

Sermon 10-25-20 Glimpses of heaven
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Last week I spoke about Heaven. I shared Paul's conundrum of looking forward to one day spending eternity in this place he longed for but had only glimpsed, even as he wanted to remain here to complete the work to which he was called and care for those he loved. I also shared that this week we would take a closer look at what the Bible has to say about the place Paul looked forward to, this place we call Heaven. While we don't know everything about Heaven, the Bible tells us much about what Heaven will be like. I don't know about you, but I want to learn all I can about Heaven. After all, if I am going to spend eternity there, it would be nice to know what to expect. Personally, if I am going to travel somewhere I want to know what the weather will be like, how the people dress, what the accommodations will be, what sorts of things I might need to know.

If we want to understand what the Scriptures teach about Heaven, a good place to begin is by taking a look at God's design for us in the very beginning. According to Genesis, God placed people on Earth to fill it, to rule over it and care for it, to develop it to God's glory. But that plan has never been fulfilled. We have failed to live up to God's purpose.

Does this mean that God was wrong in what he hoped for, or changed his mind about our place in the creation? I don't think so. Indeed, if you read through the rest of the Bible you will find that it is filled with **"re" words. Words like reconcile, redeem, restore, recover, return, renew, and resurrect.** It seems to me that the prefix, "re" points to a return to the original purpose for which we were created. This was God's plan and it is still God's plan. God wants us to be reconciled to him. He wants to redeem us from our sins. He wants to restore our place in his plan. He wants to recover what was lost, to renew his creation, and to resurrect the lives that have been lost. No matter how broken, crushed, or disjointed our world and relationships have become, God never gives up on his original plan. He is always working to call us back to the purpose for which we were created.

Hear what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:50-53: **"Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality."**

It is God's plan to restore us to the original relationships and purpose for which we were intended. Heaven is where that will happen. How will that happen? If we are going to speak about Heaven, and how it will be achieved, a good place to begin is with the door that leads from earthly life into heaven, that is resurrection. Again Paul wrote the Corinthians, saying: (1 Corinthians 15: 13,14, 35-44.) **"If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith... But someone may ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."**

Did you hear that? We will be raised with "Spiritual Bodies". Some may think that that makes no sense, that spirit and body are opposites. They argue that spiritual means non-physical and bodies are physical. But that is not what spiritual means. In this case the word "spiritual" is an adjective used to describe the kind of body we will have.

After all, when Jesus was raised from the dead he had a body, a spiritual body. Moreover in Philippians 3:20-21 we are promised a body like his. There we read: **“Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”**

Like Jesus, our spiritual body will be real. In Luke 24:39 he explained: **“Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”** Moreover, after he was resurrected Jesus ate, walked, and talked,. He did work. He even looked like himself, complete with the scars from the crucifixion. Like Jesus, our new, spiritual bodies will be us, recognizable as us, only restored and new. Instead of being the broken, wounded beings we are now, we will be the people God intended for us to be from the time of creation.

What do I mean by saying that our new bodies will be restored and new? In Revelation 21:1-5 we read: **“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”**

Did you hear that? Our bodies will be made new. The older I get, the more aches and pain I have, the more things I can no longer do, the more I appreciate the promise that God will make me new. Imagine, being able to run and jump again. Imagine waking up and not hurting. Imagine not having to worry about COVID, or cancer, or dementia. Imagine no more tears, sadness, or regrets. That’s right, not only will our bodies be healed our minds will be healed, as well. There will be no more mourning or crying or pain. No more depression or addiction or guilt. Just as our bodies will be restored to what they were meant to be, so will our minds. And when our minds are restored our relationships will be restored, too. The lion will lie down with the lamb. We will live at peace with one another. We will finally, fully know love and acceptance. We will be made new. God will not give up on us. God does not give up on his people. God will restore us.

We will have new bodies and our new bodies will need a new home. For just as God has not given up on us he will not give up on creation. I believe that the Promised Land will not be wholly unlike the Earth. However, much like us, this new Earth will be restored to what God originally intended it to be. John Piper writes, “What happens to our bodies and what happens to the creation go together. And what happens to our bodies is not annihilation but redemption...our bodies will be redeemed, restored, made new, not thrown away. And so it is with the heavens and the earth.”

What will this new Earth be like? Much like our redeemed bodies, I believe that Heaven will be both comfortingly familiar and amazingly new. All creation will be healed and restored. Which means that this is not only good news for us. It is also good news for animals, plants, planets and stars. In Colossians 1:20 we read: **“and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven...”** Heaven will not be polluted or marred by our destruction. Moreover, there will be a place, a home for each of us, a place where we belong. When we arrive in Heaven we will finally find that home we have been searching for all our lives, yet for now only finding in part.

