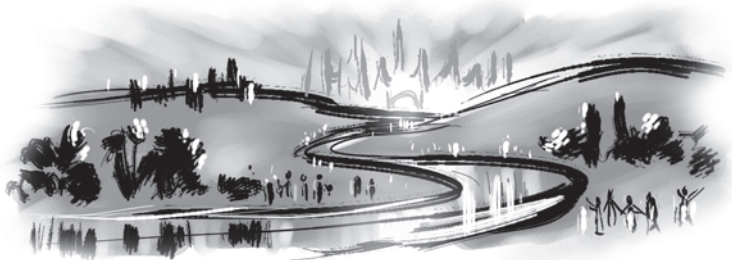


Heaven



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eccles. 9:5, 6; Col. 1:10–14; 1 Thess. 4:13–18; Rev. 21:1–4, 8.*

Memory Text: “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. . . . I will come back and take you to be with me” (*John 14:2, 3, NIV*).

For many the word *heaven* has become meaningless, a concept that belongs to the realm of fairy tales. We delude ourselves, they say, if we think there is some kind of life beyond this earthly existence. Some go so far as to say that it is positively wrong to tell people that there is a heaven. They argue that it keeps people from putting all their efforts into what they could achieve in life here and now.

Even many Christians struggle with the concept. They are not so sure that heaven is a real place. Should *heaven*, rather, be interpreted as a *state of mind*? On the other hand, there are many who believe that at death the soul is released and enters heaven to live with God. They are confident that their father, mother, husband, wife, or child—who has preceded them in death—is now with God in heaven and that a few years at most separate them from a reunion with their loved ones.

What’s the truth on this important topic?

The Week at a Glance: Why is the promise of heaven so important to us? What will life be like there? How can we experience a foretaste of it now? What destiny awaits those whose choices exclude them from heaven?

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 30.*

When Do We Get to Heaven?

It is quite astonishing that the idea of an immortal soul—which is separable from our physical body and which ascends to heaven right at death—has become so dominant among Christians. Satan’s lie in Eden was: “ ‘You will not surely die.’ ” (*Gen. 3:4, NIV*).

What do the following passages teach us about the true nature of death?

- 1 Kings 11:21
- Ps. 13:3
- Eccles. 9:5, 6
- 1 Cor. 15:51

When we die, we enter into a state of unconsciousness that the Bible compares to sleep. Unaware of what happens in the world, we await the morning of the resurrection. Only then will the great multitude of the redeemed enter heaven to join the very few, such as Enoch and Elijah, who have preceded them! But it is not going to be a long wait. The moment we close our eyes in death, the next thing we know will be Christ at His second coming. In other words, as far as those who die in Christ are concerned, it will make no difference whether it was 3,000 years ago or the day before Christ returns. They close their eyes in death, and the next thing they are conscious of is Jesus returning to get them. It will seem, to them, instantaneous.

What is the glorious truth about our future entrance into the heavenly realm? *John 14:1–3, 1 Thess. 4:13–18.*

“In the New Testament the blessed hope never focuses on individual death, but always on the return of Christ and the resurrection and translation of the saints to meet Him together, at the same time. It is in this future, and not what happens at death, that saints can find comfort.”—Norman Gulley, *Christ Is Coming* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 1998), pp. 293, 294.

Why is the promise of heaven so important to us? If there were no heaven and this life were all there was, then what hope does anyone have at all?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *John 14:2, 3*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: What Jesus meant by saying that the kingdom of God is within you.

Feel: Encouraged knowing that life on earth is but a transient phase.

Do: Be focused on the face-to-face communion with your Creator God that awaits you when this life is over.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. The Kingdom Within Us (*Luke 17:21*)

When the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God would come, He responded that the kingdom was within us. What did He mean by that statement?

II. Not of the World (*John 15:19*)

We are God's children, and we are "not of the world." Yet, we are called to live in this world until Jesus returns. How can you best represent the kingdom of heaven while here on earth?

