



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 **Heaven is My Home**
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 53-59)

Suggested Article:

📖 **Why Stand Gazing?**
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 39-42)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Heaven is Our Home

Is our true home in heaven, and we are merely sojourners on earth? Or are we genuinely citizens of the earth? Where is our true home? Heaven is our true home, but heaven begins here on earth as the Holy Spirit transforms us into a community that manifests love.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Revelation 21:1-5,22-27

Responsive Reading†

Sing the wondrous love of Jesus,
sing his mercy and his grace:
In the mansions bright and blessed,
he'll prepare for us a place.

**When we all get to heaven,
what a day of rejoicing that will be!**

While we walk the pilgrim pathway,
clouds will overspread the sky;
But when traveling days are over,
not a shadow, not a sigh.

**When we all get to heaven,
what a day of rejoicing that will be!**

Let us then be true and faithful,
trusting, serving every day,
Just one glimpse of God's great glory
will the toils of life repay.

**When we all get to heaven,
what a day of rejoicing that will be!**

Reflection

Do we hunger for heaven? The evidence is apparently conflicting. The joyful heart-hunger for heaven expressed in Eliza Hewitt's gospel hymn, *Sing the Wondrous Love of Jesus*, with its image of this life as mere "traveling days" on a "pilgrim pathway," will seem forced to many of us, because we are much more "at home" in this world than these phrases suggest.

On the other hand, a hunger for God's presence in our lives causes many of us "to embark on spiritual quests, to join new religious movements, to call up the Psychic Friends Network, or to buy the books of the latest spirituality-expert featured as a guest on *Oprah*," Susan Garrett observes. It "fuels the remarkable sales of books about angels and causes many millions of persons to tune in each week to the television show *Touched By An Angel*, which regularly assures us of God's love for us."

The New Testament helps us to make sense of our hunger. In the climactic vision of Revelation, John sees the heavenly city coming down to a new earth. The biblical heaven "is the invasion of the city by the City," notes Eugene Peterson. "We enter heaven not by escaping what we don't like, but by the sanctification of the place in which God has placed us." Heaven is our home, it seems, but heaven begins here on earth. We begin to 'get to' heaven when this world where we live and this church



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where we come together to worship, are in the presence of God.

The glory of God illuminates the heavenly city. In similar fashion, the Spirit of the Lord is a transforming presence in our lives, changing us “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). Recall that when Moses had been speaking with God, Moses’ face glowed; it was as if the fullness of God’s glory spilled onto him (Exodus 34:29-35). At the Transfiguration of Jesus, when he appeared with Moses and Elijah, Jesus’ face “shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Matthew 17:2). Jesus, even more than Moses, reflected the brightness of God’s presence and glory. Now through Jesus, Paul says, God is shining also in *our* hearts, to give us “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 4:6). Our beholding of that light transforms us.

Both our hunger for God’s presence and our hunger for the transformation of this world finally are gathered up and united within God’s plan for our lives. We really hunger for the glory of God to be shining in our lives, relationships, and world. The Good News is that God shines in our hearts through Christ, and thus it begins that “the home of God is among mortals” (Revelation 21:3).

Study Questions

1. In what ways do people express their hunger for God’s presence in their lives today? How is your church helping them to satisfy this hunger by clearly presenting the biblical understanding of this longing?
2. How do you respond to Susan Garrett’s suggestion that “many popular spiritual teachers today focus only on the individual, posing the questions: ‘How can *I* be healed?’ ‘How can *I* achieve peace?’ and ‘How can *my* life be better?’ But the greatest mark of the Spirit’s transforming presence, Paul teaches, is not *my* communion with the divine, as important as that may be. Rather, the greatest mark of the Spirit’s presence is *love manifested in community*.” (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 59)
3. We all suffer from “spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder,” observes Julie Pennington-Russell. “Left on our own, we find all kinds of secondary issues to wrap ourselves around,” including even a distracting fascination with eternity (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 41). What should we focus upon instead of “our brownstone in heaven or the brimstone of hell”? How might we stir up our hunger for heaven and for God’s presence, without living in a way that denies the goodness of this life?
4. We are being “changed from one degree of glory into another,” Paul assures us, but through what behaviors or attitudes should this change appear in our lives? Susan Garrett recommends some confirmation that we might seek (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 58).

