to Heaven. All the people captive in Hades who were in faith when they died, they were raptured to Heaven, they arrived in Heaven with Jesus. So, all those people are in Heaven now. And they are with Jesus. It is a wonderful place, filled with glory and grace. But here is the truth that you need to grasp, and it will

eventually get your hopes up when you grasp it: you will not be spending forever in Heaven, it was not made for human beings, it was never designed for you.

God made Adam and Eve at the beginning. If Adam and Eve never sinned, they would have stayed on earth forever. A perfect planet with perfect humans! They would never have gone to Heaven and would have had no need to go to Heaven. They were designed for planet Earth to be their paradise and Earth was designed for them. They would have never suffered, never died, never got old. Every human would all have been smarter than you, and never wasted the amount of time we have thinking about rubbish!

Also, our greatest scientists and inventors die just at the top of their game. They lose their eyesight; they lose their memory. The fall has cost us a lot of science and technology. Who knows what kind of technology and ideas unfallen humanity would have come up with? We might have been all over the solar system, we might have had floating cities in the sea. They would have walked with the Lord in the cool of the day. He would be giving them guidance and wisdom too. They might have ways to find other planets, other solar systems. I do not know. Maybe before the fall, more planets were kinder to life.

Adam and Eve, and every single human, including us, were not designed to live in the Third Heaven. We were designed to live on Earth. Earth was designed for humans, for people with bodies. Angels were designed for Heaven; we were designed for Earth. It is where we fit in.

Sin did not change that plan, did not change God's purpose and design. So, we are designed to live on earth. Now, look at the end of Revelation and see what happens to us. Before we do, let me remind you – the timeline – we have the rapture, we then have the reward day, everyone not raptured goes through the seven worst years on earth, while those of us raptured have the seven best years ever in Heaven, then we return to earth with Jesus. Then we have a thousand-year peace on earth, then at the end of that, something remarkable happens.

Read Revelation 21:1-3. There is a brand-new heaven and earth. The old heaven passes away and the old earth passes away. And the city that Jesus built our mansion in is moved from Heaven down to Earth. Why? Because the new earth is our eternal home, not heaven.

One day, there will be a brand-new Heaven and a brand-new Earth. Just like one day you will get a brand-new body, we will get a new earth too! Heaven has been tainted by the rebellion of angels led by satan, earth has been tainted by the fall of Adam and the increasing wickedness of humanity since then. So, both will be re-created. And it is the New Earth that will be our eternal, forever home. We are going to spend all eternity on a brand-new earth.

All the streets of gold in the new Jerusalem will be here on earth. Verse 3 tells us clearly that God will be living with us! Therefore, Jesus still has a body. Because He is going to – as a human – live on earth with us forever. The planet for embodied people. Jesus is going to live with us forever on the New Earth. I hope that has not messed up your theology too much!

And the truth is that I am glad Heaven is not my eternal home. I really want to be alive during the rapture, I think that would be awesome. But I will settle for dying first and

getting a microsecond head start on everyone else. And I think going to the Third Heaven will be great. But I am not an angel, I am a person. I am not going to do well with harps and clouds all day. I hope to visit Heaven often – I cannot wait to see the glory of God there, I cannot wait to worship with Michael and Gabriel, to see the Heavenly Tabernacle that Moses based his tabernacle on. I want to worship the Father!

But that is not my home. Heaven is more like my hotel for holidays if that is not too irreverent. It is a temporary location. Abraham has been there since the time of Christ until now. That is two thousand years in Hades until Christ took His captivity captive, then he has spent the last two thousand years in Heaven. That is a long time to be away from Earth.

I want to go and get raptured, I do not mind spending some time in Heaven, but nothing can or will make it my eternal home. I am designed for earth, and so are you. So, the big question is what will the New Earth be like?