III. Focused on the Kingdom (*1 Cor. 13:12*)

A Because of our inability to comprehend the reality of heaven, we tend to place importance on tangible, earthly, material things. Satan uses our lack of comprehension to skew our view of life and our value system. Identify specific elements in your life that monopolize your time and attention.

B What can you do to stay focused on heaven despite the fact there is so little we know about it?

▶ **Summary:** Jesus assured His disciples that He was "going to prepare a place" for them. When discouragement and pessimism creep into your life, remember that your Creator is getting a place in heaven custom-ready just for you.

Heaven or Hell?

Not all people will be saved. Some will be eternally lost. Human beings have been created with a free will. Someone once expressed it like this: There are just two kinds of people—those who say, “Lord, Your will be done,” and those to whom the Lord says, “I have to respect your choice; your will be done!” In the end, no one asked to be born. We’re here only because we’ve been created without our consent. God offers us the hope of eternal life, if we choose it. If we don’t, then we will go back to the nothingness out of which we came. It’s, in the end, our own choice.

All humanity awaits one of two ultimate destinies. What are they? *Matt. 25:46; John 5:29; Rev 21:1–4, 8.*

Heaven is a reality. It is a place. It is where God lives together with the other Members of the Godhead and a host of unfallen angels. It also is where we will live if we remain on God’s side. When Christ returns and the first resurrection takes place, the resurrected saints will accompany their Lord to heaven, where they will remain for a thousand years (*Rev. 20:4–6*). After the thousand years a series of events will take place, culminating in the creation of a “new heaven” and a “new earth” (*Rev. 21:1*), where the redeemed will then live forever.

But hell also is a reality. The popular belief in a place where sinners will be tormented and burn for all eternity does not have biblical support. But neither has the popular idea that in the end all people are going to be saved. Those who reject the good news of salvation and refuse to be obedient to God will be judged and condemned and will face a death from which there is no resurrection ever. Those who believe that all people will be saved argue that a God of love will not allow anyone to lose out on eternal bliss. They have a point to the extent that God is, indeed, love personified and wants to save all men and women. But tragically, not all people want to be saved. Christ could not have expressed it any clearer: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned,” but He also added that “those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (*John 5:24, 29, NIV*).

It remains our choice. Heaven can be ours if we choose to believe in God and are willing to become disciples of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: This week’s lesson points to heaven’s reality and challenges us to live that hope.

Is there life after death? This question has been a persistent one throughout history. More than a third of the world’s population believes in reincarnation, the endless cycle of birth and death. Many would deny any future after death. But Christians take the future seriously and believe in heaven, although their views may differ.

When the gospel reached Thessalonica, believers accepted it wholeheartedly and believed that Jesus would return soon to take them home. But saints were dying, and Jesus had not come. Was their hope an empty dream? The First Epistle to the Thessalonians was penned to address that very question.

Consider This: Discuss what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–16 about living with Christ forever.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: From the moment Adam and Eve lost the Edenic paradise, every generation of God’s people has waited for the new heaven and the new earth as their eternal home. This hope is not a figment of imagination but a reality based on God’s promises. Peter wrote: “We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Pet. 3:13, NIV). Explore with the class the relationship between God’s promises and heaven’s reality.

Bible Commentary

Overview: The future is a major concern of Scripture; it views the future as part of God’s strategy to conclude the great controversy. Heaven is God’s promised destination for His people. Even as we await this finale in God’s plan, we need to reaffirm what heaven is and what its joys are.

I. Heaven: What Is It? (Review Revelation 21:1–3 with your class.)

Scripture provides two primary meanings to “heaven.” First, heaven is the

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The Kingdom—Now and Then

When we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, we enter into a new kind of existence. Although still subject to the results of sin—aging, sickness, and the temporary “sleep” of death—we have already, in a very real sense, received eternal life. It is important never to lose sight of that crucial fact. We have been born again and have a new life “in Christ.” Those who have declared their allegiance to Christ are “children” of God (*1 John 3:2, NIV*). They have “crossed over,” Jesus declares, “from death to life” (*John 5:24, NIV*). They have become of the kingdom of God as they have incorporated the kingdom values into their lives. They now have a different Master, and their ultimate focus is no longer on the things of this world but on the eternal city.

