

Bristol Village
(or What Do We Know for Certain about Heaven?)
Revelation 21:9-14, 21-27

⁹Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb."
¹⁰And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, ¹¹having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹²It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed — ¹³on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. ¹⁴And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

²²And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And 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. ²⁴By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, ²⁵and its gates will never be shut by day — and there will be no night there. ²⁶They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, where do you ultimately want to retire? Many of you have made that decision. You have retired and here you are. However, many people I have spoken with over the years want to live out their days in a retirement community, age 55 and older -- no hassles, no children except guests, no maintenance, and suitable activities galore.

For my paternal grandfather, Raymond, and grandmother, Ann, that place was a retirement community called Bristol Village, in Waverly, Ohio, about 20 minutes south of Chillicothe, Ohio. Waverly was an old canal town on the Ohio Canal. The buildings were built facing the canal and the road ran behind the businesses and shops.

Once my grandfather and grandmother had purchased their access to Bristol Village, they could remain there for life. As they grew older and their health failed, they could move from their home into an assisted living facility, and finally into a nursing home. The Village boasted a large Community Center offering lectures, crafts, games, and social gatherings. The neighbors were all friendly and helpful. Many were retired pastors, missionaries, and their spouses. During their residence in Bristol Village, despite all the benefits and amenities, I began to consider the concept of an over fifty community depressing in a way. Every time I visited my

grandparents, they reported that this person had died, or that person had moved into the nursing home. It was a private, gated community, but it could not keep out death, and on occasion, crime. I also felt uncomfortable with the absence of children and people of different ages. Bristol Village seemed rather incomplete to me.

What do you think of heaven? Is it a place where you ultimately want to retire? I have heard somebody say about the Christian faith – “The rewards may be few in this life and you may have to bear a cross, but the retirement benefits are out of this world.” My grandfather looked forward to living out his days with grandma, puttering around the house, pursuing his interests in history and genealogy, and taking it easy. But ultimately, they had to give up their home and make one final move. I believe grandma and grandpa entered heaven. They were both believers and I officiated at both their funeral services. What do you anticipate when you arrive in heaven? What can we know for certain?

I. Arguments against heaven.

Let’s be honest; there are many people who believe heaven is just a myth. According to their arguments, conscious people cannot handle the concept of no consciousness, so they imagine an afterlife. And since the world can be so cruel, the people who imagine heaven describe it as a place of unparalleled beauty, joy, and peace. The naysayers argue that we cannot possibly know about the next life, if there is one, because no one has been there and returned to tell us about it. Suppose Christopher Columbus had not returned from his voyage of exploration, would we still be sitting in Europe wondering what lies on the other side of the ocean? Those people who argue against heaven, who negate the reality of heaven, do so because they cannot see it in their telescopes or examine it in their microscopes. They argue that the concept of heaven takes our eyes off the here and now, leads us to ignore justice on earth, give up the struggle to make the world a better place, and wastes our time thinking about dreams.

Astronomers tell us the Milky Way, our galaxy is shaped like an immense disk: a great dinner plate, with tiny Earth imbedded in it, off to one side. What we are really seeing, as we look at the Milky Way, is a cross-section of this immense, disk-shaped galaxy.

So is heaven, “up there,” as the ancients imagined? We know it cannot be – for, as the astronauts discovered, once you leave the earth’s gravity behind, there is no longer up and down. There is only “out there,” extending in every direction. And “out there” seems to go on forever.

Does this hard scientific fact diminish the wonder of looking up at the night sky and thinking of heaven “up there”? No. If anything, it increases it. In the words of the ancient stargazer who wrote Psalm 8:

*“When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you can care for them?” (Psalm 8:3-4)*

II. What can we know for certain?

Is there a heaven? What can we know for certain? The answer to the first question is simple. What do you believe about the Bible? Is it God’s inspired Word or not? If you do not believe that the Bible is God’s Word, then you cannot be certain about heaven, and neither can you be certain that your sins are forgiven or that Christ died for you. If you do not believe that God’s Word is truth, then you have no foundation for your faith. It is like a concrete slab built over loose sand containing no steel rebar and no footers. It will crack, crumble, and give way. But if you believe that God’s Word is truth, then the Lord says your faith is like building your house on a rock. When the storms rage, the foundation will not fail. What, therefore, can we know about heaven?

