

Heaven: Communion with God and the Lamb

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Now we do come this evening to the tenth message in a series of studies under the general heading of "The Biblical Doctrines of Heaven and of Hell." And we're presently addressing ourselves to the question, what is heaven? Now tonight we shall examine but one more facet of the Bible's answer to this question. And that facet I'm stating this way: heaven is the realization of the direct sight of and immediate communion with God and of the Lamb. And if there is one jewel amidst the vast array of those jewels that constitute the inheritance of the saints, a jewel that we might properly identify as the crown jewel of our inheritance, then surely it is this jewel that we shall see Him and that we shall be with Him. And what I purpose to do first of all from the Scriptures is to underscore the prominence of this twofold aspect of our crown jewel of the inheritance of heaven, this direct sight of and this immediate communion with God and of the Lamb.

Look with me at several texts that concentrate particularly upon this first aspect of this great blessing of heaven, namely the direct sight of God. In Matthew 5, our Lord gives a composite character description of the true sons and daughters of the kingdom of His grace, for that's what the Beatitudes are. They are a divinely drawn picture of the character of a true son or daughter of the kingdom. They do not tell us the way into the kingdom; they describe those who have entered in the major liniments of their character. And here the Lord Jesus tells us in verse 8, "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God." And whatever else this verse teaches us, it teaches us that the apex of blessing to those who are purified and sanctified by grace is nothing less than this direct sight of God Himself. They shall not merely behold Him as all men will behold Him upon the throne of His judgment in the last day, but they shall see Him with that sight of ravishing delight, that sight of Him that will in a very real sense be the culmination and realization of all of their highest longings implanted in their hearts by grace. And so for our Lord Jesus, this direct sight of God is the great reward of grace to the subjects of His grace. And then in what we might call a parallel passage, this same emphasis comes through. Hebrews 12:14. Here the writer to the Hebrews is urging his readers to pursue a life of peace with all men and of ongoing sanctification and holiness. And as he would buttress the great incentive that ought continually to press the pursuers of holiness in that pursuit, it is this: "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord." In other words, he's writing to a people who have heard enough of Gospel truth to know that the crowning blessing of heaven is the sight of God. And now to prod them on in the pursuit of a life of holiness against all the opposition of their own hearts, the world, and the devil, he says if you do not pursue holiness, this great crown jewel will be withheld from you. Then in 1 John 3:1-2, John the Apostle writing to the people of God says,

"Behold, [stand back in amazement and consider] what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God [we are presently the adopted sons and daughters of God. That is our legal status], and it doth not yet appear what we shall be [it is not yet manifest what we shall be in the full enjoyment of that status of sons. Though we are now the sons and daughters of God and we have been given the spirit of adoption and free access to the presence and heart of God in prayer, enabled to say, 'abba Father,' it is not yet manifest what we shall be in the full inheritance and enjoyment of our sonship]: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is."

It is the sight of God in the context of total conformity to God. And I believe with many responsible exegetes, God in Jesus Christ is held forth as the apex of the full realization of sonship. "...it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is." And the seeing Him as He is is brought into that focal point of the realization of the great privileges of sonship. And then in Revelation 22, this emphasis again comes through with great clarity:

"And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 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: and they shall see His face; and His name shall be in their foreheads" (vv. 1-4).

This throne described in this passage, occupied by God and the Lamb, is the center and the source of the life of heaven. And the One who sits upon it will give us access to behold His face. Our relationship to Him will be that of direct sight. And in these four pivotal texts, that great reality is set before us in language that is plain, simple, and straightforward. And though as we begin to meditate upon these verses and try to imagine what it will be like, in what sense shall we behold the sight of the God who is invisible and of Christ who has a visible glorified body? We can ask a thousand questions, but may I urge you to push those questions down and simply allow this glorious reality couched in these words to take hold of your mind and spirit: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Now, as the focus in these texts is upon the direct sight of God, there is another set of texts which emphasize that this crown jewel of the blessings of heaven is to be found in this immediate communion with God and His beloved Son. John 14. We looked at the passage in conjunction with demonstrating that heaven was a place. Now let's go back and look at it in another light, for that's not really the dominant emphasis of the passage. The Lord Jesus has predicted that He would depart from His disciples. This has filled their hearts with sorrow; with disturbance. And our Lord says,

"Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions: 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" (vv. 1-3).

