

“The Believer at Death: The Hope of Heaven”

John 14: 1-6

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Text: John 14:1-7 (NIV) ¹ "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ² 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. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going." ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

The Lord Jesus Christ does not use the word “Heaven” here but he speaks of “rooms” or “dwelling places” or “abodes.” Jesus said: **“I am going there to prepare a place for you.”** How are we to picture this “place?” This “house” of his Father? This Heaven ? Today, let’s speak of the “Believer at Death”...but first let us pray.

In 1990, a wonderful movie came out called “Driving Miss Daisy.” You probably remember that it was the story of a wealthy elderly southern lady named Daisy and her chauffeur named Hoke. Miss Daisy also had a housekeeper and a cook named Idella. She was a black lady with a great personality but one day, while working in the kitchen, she had a heart attack and died. Years ago, we were watching the film with our youngest son Tim, who was five at the time and, as always, he was filled with questions. When he saw Idella fall over, we had quite a dialog:

Tim: “What happened?”

Me: “Ahhh...Idella died and went to Heaven.”

The next scene shows Idella’s body in the coffin at the funeral service. The dialog resumes:

Tim: Who is that?

Me: That’s Idella.

Tim: I thought she went to Heaven ?

Me: She did.

Tim: Then who’s that?

Me: Well...that’s Idella's body...but she went to Heaven.

Tim: She went to Heaven without her body?

Me: Well....for now...she'll get a new body...someday....

I remember thinking “My goodness...it is hard to explain Heaven to a five year old. We go there but our bodies stay here...for now?” But over the years, I’ve realized that it might actually be easier to explain Heaven to a five year old! It’s the adults that Jesus had to calm down. The kids seem more able to just trust. Let’s speak of Heaven.

The Lord Jesus Christ told his disciples not to worry about their futures as his followers. He told them that his Father’s house had room for them and that he would be going there to prepare a place for them. We sense that Jesus is speaking of taking them to Heaven even though he does not use that word...Heaven. It is interesting that Jesus clearly speaks of going to the Father’s house and preparing a place for them and coming back for them so they can be with him. But he really does not give any detail about what Heaven will be like. In fact, the Word of God doesn’t tell us much about Heaven. But....it tells us some things. So, let’s pursue a handful of ideas about Heaven.

WHAT MIGHT BE THE BEST WAY TO UNDERSTAND HEAVEN?

The word “Heaven” appears 246 times in the NIV New Testament and has several dimensions to its meaning. Is it a place? Is it a community that is everywhere? Does it have more to do with who is there than where it is located? Well....the short answer might be simply that Heaven is Heaven because we will be with Jesus! But trying to explain the nature of Heaven is a bit of a challenge. Actually, I think all the very worldly images of gold streets and mansions don’t do much to help. In fact, such word pictures probably do great deal to make the very idea of Heaven seem, as Professor Hawking says, like a childish “fairy story.”

In my view, the best way to understand Heaven is to stop thinking of it as a place or a location. Perhaps you’ve heard the expression “Happiness is not where you are but whom you are with!” How often people move away to a better location but then they languish without friends or family. So again, when Jesus told them he was going to prepare a place for them and that he would be back, he said nothing about the place. But he did say:

“I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

Remember the thief on the cross who repented and asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his Kingdom? Consider how Jesus replied:

Luke 23:43 (NIV) ⁴³ Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise."

This is marvelous because Jesus uses the word “para-dee-sas” which was the Greek word for a “garden” or a “park.” Think of how often Jesus met with his disciples in

garden settings. Even on the night of his betrayal, he was with them in the Garden of Gethsemane, reputed to be a lovely area on the outskirts of Jerusalem. It was in a garden setting that they relaxed and had fellowship.

Consider how the Bible opens with God placing man in the Garden of Eden. We read:

Genesis 2:8-9 (NIV) ⁸ Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. ⁹ And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground--trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.

That garden was Paradise because Adam was there with God face to face and it was lovely...pleasing to the eye. But when Adam and Eve fell into sin, they were expelled from that garden. What Jesus is telling us is that Heaven for the believer will be admission back into the Paradise Garden and face to face fellowship with him! There the believer will be finally satisfied and wanting nothing. There with Jesus we will desire no other thing!

