

Heaven: Service / Rest Communion with the Redeemed

by Albert N. Martin

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Now we do continue tonight our series of studies on the Biblical themes of heaven and hell. And having spent some seven seasons of expositions on various Lord's Days in the past month seeking to answer from the Bible the questions, "What is hell?" and "Who is going there?", we began last Lord's Day evening to consider this question: "What is heaven?" And as we began to answer that question from the Word of God, I made two affirmations in your hearing. And then we saw that the Scriptures warrant, even necessitate these affirmations. And the affirmations are these: 1) Heaven is a place as well as a state or condition of blessedness, and 2) Heaven is a state of the perfection of the soul and body of all the redeemed of God. Now tonight we will answer two more parts of the Biblical question, "What is heaven?" At this stage, I anticipate six parts to that answer altogether, completing the remaining two next week, God willing, unless I get some fresh light in my study throughout the week. Tonight we move on from the assertions that heaven is a place as well as a condition, that heaven is a state of the perfection of the soul and body of the redeemed to assert in the third place that heaven is a place of unwearied service joined to perennial rest and refreshment.

Now let's look at two texts which underscore the rest dimension of heaven. In Revelation 14:13, we read: "And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, 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." This word that was to be written is one in which the blessedness, the happiness of those who die in the Lord is to be proclaimed, and that happiness is to be proclaimed in this context with a specific reference to this great reality of what the intermediate state will hold for these departed spirits, namely in order that they may rest from their labors. And the word for labor used in this context is the word which means "labor unto pain" or "toil unto weariness." It's the kind of labor that causes a man to come home through his front door, plunk on his favorite easy chair and sigh and say, "I am bone-weary." God says, "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord [that they may rest from their bone-weariness, that they may rest from their labor unto pain and their toil unto weariness]."

Now the same emphasis is found in a passage that points not to the intermediate state, but the final state of heaven ushered in at the return of our Lord. 2 Thessalonians 1. Here the Thessalonian believers, as you will remember, were undergoing tremendous opposition from ungodly and unbelieving men from a hostile society, and the Apostle was seeking to comfort them in that present state of distress. And so he writes to them and says in verses 7 and 8, "And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey

not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." Here the Apostle Paul points to this tremendous blessing that will be ushered in at the return of the Lord Jesus. Not only will there be this destruction of the ungodly--and it's that part of the passage that we concentrated upon when we were dealing with the question, "What is hell?" But now our concentration is upon verse 7:

"And to you who are troubled [you that feel the pressure of a hostile world, you that feel the squeeze of a society that is no friend of grace to help you on to God, you that are afflicted, fix the gaze of your soul upon this tremendous blessing that awaits you at the return of the Lord. Not only will your enemies and the enemies of Christ be destroyed (that's negative), but you will be ushered into this state of blessed and perfect rest], you who are troubled, rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels."

And so these two texts point undeniably to the fact that heaven is indeed a place, a state, a condition of perennial rest and refreshment. And yet the same Scriptures that teach us that truth teach us that heaven will be a place of unwearied service.

Revelation 7:13:

"And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple: and He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them."

Now, here the saints who have entered into their rest are described as those who serve their God before His throne day and night. And the word for service here is the word that is the standard word to describe the sacred service of a priest in the temple, the sacred service of one who labors in the official worship of God. And one of the most beautiful things about the teaching of the New Testament in which the child of God is set apart unto God (a sanctified man or woman) is that in a very real sense all of his activity becomes sacred service. It becomes an activity of worshipful service to God. And here we are told that the redeemed are those who will serve Him day and night. It will be unwearied service, for we go on to read in this very passage:

"They shall hunger no more [they'll never need to take a coffee break or a lunch break or a supper break], neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes" (v. 16).

So here is this beautiful picture of this constant service day and night, but unwearied service. In Revelation 22:3, the same emphasis is set before us: "And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and His servants shall serve Him." The bondservants shall render service that in every facet of its outworking is an act of pure worship to the living God. So I say that heaven will indeed be a place of unwearied service joined to perennial rest, and I added the word "refreshment." Why did I add that? Well, for the simple reason that there's another strand of truth that comes through particularly in the Gospels, and granted, it comes to us couched in the form of Eastern feasting and eating circumstances. But these pictures are meant to convey a substantial reality.

In Matthew 8:11, our Lord says, "And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down [recline at table] with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven." And here heaven in its consummate glory is likened to a vast banquet house in which are found Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the fathers of the faithful. And then the redeemed of God coming in from the east, the west sitting down and reclining at table feasting and banqueting in the kingdom of God.