How did Jesus express the reality of the citizenship of the kingdom for His followers even in this world? *Luke 17:21, John 14:27.*

What confirmation of this truth do we find in the words of Paul? *Rom. 14:17, Col. 1:10–14.*

But this is not where it stops. What we experience of the reality of the heavenly kingdom while we are still on earth is only a foretaste of the “inheritance” that is to come. It makes us long for more. When Jesus comes in His glory, “all the nations” will be gathered before Him (*Matt. 25:32, NIV*). “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world’ ” (*vs. 34, NIV*). That is the moment God’s children have been waiting for. They will be home at last!

“Better than all the friendship of the world is the friendship of Christ’s redeemed. Better than a title to the noblest palace on earth is a title to the mansions our Lord has gone to prepare. And better than all the words of earthly praise will be the Savior’s words to His faithful servants, ‘Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’ *Matt. 25:34.*”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 374.

Go back over the texts for today. How have you experienced the reality of what is promised in them? What choices are you making that could be hindering you from truly enjoying what Christ offers you even now?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

dwelling place of God, from where He reigns and acts (*Deut. 26:15, 1 Sam. 2:10, Pss. 11:4, 53:2, 103:19, Isa. 6:1–4, 63:15, Matt. 5:16, Rev. 3:12, 11:13, 20:9*). Heaven is His throne, and earth is His footstool, with His rulership extending to all created order (*Isa. 66:1, Acts 7:49*). Heaven is the place where angels worship God continually and await to do His bidding (*Ps. 103:19, 20; Matt. 18:10; 22:30; Matt. 24:36; Rev. 3:5*). From heaven Jesus came (*John 3:13, 31; 6:38, 42*), and to heaven He ascended and functions as our Mediator (*Heb. 8:1, 9:24, 1 Pet. 3:22*). It is from there He will come again (*John 14:1–3*).

Second, heaven is the home of the redeemed (*John 14:1–3, 1 Thess. 4:17*). The plan of salvation reaches its final stage when the redeemed enter into the joy of the new heaven and the new earth where God Himself “will dwell with them” (*Rev. 21:1–3*).

The ultimate definition of heaven, then, is where God dwells. At the end, the new heaven and the new earth will become God’s dwelling place (*Rev. 21:1–3*) and the inheritance of the redeemed. Wouldn’t that be heaven, at last!

Discussion:

1 What are some of the differing views Christians have on heaven?


2 When do the saints inherit heaven?

II. Heaven—Its Joys! (*Review Revelation 21:1–8 with your class.*)

Four times in Revelation 21:1–8, John argues that the initiative and the fulfillment of this eternal home of the redeemed rest with God. He has staked His name, nature, and authority to validate His promises. To deny this possibility is to deny God. Where lies the joys of this heavenly home?

First, God Himself will dwell with us (*Rev. 21:3, 4*). The biblical concept of the new earth throbs with the single most important idea that God would be the dynamic of that order. The earth renewed will become the locus of His throne. Fellowship with God will be fully restored. That face-to-face communion will be the source of utmost joy and happiness for the saints (*Rev. 22:4*).

Second, former things—all associated with sin—will pass away (*Rev. 22:5, Isa. 65:17*). No more tears. No more pain. No more death. No more

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Beyond Our Wildest Expectation

Have you ever wondered how it will be in heaven and on the new earth? Will we recognize each other? Will we have eternal youth? What will we do when there? Will we have our own occupations? Or will we only sing God's praises? Will we travel to other places in the universe? How much will we remember of our earthly existence? We are not the first ones to ask such questions!

What did the Sadducees want to know about the life in the hereafter?
Matt. 22:23–28.

