

“Heaven: When Love Wins”
Revelation 21:1-7; 22:1-5
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It seems undeniable to us that without hope, our lives would be hell on earth. Without hope, life would be dull, meaningless, lacking joy, and full of despair. And nothing symbolizes human hope better than our yearnings for heaven- our visions of a life without want and suffering and strife in a world without end. This relentless longing for a new and better world is actually a divine impulse that it is part of the image of God in us. It's instilled within us from our birth and requires the direst of circumstances to eventually kill such a persistent dream. Such pagan philosophers as Plato and Socrates believed that life did not end in death. In *The Republic*, Plato tells the story of Er, a soldier slain in battle, found amid the decaying corpses of other soldiers. After being hoisted upon a funeral pyre, Er's body comes back to life, and he begins to tell a great tale: his soul journeyed to the other world, where he saw two openings in the earth with judges presiding over a great gathering of humanity. The just were sent onward to heaven and the unjust to the lower way. The judges tell Er he is to be a messenger and that he must return to earth to relay all that he heard and saw. This narrative of a soul leaving the body only to return with a message is one that has pervaded all ages, literatures, and cultures.

Several years ago, *Newsweek* devoted five pages to the subject of "Heaven." Kenneth Woodward, who was then the religion editor for the magazine, cited a Gallup poll which then revealed that 77% of Americans believed there was a heaven and that 76% of them thought they had a good or excellent chance of getting there. Substantially fewer, 58% believed there was a hell and only 6% thought they had a good or excellent chance of getting there. When asked what heaven might be like, 91% said it would be peaceful; 83% thought they would be with God; 77% believed they would see people they know; 74% were convinced there will be humor; and 32% said that they'd be the same age in heaven as when they died on earth.

Though people have no difficulty believing in a heaven, everybody seems to have a different interpretation of what that heaven will be. For those who suffer from cancer, heaven is freedom from pain and the continued wasting away of their bodies. To many of the elderly, their GREATEST fear is that heaven is a place without their husbands or wives, fathers or mothers, sons or daughters. They want to know they won't be alone but surrounded by persons they love but who have since died. When I was a minister in Iowa, Dorothy Sohner--our oldest member at 107--would ask me at least once every time I visited, “David, why does God continue to keep me around? I'm not afraid to die. I just want to close my eyes and wake up again and see Jesus and of course my Russ who I miss so very much”- Russ being her husband who had passed away many years earlier. The point is that ALL of us carry deep within ourselves a dream, a vision, a hope which we refuse to let die, and that dream is a constant source of consolation to us that often carries us through some of the darkest periods of our life. It is a vision of perfect peace and absolute love and THIS tends to be our vision of heaven.

Recently, I came across an article entitled, “All Near-Death Experiences Share Surprisingly Common Themes, Say Scientists.” It begins, “Among those who have had a brush with death, the stories are often similar: Dark tunnels capped with bright lights, conversations with dead relatives, and spiritual sensations akin to the soul leaving the body are common.

Strangely, new research suggests that near-death experiences are far more common than you might think and, interestingly, share some universal themes. Based on a survey on 1,034 people from 35 different countries, a team of scientists from Norway, Denmark, and Germany found that 10 percent of people reported having some type of near-death experience (106 people). These experiences ranged from dramatic feelings of struggle, to “total peace.” The article then recounted some testimonies:

Male, 28: *As I was fighting, my life started flashing before me in my head. I felt like my soul was being pulled out of my body. I was floating and was lifted in the air. After a few moments, I felt like I was in an enormous tunnel of darkness, and at its end there was the brightest white light I have ever seen. I remember that my dead relative were at the gate, including my maternal grandmother.*

Here’s another: Female, 57: *I was very young when I almost drowned. I saw angels, and they were singing the most beautiful music I have ever heard.*

And here’s one more- a male, age 46, who said, *I encountered a truly out-of-body experience where my eyesight and visual became incredibly abstract for around an hour, I had not sense of self or my surroundings.*

Of all the near-death experiences documented, 87% included the sensation that time had sped up or slowed down, and 65% involved the sensation that thought were coming and going rapidly. More than half of people reported having exceptionally vivid senses or an out-of-body experience. Most who had ‘true’ near-death experiences reported that they were pleasant, but this wasn’t always the case.