The parallel passage to this is Luke 13:29. I'll only look at it briefly and then turn back to an amazing statement in the previous chapter of Luke. "And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down [recline] in the kingdom of God." Then if we turn back to Luke 12, some of the circumstances of that refreshment under the figure and imagery of a banquet house is opened up in a most amazing way. We read in verse 35:

"Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning; and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord, when He will return from the wedding; that when He cometh and knocketh, they may open unto Him immediately. Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when He cometh shall find watching: verily I say unto you, that He shall gird Himself, and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them."

To me, that's one of the most amazing statements in all of the Bible. Lenski, the Lutheran commentator expresses that amazement:

"The wonder of this parable begins right here when Jesus exclaims, 'Blessed are those slaves.' Why? It was the ordinary duty of these slaves to be watching and ready, to be awake, no matter how long their Lord delayed His return. We are right. There's no merit or worthiness on the part of these slaves. And the Lord's verdict 'blessed' is in no way based on what these slaves had done but altogether on what their returned Lord now does for them. No wonder Jesus exclaims once more, 'Truly I say to you.' Verity and authority seal His statement. Jesus then takes the human imagery of a great lord's returning to his palace and his slaves receiving him back in state at night and gives it a turn that is unheard of among earthly lords and the grand ones of this world. He does the same thing in other parables. The Lord does not seek His ease and retire for the night. He changes His slaves into His lords. He makes as grand a feast for them as was the one from which He came. He has them recline to dine and, wonder of wonders, He does not order other slaves to serve them, His angels who wait about His throne on tip toes eagerly anticipating the slightest glance of His eye, an intimation of His will. No, wonder of wonders, He does not order other slaves to serve them. But He girds Himself, makes Himself their slave and ministers to them. Many waiters and helpers are needed at a great feast, but this Lord needs none. This lets the reality peek through, that this Lord is the almighty, heavenly Lord Himself."

Now how can God picture it to us in plainer language? What is heaven? Here we are given in this graphic imagery this picture of heaven as the place, not only of perennial rest, but of refreshment in which our Lord Himself serves us in the meeting of all of our needs. And so we are warranted to think of heaven, if we are thinking Biblically as much as our minds will allow us, as a place of unwearied service joined to perennial rest and refreshment.

Now someone asks the question, "What will the nature of that service be?" Well, surely from the Scriptures we learn that no little part of that service will be the abandoned worship and adoration of our great God. For the pictures we receive of the redeemed, particularly in the book of the Revelation, again and again we find them engaged in whole-soul abandonment of worship and adoration. They have become so transfixed with the face to face presence of their God that it's as though they cannot pare themselves away from the glory of looking upon His face--more of that, God willing, in our message next week.

But is that all the service we will render? I can remember a time when I didn't even dare to express to anyone for fear they would think me a blasphemer, that there was something in me that didn't get too excited at the thought of doing nothing but worshipping and adoring. The sense of the creative, the desire to accomplish the aesthetic sensitivities, all of those things that mark us out as image bearers of God. And I said, "Lord, forgive me for even thinking it (and didn't dare breathe this to a soul for fear I would be thought a heretic or half an apostate or some other tragic and terrible thing), but if I find my moments of greatest joy here and now when I'm actively serving You--and that's the fruit of grace--then surely something of that will be carried on into the world to come." Then in my reading of the Scriptures, I began, I believe, to understand the implication of such passages as those in which--again it's under human imagery--there is analogy: God is teaching by likeness.

Remember when the returning Lord comes to reckon with His servants in the 19th chapter of Luke, their reward is spoken of as an appointment of stewardship of administration: "You have been faithful...I will place you over ten cities. You have been faithful...I will place you over five cities." And the whole concept, you see, of the responsibility of the stewardship of administration of the affairs of the world to come. And again, the Scriptures say, "Know ye not that we shall judge angels." And again, we are told that we shall sit down with our Lord Jesus upon His throne in the world to come. These are at least pointers. And I would not go into speculative theology tonight, but at least these substantial Biblical statements point in the direction of at least part of the answer to the question, what will the nature of this unwearied service be, this service joined to perennial rest and refreshment? Well, at the heart of it indeed will be this preoccupation with the abandoned adoration and worship of our glorious God. But with it, will there not be the true fulfillment of what is called the cultural mandate?

