

Introduction

Have you noticed how difficult it is to depict heaven as truly a marvelous place to be? Even angels are somewhat bored by the experience. Dudley, the angel of *The Bishop's Wife, or The Preacher's Wife*, even if he looks like Cary Grant or Denzel Washington becomes envious of mortals as he falls in love. In *The City of Angels*, the angel Seth desires to become a mortal who can experience the sensations that human beings feel. Heaven simply isn't all that great.

And so, as we come to the topic of worshipping in heaven, all the more I find it too difficult to depict how wonderful such an experience is. Why it is so difficult to do—besides my limits in creativity—is the limit we all have in grasping glory. We are going to consider those limits and hopefully raise our sights a little higher. But first, I want to address a matter that I think has been tripping us all up a bit, as we consider the subject of heaven.

It is our human-bound understanding of time and space. We think time in the present heaven is like time on earth, measured by minutes, hours, days, months, years. But will it be? I don't understand it, but I read that Einstein's theory of relativity demonstrates that time and space are relative to our circumstance of being earth-bound. I read C. S. Lewis' children books about Narnia where earth children mysteriously enter into the world of Narnia, spend years there, then return to earth where no time at all elapsed because, well, time moves differently between worlds of different dimensions. Someone asked how Jesus could tell the thief on the cross that he would be with Jesus that very day in paradise, when Jesus had three days before he rose again. As difficult a dilemma that may seem, it does not measure with the eternal God the Son leaving heaven for any time period to be on earth, much less spend nine months in a woman's womb. There comes a time when time itself becomes a mystery, especially when applying time and space to God and to the heaven in which he dwells. These are mysteries in which we must wait for the right time to be revealed.

One question one might ask in light of the series as we consider worshipping in heaven is, Which heaven are we speaking of—present or future? The present heaven of the intermediate state? Or the future heaven of the “new heaven and earth” that will come about when Jesus returns? The answer is both. The church bells of heaven are ringing and calling us to worship. What will it be like? It will be wonderful. What will make worship in heaven wonderful can be summed up in one word, I've already noted—glory: the glory of God, the glory of heaven, and the glory of us.

Glory of God

Our text depicts the glory of God in the present heaven:

...behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald (vs. 2–3).

Revelation 21:23 depicts God's glory as light: "And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb."

It is viewing the full glory of God that will make worship glorious. We know God by faith. We sometimes sense God and his glory in experience. It may be a piece of music that elevates our senses. Often it is by viewing a spectacular scene—a sunset over the ocean or its rays touching the clouds. It may be a view from a mountaintop or an airplane. It may be the serene walk on a beach. Whatever it is, there is a sensation of something other, something that nature is pointing us to. In heaven, there is no glimpse, no passing moment. We will stand or kneel in the presence of God and worship with all of our being.

But the glory of God lies in something more than a breath-taking experience. The essence of God is found in holiness. That is seen in the other images of our text.

From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God (v. 5).

There are the strange, four living creatures around the throne who never cease to say,
*"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
who was and is and is to come!"*

They sound like the seraphim that Isaiah saw in his vision of heaven:

*"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isaiah 6:3)*

It is holiness that causes all on earth to tremble, that causes fear in humans when holy angels appear before them. It is holiness that causes us to tremble and yet to reverence the concept of the sacred. "Is nothing sacred?" we bemoan on earth. All will be sacred in heaven, for the holiness of God is fully displayed and fully radiates into everything present.

Glory of Heaven

All will be sacred in heaven and all will be glorious. Though the book of Revelation refers to heaven a lot, there is but the barest depiction of what heaven is actually like. Chapter 4 would be the place to describe it, as John is looking in, but, as would be expected, God takes up his attention. Yet John does give a hint of what to expect. There is the throne with the rainbow that has the appearance of an emerald. The floor is "a sea of glass, like crystal."

There is a purity to the present heaven that beautiful gems and crystal depict. When heaven becomes wedded to earth in Revelation 21, when the heavenly New Jerusalem comes down to earth and there will finally be heaven on earth, the gems and crystal are seen again. It is described as "having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal" (v. 11). The foundations will be adorned with "every kind of jewel" (v. 19), and the streets will not be merely gold, but gold "like transparent glass" (v. 21).

For some of you, these images capture your imagination, and you are filled with wonder. We especially like those streets of gold. For others, they don't quite do it for you. You might be like me, who, viewing the crown jewels in the Tower of London, didn't see what the fuss was all about. Some of you more interested in nature like the river that runs through the city, which also is described in terms of crystal.

The point is that, when we think about what heaven will be like, while we are upon this earth we need to use for ourselves terms and images that convey the purity of heaven, the glory of heaven; that depicts the peace we will experience; that depicts the joy we will experience. There is going to be a sense in which heaven will be like what we could never imagine and like just what we imagined. We cannot imagine how it will actually be, but we are right to imagine that it will feel just right, indeed, that it will be, above all places we have ever been, the place we know as home, the place that we were created to fully take delight in.

