

Writer Describes Travel as Search for Paradise

The Wired Word for the Week of January 22, 2023

Dear Class Member,

Our next lesson begins with a recent op-ed by travel writer Pico Iyer about the search for paradise on Earth. The essay spurred us to think about the existence and location of the place variously known as Eden, paradise and heaven, and what it is that drives human beings to search for such a place. These will be the focus of this discussion guide.

If you wish to start thinking about our topic in advance, here is the lesson.

In the News

In his recent op-ed for *The New York Times*, ["The Trouble With Paradise,"](#) British essayist Pico Iyer wrote about experiencing travel as a search for an elusive paradise.

"As a constant traveler for 49 years now, I sometimes feel I've been zigzagging from one 'paradise' to the next. From Tahiti to Tibet, from the Seychelles to Antarctica, I've found tourist posters conspiring with travelers' hopes to present every place as a kind of Eden."

The problem was, wherever he went, Iyer discovered natives who were discontented with what he thought seemed like idyllic environments. "In Ladakh, the kind of pristine Himalayan region that might have inspired the notion of Shangri-La, I discovered more peace and beauty than I dared to dream of -- along with local kids who reminded me that the real paradise was that place called California."

In ["The Half Known Life: In Search of Paradise,"](#) Iyer recounted a conversation he had with a female theater director in a cafe in Iran:

"Do many people want to leave?"

"All," she said. "It is like a utopia for them," she went on, of the country her government still took pains to insult. "Traveling to the United States, where everything is possible."

"It's human nature, don't you think? The place you haven't seen is heaven."

[Max Fatouretchi](#), traveler and author, wrote that paradise was a word "invented" four millennia ago in Persia to refer to "expansive walled gardens of the first Persian empire." The idea that paradise might exist behind walls adds a sense of mystery, desirability and unattainability to the concept.

Here is a part of *Merriam-Webster Dictionary's* definition of paradise: "the garden where according to the Bible Adam and Eve first lived (Eden); ... the dwelling place of God and of the blessed dead (Heaven); ... a place or state of bliss, felicity, or delight."

"Until the eighteenth century, people believed that biblical paradise, the Garden of Eden, was a real place," wrote best-selling author and philosophical traveler, Eric Weiner, in *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World*. "It appeared on maps -- located, ironically, at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in what is now modern-day Iraq."

French author, Jules Renard, opined: "Paradise does not exist, but we must nonetheless strive to be worthy of it."

People may disagree about whether or not paradise exists, and if it does, where it can be found and what is its nature.

"Paradise was always over there, a day's sail away," offered Dutch-American travel writer, J. Maarten Troost, in *Getting Stoned with Savages: A Trip Through the Islands of Fiji and Vanuatu*. "But it's a funny thing, escapism. You can go far and wide and you can keep moving on and on through places and years, but you never escape your own life. I, finally, knew where my life belonged. Home."

We recall the lesson Dorothy learned in the classic movie, *The Wizard of Oz*: that for all the glitter and excitement of exotic places, "There's no place like home!"

"To find one's paradise, one needn't travel far, only well," wrote Canadian journalist Marty Rubin.

"The thing about paradise, though, is we don't always recognize it immediately," Weiner stated. "Its 'paradiseness' takes time to sink in."

In another classic film, *Meet Me In St. Louis*, Esther Smith (played by Judy Garland) tries to console her younger sister Tootie (played by Margaret O'Brien) after they learn that their father has accepted a job requiring the family to move from their beloved home in St. Louis to New York City: "New York is a wonderful town. Everybody dreams about going there. But we're luckier than lots of families because we're really going. Wait until you see the fine home we're going to have and the loads and loads of friends we'll make. Wonderful friends. But the main thing, Tootie, is that we're all going to be together just like we've always been. That's what really counts. We could be happy anywhere as long as we're together."

