

Heaven: A Place Perfection of Soul and Body

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Having spent some weeks on the questions, "What is hell?" and "Who is going there?", we now move to address those questions to the subject of heaven. And tonight we begin to take up the first of those questions, "What is heaven?" And then after spending several Lord's Day evenings on that subject, God willing, we will take up the question, "Who is going there?"

What is heaven? As we attempt to answer the question tonight just looking at two parts of the answer, I would remind you of a point made in the introductory study on this subject that we are concerned primarily, not with the intermediate state, that is, not that dimension of heaven that is the portion of every believer the moment his soul leaves his body. There are three text in the New Testament which speak very clearly of the intermediate state of the believer. Philippians 1:23: "For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better." 2 Corinthians 5:8: "We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." And Hebrews 12:23 which speaks of the spirits of just men made perfect. But we are concentrating on heaven in the terms of the eternal state, the heaven that will exist after the return of the Lord Jesus, after the resurrection of the bodies of all men, saints, and sinners, and the reuniting of their souls with those bodies and their being fixed in their eternal state with body and soul joined forever.

So we take up the question, "What is heaven?" with our concentration upon heaven in terms of the eternal state. The first assertion I will make (and then we will look at a number of Scriptures which force this assertion upon us) is this: heaven is a place as well as a state or condition of existence. When the Bible speaks of heaven, some passages clearly point to a place outside of this present world order, particularly the place where our Lord now in His glorified body resides. It is called the right hand of the Father. Let us look at several passages which would seem to point to the fact that heaven is a place as well as a condition outside of this present world order as we now know it and exist within it. John 14:1-3. Our Lord has told His disciples that He is about to leave them, and this, of course, has caused great grief to their hearts, and so He is seeking to comfort them. And He says,

"Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe [or it may be the imperative in the original. The actual spelling for the imperative or the indicative is exactly the same] in God, believe also in Me. In my Father's house are many mansions [dwelling places]: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."

Here our Lord says,

"I'm about to leave you, and in leaving you, I'm going to prepare a place for you in My Father's house. (And the contrast is their present place of dwelling and the Father's house.) I'm leaving you, but I'm leaving you to do a work of construction. I'm leaving to prepare a place for you in My Father's house. And in My Father's house, there are many dwelling places. And if I go to do that work of preparing the dwelling places, I give you My pledge that I will come back again to take you to Myself that where I am there you may be also."

If this were the only passage in the Bible with some explicit teaching on heaven, we would be rightly led to think that heaven, whatever it is, is a place up there, out there, beyond this present state of affairs, this present place of dwelling as we now know it. The same pressure is on such a text as Philippians 3:20: "For our [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself." Our citizenship is in the heavens. From the heavens we wait. We wait for our Lord Jesus to come and fashion anew our bodies like unto the body of His own glory. And the pressure again seems to be pointing to heaven as a place and a condition out there, up there, beyond here. Likewise with Colossians 3:1-4:

"If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above [outside of you, above you, beyond you], where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above [that is, the place where Christ is seated on the right hand of God], not on things on the earth. [You see the contrast. Where Christ is seated on the right hand of God is the place above in contrast to the earth.] For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with Him in glory."

Now I say the pressure of these texts, not the clear, undeniable, explicitly etched out teaching, but certainly, the pressure of these texts is that heaven is a place out there, up there, beyond this present earth. However, there are other passages which clearly point in the direction of this present earth renewed and renovated at the coming of Christ as the place called heaven, that heaven will indeed be found here on this earth. And there are two such clear texts. The first is Romans 8:18-22:

"For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature [the created world order] waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature [this world and all that pertains to it] was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of Him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now."

Here is the picture of this world having come under the curse and longing to be released and delivered from that curse in conjunction with the final installment of redemptive privilege with respect to the children of God. That comes, of course, at the return of Christ when He summons dead believers out of their graves. Living believers are transformed in a moment, and they come into the full possession of redemptive privilege in their glorified bodies. And according to this passage, the

whole creation in that same complex of events will be delivered from the bondage of corruption under which it has labored from the fall of man. For you remember, when man sinned, God said, "Cursed be the ground for thy sake." And so this passage clearly points in the direction of a heaven that is here--this very earth on which this building rests, this very earth which supports the walls and the trusses and the concrete floor on which you sit. This very creation is given the picture here of groaning and travailing, longing for its true birth into the liberty of the sons of God.