It will be a literal planet, like Earth. It will not be that different, except the mountains will be lower (according to Isa. 40.4) and there will be no seas (Rev. 21.3). I wonder if that means there will be no salt water, it will all be fresh and drinkable. There will be a literal city on that new Earth called the new Jerusalem that is larger than any nation is right now. It will be 1500 miles long and wide – and high! It will be huge, and we will all have a mansion there. We will come every year and bring gifts to Jesus (Revelation 21.24) and we will rule the nations (2 Tim. 2.12). The streets of gold, the buildings of gold, the gates of pearls. Jesus will live in this city, and it will be awesome. It will remind us of Eden, fruitful, peaceful, glorious.

We will be able to eat manna there (Rev. 2.17) and one of the greatest truths there is this: we will be servants there (Revelation 22.3). That means there will be work to do. We will not just be standing around on clouds, we will have work. We will write books, we will make and be in plays, we will make sculptures, we will farm, we will teach, engineer, we will rule. Certain jobs will not be in the new Earth. Prison wardens will be redundant in Heaven, morticians will be redundant, psychologists, doctors, lawyers, bank robbers and assassins will be unemployed in Heaven and will have to find new work!

This is exceptionally exciting. The greatest of everything on this planet has not been built yet. The greatest building has not yet been built, the greatest movie has not yet been seen, the greatest cities have not yet been designed, the greatest painting has not been painted, the greatest car has not yet been driven, the greatest song has not yet been sung. The perfect man spent most of his life making things with wood. That is something we can all do in Heaven.

And with our perfect minds – we will never be bored, never worried about the future, never concerned about what others think of us. It will just be days of adventure and creativity forever. It will be perfect and peaceful. No one will ever die (Rev. 21.4). No-one will ever cry. No one will ever be in pain.

There will be parties, the likes of which you have never seen – some will be thrown by Jesus Himself. The New Earth is real. Our eternity is on earth. A real, physical, literal forever. Your life right now, before the rapture, is nothing but a vapour, compared to the eternity we will have together forever on the New Earth. We will be on this earth forever; we will be living the life Adam and Eve should have been living.

I want you to change the way you think about this all – we say this earth is not our home, we are just passing through. If you mean this world as it is right now – yes, the curse-post-fall earth is not my home. But we are not moving to Planet Heaven, except temporarily. We will all be staying in Hotel Heaven for a while, as renovations are going on at home, but then we will be back in our home.

The Pearly Gates are coming to earth. The streets of gold are coming to earth. The mansion that Jesus is building for you is coming to earth.

There is a song about Heaven that has been around for a while now, that goes:

I can only imagine

When all I will do

Is forever

Forever worship You

Now, I love worship. I really love worshipping the Lord. I think with Chris and Von we have two of the most remarkable worship leaders in the world. But I will not be only worshipping in Heaven forever. I will not be doing 24/7 praise. I will not be living in church. I know some people think that is the way forward and try these burn nights as a test of stamina to see how long they can worship and praise before they pass out.

But on the new Earth, we will not just be worshipping. I am going to learn how to surf. I am going to work in a garden. I am going to do everything Adam did before the fall! That will be our life in Heaven. Adam did not sing praises 24/7, he gardened.

You were not just designed to just worship God! You have been designed to be fruitful, to create, to produce, to work. You have so much creativity inside you and you are going to use it forever in the New Earth. You will not just be floating on a cloud forever. That is not the Bible – that is now what happened before the fall, that is not what Jesus did 24/7. The perfect unfallen man worked with His hands and made things. In the new earth we will do the same.

Some of you will be painting, others will be designing buildings, some will be designing roads, and technology, and art, and science, and worship – all of it. There will be worship and it will be better than anything we have ever had, but there will also be creativity and productivity we have never seen. Some of it we could never have dreamed of! It will be something amazing – more than anything we have ever seen. And every single year it will just get more and more and more impressive. We will never run out of money, never run out of food, never run out of resources, never run out of people, never run out of anything. We will be glorifying the Lord forever and ever and ever.