Do you see the emphasis? The emphasis falls not so much upon the mind being preoccupied with what are the dwelling places prepared, but the one who will take us to Himself to be in those dwelling places. "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am...." And now all the dwelling places, as it were, fade in the background, and the central issue is this: "...where I am, there ye may be also." Again, we see this emphasis in the great resurrection passage in 1 Thessalonians 4. The Apostle is writing to comfort the grieving Thessalonians who have lost loved ones. Somehow the teaching has been floating about that the saints who are alive at the return of Christ will be first class saints and go to heaven in the first class compartment, and dead saints will be second class or third class. And he's writing to correct that unbiblical notion, so he gives this instruction beginning with verse 13: "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." Then he gives this specific instruction about the priority of Christ's concern with respect to His dead saints: it's the dead in Christ that shall rise first. They'll get first attention, not the living saints. And after giving some of that instruction, he then brings us to what is the culminating blessing for dead and living saints at the return of the Lord. What is it? Verse 17: "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." You see, this passage finds its culmination, its apex, its pinnacle--it finds its point of highest glory in this assertion: "so shall we" (our dead loved ones and living saints together), not so much with one another--now the great preoccupation is together with the Lord Himself. Then over to Revelation 21:1-3:

"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."

God shall dwell with them. God Himself will be with them. That's the point of emphasis in these verses, and then you'll notice the repetition of it is verses 22 and 23 of the same chapter. In this vision of the perfected church coming down as a city, he says, "I looked for a temple." And what was a temple? A temple was that building in which God manifested in a special way His presence with His people. If you wanted to have dealings with God and meet God in a peculiar way in the place of His appointment where sacrifices were made and where the priests carried on their God-ordained ritual, you went into a temple. But he looked and said, "I saw no temple." And why did he not see a temple? Well, the passage tells us:

"And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. [In other words, the immediate presence of God and of the Lamb constitute the temple.] And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof."

In other words, heaven is one glorious temple because the immediate presence of God fills it. And in that immediacy, we shall commune with Him, and we shall see Him. Then a text, at least in light of my present understanding, beautifully draws these two strands together. It's found in the high priestly prayer of our Lord in John 17. This is why I've treated the two things together: this direct vision of God and this

immediate communion with God as the crown jewel of heaven's blessings. Notice the prayer of our Lord in John 17:24. Richard Baxter said of this text, "I would not for all the world have this one text left out of the Bible." In other words, if someone said to Richard Baxter, "I'll give you the world if you let me cut out this one text." He'd say, "Take your world, but give me this text." And this is the text: "Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am [communion]; that they may behold My glory [sight], which Thou hast given Me...." That's what our Lord is committed to in His priestly intercession for His people. He is not only praying that we shall be kept from the evil one; He is not only praying all of the other things that are given to us in this passage and which we learn by inference from other passages, but He's praying that as the culminating blessing of our redemption that we shall be brought to the place where He is and that we might behold His glory, that we might see Him as He is.

Now having established from the Scriptures the prominence of this hope of the direct sight and immediate communion with God and of the Lamb as the crown jewel, the great blessing of heaven, let me just point out several characteristics of this sight and of this communion. The first thing we learn about this sight is that it will be accurate sight. There is very little that we dare say about it, but this much we can say in the light of 1 Corinthians 13:12 ("For now we see...."): Every true believer sees. He's no longer a blind sinner. Once he saw no glory in Christ. The only thing that captured his eye was the world and its glitter, the flesh and what it had to offer. Sin and a sordid world were the things that ensnared his heart. But his eyes have been opened to behold sufficient glory in Christ to bring about a divorce from sin and the world and an attachment to Jesus Christ in faith. But all of that sight at its most intensive point of spiritual insight is, according to this passage--and remember, this is a man who was even caught up into the third heaven and heard things unlawful to utter--he says, "...we [I along with you Corinthian believers] see through a glass, darkly [in an enigma]...." One of the commentators writing on the imagery here has written as follows: "Our present understanding is like peering into a primitive metal mirror with its imperfect reflection. But then in the next life we shall see face to face. Since such mirrors were made in Corinth, Paul's readers would be quick to grasp the point." You see, we look at a mirror now, and once you blow on it or put a little Windex and towel on it, it gives a fairly accurate reflection of reality. If you've got a pimple on your nose, it will show up in the mirror. If you've got a nose that's bent to the left, it will look bent the other way in the mirror, but at least it will show it's bent. But remember, Paul was writing in a day when they didn't have glass as we now have it backed with the material that gives it an accurate reflection. And the best mirrors gave an imperfect reflection of reality. So when you looked in the mirror, you saw some reflection of reality, but it was not clear and distinct. You saw the basic outline and the basic form and some of the basic particulars, but you were seeing it enigmatically. You were seeing through a glass darkly. That's the imagery. But he says, "...but then [when the perfect is come, what will be the mark of our sight?] face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." Now, this does not mean we will be given the knowledge of an omniscient God. But what he's saying is that as fully as the mind of God comprehends all the reality that an omniscient mind of deity can comprehend, so all that a human mind cleared of all darkness and dullness can comprehend in beholding reality, we shall know even as we also are known. As God knows us accurately, so we shall know Him. We shall have a knowledge, a sight of Him that will be an accurate sight. And again, I refer to Baxter who took a very strange but powerful imagery of a man looking down on a group of ants. And he said,