The second key text is 2 Peter 3. Now remember, our question is, "What is heaven?" And I have said that heaven is a place as well as a state or condition. Well, what is that place? Where is it to be found? Some text point out there, up there, outside of this present order. Now we've looked at a text that says down here in this situation within this present order. Now 2 Peter 3:10-13:

"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness."

Well, you see the Bible's all full of contradictions. Anyone can see it. Jesus said, "I'm going out there to prepare a place. I'm going to come and take you to Myself." Heaven is up there and out there. Now Peter says we're supposed to look for a new heaven and new earth. Heaven's down here. Well, is it out there or down here? Is it up, or is it down? Is it out, or is it here? Well, there is no contradiction, but there is a beautiful synthesis of these various strands of Biblical teaching. And it is wonderfully brought together in a passage such as Revelation 21:1-3. In vision, John writes,

"And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God."

Then further on in the chapter, the identity of this holy city, the new Jerusalem, is none other than the glorified church. Verse 9:

"And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife. [That's the church.] And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God."

Do you see it? He says, "Come, I'm going to show you a beautiful bride." And then He takes John and carries him away, and what does he see? A gorgeous woman in a bridal garment? No, he sees a city coming down out of heaven. And that city is the perfected church coming down out of heaven to earth. So what is the answer to the question, "Where is heaven?" The answer is, according to these Scriptures, that

heaven is the place and condition that will involve this present world that now groans and travails under all the many effects of sin purified by the fire of the returning Lord who renews it in judgment. And new heavens, the heavens above us, and who knows how far out beyond us to the farthest galaxies, the entire universe of God with its focal point being this little speck on the outer edge of this galaxy will constitute heaven as to its locality. So we are warranted in asserting that heaven is a place as well as a state and a condition, a place involving this present earth, but this earth as paradise restored and renewed and made fit for the new condition of the people of God along with a renovated universe. And beyond that all is speculation. Scripture casts a vale of silence over those particulars.

Did not our Lord say, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:6)? And think of the many billions of times the prayer has gone up, not as an empty form and ritual as it is with many, but as an earnest cry to God from the heart as obedient disciples, "Thy will be done upon earth, as it is in heaven." And that longing and holy passion in the hearts of the people of God will be answered when our Lord Jesus at His return ushers in the full glory of heaven. Think of it, this very earth--and I love to think of it in these terms--that has soaked up the blood of multitudes on battlefields, this very earth where the sod is stained with innocent blood, this very earth that supports the footstep of the tyrant and the lecher and the murderer and the thief, this very earth that supports the rebel activity of the multitudes of the unconverted, this very earth in which Almighty God is denied, this very air that surrounds us and men breathe into their lungs that they might force some of that air up over the larynx and speak words of blasphemy and denial of God; that this very earth and its total life support system will be renovated by the fire of judgment at the return of Christ. And when He's through, every particle, every atom of this earth and its support system will be permeated with nothing but righteousness. It will be the new heavens and the new earth wherein righteousness and righteousness alone has its home.

You want to get shouting happy driving down a busy freeway, thinking of all the cussing that's going on, because people are banging into one another and cutting one another off. And you go into that office, and your eyes burn with people blowing smoke into them, and your ears are defiled with the cursing. Child of God, do you want something that will make you shouting happy in the midst of it? Look at every square inch of the Garden State Parkway, every square inch of that office room, every square inch of that classroom and say, "One day nothing but righteousness will occupy you. Nothing but righteous feet will walk over that square inch of ground. Nothing but righteous words will send out vibrations to be picked up by human ears. Nothing but righteous sights will enter these eyes." Child of God, you want to get shouting happy? You just fix your mind upon that great reality.

What is heaven? Heaven is a place as well as a condition. And that place will be this present world renovated and renewed: paradise restored and all of heavens above us. And I say that beyond that, we must speculate. And I don't think God is at all disturbed with holy speculation just as long as you don't preach it. And I'll not preach my speculations, though I have great joy in turning them over in my mind.

