

How do we know that Heaven exists?

September 11, 2022 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

Today we have our final Q from the Pew and it seems a fitting place to end because it has to do with happens at the end -

What do we know about Heaven? What will it be like? How do we know we'll get there? How do we know it exists?

Those are great questions and important ones too. Because Heaven is the goal, right? It's the promise that keeps pulling us forward, no matter what we experience here on earth.

I've said this before but it's like me in an airport. I hate travelling. Drives me crazy. But if I know there's somewhere warm and sunny at the other end, then it gives me strength to deal with the inconvenience and frustration of getting through the airport. Same here, knowing that Heaven lies ahead gives us the strength to persevere, no matter what comes our way.

So, we need to have a robust confidence in Heaven. Which is what these questions are getting at.

What do we know about Heaven? What will it be like? How do we know we'll get there? How do we know it exists?

We'll address all of those today, but I think we need to start with the last one first, because it's really the foundation that all the others are built on. Because if Heaven exists, then, good, we can talk about what it will be like and how we get there, but if it's not for real, then the other questions are kind of moot aren't they?

So let's start here. How do we know that Heaven exists?

Admittedly, it's not something that a lot of people have written about – most of what I've seen tends to focus on what it will be like – but I think that there are at least four good reasons to believe that Heaven exists. And admittedly, none of them can prove scientifically that Heaven exists, the way that I could prove scientifically that the planet Neptune exists, but then again, science can only prove how this world works and Heaven doesn't belong to this world.

There are hints thought that Heaven exists and I'll give you four. They are – 1. Near death experiences, 2. Cross cultural belief, 3. The character of Jesus and 4. The flow of the Bible. Those things together I think give us quantifiable reasons to believe in the existence of Heaven on top of the conviction that it exists because the Bible says it does.

So first, near death experiences. I want to be careful here because it's easy to get carried off in all different directions when you start talking about near-death experiences, but it does seem as though these near death experiences (or NDEs) point to the existence of an afterlife. In the words of James Garlow and Keith Wall, two pastors who have spent a lot of time studying near death experiences, 'God in His grace seems to grant some people glimpses of Heaven.'¹

The reason that they say that is that most people who have near death experiences report remarkably similar things. Jeffrey Long, a radiation oncologist and founder of the Near Death Experience Research

Foundation, has spent years studying the reports that people post on his foundation's website. He has identified a series of characteristics that are common to most people's experience – for example, a lucid well organized experience of going through a tunnel, seeing a light, having their lives reviewed in some way.ⁱⁱ

Many people experience out-of-body sensations and the stories he tells about these are pretty wild. Like a person close to death seeing their body from above and also a red sticker on the upper side of a fan in the room.ⁱⁱⁱ Or a person was out of body and saw a tennis shoe on a window sill on the other side of the hospital which a nurse later found.^{iv} Or a man who came into the hospital unconscious and remained unconscious the whole time he was near death and then afterwards asked a nurse to get his dentures out of a particular drawer that he saw another nurse put his dentures into – all while 'out of body.'^v

What's more, children who have NDEs describe their experiences the same way that adults do. And people from other cultures describe their experiences the same way that Westerners do too, which suggests that they're not just reporting the stereotypical 'near death things' that you see on Western TV screens. NDEs seem to share similar characteristics, regardless of cultural or religious preconditions, which led Scott McKnight to say 'NDEs and OBEs provide a cautious affirmation that life continues after death.'^{vi}

Now, that being said, the field of NDE research has a lot of critics. Since the 1980s, scientists have theorized that NDEs occur as a kind of physiological defense mechanism by the brain and apparently a lot of the sensations described in NDEs can be triggered by drugs like ketamine.^{vii} It may be that the brain releases chemicals which cause these experiences and that's what's happening. And it certainly doesn't help that some people who have written books about their NDE have later admitted to have made them up. A kid named Alex Malarkey wrote a book called 'The boy who came back from heaven;' Tyndale Publishers later pulled the book from bookshelves after he admitted to making it up to get attention. (Maybe his name should have tipped them off).^{viii}

We have to be very careful when dealing with NDEs, but when we do, I think they hint at the reality of heaven by suggesting that life doesn't just end when we die. That's one line of evidence to consider.