People like to speculate about heaven. We will be like angels. We will carry harps. We will have halos over our heads. It all sounds nice but here is what we know for certain and it is certainly wonderful beyond anything!

There is a heaven. Scripture testifies to it over and over again. Jesus says: “In my Father’s house there are many rooms.” Paul says that everyone, living and dead, will be caught up on the last day to meet the Lord in the air.” The author of Hebrews says that the patriarchs “all died in the faith, not having received the things promised but they [were] seeking a homeland... Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city” (Hebrews 11:13-16).

We will live in that city. Although there are pearly gates, St. Peter will not be placed in front of one of them, sitting at a desk cumbered with a humongous ledger. He will not ask tricky questions to separate the wheat from the chaff. Christ has already done that. We know the way because we know Him – the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He has gone ahead of us to prepare a place for us, that where He is, we may be.

We will be sinless in heaven because Christ died and rose again for us. We have been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, and besides, nothing unclean will gain access. We have been issued the appropriate clothing, the perfect righteousness of Christ. He is our ticket.

When we arrive we will see God and the Lamb face-to-face. We will not need to peer through a veil or gaze at God through a mirror as if He were some type of Medusa. In our

perfect state, we will see God face-to-face. His glory will not burn our retinas. His presence will not annihilate us. His majesty will not crush us.

This is the reason there will be no temple or tabernacle in heaven. Those were places of sacrifice. Those were places where God made His glory known on earth. Those were places where people went to pray, sing, and glorify God. We will not require those things in heaven because God is there. His glory fills the place. We will be in His direct, immediate presence.

There will be a church in heaven, however. It will not be a Lutheran Church or any other denomination's church. It will be the holy church of Christ, the total of all the true believers. It will be Christ's bride. It will be the new Jerusalem. It will be the holy city. Christ will be the cornerstone; the teaching of the apostles will be the foundation, and the twelve sons of Israel will be gates bringing together Jews and Gentiles, males and females, slaves and free. It will be the body of Christ with Him as the head, brought together in mutual honor and service.

At my last congregation, I had two men who voluntarily spent two weeks replacing all the old fluorescent lights with LEDs. The LEDs are so power-efficient that it is almost like getting free light. However, that is something else that will not concern us in heaven. We will not require any lamps or lights, or sun or moon or stars for that matter because the glory of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – will fill the place. The eternal Word will be there, He who is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. There will be a brilliant light, an even light, a light that will reach every corner. There will be no darkness or shadows or treacherous places.

Bristol Village where my grandparents retired was a pleasant place, with small homes set amongst gently curving roads and the community building centrally located. Twenty years after purchasing a home in Bristol Village Grandpa died there after a short illness and Grandma moved away to live closer to my father. Bristol Village was a comfortable community but also a sad community many days. Spouses died, friends died, notable men and women died, and common men and women died. But, in heaven, no one will die because the eternal life we have now in Christ will be fully realized in heaven. God will wipe away every tear caused by death, separation, and the consequences of sin. Pain, death, grief, and sorrow will be things of the past, things forgotten. There will be no more of these, only joy and peace in the presence of the Lamb and God.

When Grandma moved from Bristol Village, Dad helped her pack things up. My father checked in the attic and found box after box after box filled with receipts. My grandfather, a former bank manager, had kept a record of just about every cent he had ever spent. Who knows what stories might have been contained in those records? My father disposed of all those receipts. They were liquidated. God has disposed of every one of our receipts, every record of

our sins. They are gone, forgotten in heaven. God reigns. The Lamb reigns. The Spirit reigns. And because they reign, heaven is a place of peace, joy, love, “[and] only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” will have access. We can know these things for certain. Amen.

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!