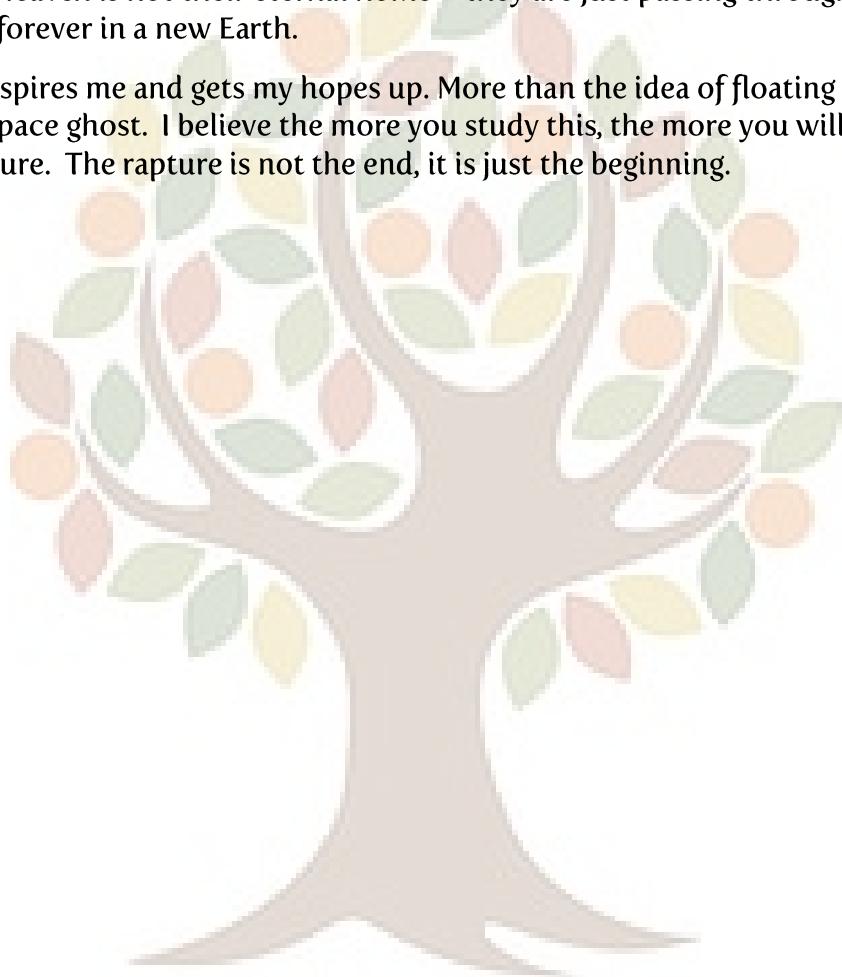
And we will move around the whole new universe. Maybe we will build spaceships. I do not know.

What I do know is this. The way most Christians think about Heaven is too vague and too cloudy. I want you all to be transformed by the renewing of your minds, it will be something so remarkable. There will be a brand new earth and you and I will live there forever with Jesus, serving Him!

We are all longing for the rapture. But I think Peter is too, and Paul, and all your family and friends who passed away in Christ. I think everyone in Heaven wants their bodies back, they want to be with you again, they miss you. They want to come home, they want to live on earth again. But the new earth, with the new Jerusalem, with Jesus throwing parties, with creativity and wisdom and righteousness – all sorts of glorious things happening.

I am not saying Heaven right now is somehow disappointed or upset about it, but they just know – Heaven is not their eternal home – they are just passing through. We are going to live forever in a new Earth.

That really inspires me and gets my hopes up. More than the idea of floating around heaven as a space ghost. I believe the more you study this, the more you will get excited about the future. The rapture is not the end, it is just the beginning.



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THE GREATEST HOPE OF ALL 03: HEAVEN'S ABOVE STUDY GUIDE Questions

1. Where is our eternal home?
2. What is everlasting life according to John 17:3?
3. When do we get everlasting life?
4. What are the three heavens?
5. Where did people go when they died before the resurrection of Jesus?
6. What happened to those people when Jesus rose from the dead?
7. What do we know from the Scripture about the new Earth?
8. What kinds of things will we do on the new Earth?



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