

Heaven: A Closer Look
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Back in the old days, the days described by the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, what happened after death was of little importance. Your soul might be lurking around in *sheol*, but immortality came, if at all, through your children and descendants. By the time of Jesus, one faction of Jews believed in the resurrection of the dead, that is, some time in the future, history would come to an end, and the dead would be resurrected, brought back to life. This was the early Christian view. But over the centuries, belief in resurrection was mostly replaced, especially in the popular mind, by a belief in heaven, a realm to which the fortunate ascended immediately at death. The alternative was hell, and you certainly would not want to go there.¹

There were, or there are, in Christianity, four theories about who goes where.

1. First, heaven is the reward for good behavior during life.
2. Second, heaven is not a reward for good behavior but the free gift of God, to those whose faith is in Jesus Christ.
3. Third, God has decided, before the beginning of time, who goes where, and there's nothing you can do about.

¹ See generally Lisa Miller, *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife* (2010); see also Shirley Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine* (rev. ed. 1994), ch. 19, "What's Going to Happen to Us? The Doctrine of the Christian Hope for the Future."

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4. Fourth is the Universalist idea – this is our heritage – everyone goes to heaven; everyone is ultimately reconciled to God.²

In Eastern religions, I'm thinking of Hinduism in particular, reincarnation is the prevailing theory. After you die you are reborn as someone else, and before you were born you had other lives. Reincarnation is in fact quite popular in the United States: nearly 30% of Americans, presumably including many Christians, say they believe in reincarnation.³

Reincarnation presents its own philosophical challenges, but this morning we'll focus on heaven.⁴ When I conducted an informal, unscientific survey, back in January, of what we expect to come next when we die, of 34 participants, no one picked heaven.

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Here's a question you may have been wondering about: When you're in heaven, how, if at all, do you learn about what's going on back on earth?⁵

One possibility is that you can watch whatever you want, whenever you want to, or even all the time. That sounds attractive, but I wonder how we would do this. Would each of us in heaven have some heavenly version of a television set? We could give it verbal instructions. "I want to watch the World Series game." "I want to watch my granddaughter's Little League game." "I want to watch the Sunday service at my old church."

This heavenly television set raises a number of questions. If we can watch events as they happen, can we also watch events from the past? Does God have it all stored up in God's memory – God, the omniscient computer in the sky? Or do we just have one chance at it, in real time? (By the way, what time zone is heaven in?) Can we watch anything, or are we restricted to our own family, or to activities that we were involved in?

Or instead of the magical television set, can we have a ghostly presence – right there, where the action is, but unaffected by it and unobserved?

If we can keep up with family and friends left behind, we would want to be able to communicate with them. I don't know about you, but I've never received a message from

² See Philip Gulley & James Mulholland, *If Grace Is True: Why God Will Save Every Person* (2003).

³ See Miller, p. 234.

⁴ See my sermon "What's Next?," UUs of Gettysburg, 1/10/16.

⁵ See Miller, p. 198.

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anyone who has died. But perhaps the dead have a way of planting ideas in our brains without our knowing where they come from. Can you prove that they don't?

You may have thought of this already: invasion of privacy. Either with the magical television set, or as ghosts, can we see what we shouldn't? – your widow with your successor, for example. Or complete strangers. Would it bother you, as a live person, to think that ghosts might be watching you, at any time of the day or night?

If we can see what's going on back on earth, how would what we have access to be regulated or controlled?

More generally, how would we get information about earthly events? Could we listen to NPR? Subscribe to the New York Times? Have access to the Internet? Or perhaps our sole source of information would be new arrivals.

Of course, another possibility is that we are cut off completely from the world that you and I inhabit now. The newly deceased – the new entrants in heaven – don't share any news with us. Even more extreme, consider the possibility that our memory of our lives and of this world is completely wiped out as we walk through the pearly gates upstairs. That would be disappointing. No, that's not quite right. The first problem is that if all your memory is wiped out, you would not be aware of it, you wouldn't know what you're missing. The second problem is, in what sense would it still be *you*?

Even if we do retain our memory of our time on earth, I should think that after a while, a few centuries perhaps, or a few millennia, after a while we would lose interest in what we've left behind. If heaven is worthy of its name, it has to have something that will hold our attention and make us appreciative of being there.