A second is this – the cross cultural belief in an afterlife. NDE's appear to not be culturally bound which fits into the larger reality that most people, spread across most times and places, have believed in some sort of afterlife and heaven.

Randy Alcorn puts it well:

"The sense that we will live forever somewhere has shaped every civilization in human history. Australian aborigines pictured Heaven as a distant island beyond the western horizon. The early Finns thought it was an island in the faraway east. Mexicans, Peruvians, and Polynesians believed that they went to the sun or the moon after death.... Although these depictions of the afterlife differ, the unifying testimony of the human heart throughout history is belief in life after death. Anthropological evidence suggests that every culture has a God-given, innate sense of the eternal—that this world is not all there is."^{ix}

Every culture has its own beliefs, right? The ancient Greeks believed that everything was made up of some combination of earth, wind, water and fire. Medieval Europeans believed that holding something

sweet smelling in front of your nose would counter act the bad gases that cause illness and plague. I grew up on a beef farm so I eat hamburgers and love my dog; some of my neighbours are from very different cultures and they would never eat a cow or pet a dog because they are sacred or unclean. Just because a culture believes something doesn't mean that it's right. But when many cultures, in many times and many places hold to a common idea, it certainly suggests that there is some truth to it.

And the almost universal conviction that there is some sort of Heaven suggests that Ecclesiastes 3:11 is right – God has placed eternity in our human hearts and we are all longing for that eternal life. The shared belief in the existence of Heaven certainly suggests that it is real.

That's our second line of evidence; the third line of evidence that suggests that Heaven is real is the character of Jesus. Jesus said a lot about Heaven; He came from Heaven and went back to Heaven so He's kind an expert in all things Heaven.

At various times and in various ways, Jesus promised us Heaven. John 14:1 for example, Jesus says: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. 2 In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.

3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am (John 14:1-3 NIV).

Jesus here makes us a promise. 'I am going to prepare an eternal dwelling place. Where I will be for eternity is where you will be.' Jesus promises us Heaven; can He break that promise? Is it in His nature to lie?

No, it's not and no, He can't. He can't break promises, He can't tell lies any more than an apple dropped from my hand could go up. First of all, He is God and so He CAN'T lie - 19 "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (Num 23:19 NIV). As God, Jesus is literally incapable of breaking promises.

What's more, the Gospel of John says that He is Truth personified – Jesus says "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). If Jesus says "I am preparing a place for you, HE IS PREPARING A PLACE FOR YOU." He not only believed in Heaven, He promised to get us there, and Jesus is not one to break His promises.

That's my third line of evidence that Heaven exists – a pretty logical one – my fourth line of evidence is a logical one too – the flow of the Bible.

I mean think about it – what did God do at the very beginning? He created everything to be perfect. The Garden of Eden was like Heaven on Earth – everything we could ever need, no crying, no sorrow, no pain.

And then what did we do? We messed it up. We fell. We said, 'God this is lovely but we know better than You.'

But what did God do? He redeemed us, the caretakers of Creation. He sent His Son into the world to lay down His life for us to restore us to Him and to the life we were created to have in the first place.

What remains yet for God to do? Well, what's happened so far? God made everything the way it should be. We came along and messed it all up. God in response redeemed US – what then logically follows? God redeems Creation. He puts it back to the way it was when everything was 'very good.' Here's the logic – God made Heaven on earth, we broke it, God restored us... it logically follows that God will restore Creation.

And that's why Paul says in Romans 8:20-22 that all of creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth, eagerly awaiting the time when it will be liberated from its bondage to decay and restored to the perfection that God made it to have, in the beginning.

God made Heaven on Earth, we broke it; God restored us, God will restore Heaven on Earth.