What will we do in Heaven? After all, Heaven will go on forever. I don’t know about you but I struggle with many of the images of Heaven I grew up with. It is hard for me to get excited about floating on clouds throughout all eternity playing a harp. I need a purpose, something of value to do. So, what will

we do in Heaven? There are hints in the Bible. We are told that not only will we have new bodies, we will have new lives. Personally, I don't think that our new lives will be wholly different from our lives now. We will retain our identities and personalities. I believe that we will have opportunities to eat, live, work, play, and worship. Most importantly, we will not be God. Which means that we will not have any of the "omnies". Only God is omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, etc. We will still be finite beings. Which means that we will continue to learn, travel, develop skills, gain knowledge, visit, explore, learn and grow. I believe that we will continue to grow forever.

You may ask, "But won't we eventually finish the process? Can we go on growing forever?" I think we can. Because if there is anything that marks the work of God it is creativity. I see no reason to doubt that God will continue to create throughout eternity. Which means that God's new creations will always outpace our abilities to explore and discover? We cannot possibly grow fast enough to catch up with God.

Sounds fun doesn't it? And it should be. As a parent there were few things I loved more than watching my children and now my grandchildren have fun. I am sure it is the same for God. When Jesus said that we must become like little children to enter the Kingdom of God, he wasn't just encouraging us to adopt the simple faith of children. I think that he intended something more. God wants us to recapture the simple wonder and joy of childhood. After all, how can we appreciate or experience God except through wonder and joy? Jesus repeatedly urged his followers to let go of the worries and stresses that suck the joy out of life. He loved it when they laughed and celebrated and experienced joy. God created this world to be a place of joy. Why else does a dog bark and chase after its tail? Why do whales and dolphins leap out of the water? Why do we so love music? Fun? Beauty? We love those things because God made them and said that they were good. In 1 Timothy 6:17 we read: **"in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."** I believe that in Heaven we will experience the joy of creation that we only taste occasionally in this life.

And we will share that joy with loved ones. I remember sitting with my grandmother near the end of her life. We were sipping coffee and she looked so sad. I asked her, "Grandma what's wrong?" She replied that she was tired. Her body was tired. Most of all her heart was tired. She said, "Kim. I just want to go be with God in Heaven. Your grandpa is in Heaven. My best friends are in Heaven. Most of the people I know are in Heaven. I want to go and be with them."

I did not understand her at the time, but the longer I live the more her words make sense to me.

That said, I know that there are some of you who do not share her longings. There are those in Heaven that you are not sure you want to see again. Perhaps they hurt you, or abused you, or you may have hurt them. In fact, there may be some who, if they are there, you struggle to see how Heaven could be Heaven. Remember, that they, too will be made new. Remember, that we will all be made new. The broken parts of our lives that caused pain will be healed. Even broken relationships will be healed. After all, if Jesus could somehow forgive and welcome those who denied, rejected and crucified him, we will be able to welcome those who hurt us, too, as unimaginable as that may seem. And it will be safe and OK because their broken parts will be healed. They will be who they were meant to be.

There are so many wonderful things about Heaven to look forward to, but of course the most wonderful thing of all is that Jesus will be there! In Heaven we will enjoy God's company and Glory! We will be seated at the heavenly banquet table with God. As Luke promised (13:9) **"People will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God."** It has been rightfully said, "Our longing for Heaven is really a longing for God."

I don't know about you, but some of the most precious moments of my life have been those brief moments when I have found myself in what I can only describe as "the presence of God." Most often these moments have surprised me, coming when I did not suspect them. There have been moments staring at a waterfall or the sun setting over the ocean, moments of interrupted prayer, moments in worship when I suddenly felt a sense of love and presence that took me out of myself; moments that I can only describe as being in the very presence of God. There have been other times when words came out of my mouth that I did not plan or intend, words which spoke with a power and a wisdom I could not claim. I have no other explanation except that God placed those words there. These are precious moments that I have I often wished I could recapture. But I can't. Such moments are rare and they come when they will. Still, I believe that they are foretastes or, better yet, "glimpses of Heaven", and they make me long for that time when I will be in the presence of God, forever.

But meantime, in the meantime, I recall the words of the passage from Paul we learned last week. It is the passage I offer for us to continue to meditate on as we go through this week. They express Paul's dilemma. Paul wrote to the Philippian church (1:29): **"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."** That of course is the human dilemma. We yearn for Heaven, for a time when we will be healed, when the world will be healed, and we will be with God. But in the meantime God has given us work to do and people to love and that is good, too. So live your life with a foot in both worlds. Enjoy the life God has given you. Give thanks for it while it lasts. But look forward to the reward at the end of the race which is life and with that goal in mind run your race as best you can.

Know that you do not run alone, for I, and all the body of Christ run, or perhaps some days limp, right alongside you.