

Christ Community Covenant Church
Heaven is a wonderful place
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‘Heaven is a wonderful place, filled with Glory and Grace. I’m going to see my Savior’s face ‘cuz heaven is a wonderful place (I wanna go there).’

It’s a children’s song, especially popular at camp. Let me ask two questions: How many know that song? How many of you believe it?

While clearly we cannot fully fathom heaven, we can know some things:

- We know that we are to lay aside treasures in Heaven (Matthew 6:19-21)
- We know that we are to set our mind on things above not on things that are on earth
- We know that Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us in Heaven
- We know that we yearn now for God’s will to be done on earth as it is perfectly in Heaven

Heaven is getting a bit of resurgence these days. And I am glad. Years ago during the Great Awakening of the early 18th Century that was so culturally profound along the Atlantic shores, pastors like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield preached about the reality of hell and were stereotyped as “fire and brimstone” preachers. Guilt and fear were the motivators. Today I pray, as we launch this important series, that we might be accused of being “glory and grace” preachers, and perhaps our lives will be forever changed as we increasingly know in the deepest parts of our hearts that the promise of heaven changes my life on earth. Maybe it will spark a revival here in our hearts. It has been said, people can be so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good. Mike and I disagree with that and agree with Paul Enns who writes, “Unless you are heavenly minded you won’t be any earthly good.” Heaven is good ‘Kingdom’ thinking and around here we care about what Jesus cared about: the Kingdom of Heaven breaking out in hearts on earth. So let’s get started; Mike we decided that it would be good to define some terms before we go too far and maybe we better start with a couple somewhat obvious but important thoughts: Mike, why eternal life and Heaven? Why not not Heaven?

Why eternal life and Heaven? (MDB)

Dave, you know I like questions, particularly these deep questions that pertain to God. This is one of the most profound questions; it is a specific case of the larger question of “Why did God create?” So, without getting off track, the question before us is why eternal life and Heaven?

We will spend most of our time over the next few weeks considering what Heaven is like. But this question asks why God made us for eternal life and why is there a Heaven. It’s always dangerous to try to posit the mind of God; however, perhaps we can make a few observations to help because I believe understanding this questions will help us live today.

I think we begin to find the answer in our created nature. Look at Genesis 1:27—God created us in His image. We say that human beings are the crown jewel in God’s creation. The evidence of that is in our celebration last week: Easter. For God so loved the world—humankind—that Jesus died for us (John 3:16) and for any of us who receive Jesus, we become the children of God (John 1:12). Because we are made in the image of God we have intrinsic value in our very existence.

But, just because we who receive Jesus are children of God doesn’t mean necessarily that we should be created for eternal life. Again, I think Jesus gives us a clue. During His last meal with His disciples, Jesus said this:

And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.
(John 17:3, ESV)

God wants us to know Him, and that Greek word for know means to know God in a deeply personal, intimate sense. Those of us who are married or who have deep friendships understand that knowing another person takes a lifetime. I can learn facts about my wife, but to know her in this Biblical sense will take me a lifetime. If it takes me a lifetime to know another human, how long will it take me to know an infinite God? I think it will take an eternity.

And, I think there is at least one more reason. Were I to only live 70 years, or 700, or 7,000, my life would have no ultimate value. Once I cease to exist, I am simply no more. As a child of God my

relationship with God would be forever ended. I came from nothing and I return to nothing...no ultimate value. With eternal life, I have ultimate value. I am created in God's image and remain His son for all eternity.

As for Heaven, Paul quotes Isaiah when he says: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Corinthians 2:9, ESV; quoting Isaiah 64:4)

I think we can go back to the Garden of Eden for our clue. Aristotle believed in four transcendent virtues: truth, beauty, goodness, and unity. We can see those in the Garden. These virtues come from God. Based on the very nature of God, why would we not expect that the New Earth will be a place of truth, beauty, goodness, and unity beyond anything that we can comprehend?

And what does God get out of this: well, Scripture tells us that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. He is glorified and will delight in our enjoyment of Him.

As for us, even now we must live as image-bearers of God. Certainly we are distorted by sin, but we are nonetheless image bearers and children of the King, co-regents with Christ. (1 Corinthians 4:8; 2 Timothy 2:12) Understanding this prevents us from thinking too small about our lives!

All this sounds great to me, Dave! But, I said above that those who receive Christ are given the right to be called children of God (John 1:12). Exactly how does the Bible describe getting to Heaven? Is Jesus really the only way?