Irish author, Lucinda Riley, expresses a similar idea in these lines from her poem, "Paradise":

A tender arm around me thrown,
The beauty of a heart's true home.
In black despair, a shooting star,
For Paradise is where you are.
For Riley and others, paradise is more about who you are with than where you are.
More on this story can be found at these links:

[The Trouble With Paradise. *The New York Times*](#)
[Paradise Lost. *Wikipedia*](#)

The Big Questions

1. What causes you to believe -- or doubt -- that paradise/heaven/Eden is real? If so, how would you define and describe it? What does paradise look like to you, and where can it be found?
2. If you answered the first part of Question 1 in the negative, how would you explain why so many people seem to have such a deep desire to discover paradise/heaven/Eden?
3. Is it possible to create paradise on Earth? Why or why not? If so, how might that be accomplished? What challenges would need to be addressed to achieve such a lofty goal?
4. Would Eden have remained a paradise for Adam if he had not joined Eve in disobeying God, and remained in the garden while she was banished? Explain your answer.
5. How does the Bible define heaven? What is the difference, if any, between human and divine definitions of paradise, and between human and divine efforts to create paradise? Where in the Bible do you see paradise linked to eternal life?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Isaiah 51:1-3, 6

*Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness,
you who seek the LORD.
Look to the rock from which you were hewn
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah, who bore you,
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.
For the LORD will comfort Zion;
he will comfort all her waste places
and will make her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the LORD;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song. ...
Lift up your eyes to the heavens
and look at the earth beneath,*

*for the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment,
and those who live on it will die like gnats,
but my salvation will be forever;
and my deliverance will never be ended.* (For context, read [Isaiah 51:1-11](#).)

The prophet Isaiah urges those who seek God to look at how God blessed their ancestors in the past when they sought after God. Specifically, Isaiah points to Abraham and Sarah ("the rock from which you were hewn and ... the quarry from which you were dug"), who were childless ("he was but one when I called him"). But God promised to make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens ([Genesis 15:1-6](#)). Though Sarah was beyond childbearing age ([Genesis 11:30](#); [Genesis 16:1-2](#)), God gave her the ability to bear a son when she was over 90 years of age ([Genesis 17:15-22](#); [18:9-15](#); [21:1-7](#)). "I blessed him and made him many," God says about how God reversed Sarah's barrenness.

Then the prophet Isaiah predicts that in the future God will comfort and delight his people by making all Zion's wastelands, wilderness and desert like the idyllic Garden of Eden ([Genesis 2:8-15](#)), where joy, gladness, thanksgiving, singing, justice and light will be found (Isaiah 51:3-4).

Just as God transformed the emptiness Abraham and Sarah felt into laughter and fulfillment, God promised to bring eternal salvation and deliverance to God's people when heaven and earth and all who live on it are on the brink of extinction (Isaiah 51:6-8). Just as God transformed the depths of the sea into a landbridge "for the redeemed to cross over" (Isaiah 51:10), God would bring those he ransomed back home from exile with rejoicing (Isaiah 51:11).

After Adam and Eve sinned, they felt the negative consequences of their actions (including expulsion from the Garden of Eden and alienation from their Creator ([Genesis 3:16-24](#)), but promised that the woman's descendant would ultimately deal the fatal blow to the tempter ([Genesis 3:15](#)). God had also allowed the Israelites to be taken captive by enemies because of their idolatry, but God promised to deliver the nation from their sin.

When we sin, God allows us to experience negative consequences of our sin, but it is God's grace and strong power that has the final word about our destiny.

Questions: Think about aspects of your life, past and/or present, that fit the description of "wasteland, wilderness and desert." How has God begun to transform those aspects of your life into spaces that bring joy, thanksgiving, light, etc., rather than sorrow and gloom? If transformation is not happening yet, to what do you attribute any delay? What, if anything, can and will you do about that?

Luke 23:39-43

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." (For context, read [Luke 23:32-43](#).)

"A dying man asked a dying man for eternal life; a man without possessions asked a poor man for a Kingdom; a thief at the door of death asked to die like a thief and steal Paradise," wrote Catholic bishop and theologian, Fulton J. Sheen, in his book, *Life of Christ*. "One would have thought a saint would have been the first soul purchased over the counter of Calvary by the red coins of Redemption, but in the Divine plan it was a thief who was the escort of the King of kings into Paradise. ...

"It was the thief's last prayer, perhaps even his first. He knocked once, sought once, asked once, dared everything, and found everything. When even the disciples were doubting and only one was present at the Cross, the thief owned and acknowledged him as Savior," Sheen concluded.

We note that the criminal only asked that Jesus not forget him. Perhaps he thought he didn't deserve anything more than that. But Jesus extended his guarantee of something even greater: that the criminal would not languish in an eternal hell, but would accompany him in paradise that very day! That could only mean that the petitioner was forgiven and cleansed from his sin and guilt.