"As a human being, I can look down on a group of ants and comprehend in one sight all of the ants in that group of ants scurrying around [perhaps a little piece of cake that was left somewhere where it shouldn't be]." But he said, "Those ants, they are fellow creatures. They have no knowledge of me. They cannot comprehend me as a human being, though we have this in common: we are both creatures." My eye can look down and fully comprehend all of them and all their actions and watch them scurrying about and dragging off a little piece of the cake. He said, "Now if fellow creatures can have such a distance between them so that the little ants cannot even comprehend a fellow creature, we should not be surprised that we creatures have problems comprehending an infinite God." God is infinite. And even when we see accurately, we shall see as creatures. But we shall no longer see as creatures with blurred vision with indistinct lines. We shall see face to face. It will be accurate sight.

And then as to the communion, it will be uninterrupted communion with our blessed Lord. No sin to grieve the Spirit and to put us at a distance from Him; no evil world to distract and seduce us and, as it were, put specks of dust and cinders in our eyes that when we would behold His beauty, we cannot see Him clearly; no devil and evil spirits to oppress and assail us, and no faith to be perfected by the trial of the sense of a withdrawn God. There are very few trials of faith more severe in this life than the trial of faith that comes to a saint when God withdraws the sensible awareness of His presence. And that saint is called upon to walk in naked trust in the Word of God with not an ounce of felt comfort. But you see, when faith is made sight, no longer will faith have to be purified by the withdrawing of God's sensible presence and felt communion with Him. There will be nothing but the unending noontide beams of His glory and His fellowship poured into our souls in that eternal noonday of that place where there is no night, and the Lamb is the light thereof. Then, though I can't support this from a text, it's a conviction that I believe is born of a general sensitivity to the Scriptures-- not only will it be an accurate sight as contrasted with our now limited inaccurate sight, it will be an uninterrupted communion as opposed to the communion we now experience. And it will be an expanding sight and communion. There will be nothing static in the sight of God and our communion with Him. For being infinite and we continually throughout the ages of eternity being finite, we shall be able to grow in the knowledge of this glorious God. And though He continues to expand the capacities of our finite minds, He will never exhaust the riches of His own glory, for He is the infinite God. No wonder the hymn writers who contemplated this penned such words:

As all earth's flowing pleasures were a wintry seed,
Heaven itself without Thee, dark as night would be.

And the hymn we so often sing in this place:

The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear Bridegroom's face.
I will not gaze at glory, but on my King of grace;
Not at the crown He giveth, but on His pierced hand,
For the Lamb is all the glory of Immanuel's land

What will it be like to hold the hands pierced for us; to look into the very eyes that wept bitter tears over an impenitent Jerusalem, the eyes that were closed in death when He bore the wrath of God? What will it be to clasp those pierced hands; to gaze into those eyes and say, "My Jesus, I love Thee."

Face to face with Christ my Savior, face to face, what will it be?
When with rapture I behold Him, Jesus Christ who died for me.

Now there are many questions, as I said earlier. All kinds of questions swirl through our heads. But surely, if we have tasted anything of grace and have known the first dimensions of eternal life, which is to know Him and Jesus Christ whom He has sent, then surely this is all we need to know: that we shall see Him; we shall be with Him; we shall behold Him, and we shall have communion with Him. Now may I say that few things are a greater index of the true state of your soul than whether or not such thoughts really excite you.