And here's where we need to nuance our understanding of Heaven. Because for a lot of people, Heaven is off on the clouds, eating cream cheese or something. It's this spiritual place that we go to and to a degree, that's true. That's where saints go now when they die – if you died tomorrow, trusting in Jesus, then you would enter into the presence of God in the 'for now' Heaven.

But that's not our final destination. That's not the Heaven that pulls us forward through the inconveniences and frustrations of life. The Heaven that Jesus promised us is not some place that we go off to when we die; the Heaven that God promises is nothing less than Heaven come to us – the place that Jesus goes to prepare for us is the New Heavens and the New Earth. This world, restored to the perfection that God made it to have, in the beginning.

It's what God says in Isaiah 65:17: 17 "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind." It's what Peter says in 2 Peter 3:13: 13 "But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2Pe 3:13 NIV).

The Heaven that we are looking forward to is THIS WORLD, restored. 'Creation on steroids,'^x remade in the footprint of the original Creation. If God created everything perfect, and then we messed it up, and then He redeemed us, it follows that He will redeem what we messed up and that means putting Creation back to the perfect state that He made in the beginning, and that's the new heavens and the new earth.

As Randy Alcorn says: "God never gave up on his original plan for human beings to dwell on Earth. In fact, the climax of history will be the creation of new heavens and a New Earth, a resurrected universe inhabited by resurrected people living with the resurrected Jesus" (Revelation 21:1-4).^{xi} The flow of the Bible: Creation – Fall – restoration of fallen people – restoration of fallen creation, seems to be to be evidence for the reality of Heaven. If God redeemed us then He will redeem the earth and make it Heaven.

So, for my part, those are four lines of evidence that I think point to the reality of Heaven. We can know that Heaven exists because of NDEs, cross cultural belief, the character of Jesus and the flow of the Bible. I know that we all process information differently, so I've given you Scott McKnight's list of nine reasons to believe, in case one of those resonates more powerfully with you than it did for me.

And there does come a point where we have to take it on faith that Heaven does exist. God says that Heaven exists and God cannot lie so it must exist. You can see right there - Scott McKnight's number

one reason to believe in the existence of Heaven is ‘because Jesus and the apostles did.’ He says “I’m not ashamed to say they know more than I do, and neither am I ashamed that if it was good enough for them, it is good enough for me.”^{xii}

We take it on faith that Heaven exists, on top of the evidence provided by NDEs, cross cultural experience, the trustworthiness of Jesus and the flow of the Bible.

So that being said, let’s take a few minutes and address the other questions that this person has asked – one, what will it be like? and two, how do we know we’ll get there?

The first one: What will it be like? Well, it won’t be floating around on clouds, eating cream cheese. There’s decent reason to believe that there’ll be cream cheese; Randy Alcorn spends three or four pages arguing quite successfully I think that there will be coffee in Heaven^{xiii} (pew!). The logic is – anything that God created – coffee trees for coffee beans, cows for dairy, pigs for bacon – anything that God created in this world and put under our stewardship will probably exist in the perfected version of this world that is the Heaven that we are looking forward to. It will be a place of rest and peace and worship and exploration. Randy Alcorn writes:

“It’ll be a place where we’re constantly discovering—where everything is always fresh, and possession of a thing is as good as the pursuit of it. Yet it’s the place where we’ll be fully at home—where everything is as it ought to be and where we find, undiminished, that mysterious something we never fully found in this life.”^{xiv}

Everything good about this world will be there, but nothing bad. Imagine a sign on the gates of Heaven that says – NO MORE! [No more tears] There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (That’s Rev 21:4 NIV).

A tenth century Irish writing^{xv} fills that out –

“[Heaven will be] a kingdom without pride, or vanity, or falsehood, or outrage, or deceit, or pretence, or blushing, or shame, or reproach, or insult, or envy, or arrogance, or pestilence, or disease, or poverty, or nakedness, or death, or extinction, or hail, or snow, or wind, or rain, or din, or thunder, or darkness, or cold.