Adam's task was to subdue the earth. And because he sinned, this earth became a cursed earth and an unyielding earth. "In the sweat of thy face," God said, "shalt thou eat bread." What will it be when this present world is delivered from the bondage of corruption at the revealing of the sons of God? Surely it must be in this direction: the engagement of all our faculties with all of the capacities for aesthetics and mathematics and logic and all the other glorious faculties of the mind and the soul and the body brought into the unwearied service of this glorious God to explore and bring glory to God throughout the entire universe however far it extends. And if I think more than that, then my poor little pea brain begins to feel the weight of it, and I feel that something will rupture between my ears. Surely, if the first commandment is "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy mind, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength," a glorified body and a glorified soul in a context of this unwearied service will find the people of God forever living out that commandment for the glory of their redeemer God.

Well, by way of application, let me say, dear child of God, it is this hope that should burn in your breast in the midst of your toil that is always now marked by weariness. "In the sweat of thy face" is the terminology of God that marks labor in this present order of things, and even in the service of Christ because, as Paul says, "We that are in this tabernacle do groan...." Our service, though at times because we have the first fruits of the Spirit, partakes, as it were, of a little glancing glow and impulse of the powers of the world to come, and we feel at moments in devotion and service that we could go on forever under that particular impulse. But we sense, alas, alas, how quickly it fades, and we are made very conscious that we have the treasure in earthen vessels. The Apostle Paul understood well how this perspective on heaven strengthened him in the present pressure of toil unto weariness. In 2 Corinthians 4, there's a practical application to us, dear people of God. This is not something to give us a momentary lift while we sit in this building. It's something to be carried with us as an overarching perspective. Verses 17-18:

"For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment [and it is for the moment. And the moment is this present order of things prior to the coming of Christ], worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal."

Here are two contrasting sets of things. There are things that are seen. The pulpit is seen; the microphone is seen; the preacher is seen; the book is seen; the walls are seen; our cars are seen; our friends are seen. That's the set of the things that are seen. But there is another set of realities just as real, not shadows, not notions, not ideas. They are things. They have substance. They are things, but they are not beheld with these physical eyes yet. And he says we fix the gaze of our souls not upon the things that are seen. Now that doesn't mean that when Paul was walking down a Roman street, he closed his eyes and said, "I don't look on the things that are seen" and trust God to guide him by an angel. That would be tempting the Lord. Yes, he looked where he was going, but he's speaking of the focus of the soul, the concentration of the faculties of the inner life. He says we do not fix them on the things that are seen. When he did, what did he see? Everywhere he turned he saw the constant reminders of this decaying outward shell, this vessel of clay. He saw the lector's lash; he saw the jailor's key; he saw the scowl; he saw the stones that would be hurled upon him; he saw the howling seas in which he experienced shipwreck. All of his labor for Christ was marked by toil and suffering and agony, but he says it's all a light affliction. Why? Because he did not fix his gaze on the things that are seen but on the things that are not seen, for the things that are seen are temporal. They are passing; they are fleeting, but the things that are not seen are eternal.

Child of God--I'll put it in as blunt language as I know how--if you don't pause periodically amidst your life in the circle of the things that are seen to force your gaze upon the things that are not seen, you will not live as you ought to live as a child of God in this world. I've heard the phrase many times, "That guy's so heavenly minded he's no earthly good." I've never yet met such a person. But I've met thousands of professing Christians who were so earthly minded they were no heavenly good. The church is never more mighty to deliver men from the clutches of a damning attachment to earth than when it has its affections most firmly embedded in heaven and in the world to come.

And my unconverted friend, you better start facing reality. What's that little bubble you're chasing right now? Marriage, a home, position, security, prestige, a slap on the back from your peers? What is it that's really important to you, the thing that keeps you from becoming a Christian? What is it? Compare it to what awaits the people of God. Can that thing promise you this? Can it promise you what I have couched in these words: unwearied service joined to perennial rest and refreshment in the enjoyment of God? If not, my friend, it isn't worth bartering your soul for it. O, I hope to make some of you jealous enough to seek the way of life and salvation in the Lord Jesus. Don't pity us poor wooly-headed, air-headed Christians. My friend, the moment is coming when the entire universe of intelligent human beings will stand back bug-eyed and aghast when they see us in all the glory that Christ has purchased for us.

But I must hurry on to touch on one more aspect of what heaven is. According to the Scriptures, heaven is not only a place and a condition. Not only is heaven a state of perfection of the soul and the body; not only is heaven a place of unwearied service joined to perennial rest and refreshment, but fourthly, heaven is a place of the perfected communion of all the redeemed of all ages.