There have been a number of popular books on this subject which continue to top the Christian bestseller lists- a literary genre which some sociologists have referred to as a “heaven tourism” memoir. Over the past decade, there has been *90 Minutes In Heaven* by Texas pastor Don Piper in which he recounts the marvels of heaven he experienced during his alleged sojourn there following a near-fatal automobile accident; *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy’s Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back*, detailing a four-year old’s time in heaven as told to his pastor father; and *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven: A Remarkable Account of Miracles, Angels, and Life Beyond This World* which describes the similar experiences of a six-year-old boy named Alex Malarkey after he awoke from a two-month coma caused by a car accident. However, Alex created quite a stir when several years later, he confessed to making the entire story up. He admitted that he told everyone he went to heaven because, “I thought it would get me attention.” It turns out that Alex Malarkey’s personal tale had been FULL of malarkey all along.

One of the more CREDIBLE accounts is that of Dr. Eben Alexander, a Harvard-trained neurosurgeon who also teaches at that school. In the fall of 2008, after seven days in a coma during which the human part of his brain—the neocortex—was inactivated, he experienced something SO profound that it gave him a scientific reason to believe in consciousness after death. He had contracted a very rare bacterial meningitis that penetrated his cerebrospinal fluid and was eating his brain. However, while the doctors debated whether to cease treatment altogether, he experienced an out-of-the-body adventure that has changed his life for good and drawn him ever closer to God. As a result, he is now MORE than certain that we are loved and

accepted unconditionally by a God even MORE grand and glorious than the one he'd learned of as a child growing up in Sunday school. He says:

I know full well how extraordinary, how frankly unbelievable, all this sounds. Had someone—even a doctor—told me a story like this in the old days, I would have been quite certain that they were under the spell of some delusion. But what happened to me was, far from being delusional, as real or more real than any even in my life. That includes my wedding day and the birth of my two sons.

However, rather than the subjective experiences of individuals once near death, as intriguing as such testimonies may seem, our faith must ULTIMATELY be founded upon God's revelation, that is, what it is that SCRIPTURE reveals to us on the subject. And what IS the Bible's vision of heaven? It is actually a concept that has evolved over the centuries and even includes material from several ancient traditions. Abraham, we are told, "looked to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God," and Job could affirm amidst all his sufferings: "For I know that my redeemer lives, and that he shall stand at the last day upon the earth: And though worms may destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another."

The Jews did not believe in heaven but rather "sheol"—sheol being a shadowy chamber in the underworld which served as the abode of the dead. But with the later prophets, they introduce the notion of "the Day the Lord"—a day in which sin and death will be put away and all God's people shall live in peace with one another—begin to grow and take on greater significance. Isaiah said he longed for the day when:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.⁹ They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

and Daniel spoke of an age when:

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

Although to Jesus, heaven remained a mystery, he viewed it not as a place where one might enjoy endless material pleasure but a domain involving eternal communion with the living God. Far more than a reward for good behavior, he viewed it as the believer's TRUE home, the ULTIMATE human destiny.

In our New Testament lesson, the Apostle John was exiled to the island of Patmos where God gave him a vision of a new heaven and a new earth— one in which there was to be no more disease or death and God would wipe away every tear. It was a dream that sustained the early church during periods of some of her greatest persecution and it has CONTINUED to sustain the church for the past two thousand years— the hope that one day we would dwell in a new life in which peace and love and wholeness would be without end.