I want you to turn in conclusion of our meditation to Psalm 17. This is a prayer for protection against wicked men and their oppression. In verses 13 and 14 the Psalmist cries,

"Arise, O LORD, disappoint him [that is, the evil man and the oppressor of the righteous], cast him down: deliver my soul from the wicked, which is Thy sword: from men which are Thy hand, O LORD, from men of the world, which have their portion in this life, and whose belly Thou fillest with Thy hid treasure: they are full of children, and leave the rest of their substance to their babes."

He describes the men of this world as those whose portion is bounded by this life: by birth and death. God graciously in His common kindness to His creatures gives them all they could want to make them happy in this life, and alas, they're satisfied with this: with their children and their grandchildren and their earthly substance. And if they can look back and see these things in hand, they are satisfied, but not the Psalmist. Verse 15: "As for me, I will behold Thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with Thy likeness." Now let me ask you a very personal question. What satisfies you? If right now I had the power to pay all of your bills for the next twenty years, and I paid them in advance--you'd not get one more PS&G bill; you'd not get one more notification from your bank with all of your mortgage envelopes--everything's paid up; an inheritance for your children secured so they could go to college, buy a new car and all the rest--if you could have all of this, would you be satisfied; sit back and say, "I've got it made"? If so, my friend, you're not going to heaven when you die unless that frame of reference is radically changed, because you're a man or woman of this world. And when Jesus Christ returns to consume this world and the works thereof, in that state you'll be consumed with it. The most immature, the most recent convert to the Christian faith has tasted enough of communion and fellowship with God in Jesus Christ that he can never be satisfied until he awakes with beholding the glory of His Redeemer. And dear child of God, that holy restlessness you now experience that causes you to go home from a day like today in which we can look back and say, "O God, You answered the prayers of yesterday morning when we prayed, 'Lord, come upon us in our stated seasons of worship. Lord, visit us in the ministry of the Word.'" We can look back and say, "O God, You met our hearts." And we anticipate that He will meet us when we come to His table. And yet not a one of us says, "Lord, I thank you that there's nothing more to be experienced." We sense in our most blessed moments of communion here on earth alone or in the company of His people that we can never be satisfied till we awake beholding His glory. It will be our joy in a few moments to take the bread, the emblem of His broken body. And many of us will sit with that portion of bread in our hands, and our hearts will run out in expressions of love and appreciation and gratitude to the Lord Jesus. And we will take the cup, and that same gratitude will

swell up within our hearts. It will be expressed in what we sing, but in the very midst of that expression of devotion, there is that haunting, that relentless pressure--"O that I could love Him more than I now love Him! O that I could see more clearly than I now see the glory and the wonder of His redemption for a sinner such as this sinner!" My friend, you will not be satisfied if you're a true child of God till you see Him as He is. But as surely as God by grace has worked that very disposition in you, Jesus Christ is praying that you will be kept, and that one day you will be with Him, and you will behold His glory. Does it seem like a dream? It's not. And when we do, we will cry out with the queen of Sheba, "The half was not told me." What will it be? I cannot begin to try to articulate it. I have felt as though my tongue was three inches thick just trying to speak of these things simply from the plain text of the Word of God. But one sight, and then we shall know. "We see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face...[we] shall know even as also [we are] known."

My final word of application is this: do you see why a Christianity that is man-centered fails to make people heavenly minded? Because once you've gotten your goodies from God, He's not an essential element of the whole religious picture anymore. Come to God and get your goodies. Alright, now go and do your own thing. One of the tragedies of present evangelicalism is that it is so little marked by heavenly mindedness. Whereas when we read the Word of God, we find again and again, it is the perspective of the people of God, conscious that they are sojourners passing through to another land, to another place. It is the picture that God gives of His people. May God fill our hearts with holy longings even as we again tonight take the best things He's given us until we can hold His hands and look into His eyes. We can take the bread because He said, "Take, eat in remembrance of Me." We cannot look upon the hands that were pierced, but we can look upon the cup that He said, "Drink in remembrance of Me." And as we now feed upon Him by faith, we do so until He comes. And surely the cry that will swell from our hearts as we catch a fresh glimpse of Him here even through a glass darkly is: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

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