What did Jesus reply? *Matt. 22:29, 30.*

The statement of Jesus that is recorded in Matthew 22 was part of a discussion with the Sadducees. They were a group of Jewish leaders who denied the possibility of a bodily resurrection. It is clear that it was not Jesus' intention to give a full description of the conditions of eternal life. The context makes clear that Jesus wanted to emphasize that death has been conquered. He points beyond the reality of death and resurrection. Those who die are safe in His memory, and He can therefore still be called the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Nonetheless, Jesus' remark also clearly indicates that, in spite of all continuity, we will be raised with the unique identity that we had in this temporary life; there also will be plenty of discontinuity.

What are some of the things we will no longer experience in the earth made new? *Rev. 21:1, 4, 22–27; 22:5.*

Those of us who love vacationing on the seaside may be disappointed to learn that the sea will be “no more.” However, to the people who first heard these words, the sea was a threat. Israel never was a seafaring nation. For good reasons, it feared the dark depths of the oceans. And we know from several Gospel stories that even crossing the Sea of Galilee could be a scary experience. John the revelator tells us that in the new world that God will create, everything that could possibly be a threat to us will have been removed and everyone who could present a danger to us will be absent. We will be eternally secure!

Try to imagine a world without sickness, death, fear, loss—a world in which we only keep growing in knowledge and love. What things here give us hints at what it will be like there? Let your imagination seek to grasp what this new existence will be like. What are you especially anticipating?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

unfairness and injustice (*Isa. 65:21, 22*). Work will have its dignity and fulfillment (*Isa. 65:23*). Sickness will vanish, and perfect health shall characterize the inhabitants: “The leaves of the tree [of life] were for the healing of the nations” (*Rev. 22:2*; see also *Ps. 46:4*). Perfect peace, perfect enjoyment of God, perfect worship, and joyful obedience will mark the life in the new earth (*2 Cor. 6:16, Heb. 8:10, Zeph. 3:9*).


Third, harmony and righteousness shall characterize land and life in the new earth (*2 Pet. 3:13*). With the abolition of the curse upon the earth (*Rev. 22:3*; cf. *Gen. 3:16–19*), creation would be freed from its bondage and decay (*Rom. 8:18–22*). The desolate will be transformed like the Garden of Eden (*Isa. 30:23; 35:1, 2, 7; 65:17; 66:22; Hos. 1:10; 2:18; Zech. 8:12*). Peace will characterize the environment: “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together” (*Isa. 65:25*).

Discuss: Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God as already come and as yet to come (*Matt. 6:10, Luke 17:21*). How do you distinguish between the two?

►STEP 3—Practice

Just for Teachers: “As through Jesus we enter into rest, heaven begins here. . . . Heaven is a ceaseless approaching to God through Christ. . . . As we walk with Jesus in this life, we may be filled with His love, satisfied with His presence.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 331.

Discuss: Your home is known for its joy and happiness, a little heaven on earth. But recently your teenage son has shown a rebellious attitude and has made some lifestyle choices that you are not comfortable with. Your little heaven on earth is disturbed. How would you apply the thought given in the quote from *The Desire of Ages* to your home situation?

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Meeting the Lord of Heaven

We have every reason to believe that on the new earth we will be able to recognize those we knew in this life. Our resurrection bodies will resemble that of the risen Lord. When He appeared to His followers after His resurrection, He clearly was recognizable to those who had been with Him prior to His death. What an inexpressible joy it will be to be reunited with those we lost in death. But the supreme experience will be to meet the Lord of the universe. Our songs will come true: “Face to face shall [we] behold Him, far beyond the starry sky!” What a privilege it will be to stand before the Alpha and the Omega of the universe.