It is interesting that none of the world's religions suggest what the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures teach about Paradise. Islam promises seventy virgins and continual feasting. An eternal party in the flesh. All physical desires satisfied. Buddhism ironically promises that the next life will mean the cessation of all desire. Buddhism does not promise to satisfy desire but to eliminate it. Hinduism suggests that the soul is reincarnated or re-embodied over and over until it is made ready for a blessed afterlife. And the list goes on.

Heaven is not an orgy that our soul seeks and it is not gold streets or mansions that we desire. It is the satisfaction of our souls and Christ alone can offer that! But only the Bible promises to satisfy the soul longings of the human being by rescuing the lost soul thru the suffering and victorious Christ. It's been said that all of the world's great religions attempt to save a drowning man by throwing him a rope. Christianity saves by sending out the lifeguard Jesus Christ to gather the man and bring him safely ashore.

Sometimes it is said that the promise of Heaven is only a New Testament concept. Some say that the Old Testament does not promise Heaven and such unspeakable joy. But that is not really accurate. We find in the Psalms these same promises of Heaven. Consider the longings of the Psalmist:

Psalms 42:1-2 (ESV) ¹ As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. ² My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?

Of course it is our natural lot in this life to try to satisfy the longings of our souls by indulging our physical selves. That is why Jesus said the really rich don't often enter Heaven because they have anaesthetized their soul longings with stuff and pleasure and the world! But only God can satisfy the soul. We read:

Psalms 62:1 (NIV) ¹ My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him.

Certainly the Old Testament believer in salvation thru faith in God also looked forward to this great moment of entrance into Heaven. We read:

Psalms 73:23-25 (NIV) ²³ Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.

²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.

²⁵ Whom have I in Heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

What a marvelous promise is that! “Afterward you will take me into glory!” Permit me to touch lightly on something I have spoken of before....the death of my own father who came to Christ literally a week or so before he passed. It was 1986 and I was asked to preach his funeral service. The night before I lay awake asking the Lord “Father...was he really saved? Is he really with you? If so, please give me some kind of reassurance before I proclaim that he is in Heaven ...in front of a hundred unbelievers that he...even he...could be saved and was saved!” Then...I fell into a deep sleep and a vision came upon me...the only time I ever experienced this in my Christian life. It was not a dream...it was very different. It was really a supernatural moment. In my vision I saw several men walking in a beautiful green garden area. The tallest man was talking unhurriedly and the others were listening but one man’s face I recognized. It was my father and on his face was a look I had never seen before and have never seen on any human face since then. I saw complete and total contentment. I knew from that moment on...as I have often said at funerals that the Christian would not come back if given the opportunity....not after they’ve been face to face with the Risen Christ!

The best way to understand Heaven is that Paradise... is a stunningly beautiful place and it is totally satisfying because we will be with Jesus! That wonderful reality brings us back for a moment to the message of last week. We discussed Hell and the punishment of the unbeliever. We need to clarify one point that I was asked about and that I did not properly address.

The question was this: if Hell is not literally endless flames and torture, in what sense is there really punishment? How does the unsaved soul suffer? What is the nature of their suffering? Well....think about it. If Heaven is the complete satisfaction of the longing soul....Hell is just the opposite. Think of it this way: what one thing does the human soul desire? To be with God who created it! And what does the unbeliever realize all in a moment at death? That there is a God! That the God they have denied really does exist and now they stand before Him! And that his or her soul will never, ever have fellowship with God. They remain excluded from Paradise and their souls cry out in anguish “I was wrong! Let me in!”

The unbeliever at the moment of death passes in spirit from their dead body...yet alive and aware of who they are and with genuine human personality....and they find themselves confronted with the worst possible reality...that they were wrong! And all at once they realize that everything they ever did was done out of desire to satisfy self. And that was not necessarily sinful...the pursuit of love or success or achievement....but that such pursuits never, ever can fully satisfy! Like when you finally can afford something you've really wanted and after a day you realize that...it does not fully satisfy. Then you see the one thing that will fully satisfy and you are told that it is and forever will be out of your reach! Forever! You will never, ever have it! Never!