How do we get to Heaven and is Jesus the only way? (DLS)

Mike this is another one of those questions that is embedded in a larger discussion that in this day has become quite a stumbling block for some. It is the question of exclusivity. You have heard some say, "How can Christians say, 'Jesus is the only way to God.' That seems so arrogant." Let's start by going to scripture to make sure of the facts of our faith:

- **John 11:25;** "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.
- **John 14:6;** Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."
- **John 6:40;** "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."
- **Romans 10:9-10,13;** If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." ¹³For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."
- **1 Corinthians 3:11;** "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

Some day I think there will be a time when we can deal with the so called arrogance of Christianity. For now two things; first, remember that essentially all religions and worldview ideologies, claim to have a superior knowledge of how to get to Heaven. Christianity is not exclusively arrogant. And secondly to that point, let me just say that the person that says so emphatically, "All religions are just as worthy" is making a statement with just as much arrogance. They are simply stating, by faith, their opinion. I can just as easily say, "Oh yeah, who died and made you God?"

Mike, too much is made of this "How do I get to Heaven?" subject sometimes. This is not rocket science; it is simple faith in Christ alone to save me from my lost condition – as it says in Romans, believing in Christ and receiving His Holy Spirit as a seal of my faith.

The Testimony of Charles Spurgeon

I sometimes think I might have been in darkness and despair now, had it not been for the goodness of God in sending a snowstorm one Sunday morning, when I was going to a place of worship. When I could go no farther, I turned down a court and came to a little primitive Methodist chapel. In that chapel there might have been a dozen or fifteen people. The minister did not come that morning; snowed up, I suppose. A poor man, a shoemaker, a tailor, something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach.

Now it is well that ministers should be instructed, but this man was really stupid, as you would say. He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had nothing else to say. The text was "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter.

He began thus 'My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says 'Look.' Now that does not take a great deal of effort. It ain't lifting your feet or your finger, it is just 'look.' Well, a man need not go to college to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool and yet you can look. A man need not be worth a thousand a year to look. Anyone can look; a child can look.

Then the good man followed up his text in this way: "Look unto Me; I am sweating great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hanging on the cross. Look! I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend and sit at the Father's right hand. O! Look to Me!" Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I dare say, with so few present, he knew me to be a stranger, He then said, "Young man, you look very miserable. And you will always be miserable in life, and miserable in death if you do not obey my text. But if you obey now, this moment you will be saved."

Then he shouted as only a Primitive Methodist can: "Young man, look to Jesus Christ!" I did 'look.' There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun: I could have risen that moment and sung with enthusiasm of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to Him. Oh, that somebody had told me that before.

Mike let's stop there for now and get to a really big question. Because it seems to me that we can't talk about Heaven without dealing with the fact of judgment and Hell. Help us with these discussions for a bit.

Eternal Judgment

Dave, I don't want to say too much about whether or not God has the right to judge us at all. I think it should be clear to us that it is only common sense that there is some judgment for right and wrong. We do that in our everyday lives.

I think the better question, at least for today, is this idea of an eternal judgment, and particularly whether it is fair for someone to have to spend an eternity in Hell, which Jesus often described as a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (e.g., Matthew 8:12).

First and foremost, everything we say about God's "fairness" must be said with this in mind: Jesus died to give everyone the opportunity to spend eternity with Him. Everyone. Some argue that based on the God-commanded killings in the Old Testament and the very existence of Hell that God must be a moral monster. But what moral monster would die for us on the cross, which is the ultimate act of love? The cross must color how we think about God's justice. In other words, we must believe that God is love and then work to understand His actions against that backdrop.

So, to try and understand God's justice, let's take a specific case: Adolph Hitler. Hitler ruled Nazi Germany during the 1930s and 40s. Under his direction, over 6 million Jews were exterminated. As WWII was winding down, Hitler killed himself rather than be taken by the Allied soldiers. He killed 6 million people...and he killed himself. "Where is the justice in that?" we ask. Certainly killing himself is getting off too easy. There must be more punishment for a guy like that. So, I don't think we have a problem with punishment beyond death, or Hell. But we may ask, "Why eternal punishment, even for a guy like Hitler? Here we give life sentences for murder, so let God give him 6 million life sentences in Hell—say, 600 million years—and then let him into Heaven." After all, even 600 million years is not an eternity, so Hitler still has a chance to be rehabilitated and go to Heaven.