[But this WILL be]

a noble, admirable, ethereal realm, endowed with the wisdom, and radiance, and fragrance of a plenteous land, wherein is the enjoyment of every excellence.”^{xvi}

Heaven will be everything good about this world and nothing bad.

And that applies to our bodies too. 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says that our bodies now are perishable; our eternal bodies in the new heavens and new earth will be imperishable. What is now natural will become spiritual. It is sown in weakness it is raised in power. Dick Archer’s going to get up and run a race like Usain Bolt.

Randy Alcorn writes:

“No arthritis, no handicaps, no cancer, no taxes, no bills, no computer crashes, no weeds, no bombs, no drunkenness, no traffic jams and accidents, no septic-tank backups. No mental illness. No unwanted e-mails.”^{xvii}

Heaven will be everything good about this world because it is God’s restored Creation, just like He made it, in the beginning.

So that brings us to the million dollar question. How do we know we’ll get there? How do we know that we will be among those who dwell with the Lord forever?

Well, for one, we receive the gift of salvation that Jesus secured for us when He came to live and die and rise again. John 20:31, John writes - 31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (Joh 20:31 NIV).

When we take the Bible seriously and turn from sin to trust in Jesus, we are promised a place in the Father’s house as Jesus says.

But how do we know we’ll make it? I mean, you qualify for Heaven by faith, but there’s a long way between now and then, how do we know we’ll get to Heaven?

Well, that’s where 1 Peter 1 comes in – verse 3-5:

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (1Pe 1:3-5 NIV).

Let’s tease that out – Because of His mercy, God has given us new birth. He has given us an active hope because Jesus’ resurrection means that death is not the end. And not only has He given us new birth, He has given us an inheritance – and what’s that inheritance like? It can never perish, spoil or fade and it is kept in Heaven for you. It’s not like the thing that gets kept in the back of the fridge and starts to go bad; no God is actively preserving your eternal inheritance and that’s not all He’s preserving. He’s preserving YOU – by faith, you are being SHIELDED by God’s power, until the day that you live forever with the Lord. Like I said on the first Good Friday during COVID, “We have hope because nothing can keep us from the eternal life that God is keeping for us.”^{xviii}

We will get to Heaven and the reward that is waiting for us because God Himself is keeping it for us and keeping us safe along the way.

So, one, is there evidence that Heaven exists? Yes and you have a whole range of arguments to explore. Two, what will Heaven be like? Like our own world now, but perfect in every way. Three, will we get there? You bet. If your trust is in Jesus – and you’re living it out – your final breath will not be the last one on this earth. We will dwell in the new heavens and the new earth forever.

Nothing can keep us from the eternal life that God is keeping for us.

ⁱ Quoted in Scott McKnight, *The Heaven Promise*, 144.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6172100/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Recounted in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Heaven*, 64.

^{iv} Strobel, 66.

^v Strobel, 67.

^{vi} McKnight, 144.

^{vii} <https://time.com/68381/life-beyond-death-the-science-of-the-afterlife-2/>

^{viii} <https://relevantmagazine.com/culture/books/read-the-aftermath-of-what-happened-after-the-boy-who-came-back-from-heaven-said-he-made-it-all-up/>

^{ix} Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, 4.

^x McKnight, in Strobel, 108.

^{xi} Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, 4.

^{xii} McKnight, 189.

^{xiii} “Given these biblical perspectives—and realizing that caffeine addiction or anything else that’s unhealthy simply won’t exist on the New Earth—can you think of any persuasive reason why coffee trees and coffee drinking wouldn’t be part of the resurrected Earth?” Alcorn, Randy. *Heaven* (Alcorn, Randy) (p. 297). Tyndale House Publishers. Kindle Edition.

^{xiv} Randy Alcorn, *Biblical Answers to Common Questions: Heaven* (booklet), 27.

^{xv} https://www.yorku.ca/inpar/adamnain_boswell.pdf

^{xvi} The idea of a ‘No Mores’ sign and the Irish writing are found in McKnight, 84-85.

^{xvii} Alcorn, *Biblical Answers* booklet, 35.

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