The second thing we are warranted to say about heaven is this: heaven is a state of the personal perfection of soul and body. Let us consider, first of all, the perfection of the soul. When God begins His work of grace, He begins that work by breaking the dominion of sin over the soul of an elect sinner. Romans 6 is the watershed of

Biblical teaching on this point. Paul says in that chapter, "But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness" (vv. 17-18). And in verse 22, "servants of righteousness" is changed to "servants of God," and I love the fact that both are used. You see, if we became servants of righteousness in the abstract, that would be mere legalism and moralism. But if it simply said "servants of God," it might leave the door open to the mystical flight of an unethical pietism. And someone says, "O, I'm a servant of God," but he lives like the devil. But being made servants to God, we are made servants of righteousness. One is never true without the other. The dominion of sin is broken, and in the deepest recesses of the soul, we are delivered from the clutches of the devil and the principle of living for self and sin. We are given the gift of the Holy Spirit. And in these souls of ours, God implants what the Bible calls a down payment of a completed redemption. And within our hearts, we have a longing to be here and now what we one day shall be by the grace of God.

We shall have souls with all of the faculties of the soul: the intellectual, the thinking faculties (the affectional), the feeling faculties (the volitional), the willing faculties, and all the mysterious faculties of the soul. To think that as surely as sin has entered and twisted and marred and scarred and warped every faculty, the God who has broken its dominion will one day scour every last remnant of sin from every atom of the soul--if I may materialize the soul into a collection of atoms--until the very eye of God with a God-made microscope cannot find one single remnant of sin left in the human soul--completely and holy sanctified by His grace. Now for those who die before the return of Christ, that's what the Lord does at the moment the soul leaves the body and enters His presence. That's why Hebrews 12:22-23 says, "But ye are come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels...and to the spirits of just men made perfect." So the soul is perfected at the moment of death. "To be absent from the body [is] to be present with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). That's why John can say in Revelation 14:13, "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them." They have the perfection of the soul at the moment of death.

But God did not make us to be disembodied souls, even perfect disembodied souls. And when the Bibles says that in the resurrection they shall be as the angels, it's only speaking in reference to the institution of marriage. It doesn't mean we shall be disembodied spirits. May I say it reverently, do you know you could never be happy as a human being existing for eternity with a perfect soul without your body? The reason is that God didn't make you to be a disembodied soul. He made you a human being. He made you a body-soul entity. And you can never be totally happy in God unless you are totally what God made you to be: a holy man, body/soul; a holy woman, body/soul. And so heaven will realize for us, not merely--bless God!--the perfection of the soul but the perfection of the body as well. And according to 1 Thessalonians 4:14, this will be brought about at the return of the Lord Jesus.

Look at the passage familiar to many of you that we as elders are constantly reminding ourselves that we have those who are very new to the Christian faith. And some of the texts that some of us received almost, as it we were, at our mother's breasts are as new as tomorrow morning's sunrise to some of you. 1 Thessalonians 4:14. Some silly notions had been floating around the church at Thessalonica, that there was some kind of special privilege that awaited those who would be alive when

the Lord came, and that those who died before His coming would be sort of second class citizens in the kingdom. So Paul addresses himself to that notion:

"But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him. [That is, He will bring their souls with Him at His return.] For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. [You see his masterful stroke. He says, 'We won't be found the first class citizens.' He says, 'I've got news for you. You know whose going to get preferential treatment? Not living saints, dead saints. Look, we who are alive will in no wise precede them that are fallen asleep.'] For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (vv. 14-17).

The Lord Jesus at His return is going to show preferential treatment to the dust of His departed saints whose bodies have long since been eaten by the worms. Returned to dust, they will have preferential treatment. And when He raises them to life, with what kind of body will He raise them? Philippians 3:21: "Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body." Think of it. Try to meditate for a moment tonight. Gird up the loins of your mind and think. What is that body like that our Lord now has subsequent to His resurrection, that body in which He moved freely in and out amongst His disciples for forty days subsequent to the resurrection, that body that could pass through walls and yet had substance and could prepare a lovely fish breakfast by a seashore, the body that they could see and discern, and yet it could appear, the doors being shut, that body they saw ascending up before their very eyes (while they were gazing upon Him, He was taken up from them into heaven with His hands outstretched in a posture of priestly blessing), the body of His glory, the body of the outshining of the perfection of His own glorious person as the exalted majestic Son of God who came obediently through the course of humiliation and now is seated at the right hand of the Father, that body of tireless energy (He day and night intercedes for His own), that body with which He carries on His high priestly heavenly ministry? This passage says He shall fashion this body of our humiliation, this body of our present lowly state with its aches and pains and its constant tendency to press, as it were, its own state and indisposition in upon the soul and hindering and constantly keeping us from carrying out the longings of our renewed heart--it shall be fashioned like unto the body of His own glory.

