

# **CHANGE IS COMING**

## **Understanding the Hope of Heaven**

**Text: 1 Corinthians 15:35-58; Revelation 21:1-5**

We have been talking this month about why and how followers of Jesus are – or at least ought to be – the most HOPE-FULL people on planet earth. We've discussed how Christian hope differs from notions of hope rooted in mere optimism or confidence in evolutionary progress or pie in the sky when we die. We've explored the kind of hope that comes from knowing a God who can forgive sins and bring about new beginnings and supply us with the power we need to endure. We've looked together at how God calls his people to bring hope into this world through the pursuit of reconciliation, justice, beauty, and evangelism. But today, I want to close out this series by reprising a message that clarifies the deep meaning of what has historically been one of the greatest sources of confidence among Christians. By that I mean the Hope of Heaven.

### **Heaven Is Where God Is Fully Met, Honored & Obeyed**

Someday, you and I are going to die – hopefully not before we get to the donuts today. If the testimony of the Bible and many who have come near-to-death are correct, then at that moment, your eternal soul will leave your body and go to a dimension of reality beyond this world that we cannot currently see with our eyes, which Jesus has prepared for you. For the faithful, this destination is called HEAVEN.

As I'll explain further in a moment, this Heaven is not your ultimate dwelling place. In fact, when Jesus says that in my Father's house there are many "rooms" or "mansions," as some translations have it, we often misunderstand his meaning. The Greek word for the domicile Jesus speaks of there is "monai." In its original sense, monai is akin to our word "apartment" or "motel." The place that God is going to take us to immediately after we die will be only a TEMPORARY dwelling place. It's like the apartment some of you lived in during college or like the motel room you stay in on the road trip you're making as you move to your real new home.

Nonetheless, this "room" has particular characteristics that are very much worth noting. The Bible only speaks in poetry and metaphor about this "prepared room" but here are some of the big ideas. First of all, heaven is where God is fully present now. God touches and penetrates this world here, but he is present to those in that other dimension in a dramatically more palpable way. Because of that, heaven is also where God's worth is fully recognized and honored. Nobody has any doubts or questions about who he is or what our response to him should be. As a result, heaven is where God's will is fully done. Everyone who lives in the kingdom of heaven obeys the King and advances his purposes – not out of fear or obligation, but because he is holy and good.

### **Heaven is Where God's Family Relates & Rejoices**

But there's more to what the Bible says on this topic and that's what I want to explore this morning. The scriptures teach that heaven will also be a place of relationship and rejoicing such as we only begin to taste on this earth. The Bible pictures it as like the greatest family reunion you could imagine. The book of Genesis declares that when God's faithful servant "**Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years... he was gathered to his people**" (Gen 25:8). Jesus further unpacks this image in the New Testament: "**I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven**" (Matthew 8:11).

Now, I don't know about the last family reunion that you went to, but I do know that for many people the thought of being with certain family members forever -- even the church-going kind -- may not always feel like a blessing. Some of us are honest enough to confess that if heaven is filled with people just like me or some of the people I know, then it could start feeling like that OTHER place after awhile.

It's not like we aren't at least trying to get ready for this future. We come to worship and leave resolved that we're going to try to be more forgiving, more generous, more patient with others. Five minutes later, however, we're yelling at our kids, irritated at our spouse, and jostling for position in the parking lot. Maybe that's just me. How's heaven going to stay heavenly for other people with ME there?

### **Heaven is Where God's Character Becomes Ours**

Well, did you ever do that experiment back in school where you took a small piece of metal (maybe a paperclip) and rubbed it repeatedly with a magnet? What happened? What happened is that the orientation of the electrons in that big piece of metal produced a fundamental realignment of the electrons in the lesser metal. The character of that greater metal was so powerful that it altered the properties of the little one simply by coming close.

This is something akin to what the Apostle John suggests will happen to you in heaven. "**Dear friends,**" he writes, "**now we are children of God**" (Matt 8:11). We already exhibit some of our heavenly Father's characteristics. But like all children, we are still untrained in a lot of ways. Our emotions and thoughts and impulses still ping around inside of us like electrons gone wild. They produce speech and actions and consequences that sometimes shock and discourage us.

Some of us are trying to do something about this. We've begun an intentional spiritual journey that involves purposely rubbing up against the magnet of God's character in hopes that this will produce better internal alignment. Maybe you're engaging with God through regular rhythms of worship and prayer, Bible study and fellowship, servanthood and stewardship, or some other soul-training practices. If you are, then you are probably seeing some transformation happening.

While we're in this world, however, we're always a bit like RUSTED paperclips. Our brains and bodies and culture have been so subtly and steadily corroded by sin over

time that it is hard to get full contact with God for very long. John goes on to say, however, that **“What we will be has not yet been made known. For we know that when God appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is”** (1 John 3:2). In other words, the moment you get to heaven, you are going to be as close to God as the angels are now. You are going to see him as fully as they do now. You are going to fall on your knees in awe and adoration before him and be magnetized by his holy glory as the citizens of heaven are now.

