

Sermon 10-18-20 Glimpses of heaven — passing away  
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Heaven. For the next three Sundays we are going to be talking about Heaven. Have you given much thought to Heaven, to what it will be like? Is Heaven something you look forward to? Is it something you fear? Or is it so distant and hard to grasp that you struggle to imagine what it will be like or even wonder if it is real?

According to a Barna Research poll: 81% of us believe in an afterlife of some sort. 76% believe that Heaven exists. And 24% admit they have “no idea” what will happen after they die. Personally, I believe that there is a real Heaven. Certainly, there is a lot I don’t know about it. Still, I have had many glimpses of Heaven. More than enough to look forward to going there one day. That is what we will be exploring over the next few weeks, glimpses of Heaven.

The other day a friend told me that a mutual friend had “Passed away.” I used to hate it when people used the expression “passed away.” It seemed to me that they were denying the reality of death. Why didn’t they just admit that someone had died? What is wrong with the word “dead”? However, I have since learned that saying that someone has “passed away” is a very biblical way of describing what happens when we die. In his first letter John said, **“The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.” — 1 John 2:17**

It is true. Look at your hands, your feet, your body. The day is coming when they will pass away. Our bodies will die, but our spirits will live on for eternity. What do you think about that? About living for eternity? Is it something you look forward to?

Paul did. He looked forward to the time when his body would pass away. In his letter to the Philippians Paul wrote: **“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 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! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.” — Phil. 1:21-23**

Paul looked forward to dying. Can you image that? Don’t misunderstand what Paul was feeling. Paul wasn’t depressed. He wasn’t suffering. He wasn’t suicidal. Paul tells us that his life was good. Still, Paul knew that when his body passed away he would be with Jesus, in Heaven, forever! Life was good but an eternity with Jesus was something he longed for.

Still, Paul was content to wait, for the sake of the ministry he was doing and for the sake of those he loved. That of course is the conundrum all of us find ourselves in. We catch glimpses of Heaven and long to be there. We have moments of profound connection with God and don’t want them to end. Yet, we also have responsibilities and people here on earth that require our presence. We want to go and yet we want to stay. We long to be in Heaven and yet are hesitant to leave a job undone or a loved one alone. So what are we to do?

I think it helps if we have a sense both of what it is we have to look forward to and what God is asking of us now. The truth is that many of us don’t know why we are here and have even less understanding of what Heaven might be like when we get there.

In fairness, there is not a lot of concrete information on what Heaven is like. The Bible mostly gives glimpses and speaks in allegories. There is more we do not understand about Heaven than we understand. Perhaps that is why Paul wrote: **“But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him’—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.” — 1 Cor. 2:9-10**

There are a lot of things we don't know about Heaven, but there is also a lot we do know. The Bible provides us with glimpses of Heaven. Glimpses that dispel many of the mistaken beliefs of the world. Mistaken beliefs I have heard all my life. Mistaken beliefs that are widely held. What mistaken beliefs am I speaking of? For starters:

- “We should eat, drink and be merry while we can, for there will be nothing after we die.”
- “There is really no need to be concerned about eternal things. After all, we will be born and born again until we get it right.”
- “Basically it all boils down to how we live. Good people make it into heaven.”

I can't count the number of times I have heard those things. I have heard them so often that they carry the ring of truth. But they are both unbiblical and wrong.

We need to learn the truth about Heaven and eternal life so that we aren't misled by the misinformation around us. More than that, we need to understand what we have to look forward to because, as Paul pointed out, Heaven is the goal at the end of the race. Like any racer, we run best, we can endure more, if we keep our focus on the finish line. Again, Paul said, **“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” — Col. 3:1,2**

Sadly, many people, even Christians, are not focused on the hope of Heaven. They seldom think about Heaven. And when they do they have only vague, uninspiring images that have more in common with old Hollywood movies than anything found in the Bible. They fear that when they enter the Pearly Gates the first things they will be handed are a choir robe and a harp; that they will be transformed into **fat little babies with wings**; that they may lose their personal identity, their memories, themselves.

In “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” Mark Twain portrays just such a view of Heaven. According to Huck, the Christian spinster, Miss Watson described heaven in less than inviting terms. In his words, “She went on and told me all about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever. So I didn't think much of it... I asked her if she reckoned Tom Sawyer would do there, and she said, not by a considerable sight. I was glad about that, because I want him and me to be together.”

If that is what Heaven will be like it is little wonder few long for it. There are a lot of unbiblical misunderstandings of what heaven will be like. To be honest I do not know exactly what Heaven will be like. But I have caught enough glimpses of Heaven in the Bible to look forward to one day living in what the author of Hebrews calls “a better country.”

So what glimpses have I seen? Well, we are told that we will be given a new home. Indeed, John describes it as a mansion. It will be surrounded by beautiful gardens, rivers and trees. There will be no more war or conflict. We will all live in peace. We will be restored to the ones we love. We will be healed and receive new bodies that will never get sick or injured or even tired. We won't be discouraged or depressed. Indeed, all of life's tears will be dried from our eyes. We will be healed both externally and internally. We will neither die or decay nor will those around us. And, best of all, we will know and be with God. We will have seats at the heavenly banquet table with God. Think of the holiest, most intimate moments you have ever had with the Spirit and imagine experiencing that throughout all eternity. That is a taste of what Heaven will be like. Wow, I am beginning to understand why Paul longed for Heaven.