What is heaven? Heaven is a state, not only of the personal perfection of the soul but the personal perfection of the body. And for a more extended treatment, I commend to you 1 Corinthians 15. Let's look at just a couple of verses that capture the essence of the glory of the body that awaits us. Verses 42-44: "So also is the resurrection of the dead. It [the body] is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body." It is raised a body. Spiritual does not mean it is raised as a phantom. Whatever the spiritual body is, it is a body. There is a resurrection of the body. Now at this point when the Lord returns and brings with Him those perfected spirits and souls that have been in His presence (to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, which is far better), the souls of all the redeemed that have beheld His

face with joy, that have in the disembodied state known blissful communion with Him (all stain of sin removed from the soul), those souls brought with Him joined to these bodies sown in weakness will be raised in power, sown in dishonor, raised in honor, sown in corruption, raised in incorruption.

At that point, God's eternal electing purpose for every one of His people will be realized. "For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren." And at that point in time, the humblest believer (someone like that thief on the cross who got sanctification begun and continued in a matter of a few moments) to the one who has served Christ for decades--in the language of John: "We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." Then the purpose for which Jesus died will be realized. He died that He might perfect the church, taking out all of its wrinkles and its spots and present the church to Himself a glorious church without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. Heaven is not only a place and a condition. Heaven is a state of the personal perfection of the body and the soul.

Now as I close, let me try to bring this home by way of application. Can you begin to think of what this will mean? Now, in this present state there are times when the dynamics of grace so work in our soul that we feel we could pray for hours on end, we could go out and witness to everything with legs upon it and ears to listen. There are times when the soul is so infused with the influences of grace that we can really feel that if we had a thousand tongues, they would be too few to sing the praises of our God. Do you know what it is, dear Christian, to have the dynamics of grace so pulsing in your breast at times that you do feel that if you had a thousand legs, you couldn't travel enough places to speak of your Savior; if you had a thousand voices, you couldn't say enough of His praise? Yet when you begin to attempt to carry out the impulses of that renewed soul throbbing under the impulses of grace, it isn't long before you're conscience that you don't serve Christ as the angels do or disembodied spirits.

You try to pray for an hour and what happens? Weariness comes over your body. And when you would do good, and when that heart and soul throbbing with longing for communion with Christ sets itself to engage Christ in earnest fervent prayer, it isn't long before you're utterly exhausted in the very effort to pray. And before long, the soul that was ebullient and bubbling and bursting with the pressure of the dynamics of grace now is a soul that groans being burdened. That's exactly what Paul meant when he said, "For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened, [longing to be clothed upon with our habitation from heaven. When, O God, will I have a body that can serve the soul that has known the touch of Your grace.]"

You come sometimes to a gathering like this, and God, by the gracious operation of the Spirit, gives you such a felt taste of the reality of Christ that you say as you sit there, "Lord Jesus, sin will never be attractive to me again. With such a sight of Your glory, sin will be seen in all of its sordid and ugly reality, and I will be nerved in every fiber of my being to resist it." Ten minutes later, some appetite ultimately rooted in the soul but finding a powerful channel through a physical passion begins to appeal, and within an hour you've succumbed and bloodied your conscience. And all of that blissful communion with Christ is but a memory.

How I was reminded of it this past week when in the very act of preaching, there were times when I felt my soul would burst under the pressure of truth. And I felt that this mortal frame (the lungs and the larynx and the diaphragm and the hands and feet) were not enough to even give a tithe of the expression of which God's truth was worthy. That's why a man whose heart is impregnated with truth is not fooling around with the tricks and the arts of the stage and the histrionics. When he preaches with his hands and his feet and all of his being, he's trying to find some outlet for what he knows and feels in his soul, as his soul is quickened by grace in the operations of God's Spirit.