Though the New Testament speaks again and again of this hope, it does not provide us with a clear or full picture of what our permanent home will be. Some verses suggest a new order on a transformed earth while other passages suggest that the perfect order will not be on earth but in heaven where the multitudes stand before the throne of God and praise him and the Lamb for giving them salvation. HOWEVER, it is important to remember that what the Bible offers us is purely symbolic and NOT to be taken literally, that it represents for us the PERFECT IDEAL or the HIGHEST DREAMS AND ASPIRATIONS of the human soul. The fact is that what awaits God's people will be a THOUSAND times more beautiful and wondrous than what the Bible describes and what we could ever conceive in our own limited imaginations.

What we can say with SOME certainty is that rather than a PLACE, heaven is first and foremost a PERSON; it is living in a dynamic, intimate relationship with God through his Son, Jesus Christ. Wherever Jesus is found, THAT is where heaven begins. Wherever Christ is, there is release from fear, release from guilt, release from hatred and pride and jealousy and self-love. He replaces such destructive passions with his own love, his peace, his gentleness, his self-control- and THAT is the start of heaven in our lives. Christ breaks the power of those things that make our lives a living hell in order to give us a fresh start in life, a whole new beginning with God's own values filling our heart.

And heaven does not start once we die but rather HERE AND NOW- in our fellowship with one another and other members of the family of God. The first fruits of heaven begin in the present as we discover the richness of loving and being loved by others, beginning with the primacy of our relationship to Jesus Christ himself. To commit ourselves to the Body of Christ, to discover real fellowship in the presence of Christ, to worship our Lord and Savior with a single heart and common voice- THIS is in fact where heaven begins for us.

Finally, we know that heaven will be a place of perfect justice and righteousness where sin and death will be no more and Christ himself shall dry our tears. That kingdom we pray for each Sunday to come, the one in which God's will is to be done, shall finally be realized. God's law will no longer be etched upon stone tablets but inscribed upon the soft flesh of our hearts. Instead of rebelling, we will live in glad obedience to our Lord, with our love for him matched by our love for one another.

THIS then is our hope- believed by faith, witnessed to by Christ in his Word, and attested to by his Spirit in our hearts. It was the hope for which the early church believed in, even suffered and died for, and it is a hope God keeps alive within us TODAY. That very same promise which sustained the hope of Abraham and Job and Isaiah, which carried the Israelites through years of exile and enemy occupation, which enabled the disciples and early church to persevere amidst all their persecution, which inspired Luther, Calvin, and Knox and emboldened the great martyrs of the faith- that very same promise is now offered to US, this MORNING. And we are told that if we TOO hold onto that dream and never let go of it, our OWN faith shall be renewed, enabling US to remain faithful and strong in the midst of life's trials and tribulations- even the WORST of them.

My friends, as people of faith, this is not some grand fiction concocted from out of our own wild imaginations, nor are we merely "hoping against hope" here out of our great fear of the unknown, of what lies beyond death's door. This is the PROMISE OF GOD and it is one God makes to his children THIS VERY MORNING- the pledge that in spite of the lack of clarity and all the unanswered questions we still have, we are loved with an everlasting love and that

nothing—no NOTHING--will ever separate us from either his presence or his love- and that INCLUDES death! It is this PROMISE that makes heaven a reality for us REGARDLESS of what may lie on the other side of that mysterious divide we call “death.” We CAN be assured that he who holds our hand on THIS side of it pledges he will no less be clasping it on the OTHER side AS WELL! Hence, I no longer speculate as to WHAT heaven may look like or WHERE it will be for I am now MORE concerned with WHO it is that knows my name and of his assurance that he will never leave or forsake me. Heaven ultimately resides in the same promise found in those immortal words by St. Paul to the church in Rome when he asked:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death [and he intentionally BEGINS with death], nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thus, therein lies the secret of heaven: it is to KNOW HIM and to LIVE EACH DAY with this hope firmly fixed on our minds and in our hearts- nothing more and nothing less. Yes, heaven CAN be ours this morning- that is, if we TOO grasp this promise and never let it go. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, we are unworthy of your love and of the many blessings we have found ourselves the recipients of. Help us to remain humble and contrite before you. May we never become so HEAVENLY-minded that we are of no earthly good, or so EARTHLY-minded that we no longer take thought of our promised inheritance. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.