

## Heaven and Hell (Part 1)

Welcome to the third part of our 'Connect Group Extra' sessions where we take a theme from our studies in 1 Peter to explore in more depth. The first two 'Extras' looked at living as 'strangers and aliens' in this world. This, and the next 'Extra' session, is focused on the life to come, the end of the world as we know it – and how we can live in hope.

'The future' is a theme that runs through the first letter of Peter, for example,

1 Peter 1:3-4, *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you."*

1 Peter 4:7, *"The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers."*

1 Peter 5:10, *"And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."*

In society today we are encouraged to think of the future – pensions, investments, healthcare plans, and so on – but only until we die. Culture at large has lopped off eternity, and freighted everything into this life; our three score years and ten. Christians have tended to buy into this mindset too: there are lots of books about the stuff of this life – marriage, money, mental health – all of which are important, but far fewer about the life to come. I am struggling to think of a sermon I have heard about heaven, let alone hell...

A big reason why our gaze has moved from things to do with life after death is that we are preoccupied with our lives *before* death. We are raised to be obsessed with what we can see, hear, touch, taste and smell *now*; the impact of Covid-19 has only heightened our care for this life. In addition, the big steps in communications technology over the last couple of decades has hastened the demise of stillness, wonder, and deep thought about life beyond death. It is hard to switch off and think.

It is hoped these two short 'Extra' session will help us to stop and consider what the Bible says about heaven and hell, and to think how we might live in the light of these realities.

## Heaven and the Bible

The Bible begins with creation: *"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."* (Genesis 1:1), and it ends with a new creation: *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away"* (Revelation 21:1). In between we read of heaven as God's dwelling place (Psalm 33:13), where his throne is located (Psalm 2:4), and to where Jesus returned (Acts 1:11). It is pictured as a city (Hebrews 11:10), a country (Hebrews 11:16), and where Christ's people will one day be with him forever (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

In the gospels Jesus talked frequently about “the kingdom of heaven”, and told several parables to illustrate it. He also talked to his disciples about preparing a place in heaven for them (John 14:2-3). The Apostle Paul speaks of heaven as the place of rule for King Jesus (Colossians 1:15-20), and that he “*raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places*” (Ephesians 2:6). As such we are to have a heavenly mindset: “*If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.*” (Colossians 3:1-2).

Heaven is described as place of unending worship (Revelation 7:11-12) that can only be entered by one door, Jesus Christ (John 10:9). This means our faith and hope are in him alone, for he alone can save us eternally. And not only that, God will also make “everything sad come untrue” (J R R Tolkien’s words reflecting Revelation 21:4).

## **Heaven and earth**

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to ask for God’s kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10). But what is the relationship between heaven and earth? ‘The Bible Project’ make animated videos that explore the books and themes of the Bible, and this six minute video looks at how heaven and earth are meant to overlap: [bit.ly/3jorNro](https://bit.ly/3jorNro)

The video illustrates how central Jesus is to this, and that a view of heaven as ‘other worldly’ and remote is not what the Bible depicts. One writer helpfully unpacks his own thinking on this:

*Though heaven had some preferable qualities, my shallow understanding of the world to come did little to excite me or stir any longing in me to go there. As I said, from the options before me, heaven was the better choice, but any thought of heaven left me wishing for some other reality and hope.*

*When most of us think about heaven, we think in terms of another world other than this one, and we see no connection between the two. My struggle with this mindset is that it is fuelled by the fact that I love this world and I don’t want to leave to go to a world that has been portrayed, whether intentionally or not, as an ethereal existence away from the things I love most about this world.*

*If you have ever harboured such secret thoughts and felt as though you were less spiritual or odd because you simply could not look forward to a world beyond belief and imagination, I have good news for you. The physical world which God fashioned with his own hands is the world to which we belong and the one his elect will enjoy and rule for all of eternity. When sin entered his good world, God did not abandon it, rather, he set out to redeem it and restore it, not merely to its original condition but to a state infinitely greater than even the original. This is the purpose for which Christ died. For too long we have understood the scope of Christ’s redemption only in terms of his sacrifice for sinners. And though I exult in his atonement for the sins of his people, his death and resurrection reached far beyond man into the entire created realm. This is the idea of the great song we sing each Christmas, “No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found.”*

## Heaven and us

If pressed, more than a few Christians would echo what Rick Kirby said at first, *“any thought of heaven left me wishing for some other reality and hope.”* A diminished view of heaven makes living with Christ-like purpose now seem unfeasible. In contrast, in Peter’s second letter, he encourages his readers to focus on the reality of a new creation to give them hope and purpose in their daily lives in the here and now:

*“...what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you **look forward** to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are **looking forward** to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. So then, dear friends, since you are **looking forward** to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.”* (2 Peter 3:11-13, NIV)

### Questions to consider / discuss:

1. If a friend asked you what heaven is like, what would you say?
2. If your friend asked if they are going to heaven, how would you reply?
3. What things could you start (and stop) doing to *“set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth”*?
4. Take some time to pray each phrase of the first half of the Lord’s Prayer slowly:  
*“Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.”*

### Further reading

[www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/4-questions-about-heaven](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/4-questions-about-heaven)

[www.christianity.com/wiki/heaven-and-hell/what-is-heaven-like-according-to-the-bible](http://www.christianity.com/wiki/heaven-and-hell/what-is-heaven-like-according-to-the-bible)

*‘What happens when I die? And other questions about heaven, hell and the life to come’*, by Marcus Nodder

[www.10ofthose.com/uk/products/15500/what-happens-when-i-die](http://www.10ofthose.com/uk/products/15500/what-happens-when-i-die)