

# Heart Matters: Heaven Bound

Gen 5:11-24; John 14:1-10; Rev 21:1-8

*I gotta wings, you gotta wings, all God's chil'ren gotta wings.  
When I get to Heaben, gonna put on my wings,  
I gonna fly all ober God's Heaben, Heaben, Heaben.  
Eb'rybody talkin' 'bout Heaben ain't a-goin' dere;  
Heaben, Heaben, gonna fly all ober God's Heaben.<sup>1</sup>*



We often sing or talk about heaven, but do we know what we are talking about? We read of streets of gold, a land of promise, the absence of war, tears, and pain. If we are not careful, our thinking of heaven becomes magical. Abracadabra zam! Our inclination to sin no longer exists! Time to rock on the porch, gazing at the streets of gold and listening to the choir! Is that what we ought to expect? Is that what the Bible really teaches? Are we preparing ourselves for heaven as reality, or are we planning for some sort of nebulous fairy-tale utopia?

In reading Genesis, we'd rather skip over the genealogies. So-and-so begat so-and-so, lived so many years and died. We don't get too many thrills out of those passages. I have often counseled folks to go ahead and skip the genealogies, as there is not a whole lot to be gained from reading them. Then again, that is partly the point. The lives of so many are nothing much more than living, having children, and dying. Then there is Enoch.

Enoch stands out in the midst of his genealogy. We don't know too much about him, other than the description, "And Enoch walked with God and was not, for God took him." A few verses later, the same description is applied to Noah. "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God." Noah's story is more interesting in its detail and plot, but perhaps Enoch's gets right down to the major point of life. What stood out in his life was his walking with God. In that context, the follow-up phrase makes more sense: "God took him." It is not spelled out, but the idea is that Enoch continued his walk with God beyond death. It is the same kind of experience of Elijah's passing into heaven in chariots of fire.

Jesus spoke to the disciples on the eve of the crucifixion of going away and preparing a place for them. He wanted to reassure the disciples of being reunited. They would feel abandoned and orphaned in the wake of Jesus' death. He assured them that this was only a temporary experience. He spoke in terms of preparing a place for them. They were terms the disciples could understand. Thomas got the wrong idea from Jesus' words. He just did not understand the symbolism.

Jesus talked about a destination, but He also called himself the path to get there. He said He would return to bring them with Him. I would have been as confused as Thomas. How can the road you take be my destination and the means to get there? Then again, how can Jesus be the way to the Father, the one preparing for our arrival, and the destination itself? Symbolic language is necessary when our language is inadequate to express things beyond our experience. It is also inadequate, since it is not specific enough. Like Thomas, we may latch onto the wrong aspect of a symbol, missing the point altogether.

<sup>1</sup> "I Got Wings." Traditional spiritual.

Jesus was not talking about a geographic destination, which was Thomas' concern. He was talking about a new dimension of intimacy with God. We might rephrase Jesus' words as "coming home to God." While we forget that the Jews used the term "heaven" as a synonym for God, we tend to overlook that Jesus' teaching focused on an intimate relationship with the Father who welcomes us into a heavenly home. The focus is not geography, but intimacy and fellowship.

John picked up Jesus' call to dependence and intimacy with God. In the midst of religious oppression, John wrote believers a clarion call for faithfulness amid the conflict of faith they faced. The crowning hope of his prophecy was the vision of heaven in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Revelation. We are familiar with many of the descriptions: streets of gold, the end of death, drying of tears, and the end of pain. We relish the vision of beauty and utopia the text presents. There are some points of the description, however, that we tend to overlook. Perhaps even the most important of them all: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God!" We sing that there will be no more crying there, but John says that God will care for us so intimately, that God will be the one to wipe the tears from our eyes.

John's is a different picture from that of the popular songs we often hear. His focus and attention is on the immediacy of God's presence. He stresses God's immediacy and the nature of God's impending return to gather the faithful to Himself. Rather than reigning far away in heaven, separated from humanity, God brings the throne room down to a new kind of earth—a whole new creation with a new way to relate to the Creator, present in our midst. In this renewed presentation of God's final redemption, John pictures a new heaven coming down to a new earth. There is here no more separation between Creator and creation. In this new context, there is no escaping God's presence, nor is there any desire for such.

This was John's call of confidence and trust to a people suffering persecution for their faith and convictions. This was John's clarion for patience to await the resolution that God had in store. He was not too concerned with the streets of gold. He was not obsessed with the destruction of the enemies of faith. He was not preoccupied with the singing of angelic choirs. He was concerned with God's vindication of those who had suffered in faithfulness to Christ Jesus. He was concerned to remind believers that suffering faithfulness would not go unheeded, their tears undried, their pain unshared. God would reverse the fortunes of the faithful. God's presence would be intimate and immediate. God would personally dry their tears, offering comfort and peace.

John stresses this vision of intimacy mentioning that there would be no temple in the city, nor any need for one. The comfortable divisions and boundaries between light and dark, presence and separation, even good and evil would cease to exist. In this vision, the sea—long held in Hebrew tradition and theology as a symbol of rebellion against God—the sea no longer exists. It simply is no more. There is no more need for boundaries, for God is in intimate contact with creation.

Heaven? Heaven is living in unreserved intimacy with God. Have we understood what we are talking about, or are we following Thomas' lead, focusing on the wrong aspects of the symbols? *Eb'rybody talkin' 'bout Heaben ain't a-goin' dere, Heaben! Heaben! Gonna join my Lord up in Heaben!* At the end of Enoch's life, they said, "And God took him." Could we hope for better?

—Christopher B. Harbin