I tell you, to think of a heaven where the soul in its perfected state will have a vehicle that's up to all of its demands--that makes the thought of heaven glorious to me. Does it make it glorious to you? No more weariness in communion, no more weariness in service, no more distractedness!

And then let's reverse it. There are times when the body is healthy and strong, and there are no or few aches and pains, no headaches. You've had plenty of good sleep and food, and the body is healthy and vigorous. And you ought to be the epitome of someone rendering active joyful service. But what's the problem? You've got a dull soul; it is a stranger to communion with Christ, a soul that has entertained sin that's been unconfessed and unrepented of, a soul that is shriveled and sick, a soul that is poisoned. And though you have a body which should be able to render so much more service, the problem is not your body and its limitations; it's the imperfections that still cling to the soul.

What is heaven? Heaven is the perfection of both departments of our humanity so that joined to that perfected soul will be, not a body that can perform only what God can do (it will still be a human body), but a body capable of all the wonderful and glorious tasks that will be assigned by God Himself in a state and a condition that defies present description. What will it be to have a mind full of clear light no longer to be chasing the shadows of indistinct views of God and His truth and who I am and what my duty is, a mind that will be full of the pure light of God's truth, a heart that is pure undiluted love to God, zeal that will be constant and always wise, a conscience never stained but ever full of light, emotions all in constant full-blown engagement with God in truth but never out of balance? The thought of a perfected soul, and then joined to it a body that will be its perfect vehicle to serve and glorify God. No wonder the Bible closes with the prayer: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." A man would be a fool to know that's what he's destined for and not be sick unto death longing for it.

My unconverted friend, do you pity us poor Christians who spoiled all our fun in life because we've turned our backs on the trinkets and toys you cling to and that will take you to hell? My unconverted young man, young woman, boy or girl, adult, don't pity us. You're to be pitied. All you're doing now is through those sensory abilities of your body, your nerve endings, your capacity to enjoy things with your taste buds, and the nerve endings of your sexual capacities, and your auditory nerves that can enjoy pleasant sounds, and your nose that can enjoy pleasant smells--all you're doing is sucking a little sweetness here and there only to have that body sent into hell where all of its capacities of sight and sound and feeling will be tracks upon which the wrath of Almighty God will run into the very citadel of your soul forever! You will weep and wail and gnash your teeth! O my unconverted friend, pity yourself that you would trifle away your never-dying soul and make that body fodder for the anger of God in hell forever.

O, I appeal to you by the loveliness of heaven to turn from your sin. Turn from your pride, turn from your self-righteousness. I appeal to you on the basis of all that is noble and glorious in the capacity of that soul that God has made in His own image marred by sin, but a soul that can be renewed in Christ. I appeal to you in Christ's name, turn from your sin. Run to the Lord Jesus who by His work on behalf of sinners received by faith is able to bring you amongst the number of those who are marked for heaven.

People say derisively of us, "Ha, you Christians, with your pie in the sky bye and bye religion." My friend, that's some wonderful pie that's waiting out there. You can call it pie in the sky bye and bye, but if having a perfected soul joined to a perfected body in a perfected heavens and earth--if that's pie, give it to me, Lord, and give it soon. It cost the Son of God His blood to provide such rich fare for needy sinners. Don't despise that blood, but flee to Christ.

And child of God, remember Bunyan's perceptive comment. In the dialog that's going on between the two pilgrims on their way to the celestial city when the question is asked, "When do you find yourself in your most wholesome and vigorous state?", do you remember what the answer was? "When I think of the place to which I'm going, that will do it." Think of the place to which you're going if you're in Christ. That will give vigor and renewed energy in the pursuit of holiness and obedience and consistency in living to the praise of Jesus.

Heaven's a wonderful place, children. When the world comes and tells you what it has is wonderful, you ask the world, "What can you give me to compare to heaven?" And when the devil comes and beckons to you, "Be my servant a little more; give yourself to me a little more." You ask the devil, "What can you give me compared to what Jesus gives to those who trust Him?"

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