You'll remember the parable Jesus told about the maidens or virgins awaiting the bridegroom. There were ten of them but only five had oil in their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time coming and they fell asleep. When he arrived the five were not ready and they asked the others to share their oil. But the others said "No" and told them to go and find oil elsewhere. And we read these horrible words that point towards eternal separation from Christ:

Matthew 25:10-12 (NIV) ¹⁰ "But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. ¹¹ "Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' ¹² "But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.'

Their souls will never be satisfied. That fate is like fire and torture to the soul. They will hear "Go from me; I never knew you!" That...will be suffering for the soul worse than any flames to the flesh.

But Heaven will be the opposite for the believer! He or she will hear Jesus say "Welcome! Come in!" And their longings will be fully satisfied! I love that passage written by the Apostle Peter where he completely expressed all of our waiting feelings as we look forward to Heaven. Speaking of Jesus, Peter said:

1 Peter 1:8-9 (NIV) ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Peter was speaking of the here and now. He said the goal of our faith is the salvation of our souls! The word means "deliverance from evil!" Salvation means the soul set free and made secure. And when that moment of death comes for the believer, there will not be even a millisecond of anguish. We'll say more about the moment of death shortly.

But what of the nature of Heaven? We've said the wonder will be the presence of God and the direct fellowship with Jesus Christ the Son of God. But why can't we understand Heaven or Paradise better? Why can we not grasp it in greater detail?

Simply because we do not have the senses needed to perceive it with our minds. We might as well sit down with a small puppy and try to teach it piano or speak to a bird in a cage about the internet. We might as well, as many have said, try to explain to a fish how much more interesting life is on land! In fact, even if the fish could grasp what we are saying, it would prefer to stay where it is...underwater. Like the child in the womb happily swimming about at the moment of birth...coming out crying and screaming! We cannot perceive Heaven for what it is. It is veiled from us.

In the past forty years many books have been written about “NDE’s” or “Near Death Experiences.” Some accounts sound bizarre and some make sense. But the original account seems to have come from the Apostle Paul. He spoke of it when he wrote his second letter to the Corinthian Church. For His own reasons, God allowed Paul to look into Heaven or even go there for a few minutes. And Paul was forever changed but unable to fully describe his experience. He wrote these words:

2 Corinthians 12:1-4 (NIV) ¹ I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third Heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know--God knows. ³ And I know that this man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows-- ⁴ was caught up to Paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.

In the first century world, the idea of three “Heavens” simply meant this: the “First Heaven” was the visible sky that we see...the birds and clouds. The atmosphere. The “Second Heaven” was the outer region of planets...the stars the sun and the moon. The “Third Heaven” was the actual dwelling place of God and the host of Heaven. Paul meant that he was transported somehow to that place. He was not even sure if he was in his body or if he just went there in spirit. Perhaps it was during one of those times he was badly beaten and left for dead. But he looked into Paradise itself! And it changed his life.

We can tell Paul's visit to Paradise changed him because of the things he later wrote to the Church at Philippi. Paul was imprisoned at that time and there was a real chance that he would lose his life. In the end, he was set free from there but here is what he wrote:

Philippians 1:20-23 (NIV) ²⁰ I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.

What does this tell us for the believer at death? It tells us that it will actually be “gain” to depart from these bodies and go to Christ. He is saying while we are here, we should live with Christ at the center of our lives. But when he calls us, it will be better. I like to say at Christian funerals that the departed person would not come back to be with us even if we could arrange it.

And what did the Holy Spirit teach us thru Paul about our moment of physical death? That when our bodies die, our spirits are immediately in the presence of Christ. Consider:

2 Corinthians 5:6-8 (NIV) ⁶ Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. ⁷ We live by faith, not by sight. ⁸ We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

So, the Christian slips away from the body, like the unbeliever. He or she stands before Christ for preliminary judgment. Having been acquitted of all sin and law-breaking because of Jesus and his redeeming work on their behalf, they are shown the place in Paradise where they will await the resurrection of their bodies. The same ones? Different bodies? Better ones? When?

We are all the way back to a little boy’s question: why would we be in Heaven without bodies? Eventually, we will have those new bodies but our spirits will consciously await them in Paradise itself. What will those bodies be like what does the Word of God tell us about the resurrection of both unbelievers and believers?

We’ll see...next week...let us pray!