Now from the patriarchs onward, heaven is set before us under the dominant imagery of a city. Now has that ever puzzled you? When we think of rest and refreshment, most of us think of what? The city or the country? "O, if I could only move out into the country and get away from everybody at my elbow and the Garden State Parkway and Route 80 and all the rest." The closer to the city we feel, the farther we are away from anything to remind us of heaven. And yet from the patriarchs onward, the dominant imagery of heaven is not that of a placid countryside with a beautiful lake jumping with trout, but it's the picture of a city.

Look at Hebrews 11. Speaking of Abraham, the father of the faithful, verse 8: "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went." Some people probably really thought poor old Abraham had a few screws loose. One day he took down his tent, pulled up all the tent stakes, wrapped up his tent and put his few pots and pans in a gunny sack. And people come around and say, "Abraham, where are you going?" He says, "I don't know." "Abraham, you didn't hear me. Abraham, look me straight in the eye; let me smell your breath. Abraham, where are you going?" "I don't know." "Abraham, you seem to be a reasonable man. Perhaps I've not made my question plain. Abraham, where are you going?" "I don't know. God just said get up and go. And He said He'll show me where I'm going to go." What in the world makes a sane man like Abraham do that? Well, read on: "By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (vv. 9-10). He looked for a city. Now where did he ever get the notion of a city out in the wilderness where God called him? God gave by revelation that wonderful understanding that his ultimate destination was a city which has foundations, not a tent that merely has stakes but a city that has foundations whose builder and maker is God.

Now you cannot think of a city without thinking of the social dimensions of the relationship of the dwellers. A bunch of nomads with a lot of land between them, each dwelling in his own tent, can have very little to do with one another. But the whole concept of a city is that men are pressed into intimate social contact. Now they

may, because of the tragic effects of sin, live as little islands--and that's the heartbreaking tragedy of the modern American city where no one says hello, where each one is fearful of his neighbor--but nonetheless, intimate social contact there must be whether that stewardship is responded to righteously or unrighteously. Hebrews 12--and in a moment you'll see where I'm going, so hang in there. The writer to Hebrews is contrasting the things to which we come in the new covenant and those to which the people of God came in the old covenant--verse 18: "For ye are not come...." And then he describes some of the external factors of the giving of the old covenant. But he says in contrast in verses 22-24,

"But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel."

So whenever a sinner, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, out of the matrix of that agony of acrid self-discovery, comes to see himself a sinner in whom there is no hope for this problem of sin to be found in himself or anyone else, and when such a person turns to Christ, the mediator of the new covenant, he invariably, immediately comes into communion with the spirits of just men made perfect. He immediately becomes one who is identified with the general assembly and church of the firstborn. Enrolled in heaven, he becomes a citizen of the city of God. So when we turn to the book of the Revelation and read the record of what John was given to see of the perfected church, this imagery comes to its full-blown expression in that city of God that comes down out of heaven. Revelation 21:2: "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 that city is none other than the church as we saw in our study last week. And then again in chapter 22, verse 14: "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city." And verse 19: "And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city...."

Now think for a minute, surely here in this metropolitan area, we should be able to relate to this in a way some of our country friends could never relate to it. There are many passage country folk understand better than we do. But here's one we ought to be able to understand. Can you begin to conceive of what it will be like? The multitudes of the redeemed gathered together in a manner that is in some way analogous to the life of a bustling city with all of the constant interaction and interpenetration of one life with another and one segment with another. But here is a city in which all of the pressures and intimate integrated life of that city--nothing but love, harmony, and mutuality of desire pervades every single level of the dynamics of the life of the inhabitants of that city.

According to Scripture, there will be degrees of responsibility as part of divine reward. "I will make you ruler over ten cities. I will make you ruler over five." Imagine, the man with five is never envious of the man with ten, and the man with ten never looks down his snout at the man over five. Degrees of responsibilities fully acknowledged and accepted, but with no disdain from the greater to the lesser, and no sinful envy from the lesser to the greater. Again, there is every indication that in that state, there will

be the total absence of everything that would jangle and jar the sense of perfect love and oneness and self-givingness. What is one perfected man or woman, boy or girl and now a great multitude whom no man can number congregated in something analogous to a city? I say, this strand of Biblical truth forces upon us the statement that heaven is a place of the perfected communion of the redeemed of all ages. A man by the name of Cheever wrote a book titled, *The Power of the World to Come*, and in his chapter on heaven, he's one of the few authors I've read who has captured this element of truth and expanded upon it. And I'll give you just a little taste of Cheever's perspective on this:

"In the second place [speaking of heaven], it is a social life in which all the communicative and companionable tendencies of our nature and powers of our being will be exercised in an enjoyment ten thousand-fold intensified by being reflected from and shared with the beatific experience of others. It's remarkable as an indication of the glory of the social life of heaven and the activity and blissfulness of mutual thought and affection interchanged and ardent there, that this same epistle to Hebrews introduces us to the innumerable company of angels and the general assemble and church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven. We are come to such vast and glorious assemblages as to scenes and objects transporting, even to be only looked at and admired. But how much more enrapturing to go in and out among them, holding communion with them. The very sight of others in glory will be infinite joy, a study of salvation, a rapture of delight. There will be so much to admire and love in every creature. Every creature will be so full of glory, so ravishing a refection of the glory of the Savior, that eternity might be occupied in silently gazing and adoring. And even so, the Lord Jesus, at His coming with His saints, will be admired in all who believe."

Tremendous thought, the kind of thought that will not find lodgment by a mere glance upon your mind. It takes sober, concentrated meditation for it to find any settled lodgment, because it is so utterly contrary to all that we know here and now. Think of it, we who are indwelt by the Spirit, graciously saved by the one Redeemer, and with all of our hearts we long that we should experience nothing but pure love flowing between us and all who name the name of Christ. But alas, because of remaining sin, often some who we most dearly love in Christ cause us our deepest grief. And alas, some who most dearly love us in Christ, we cause them their deepest grief. We cause them the pain of our own unChrist-like words. We cause them the grief of our unChrist-like insensitivity. We cause them the sorrow and pain of our lapses in grace. When they, longing to see Christ formed in us, instead see the outcroppings of carnality. And so looking at one another and feeling the longings of love, there is the pain; there is the vulnerability that comes from seeking to dwell in love where sin yet remains.

O, what will heaven be in that perfected communion of the saints when every saint will love perfectly, not only God, but all of his fellow saints. And while maintaining all of our own God-given individuality--and don't have any silly notions that we'll all be flattened out to something that's been produced by the computer in which every nose is the same shape and every voice the same tone--the God of infinite variety will not blot all of that out. You'll be you in heaven, and I'll be me. God will so work on us by the dynamics of redemptive grace, that all that is now sinful and irritates and causes the drawing back of reserve and lack of trust and hurt and pain, and all of the rest will be forever done away with. John said, "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren" (1 John 3:14).

For a true child of God, this dimension of heaven is exciting to him. Do you find it exciting that you will dwell in the city of God in a state of perfected communion with all of His people? Does that excite you? If you really love the brethren, it does. It grieves me to have to speak against my brethren. But speak I must when they err and say the Bible says something it doesn't say. But it's painful nonetheless. It's never a delight to speak against one's brethren, but it's Biblical to do so. When people err from the truth, that must be exposed. It must be done with grief and pain and reluctance, but it must be done. And O how we long for the day when all the darkness is so taken from our minds and all the carnal dispositions from our hearts, that we shall dwell in perfect love with all the people of God and that forever.

God is so committed to that aspect of redemption. That's why not one saint will get his last installment of redemption until we all get it at the same time. Have you ever wondered, if God can do anything, why doesn't He give to every saint a glorified body when the soul departs? But you see, until that last elect soul is brought in and the Lord Jesus returns, not one saint will get the last installment of redemption until we all get it at the same time. And then we shall be constituted that city of God coming down out of heaven with our returning Lord resplendent with the glory that will cause us to "be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2).

My dear unconverted friend, I don't know what you're selling your soul for, but it's pretty cheap. It's pretty cheap when these four great realities could be yours if you will but have Christ. Richard Baxter said these words--and they really got hold of me this week, and I found it hard at times to think of anything else--he said, "God always takes a man's heart to heaven before He ever takes his person there." Now you're sitting here in your person. Do you hope that that person, you, will one day be taken by God to heaven? God will never take your person there until He first of all takes your heart there. And you know how He takes hearts there? Through the Gospel. When that Gospel is brought home with power and your heart vomits out its sin, divorces itself from the world, and throws itself into loving, trustful attachment to Jesus Christ, that's how your heart is taken to heaven. And if your heart's taken there, one day God will take your person there. But if your heart's on this earth, your person with this earth will be burned at the return of the Lord Jesus when He comes in flaming fire. Where's your heart? My friend, where's your heart? If your heart's there through the Gospel, it's certain God will get your person there. If your heart's not there, you'll never be there. May God grant that you will not hear such things and sell your soul for trinkets.

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