In his book, *For All the Saints: Remembering the Christians Departed*, Anglican bishop and theologian N.T. Wright asserts that "... this brigand ... had no time for amendment of life; no doubt he had all kinds of sinful thoughts and desires in what was left of his body. All the standard arguments in favor of purgatory apply to him. And yet Jesus assures him of his place in paradise, not in a few days or weeks, not if his friends say a lot of prayers and masses for him, but 'today.'"

Questions: What, if anything, did the criminal have to do to gain admission to paradise?

Since the criminal asks to be remembered *in Jesus' kingdom*, what does this suggest to you about who he thinks Jesus is? Why does Jesus use the word *paradise* instead of the word *kingdom* in his response? Does he mean to equate the two? And what gives Jesus the right to make such a guarantee?

Matthew 6:10

[Jesus said,] "*May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" (For context, read [Matthew 6:9-13](#).)

One definition of paradise might be a place where the will of God is always done, whether on Earth or in heaven. Paul writes in [2 Corinthians 5:6-8](#) that whether we are living on Earth in our physical bodies, or at home [in heaven] with the Lord, "we make it our aim to be pleasing to him."

Questions: Why is pleasing God by doing God's will so central to paradise? How does the Bible define doing God's will? How can we become answers to the prayer, "May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven"?

1 Corinthians 15:19

If only in this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (For context, read [1 Corinthians 15:12-20](#).)

St. Paul makes it pretty clear: If there is no resurrection of the body -- no heaven -- then the Christian faith is worth nothing. In that case, we should live this life only for its pleasures -- and with no need to think about anyone else.

But -- and this is a big one -- Jesus' resurrection shows that there *is* an afterlife: There is a heaven. This world is the gateway, not the final goal.

Question: How does "the long view" that includes eternal life with God in heaven help and comfort you in the troubles of life?

Revelation 2:7

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God. (For context, read [Revelation 2:1-7](#).)

In one of his messages to the churches, our Lord commends the church at Ephesus for their hard work, endurance and ability to discern the difference between truth and falsehood. But he also holds them accountable for abandoning their first love and calls them to repent and renew their commitment to the works they did at first.

Then he promises to grant everyone who conquers permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

You may remember that this is the very tree that became off-limits to Adam and Eve after they sinned ([Genesis 3:22-24](#)).

Questions: Why did God not want Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of life while they were in a state of sin? What do we need to conquer in order to be granted permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God? Where does that victory come from?

For Further Discussion

1. Review [Heaven and Hell: The Parable of the Long Spoons](#). Based on this parable, how would you define paradise? How closely does this parable reflect biblical definitions of what constitutes paradise?

2. Consider the following:

"If my mother will not go to heaven, I renounce the privilege." — Rwandan writer and activist, Bangambiki Habyarimana, *The Great Pearl of Wisdom*

"Even heaven would become hell if you were alone in it, or away from a loved one." — Egyptian-American poet, Suzy Kassem, *Rise Up and Salute the Sun*

Paul had such a deep desire that his fellow Jews would not miss out on God's salvation and paradise that he wrote: "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own brothers and sisters, my own flesh and blood" ([Romans 9:3](#)).

In his book [The Great Divorce](#), C.S. Lewis depicts heaven as a place where the power of things of earth, such as the presence or absence of a cherished loved one, diminish in importance.

How important are relationships in paradise or heaven?

The Bible teaches that only God saves, and Peter preached, "There is salvation in no one else [other than Jesus of Nazareth], for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" ([Acts 4:12](#)). From this, we understand that we can't save others or give them a ticket to enter heaven. But is there anyone you would not want to live in heaven without? What would you be willing to do or give to ensure that that person would be granted admission to paradise?

3. French novelist, Andreï Makine, wrote: "The fatal mistake we make is looking for a paradise that endures ... This obsession with what lasts causes us to overlook many a fleeting paradise." But, can something really be a paradise if it is fleeting in nature? Why or why not? Why are both words in the term "eternal life" critically important?

4. Not everyone has the luxury of traveling to distant places in search of a "heaven on earth." Is there a place or experience within your own community that you would describe as heaven-like, or paradisiacal? What gives that place or experience that quality?

Responding to the News

Try to think this week of something you can do for others that would make them think that they are just a little closer to paradise.

Prayer

O God, as we wait for the new heavens and the new earth you have promised, help us to do your will on earth as it is in heaven, to the best of our ability and drawing on your Spirit's resources, that working together with you, we might make a heaven of hell and create a paradise where partitions previously caused division and brokenness. For the sake of Christ, who prayed that we might be one, as you are one, Amen.