

SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 25 AUGUST 2019



What's Really Heavenly about Heaven?

Randy Alcorn

The 1998 movie *What Dreams May Come* portrays heaven as a beautiful but lonely place for Chris Nielsen (played by Robin Williams) because, although his children were there, his wife wasn't. Remarkably, someone else is entirely absent from the movie's depiction of heaven: *God*.

That movie's viewpoint mirrors numerous contemporary approaches to heaven which either leave God out or put him in a secondary role.

The Five People You Meet in Heaven, a best-selling novel by Mitch Albom, portrays a man who feels lonely and unimportant. He dies, goes to heaven, and meets five people who tell him his life really mattered. He discovers forgiveness and acceptance –

The Bible knows nothing of this pseudo-heaven.

all without God and without Christ as the object of saving faith.

This is a portrayal of a heaven that isn't about God and our relationship with him, but only about human beings and our relationships with each other. A heaven where humanity is the cosmic centre, and God plays a supporting role. The Bible knows nothing of this pseudo-heaven.

Numerous people claim to have gone to heaven and seen loved ones and even Jesus, yet almost never do they react as the beloved disciple, the apostle John, did: "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead" (Revelation 1:17).

Surely no one who had actually been in heaven would neglect to mention what Scripture shows is its main focus. If you had spent an evening dining with a king, you wouldn't just talk about the place settings. When John was shown heaven and wrote about it, he recorded the details – but first and foremost, from beginning to end, he kept talking about Jesus, the Lion and the Lamb, with infinite gravitas and beauty.

Honeymoon Without a Groom?

Jesus promised his disciples, "I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:3, NIV). For Christians, to die is "to be present with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8, NKJV).

The apostle Paul says, "I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far" (Philippians 1:23, NIV). He could have said, "I desire to depart and be in heaven," but he didn't – his mind was on being with Jesus.

Heaven without God would be like a honeymoon without a groom or a palace without a king. Teresa of Avila said, "Wherever God is, there is heaven." The corollary: Wherever God is not, there is hell.

The presence of God is the essence of heaven. John Milton put it, "Thy presence makes our paradise, and where thou art is heaven." Heaven will be a physical extension of God's goodness.

Samuel Rutherford said, "O my Lord Jesus Christ, if I could be in heaven without thee, it would be a hell; and if I could be in hell, and have thee still, it would be a heaven to me, for thou art all the heaven I want." To be with God – to know him, to see him – is the central, irreducible draw of heaven.

We may imagine we want a thousand different things, but God is the one we really long for.

Heaven's Greatest Miracle

The best part of heaven on the new earth will be enjoying God's presence. He'll actually dwell among us (Revelation 21:3-4). Just as the Holy of Holies contained the dazzling presence of God in ancient Israel, so will the New Jerusalem contain his presence. The new earth's greatest miracle will be our continual, unimpeded access to the God of everlasting splendour and perpetual delight.

What is the essence of eternal life? "That they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). The best part of heaven will be knowing and enjoying God.

Sam Storms writes, "We will constantly be more amazed with God, more in love with God, and thus ever more relishing his presence and our relationship with him. Our experience of God will never reach its consummation...It will deepen and develop, intensify and amplify, unfold and increase, broaden and balloon."

Reservoir That Never Runs Dry

Because he is beautiful beyond measure, if we knew nothing more than that heaven was God's dwelling place, it would be more than enough to make us long to be there.

Of course, we will enjoy all the secondary gifts God gives us, but they will be derivative of God himself,

and our happiness in them will be happiness in him. Jonathan Edwards said, "The redeemed will indeed enjoy other things...but that which they shall enjoy in the angels, or each other, or in anything else whatsoever, that will yield them delight and happiness, will be what will be seen of God in them."

"They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life" (Psalm 36:8-9). This passage portrays the joy that God's creatures find in feasting on heaven's abundance and drinking deeply of his delights. Notice that this river of delights flows

from and is completely dependent on its source: God. He alone is the fountain of life, and without him there could be neither life nor abundance nor any delights.

Ultimate Wonder

We may imagine we want a thousand different things, but God is the one we really long for. "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek

you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Psalm 63:1). God's presence brings satisfaction; his absence brings thirst and longing.

Our longing for heaven is a longing for God – a longing that involves not only our inner beings, but also our bodies. Being with God is the heart and soul of heaven. Every other heavenly pleasure will derive from and be secondary to his presence.

All our explorations and adventures and projects in the eternal heaven – and I believe there will be many – will pale in comparison to the wonder of being with God and entering into his happiness. Yet everything else we do will help us to know and worship God better.

God's greatest gift to us is now, and always will be, nothing less than himself.



Randy Alcorn is the founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries (EPM), a non-profit organization dedicated to teaching biblical truth and drawing attention to the needy and how to help them.

EPM exists to meet the needs of the unreached, unfed, unborn, uneducated, unreconciled and unsupported people around the world. www.epm.org

Source: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/heaven-would-be-hell-without-god>

For the complete library of St David's Articles, please go to rest.org.au

Kindly pass on this article.