

Where Is Heaven? And When Does It Start?

1. Warm-up Question: If it were up to you to decide where to locate heaven, where would you choose?

2. Christians have different opinions about where heaven is and when it starts. First let's tackle the question of when. Christians agree that heaven already exists as an ongoing enterprise somewhere right now. But that leaves the question: When will we get to be there? Here are three different viewpoints about what happens when we die:
 - ✓ **Sleep Theory.** We sleep in the dust of the earth until the end of the age, then rise to be with Christ in heaven. Examples: Daniel 12:2-3 and John 5:25-29.
 - ✓ **Immediate Theory.** We are immediately with God in heaven the moment we die. Examples: II Corinthians 5:6-8 and Luke 23:39-43
 - ✓ **Hybrid Theory.** Our soul is immediately with God when we die, but our body sleeps in the grave until the end of the age, when it will be transformed and reunited with our soul in heaven. Example: I Thessalonians 5:13-18.

- a. Does it bother you that Christians don't agree on something so important? Why or why not?

- b. Which of these theories was taught in the churches of your past?

- c. Which of these theories most appeals to you – and why?

- d. Read Professor Long's quote on p. 3 and discuss the question stated there.

- e. Read the excerpt from the *Smithsonian Magazine* found on p. 3 and discuss the question stated there.

- f. Jeff told a story about a dog who sprang through a doorway into an unknown room without any fear because the dog heard his master's voice from inside the room and knew, if his master was there, nothing else mattered. Jeff said, "It's important as people of faith that we realize we don't have to know everything – that we accept that we're not going to be able to figure everything out. Get comfortable with not knowing." How do you feel about not knowing? Does it make you anxious not knowing exactly what's going to happen when we die?

- g. Edicio de la Torre said, "If we look at our life as some precious treasure we must hoard, the demands made by others on our life are like losses. And death is a final loss, a final failure to hold on to our life. But if we look at our life as a treasure we must share, every service we give to others is a fulfillment of our life's purpose. And death is the final giving, the total giving." When you're time comes to die, do you think you'll have enough trust to gladly surrender to the unknown?

3. Christians also have different ideas about where heaven will be located. Here are three different viewpoints:
- ✓ **Out There.** Heaven is way ‘out there’ somewhere beyond our galaxy. Examples: Genesis 28:12 and Revelation 4:1.
 - ✓ **Right Here.** Heaven will be right here on a new earth fashioned by God at the end of the age. Example: Revelation 21:1-7.
 - ✓ **Both.** Heaven is wherever God is, and because God can be everywhere, heaven will be multi-locational, including right here and way out there.
- a. Which of these three theories most appeals to you – and why?
- b. Jeff recounted a conversation between Dr. Irwin Moon and a leading agnostic scientist. The agnostic argued that if heaven is beyond the known cosmos, it would take a human who dies thousands of light years to get there. Dr. Moon reminded the scientist of the notion in physics that matter is porous, which means it’s possible for something that appears solid to be mostly space and thus it would be possible for different worlds to occupy the same space if they were synchronized on different frequencies. When the agnostic scientist agreed, Dr. Moon said, “To go to heaven, I may not have to move an inch. All I’ll have to do is change frequencies.” What do you think about the idea that heaven may be right here among us, but exist on frequencies and in dimensions we cannot currently perceive?
- c. In Luke 17:20, Jesus said, “Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming. Jesus answered, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!” For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.’” What did Jesus mean? What does it mean to say that the kingdom of God is already “among us”?
- d. Read Matthew 17:1-8. Here the disciples see Jesus in his heavenly glory and two “dead” prophets (Elijah and Moses) alive and well and conversing with Jesus. What does this suggest about where heaven (and our dead relatives) are located?
- e. Jeff said, “Perhaps heaven is closer than we realize. Maybe it’s already right here among us, but on a frequency and in dimensions we cannot perceive, except for those rare times when the curtain is briefly pulled back and we catch a glimpse of something heavenly” – like an angel, or a dead relative, or a miracle of God’s presence in our life, as Natalie Garibian experienced when she was homesick in Paris and miraculously met her great aunt. When in your life have you experienced something that felt like a close encounter with heaven right here among us?
4. Based on all we’ve discussed, how would you personally answer someone who asked you: Where is heaven? And when does it start?

Professor Thomas Long, Candler School of Theology

“There are two images in the New Testament about what happens [when we die]. First, the Resurrection Day, when the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised incorruptible. If you only had that image, we would imagine that when people die, they lie in some intermediate state awaiting the great Resurrection Day.

The other image, however, is that death [has] no victory over us at all. As soon as we die, we’re with God. We get this in the Book of Revelation where John looks up and already the saints who have died are praising God around the throne. In terms of linear time, we can’t work this out. We’ve got these two competing images: You either wait until the general resurrection [at the end of the age] or you go immediately to be with God.

But the imposition of linear time on what is an eternal idea is what creates the contradiction. I don’t try to make a theologian out of Einstein, but he did show us that events that happen in sequence can also . . . happen simultaneously. If Einstein can imagine that in terms of physics, theologians can imagine it also in terms of the intrusion of eternity into linear time – that we are both immediately raised and [will wait to be] raised together.”

Question: Einstein’s Theory of Relativity suggests that events that happen sequentially from one perspective can happen simultaneously when viewed from a different perspective. Building off this, Professor Long suggests that something that appears sequential from an earthly perspective (death now, resurrection later) might actually be simultaneous when viewed from an eternal perspective. Do you think he’s on to something? Why or why not?

Excerpt from *Smithsonian Magazine* (2018)

“According to string theory, one of the leading physics models of the last half century, the universe operates with 10 dimensions, [not just the four we can perceive]. But that raises a big question: If there are 10 dimensions, why don’t we experience all of them? Why can’t we detect all of them? Lisa Grossman at *Science News* reports that [scientists believe] that the extra dimensions are so tiny and so fleeting we currently can’t detect them.

It’s difficult to completely explain the mathematics behind string theory without putting on a graduate seminar, but in essence dimensions five through ten have to do with possibility and include all possible futures and all possible pasts including realities with a totally different physics than those in our universe.”

Question: How does it make you feel to realize that there may be six dimensions of reality happening all around us right now that we simply cannot perceive? What does that suggest for our ability to understand questions of the ultimate reality of heaven?