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Let's look at another aspect of life in heaven – or should I say, of death in heaven? Will there be conflict there? Surely not, heaven is, well, heaven, after all. It's the good place, with the imperfections and hassles of earth and this life left behind. But heaven without at least a little conflict sounds boring. There will be other people there, right? We won't have it all to ourselves. If there are numerous people – two or more, I should think – then conflict is inevitable. We won't all think alike on everything. If there isn't conflict, that would mean that we don't have free will. We're more like spectators than actors. This doesn't sound attractive.

“Nearly half of Americans,” according to a Gallup poll, “believe they'll see family and friends in the next life.”⁶ That raises the question, what age will we all be when we reach heaven? An obvious answer might be, we'll be at whatever age we've reached when we die.

⁶ 1982 Gallup poll, Miller, p. 186.

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But what fun is that? I don't think I'll be at my best when I'm 95. And what about the child who dies at five? Do we get to choose our age? Are we all at the age we were when we were at our prime? I'm not sure what that would be. Or are we somehow ageless? Do we continue to age once we're there, or do we stay as we were when we arrived? Are we all assigned the age of 35 when we arrive, and we stay 35 forever?

What about members of our family? I would expect my parents to be older than I am, about a generation older. And I would expect my grandparents to be older still. But I don't suppose my grandmother wants to be a 95-year-old in heaven any more than I do. Will our children and grandchildren be appropriately younger than we are?

Then there's the question that Jesus was confronted with, in Matthew, chapter 22⁷ – suppose a person has seven spouses (one at a time, we will assume) – which one are they married to in heaven? Let's assume it's the last one; let's call her Ann. But Ann's last spouse wasn't you, it was Bob, and Bob's last spouse wasn't Ann but Charles. It gets complicated. Or perhaps we get to pick the favorite spouse. Deborah's favorite spouse was Ed, but Ed's favorite was Frank.

Of course, if we expect to be in heaven a long time, a *very* long time, actually, we might want to spend a few decades with each of our ex-spouses. Indeed, we might find someone we had never met on earth. Maybe Jesus was right when he said there would be no marriage. But I don't think he had in mind free love and promiscuity.

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Another possibility is that everyone gets just the life – or whatever we should call it – just the life they want in heaven. Do you want streets paved with gold? You've got it. Now, I don't think that getting the heaven we want would present a problem, at least at first, as long as we believe that everything in our heaven is the real thing. But, sooner or later, some of us, at least, would start wondering why everything is always just the way *we* want it, while others must inevitably suffer disappointments. That means either that we are the favored one, or, more likely, each of us has our own heaven. The other people who appear to be there, our old friends and relatives, aren't the people they seem to be – *they* are in their own heavens. The people

⁷ The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.' Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother. The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh. Last of all, the woman herself died. In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her." Jesus answered them, "You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven." (Matthew 22:23-30)

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who populate your heaven are just props, though they seem real. And presumably *you* have look-alike props in the heavens of others.

Always having everything just the way we want it turns out not to be as satisfying as one might think beforehand. Where's the challenge? Where's the satisfaction of achievement, of overcoming obstacles? Do we want the responsibility? Deciding how everything should be could become burdensome, and we could make decisions that we later regret. When we've noticed that others don't get their way the way we do, we could decide that what we want is a world in which everyone gets just what they want. It won't take very long for you to discover that this arrangement has its drawbacks as well. We can't all have our favorite team win the World Series.

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As I mentioned, nearly half of Americans believe they'll see family members again in heaven, but what about pets? Forty-three percent of us expect to be reunited with pets as well.⁸ Well, why not? The life of a dog tends to be a lot shorter than the life of a human. Thus while most of us have only one mother and one father, we might well have seven dogs in the course of our life. Do all seven go to heaven? It wouldn't be fair for one to make it and for the others to be left behind. But do you really want to have seven dogs in your heavenly household? Is there a large heavenly animal shelter in the sky for unwanted pets?

If our dogs and cats are with us, up there, what about cows and pigs? And where does food come from – I assume we'll still have to eat. Or at least we'll still want to eat. What fun would heaven be without raspberries, and a good steak once in a while? And in heaven you don't have to worry about cholesterol clogging your arteries – you're already dead. You can't die again, can you?