Paul puts it like this: **“I declare to you that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen,”** says Paul, **“I tell you a mystery... we will all be changed”** (1 Cor 15:50-51). When you leave your flesh behind and go to heaven, your soul will get contact with God fully and forever. What’s left of the corrosion of sin will be dissolved and disappear. You will be so close to God that the orientation of your soul will be permanently magnetized to the vector of his kingdom. The process of “sanctification” (or being made holy) that began for you in this life will be completed in heaven with your final “glorification.” (Rom 8:30 NLT)

What that means is that the glorious character of God will finally become your character entirely. You will love God with all that you are, wanting nothing better than to honor and please him. You will love everyone around you as fully as God loves you and them, longing to bless each soul you meet in every way you can. You will not have to work at loving. It will simply be your way – as it is his.

### **Heaven Is Where Your Home Is**

It would be enough, I think, if this was the end of the story; but the wonder of heaven does not stop there. In a sense, it is only really the beginning. The Bible teaches that there will come a day when God brings about an end to history as we have known it. When he does, all humanity -- both those who have died and those who are still living on the earth -- will be called to stand before Christ in a decisive moment of judgment. I know that many of us have serious questions about this. What I want to explore with you in closing today is the THIRD meaning of the word “heaven” as the Bible uses it.

Heaven is a code word for the source of divine provision on which we all depend. It is the present dwelling place of God where the souls of the faithful go after death. And, finally, heaven is the future state of life on a new earth. Listen to how the Apostle John described it in the revelation Jesus gave him: **“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea”** (Rev 21:1).

The message of the Bible is that there will come a day when heaven as we think of it and earth as we know it will pass away and the “SEA” of separation between these different dimensions will be gone. At that time, the kingdom of heaven Jesus spoke of -- that glorious realm of God which has occasionally and partially broken into this world we are living in now -- will break through fully and alter the earth forever (Rev 21:2)

On that coming day, heaven and earth will, in a sense, re-marry. The divorce between God and humanity occasioned by the Fall will be fully repaired. Like a bride descending a staircase, those who have responded to God's invitation to intimacy with him will descend from the former heaven to take up life on a physical earth once again (Rev 21:2). You and I will move from our temporary lodging in the motel to our permanent home on earth.

This time around, however, human beings will not view God as a peripheral concern or after-thought. God will dwell at the very center of human life. We won't draw our identity from marriage or money or the opinion of other people. God will be the radiant core of our life (Rev. 21:3). His love will fill us and move through us and it will fill every emptiness and satisfy every hunger we've ever had.

The tears of sin/death will be wiped away]We will forget the pains of our past. The tears that sin and death once brought upon people, God now wipes away entirely. **"There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain."** That **"old order of things"** will be replaced by justice and rejoicing, absolute security and peace (Rev 21:4,25).

In that age to come, the Earth will be restored to Eden-like condition. Revelation 22 gives us a vision of a world of both gleaming cities and lush vegetation. It is a place where good water flows and food is abundant and the old wounds of war over resources are finally healed.

I hope you can tell that this future is a wonderfully physical one. It is not some wispy ethereal spirit-world, but a life of real substance, succulent tastes, and rich textures. It will require an actual BODY to enjoy this life. The reason the Apostles' Creed declares, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting," is because the apostles had actually seen one of these bodies. Jesus was wearing one when he came back from the grave.

On one level, it was very much like the body you now have. Thomas was able to touch it (John 20:26-28). Jesus was able to eat breakfast with it (John 21:10-14) and go walking on the Emmaus Road in it (Luke 24:15). And yet it was also of a sufficiently different kind that it could pass through grave-clothes (John 20:6-8), and appear behind locked doors (John 20:19), and was not immediately recognizable to the disciples when the risen Christ first approached them (Luke 24:15-16; John 20:15). In short, it was an immortal body – the kind you will be given for the new earth.

Don't be too afraid of the death of this body you now have. Take good care of it for now, but don't panic that it may be wearing out. Let me share a wonderful mystery. God's plan is for you to trade that body in for an infinitely more durable model one day. **"In a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet,"** writes Paul, **"the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For [by the grace of God] the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality"** (1 Cor 15:52).

As my friend and colleague, Bob Geelhoed endured a ten-year journey with the cancer that eventually took him, many of us were inspired by his relentless courage. Bob so loved this life. He did not want to leave it. But even as the cancer wore his body down, he remained full of hope in a way that was simply stunning. "I know that God will heal me, either this side or the other side of the grave," he'd say. And then he'd end almost every communication with these words of the pastor-poet, George MacDonald. Bob would say: **"A great good is coming."**

That's the point of view that makes followers of Jesus unusual. In the face of all that daunts and haunts humanity, we believe a great GOOD IS COMING that will redeem everything. Even when we are tired from paddling, we swim on because of that vision. We wake up every day looking for the in-breaking of that change in all the new possibilities of each moment. We work in every way we can to be the forerunners of the changes we know God will finally and fully bring. In a world where so many see the glass of life as half-empty, we are HOPE-FULL, because a great change is coming. So, as you go today, dare to live in the power and promise of that good news.