Departing Hymn: “Heaven Shall Not Wait”

† Adapted from “When We All Get to Heaven” by Eliza E. Hewitt, 1898.

Heaven is Our Home

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the biblical teaching that heaven is our true home, yet we properly hunger to enjoy God-transformed lives and relationships in this world.
2. To reflect on the moral changes that should occur in us as we are being transformed by the glory of God.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Heaven and Hell (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a story

Share the story that Susan Garrett tells of her grandma, who suffered from Alzheimer's disease and, though living in her own home, would sometimes grow restless to "go home now" (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 53). This story reminds us that often some homesickness surfaces in our lives, which can be (at least) analogous to, if not expressive of a longing for heaven.

Or, remind members of the story of Marshall Applewhite and the "Heaven's Gate" community (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 55). Their lives were tragically wasted because they accepted a distorting vision of heaven and its relation to this world.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members will be aware of how God, through Jesus, is a transforming presence in their lives.

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read Revelation 21:1-5,22-27 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins, and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

The reflection begins by exploring the following paradox: many people today express a hunger for spiritual experience (which Christians will understand as a deep longing for God's presence in our lives), yet they are put off by a theology of "getting to heaven." Susan Garrett observes that, "against the backdrop of everyday conversation, such talk seems old-fashioned. Most of us just do not talk about heaven that way anymore. Heaven has lost its hold on our imagination." Why this paradox? "We are convinced that life on this earth, in these bodies, ought to mean something; we are not ready to write off

our lives in this world as if they were worthless. We don't want 'pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by;' we want happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction here and now."

The biblical view of heaven does not force us to separate these longings, for God's presence with us and for heaven, but sees them as continuous with one another. This means that talk about "getting to heaven" is not just about eternity after we die, but also about a quality of our life in God that begins now.

Ask three members to read aloud Exodus 34:29-35, Matthew 17:1-8, and 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, and 4:6. The passages from Matthew and 2 Corinthians clearly build upon the story in Exodus, and the vision in Revelation 21 must be understood in light of all of these passages. Pull together these passages about God's glory to think about how heaven is our home, but heaven begins now.

Study Questions

1. Members may mention elements of popular culture (books, movies, or television programs) that are expressions of this longing. Christians will interpret the New Age spirituality as a distorted reflection of it. Your church may have discipleship groups in which members discern together the spiritual themes in popular books or movies, and it may reach out to people outside the church through these study groups. Not only the sermons and teachings, but also the church's music and art can express and shape our longings for heaven.
2. In addition to some New Age eclectic spirituality (drawing from many different religions, as the individual desires), members might mention the television-only Christianity that makes no demands upon its 'congregants.' Closer to home is our tendency to distort the Church into being a therapeutic center, 'on call' to satisfy member's desires and spiritual needs.
3. Julie Pennington-Russell warns, "Perhaps that is why Jesus was always giving us such straightforward instructions: *Follow me. Don't be anxious. Love God. Love each other.* Christ apparently did not think it important to fill in all of the missing pieces about life after death. What he gave us was a calling so high and a love so expansive that everything else seems puny by comparison" (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 41). You could approach this question by summarizing how the disciples responded to the messenger's rhetorical question: "Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" They organized to pray, witness, and continue Christ's ministry (Acts 1:12-26).
4. Susan Garrett writes, "As a Christian community, as a church, we are called by Christ to pour out his love by honoring and serving the weak, rather than holding onto any privileges or prestige that set us apart. How are we and the other members of the church honoring and serving the weak, both those within the Christian body, and those outside of it?" (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 58) Use this discussion to lead members toward singing or praying the closing hymn, "Heaven Shall Not Wait."

Departing Hymn

"Heaven Shall Not Wait" is on pp. 62-63 of *Heaven and Hell*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.