What assurance do we have that we will meet the Lord of lords? *1 Thess. 4:16, 17; Rev. 21:22, 23.*

We cannot yet imagine what it will be like to meet our Savior. How many questions will we want to ask! The *why* question, which has so often been on our lips, finally will receive its definitive answer. We will at last understand why God permitted particular trials and temptations into our earthly existence. Never again will we doubt God’s wisdom and goodness. All distrust will dissipate as we learn why God allowed certain things to take place. And only then will we realize fully how we have been protected from all kinds of dangers.

What will be a dominant aspect of eternal life? *Rom. 14:11, 1 Tim. 1:17, Rev. 5:13.*

Eternal life is singing eternal praises and worshiping the King. Why? Because He is worthy of our adoration. “That the Maker of all worlds, the Arbiter of all destinies, should lay aside His glory and humiliate Himself from love to man will ever excite the wonder and adoration of the universe. As the nations of the saved look upon their Redeemer and behold the eternal glory of the Father shining in His countenance; as they behold His throne, which is from everlasting to everlasting, and know that His kingdom is to have no end, they break forth in rapturous song: ‘Worthy, worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by His own most precious blood!’ ” —Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 651, 652.

What will it be like when you meet Jesus face to face? What do you think you will say to Him, and why? What do you think He’ll say to you?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 4—Apply**

Just for Teachers: To some, heaven is a true but distant reality, too removed from the daily grind of life to impact much. To others, it is a comforting mythology; to still others, it is an opiate that numbs the pain of the present. As a believer, how do you relate to heaven’s reality?

While in India, a man hailed a taxi to take him to an Adventist college. As he got out of the taxi, the driver took a long look at him and asked him if he was the pastor who had held an evangelistic series earlier that year. The man replied with some surprise that, yes, he was. The driver’s next question was if the man recognized him. The pastor did not. But the driver jump-started the pastor’s memory by relating an incident that had occurred at the evangelistic series. The driver and his wife had brought their three-year-old son every day for special prayer. The pastor had prayed for divine healing so that this beautiful child could walk.

“Yes, now I do know you. How is the child doing?” the pastor asked.

“He is doing well,” the cab driver said with joy. He then explained. “In your last sermon, you spoke about heaven where there will be no more sorrow, no more pain, no more death. You even read from the Bible, in Isaiah 35:6, ‘Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing’ [NKJV]. That hope is the reason for my joy.”

Discuss: How can the promise of heaven be as real to you today in your daily Christian walk, as it is for this man?

For Further Study: Ellen G. White has written a lot about heaven and our entrance into the heavenly kingdom. The final chapters of *The Great Controversy* are a sublime description of what will be ours. But the compilation *The Story of Redemption* also captures this topic admirably. See the last four chapters, pp. 418–433.

“‘And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away.’ Rev. 21:1. The fire that consumes the wicked purifies the earth. Every trace of the curse is swept away. No eternally burning hell will keep before the ransomed the fearful consequences of sin. One reminder alone remains: our Redeemer will ever bear the marks of His crucifixion. Upon His wounded head, His hands and feet, are the only traces of the cruel work that sin has wrought.”—Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption*, p. 430.

Discussion Questions

- ❶ How do we deal with the question of salvation for those who have never heard the name of Jesus? How should the fact that Jesus died for the sins of all humanity, even those who never heard of Him, help us trust that God has not forgotten those folk either?
- ❷ The Bible describes death as a sleep, a state of unconsciousness. How can one then explain “near-death” experiences in which people claim to have seen heavenly beings in a dazzling light or dead friends and relatives? How can we help these people realize that what they experienced might not be what they are judging it to be? In other words, how can we help them realize that what they saw couldn’t be what they think it was, no matter how real it seemed to their senses?
- ❸ How have people abused the promise of eternal life in ways that allowed them to manipulate others for personal or political gain? What are some ways we might be guilty of doing the same thing, if on a less dramatic scale?

Summary: We are people with a destiny that extends far beyond our short existence in this present world. We are citizens of a heavenly kingdom. This kingdom is both present and future. It already is with us but will be realized fully in all its glory when Christ returns to take us home. Then eternal life in God’s presence will be ours.