Hitler is a big example. How about one that is closer to home. What of the unbelieving guy who lashes out at his wife after a bad day? Should he, too, go to Hell for an eternity. Certainly he deserves a slap on the wrist, perhaps a week in Hell, but an eternity?

These examples expose the error in our thinking. Hitler will not go to Hell because he killed 6 million people. Our fictitious husband will not go to Hell because he got angry with his wife. Another will not go to Hell because she called the driver a fool who cut her off. Yet another will not go to Hell because he cheated on a history test. Yes, those are each sins; however, that is not why one goes to Hell.

A person goes to Heaven or Hell based on his or her response to God. Remember the greatest commandment:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (Luke 10:27).

Israel's King David puts it this way:

Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them. For God will save Zion and build up the cities of Judah, and people shall dwell there and possess it; the offspring of his servants shall inherit it, and those who love his name shall dwell in it. (Psalm 69:34–36, ESV)

“Those who love His name shall dwell in it.” If you do not love God, then it would be Hell for you to be forced to spend an eternity with God. Heaven is for those who love God and by extension have accepted God’s grace through Jesus’ death on the cross.

Imagine this: imagine that I back into your car in the parking lot. You see me do it and you confront me. I get very indignant with you and deny that I did anything wrong. How can our relationship possibly be restored as long as I refuse to acknowledge my wrongdoing...I obviously do not care about any kind of relationship with you.

Martin Luther put it this way:

There are two kinds of sin: one is confessed, and this no one should leave unforgiven; the other kind is defended, and this no one can forgive, for it refuses to be counted as sin or to accept forgiveness.¹

God chose to create us with free will so that we might freely love Him or reject Him. We see this same choice being offered to the Jews as they prepared to enter the Promised Land 3500 years ago:

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call Heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them. (Deuteronomy 30:15–20, ESV)

Jesus’ story of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31) appears to tell us that we have only this one chance in this life to make the right choice; there will be no further opportunity once we die. But God gives us every opportunity to choose Him. Paul tells us that the evidence for God is clear to everyone, there is no excuse (Romans 1:18-20). Luke tells us that God has determined where and when each of us will live so that we “would seek God” (Acts 17:26-27).

There is much more that can be said about this, Dave, but this is enough for now. Given this choice that God has placed before each of us, Dave, how can I have some assurance that I am going to Heaven when I die? How can I be sure of where I’m going?

How can I be sure of whether I am going to Heaven?

Mike the answer to that question comes out of the passage from Revelation 21. Remember the verse where it says the only ones who get in are only those whose names are listed in the Lamb’s Book of Life? The critical point in this last topic is really not do I know God but better does God know me?

The Royal Wedding illustration: You don’t get into William and Kate’s Royal Wedding unless the King and his Bride know you and you are on the invitation list. Security is too tight. The security is tight at Heaven’s door too!

Where the sense of confusion over where we can know for certain if we are saved is either we have bad theology and we are trying to earn our way to heaven and we don’t know God’s scoring system. That is just bad theology and if that is what you believe you don’t need to wonder – you won’t get in. But I think sometimes the believer reads Jesus talking of that day (Matthew 7:21ff) when we come before the throne and Jesus says; ***21 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'***

¹ Quoted in Volf, Miroslav. (2005). *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a World Stripped of Grace*. Zondervan. 153-154.

The problem isn't just that I say I know who Jesus is but that He knows me and has written me in His Book of Life. This is crystal clear when Jesus says you say you knew of me, but "I never knew you."

Here is the good news of assurance I want you all to hear. The apostle John writes in his little letter. 1 John says (5:10-13)

Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

This passage is making it clear; simply saying "I believe in Jesus" simply says, "I know Jesus" it does not say He knows you. The demons know Jesus and tremble. This passage is saying you must believe and receive – receive the testimony, the truth, which is the Spirit. If you believe and have received the Spirit as a seal to your faith, God knows you. You can know that you have eternal life. I can't answer it for you but you can look inside your heart and say I have God living inside me. If not, stop now and look to Jesus, pray to receive Him and be sure.

For the next several weeks we will be looking at heaven, its character and its values. We will be looking to see if it makes any difference in our lives today. Here is my one take away from our time together today; Set your eyes on the Kingdom of Heaven and its priorities. Spend time this week asking yourself "Where have I placed my time and treasure resources?" Where do I set my hope?" In this world or the next?