

## SHARING HEAVEN

The New Testament places a tremendous emphasis on forgiveness. I don't just mean the mercy that we hope to receive from God, but also the mercy that God insists that we show toward others. Jesus warns us that we must forgive others if we expect to receive mercy from God.<sup>1</sup> The Lord's Prayer asks God to forgive our debts, "as we also have forgiven our debtors."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, we must be prepared to forgive repeatedly:

Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."<sup>3</sup>

A closely related concept is that of peace. Jesus urges us to "be at peace with one another,"<sup>4</sup> while Paul goes even further: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."<sup>5</sup> Other New Testament writers agree.<sup>6</sup> Forgiveness is necessary for peace, because we cannot be at peace with someone whom we refuse to forgive.

So what do forgiveness, mercy, and peace have to do with Heaven? To answer this question, let's consider what the New Testament tells us about Heaven. Aside from the spectacular symbolism of Revelation<sup>7</sup> (which probably should not be taken too literally), the Bible tells us little about what Heaven will be like. We know that those who are accepted into Heaven will receive eternal life.<sup>8</sup> Our mortal bodies will somehow be replaced by, or transformed into, an immortal form,

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<sup>1</sup> See Matthew 6:14-15, 18:23-35; Mark 11:25-26

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:12; Luke 11:4; see also, Ephesians 4:31-32, Colossians 3:13; and James 2:13 (all Biblical quotations are from the *New American Standard* translation)

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:21-22; see also, Luke 17:3-4

<sup>4</sup> Mark 9:50

<sup>5</sup> Romans 12:18; Paul also talks elsewhere of the need to be at peace with other men, such as Romans 14:19; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Ephesians 2:14-16 and 4:2-3; 1 Thessalonians 5:13; and Titus 3:2.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Hebrews 12:14; James 3:18; 1 Peter 3:8.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Revelation 21:9-22:5 describes the "New Jerusalem" as a huge walled city of gold, jasper, pearl, and precious gems, which encloses the "tree of life."

<sup>8</sup> See Matthew 19:29; Mark 10:30; Luke 18:29-30; John 3:14-16, 3:36, 4:14, 5:24, 6:27, 6:40, 6:47, 6:54, 10:27-28, 12:25, 17:1-3; Acts 13:46-48; Romans 2:7, 5:21, 6:22-23; 2 Corinthians 5:1; Galatians 6:8; 1 Timothy 1:16, 6:12; Titus 1:2, 3:7; 1 John 2:25, 5:11-13, 5:20; Jude 21.

and we will always be with the Lord.<sup>9</sup> Hunger and thirst will no longer exist,<sup>10</sup> and people will not get married anymore<sup>11</sup> (presumably because procreation will be unnecessary). Yet these verses tell us surprisingly little about what we will experience in Heaven.

Other New Testament verses speak of “treasure” and “reward” in Heaven,<sup>12</sup> but these ambiguous terms only hint at the wonders in store for us. Similarly, Jesus’ other references to Heaven—for example that a rich man will have difficulty getting in,<sup>13</sup> or that Heaven rejoices over one repentant sinner<sup>14</sup>—reveal nothing about what we can expect to find there. Paul is only slightly more enlightening when he tells us that “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known,”<sup>15</sup> or when he implies that the glory of Heaven will make us forget all about our sufferings in this life.<sup>16</sup> His description of his experience of being “caught up into Paradise,” where he “heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak,”<sup>17</sup> sounds fabulous, but doesn’t even suggest what he saw and heard there.

Of the New Testament writers, John may provide the most helpful insight. For example, while confessing the mystery surrounding eternal life, he gives us an important clue about Heaven:

Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.<sup>18</sup>

When John says “we will be like Him,” does he mean that we will have Christ’s compassionate and forgiving nature? Perhaps, because John insists that hatred is inconsistent with true Christianity: “The one who says he is in the Light and yet

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<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:42-54; 2 Corinthians 5:1-4; Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; 1 Peter 1:3-4

<sup>10</sup> Revelation 7:16

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 22:29-30; Mark 12:24-25

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 5:11-12, 6:20-21, 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 6:22-23, 12:33-34, 18:22; 1 Corinthians 3:8, 2 Corinthians 4:17-18, 1 Timothy 6:19, Hebrews 10:35; Revelation 22:12

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 19:23-26; Mark 10:25

<sup>14</sup> Luke 15:7, 15:10

<sup>15</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12

<sup>16</sup> See Romans 8:18: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

<sup>17</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:4

<sup>18</sup> 1 John 3:2

hates his brother is in the darkness until now.”<sup>19</sup> Yet the most revealing description of Heaven may be this one, from John’s Revelation:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.”<sup>20</sup>

In John’s eyes, Heaven will be a place of perfect peace and harmony, where everyone will get along together, and people will no longer hurt one another. Crying and pain, like death, will disappear. The causes of so much suffering in this life—such as hatred, revenge, and jealousy—will be abolished. But how can any of this occur without forgiveness?

Is there anyone you would be unwilling to share Heaven with?—someone you don’t want God to forgive? Maybe she was unfaithful or unkind. Maybe he committed a terrible crime, or simply betrayed your trust. Whoever he is, and whatever she may have done, you must try to forgive that person.

After all, the object of our hostility might enter Heaven before us. God is very forgiving. Jesus forgave the men who were crucifying Him.<sup>21</sup> He also forgave one of the two criminals who were executed beside Him.<sup>22</sup> Christ stands ready to forgive all who will repent and surrender their lives to Him.<sup>23</sup> And that creates a dilemma for us. We must give up our enmity—or we might have to give up Heaven. If we are unwilling to share Heaven, we may not be allowed to enter at all.

Personally, I believe God cannot allow our hostility to contaminate Paradise, because bitterness, resentment, cruelty, and pain would inevitably follow. Heaven is simply not big enough for both us and our animosity. For Heaven to be Heaven, peace and forgiveness must reign supreme.

I understand that forgiveness is sometimes hard, and I don’t know that we can achieve perfect forgiveness in this life, because of our flawed human nature.

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<sup>19</sup> 1 John 2:9; see also 1 John 2:11, 3:10, 3:15, 4:20

<sup>20</sup> Revelation 21:3-4; see also Revelation 7:17 (“ . . . and God shall wipe every tear from their eyes.”)

<sup>21</sup> Luke 23:33-34

<sup>22</sup> Luke 23:32-33 and 23:39-43

<sup>23</sup> For example, see John 3:15-18. For more on this topic, see the article “For God So Loved . . . Well, Wait a Minute,” at this web site.

But I believe we must try, because Jesus wants us to—and because Jesus **commands** us to. We must pray for our enemies, and try to show them kindness.<sup>24</sup> We must ask God to turn our rancor to love. If we want God to forgive us, we must try to forgive others. And that includes those we find hardest to forgive, because we may have to share Heaven with them.

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35; Romans 12:20