Think of it this way. You go to an architect about building your dream house. You know what you want; i.e. you have vague concepts of what it should be like, but you know exactly how you will feel when you see it. He listens to you, not so much to replicate what you tell him but to get the feel of what it is that inspires you. You depend upon him to capture for you what will work. And so we place our trust in God as did Abraham who "was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10).

Trust God to provide a heaven, even a heaven on earth, that will be exactly what we need and fulfills our deepest desires. And don't get hung up on imagery that is meant not to give you a virtual tour but to answer theological questions. Here is one: "Will life always be unsettled and I always be looking for home?" No, you will not always wander about in the desert but will settle down as in a city that is secure. "Will life always be a turbulent and dangerous sea?" No, you will live in a place without such a sea of turmoil.

Purity, security, peace—in such a glorious place we will worship God.

Glory of Us

We will behold fully the glory of God. We will worship God in a place of glory. Now for the most wondrous part: we will be glorious worshippers.

Revelation 7 describes the dress of human worshippers now in heaven. They are wearing white robes. That may or may not catch your fashion fancy, but the theological truth being displayed is that they will have been made wholly righteous. They will be pure, like the purity of the crystal in heaven.

So we will be pure. We will be spotless: no sin, no tarnish, no stain, no hidden guilty secret, no impure thought. We will possess pure holiness and pure love.

But there is more. We will possess glory.

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory (1 Cor. 15:42–43).

When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Col. 3:3).

And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified (Rom. 8:30).

... you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 1:6–7).

Do you understand what is being said? You will become a glorious being. You will bear, no longer the image of the man of dust (Adam) but the image of the man of heaven (Jesus). We will be changed and bear spiritual bodies, not spirits but bodies fitted for heavenly, eternal living. I think C. S. Lewis is right when he describes our future appearance as such that if we saw such a person now, we would be strongly tempted to worship. Glory awaits us.

And when that happens—when we enter into glory, when we behold the glory of God, when we take on glory, it will be right. That sounds like a weak word, but it is fitting. We use it whenever we experience something that brings together all the qualities in a fitting way. It doesn't just feel good; it feels right. It is the ways things should be.

But until then, until it all comes together, "it" will never be just right. And this is particularly true in the case of worship. As much as we might enjoy worship, it is never quite right.

God is not quite right to us. He may seem distant. It is difficult to worship what we cannot see. Using an image might help us feel more focused in our worship, but, as God makes clear, it then leads us to worship a false image of him. For some, worshipping God as Father is difficult because of harsh fathers. Jesus seems closer but then we have trouble regarding him as God. The Holy Spirit seems impersonal. To worship God as the Trinity is confusing.

You could say that the problem is with us and our imperfect imaging of God. And you are right. We cannot see God; we certainly do not see God in all of his glory. Therefore, our worship experience falls short. John Newton expresses this very problem in the hymn we sang:

Weak is the effort of my heart,
and cold my warmest thought;
but when I see thee as thou art,
I'll praise thee as I ought!

But what if we were to see God now as he is? What if now we were to see Jesus as he is? There are experiences of it in Scripture. Isaiah has such an experience. He has a vision of God in his temple and his response is, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell

in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isa 6:5). John has a vision of Jesus that he records in Revelation 1. In response, John falls down as one dead.

Seeing God in all of his glory did not feel right to Isaiah or John. It felt terribly wrong. Why? Isaiah said why. He was a sinner. Sinful man cannot look upon the God of holiness without becoming undone. Isaiah had to have his sins atoned; John had already his sins atoned by Jesus. Even so, atonement does not clean away all vestiges of sin. We are justified but still not sanctified, and until then we cannot abide the full glory of the holy God. We believe such a full sanctification takes place when we die, so that when we are with God, with Christ, we feel not fear but peace; indeed, we feel joy, and in that joy we will worship God. Once we are made righteous, God will be right for us.

God will be right for us and heaven will be right for us. Heaven seems boring, what with sitting on clouds, nothing to wear but white sheets. Maybe we get a harp to strum. Our problem lies not in heaven but in our poor imagination on earth. Again, I turn to C. S. Lewis. He writes, concerning our lack of enthusiasm about the glory of heaven: “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

As imaginative as the mind of humans may be, the glory of heaven eludes us. But no wonder. How can the imagination of man break through into eternity, into divine glory? We occasionally have sensations of it, brief moments that awaken us to there being more than what is upon this earth, but we cannot break into that heavenly world and the world to come. But what really limits us in the sinful mind.

We simply cannot imagine pure holiness as something that is enjoyable. We cannot link holiness with joy, righteousness with love. Don’t we say, “I’m glad to know some defect in you. It makes you human”? We actually don’t want perfection. We don’t want to know someone perfectly good or live where everything is just right. It doesn’t feel right!

But when we are made perfectly right; when we become glorious beings ourselves, then it will feel right to enter into a perfect heavenly world and worship together with glorious saints the God of all glory. It will feel right. It will be all glory.