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Maybe you can. Swedenborg, the 18th century mystical religious leader, taught that "Heaven is indistinguishable from this world to the degree that people don't realize they've died."⁹ If heaven is that much like earth, then we'll need the cows and pigs, since we eat them. A heaven where everyone is a vegetarian would be suspicious. A heaven that is indistinguishable from our world would be a heaven with hard work, disappointments, inequality, oppression, crime, hunger, coal mine disasters, tornados, earthquakes. I thought you were supposed to get away from all that.

⁸ Miller, p. 202.

⁹ Miller, p. 194.

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And if heaven is indistinguishable from earth, there must be death in heaven. I see three choices here. First, when you die in heaven, you go on to another heaven that's just like earth, and another one after that, and so on. Second, when you die in this Swedenborgian heaven you end up in a more traditional heaven, where it's clear where you are. Or, third, when you have your second death, then you're really dead. The end.

But let's go back to the dogs and cats, and the cows and pigs. If they get to heaven, how about rabbits and robins, bumble bees and spiders, algae and corals? If a tree, when it dies, goes to heaven, does it suddenly just pop up? Or does it start over again? Perhaps there's a separate area especially reserved for newly arriving trees.

Now, some of you, you don't have to raise your hands, but some of you have been thinking about the suicide bombers – and the 72 virgins that await them when their deed is done and they've gone to their reward.¹⁰ The virgins, by the way, are of whatever gender the suicide bomber requests.

Where do all these virgins come from? Are they people who have died as virgins? Or are they, once again, heavenly props, especially created for this duty? They can't all be octogenarian Catholic nuns, can they? Or priests. Is their participation voluntary? What happens to them when they've completed their assignment? Is their virginity restored, so they're available for the next suicide bomber? What does the suicide bomber do when he's had a turn with each of the 72? He'll be in heaven a long time, after all. Does he pick a favorite? On this you might check the Book of Esther in the Bible.

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Let's conclude with another story by David Eagleman, "Metamorphosis."¹¹

Final death is that moment, sometime in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time.

¹⁰ Thomas Cathcart & Daniel Klein, *Heidegger and a Hippo Walk Through Those Pearly Gates: Using Philosophy (and Jokes!) to Explore Life, Death, the Afterlife, and Everything in Between* (2009), pp. 131-32.

¹¹ David Eagleman, "Metamorphosis," *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives* (2009), p. 23 (abridged and edited). (A reading earlier in the service was his "Egalitaire," p. 5.) To go deeper, see, e.g., Philip Kitcher, "Mortality and Meaning," in *Life after Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism* (2014); Samuel Scheffler *et al.*, *Death & the Afterlife* (2013); Robert Nozick, "Dying," in *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (1989); Bernard Williams, "The Makropulas Case; Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *Problems of the Self* (1973); Thomas Nagel, "Death," in *Mortal Questions* (1970).

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So you wait in this lobby. There are people here from all around the world, and with a little effort you can strike up convivial small talk. Just be aware that your conversation may be interrupted at any moment by the Callers, who broadcast your new friend's name to indicate that there will never again be another remembrance of her by anyone on the Earth. Your friend slumps, face like a shattered and reglued plate, saddened even though the Callers tell her kindly that she's off to a better place. No one knows where that better place is or what it offers, because no one exiting through that door has ever returned to tell us. Tragically, many people leave just as their loved ones arrive, since the loved ones were the only ones doing the remembering.

Not everyone is sad when the Callers enter the room and shout out the next list of names. On the contrary, some people beg and plead, prostrating themselves at the Callers' feet. These are generally the folks who have been here a long time, too long, especially those who are remembered for unfair reasons.

For example, take the farmer over there, who drowned in a small river two hundred years ago. Now his farm is the site of a small college, and the tour guides each week tell his story. So he's stuck and he's miserable. He is utterly alienated from his name; it is no longer identical with him but continues to bind.

He waits with aching heart for the college to go broke. And that is the curse of this room: since we live in the heads of those who remember us, we lose control of our lives and become who they want us to be.