Sadly, too many in my profession have shortchanged the hope of Heaven. We have not spoken of it much. We have been afraid of being accused of preaching “pie in the sky bye and bye” while ignoring the real issues of the here and now. Even worse, we have tried to frighten people into the kingdom by focusing on the prospect of Hell instead of drawing them with the hope of Heaven. We have reduced

Heaven to a place that older people would want to go to as a preferable to a nursing home, but have shown little eagerness to get there ourselves. If you ask a hundred people what they look forward to most, few would answer "Heaven". Not many of us share Paul's excitement at the prospect of heaven. Instead, if we even think about passing away, we count on Jesus to be our personal "get out of Hell" card and look forward to going to Heaven one day as a way of escaping the suffering of old age. Certainly we hope that Heaven will be a good place but we expend little time thinking about what it might be like.

If only we understood what Heaven will be like, we'd realize that it is so exciting and compelling that even the youngest and healthiest of us would daydream about the day that our bodies will "pass away" and we will be with Jesus. Instead of trying to scare people with stories of Hell, or assuring them that Heaven is certainly better than the suffering of later years, we need to remind them of the wonders that await those of us who have said "Yes" to God.

In her story, "It's Not in the Book!" Ruthanna Metzgar writes, "As a professional singer, it was not unusual to be asked to sing for a wedding, but it was a bit unusual to sing for the wedding of a millionaire. I knew the wedding would be picture-perfect and was pleased to be able to participate, but when the invitation to the reception arrived I knew it would be something exceptional.

"The reception was held on the top two floors of Seattle's Columbia Tower, the Northwest's tallest skyscraper, and it was even more wonderful than I imagined. There were waiters wearing snappy black tuxedos who offered luscious hor d'oeuvres and exotic beverages for the most discriminating tastes. The atmosphere was one of grace and sophistication.

"After about an hour of merriment the bride and groom approached a beautiful glass and brass staircase that led to the top floor. A satin ribbon, which was draped across the bottom of the stairs, was cut and the announcement made that the wedding feast was about to begin. The bride and groom ascended the stairs and the guests followed. What a lavish event of which to be a part.

"A gentleman with a lovely bound book greeted us as we reached the top of the stairs. "May I have your name please?" "I am Ruthanna Metzgar and this is my husband, Roy Metzgar," I replied. The gentleman searched for our names, then explained, "I'm not finding it. Would you spell your name please?" I spelled it slowly and clearly. After searching throughout the book the gentleman looked up and said, "I'm sorry, but your name is not here. Without your name in this book you cannot attend this banquet." "Oh, there must be some mistake," I replied. "I am the singer. I sang for this wedding!" The gentleman calmly answered, "It doesn't matter who you are or what you did, without your name in the book you cannot attend this banquet." As I looked around the room I thought briefly of running to the groom and trying to plead my case, but with a hundred guests on the stairs behind us and every place at the tables assigned according to the thoughtful choices of the bride and groom, I stood silent.

"The gentleman with the book motioned to a waiter and said, "Show these people to the service elevator please." We followed the waiter past beautifully decorated tables laden with shrimp, whole smoked salmon, even gracefully carved ice sculptures. And adjacent to the banquet area was an orchestra, its members all dressed in dazzling white tuxedos, preparing to fill the room with glorious music.

"We were led to the service elevator, stepped in, and the waiter himself pushed "G" for garage. My husband, thoughtfully, did not say a word, nor did I. As Roy drove out of the Columbia Tower garage, we both remained silent. After driving several miles in silence, Roy reached over and gently put his hand on my arm. "Sweetheart, what happened?"

"And then I remembered: "When the invitation arrived for the reception I was very busy and I never bothered to return the RSVP. Besides, I was the singer, surely I could go to the reception without returning the RSVP!"

“As we drove on I began to weep. I was not weeping because I had just missed the most lavish banquet of my life, but I was weeping because suddenly I knew what it will be like someday for people as they stand before the entrance of heaven: People who were too busy to respond to Christ's invitation to His heavenly banquet. People who assumed that the good things they had done, even perfect church attendance or singing in the choir, would be enough to gain entry to heaven. People who will look for their name in the Lamb's Book of Life and not find it there. People who did not have time to respond to Christ's gracious invitation to have their sins forgiven and accept Him into their hearts.

“And then I wept again because I was so grateful that I had, many years earlier, received Christ as my personal Savior and can be confident that my name is written in the most important book of all: The Lamb's Book of Life.”

That is what we, as Christians fear most. Our real deepest fear is not of the fires of Hell. What we fear is the possibility of missing out on the great wedding feast. It is missing out on the best party we can imagine, one that will never end. What we fear is not spending eternity with Jesus.

The passage we read from Colossians reminds us: **“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” — Col. 3:1, 2**

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. But of course this is not just a future hope. Heaven is something that we will fully experience when the things of this world fade away and we find ourselves fully in the presence of God. Still, like the writers of the Bible, we can catch glimpses of heaven here and now. We can glimpse heaven in the beauty of a sunrise or sunset. We can glimpse heaven in the smile of a child. We can glimpse heaven when we pour our heart out in worship. We can glimpse Heaven in the words of the Bible. And we can glimpse heaven in prayer and meditation when we open ourselves up to God and the Spirit comes and fills us.

I don't know about you but for me those moments come when they will and never last long. Yet, when they are gone, I mourn their passing and look forward with eager anticipation to when I will be touched by Heaven again. I call those moments "glimpses of Heaven" and they cause me to look forward all the more to that time when Heaven is no longer something I glimpse, but has become my everyday reality. Yes, I look forward to Heaven, with Paul I yearn for that time. But in the meantime I have work to do and people to love and that is not bad, not bad at all.

So what is our scripture passage for this week, the one on which we will meditate each day and allow to guide our lives. There were a number of options. The Bible gives us many glimpses of heaven. That said, I think the words that best capture both the dilemma and hope of heaven is the cry of Paul, **“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” — Phil 1:21**

See if these words do not express your own experience too, as you live the life God has called you to live for now, even as you look forward to Heaven.