

“I’d like to hear a sermon about: Heaven”
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
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Psalm 146

- ¹ Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul!
² I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
³ Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.
⁴ When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.
⁵ Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God,
⁶ who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;
⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.
 The LORD sets the prisoners free;
⁸ the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
 the LORD loves the righteous.
⁹ The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow,
 but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.
¹⁰ The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

John 14:1 - 7

¹“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

A few years ago, heaven hit us big.
 Big on the bestseller lists and in the box office.

There was “Heaven is Real,” the account of Colton Burpo¹ a child, not yet four years old, the son of a Wesleyan pastor², who had emergency surgery and told his parents amazing things about what happened to him while he was being operated on. They wrote a book. It became a movie.

In addition to meeting deceased family members and hearing family stories he had never heard before, he described “he described how he sat in Jesus’ lap while being serenaded by angels, saw Jesus riding a rainbow-colored horse and witnessed Mary kneeling before God’s throne.”³

¹ <https://www.thomasnelson.com/heaven-is-for-real>

² <https://www.wesleyan.org/>

³ https://lancasteronline.com/features/faith_values/what-is-heaven-like-colton-burpo-can-tell-you/article_422fb798-60b4-11e6-9681-9bcccb16558e.html

And there was the bestselling book “Proof of Heaven” by Eben Alexander, a neurosurgeon who was in a coma and, in part, experienced this:⁴

Although I still had little language function... I began wordlessly putting questions to this wind, and to the divine being that I sensed at work behind or within it.

Where is this place?

Who am I?

Why am I here?

Each time I silently put one of these questions out, the answer came instantly in an explosion of light, color, love, and beauty that blew through me like a crashing wave....

It wasn't the first-time heaven had made a play on the main stage of culture nor will it be the last. Because heaven is something people are interested in.

And for us, people of faith, very real.

That heaven is real is something that is not new. We talk about it every week. It's right there in the Apostles' Creed: *I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.* It's right there in the Lord's Prayer: *Our Father who art in heaven*

But not much after that is clear. And in part that's because the word heaven can mean so many different things.

It can mean a geographic space- the atmosphere, or space. God made the heavens and the earth? It is a spatial understanding.

It can mean a spiritual location. What happens when we die.

It can mean the kingdom of heaven, a place where God is made manifest, here, now, in our present reality.

Heaven can be a reward, a realization, or an escape.

And more often than not, whatever it is that you believe about heaven is tied to a place deep within you, connected to understandings you've had since childhood, deeply held beliefs, and grief, missing loved ones who are no longer living.

Which makes it all the more difficult to untangle and organize and understand these many threads.

In a previous call I was teaching a class about Moses, and when we got to Moses' childhood, after he had been rescued from the river by Pharaoh's daughter, I stated that we didn't know much more about his childhood after that.

⁴ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/10/07/proof-of-heaven-a-doctor-s-experience-with-the-afterlife.html>

One of my members objected vociferously, telling me that Pharaoh's daughter hired tutors for Moses and made sure all of his needs, educationally and physically, were met. She kept going, and it was only after a while that I realized she was talking not about what the Bible tells us about Moses' upbringing, but what she had seen in the classic Cecil B. DeMille movie, the *Ten Commandments*.

The two had become mixed and intertwined in her mind that they were one and the same.

The same is often true for us. The many threads of what we believe about heaven can be difficult to untangle.

I offer this sermon today in no way as a complete analysis, but rather an invitation for consideration, a conversation at its very beginning.

And maybe, a good place to start is with trying to understand what the Bible says about heaven.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, the heavens were the realm of God—not a place for humans in this life or after death. Death was Sheol, the place where you went when you died. This was not a negative judgement, it was simply what happened to **everyone**. It was not until the Greeks came onto the scene, with their many and varied views of the afterlife, that new understandings begin to show up in writings and, eventually, in the New Testament.⁵

Theologian Christopher Morse, reflecting on our modern understanding of heaven as a place where we go after this life, writes:⁶

Remarkably few of the approximately six hundred and seventy-five instances of the term found in the Bible may be said to [be about life that happens only after death]. In such testimony, heaven neither begins nor ends with death. The automatic tendency to suppose when we hear the word 'heaven' that the subject is either the sky or the hereafter only shows how much our own thinking has become conformed to the world...

Heaven....is less about a place we go to than one that comes to us, less about a postmortem afterlife than about life here and now.... less about a timeless, static state than about a timely taking-place.

Knowing this, we also need to understand what theologian Shirley Guthrie reminds us—that when the Bible talks about heaven we must not take it literally, because we are being invited to understand it metaphorically.

Guthrie writes:⁷

⁵ *New Interpreter's Bible Dictionary, Volume 2: D-H* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), pages 766-768.

"What is Heaven Like," by Marianne Blickenstaff. *The Thoughtful Christian*, 2013. *The Thoughtful Christian*

⁶ Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News*. (New York: T&T Clark, 2010). Pages 4-5.

⁷ Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), page 382-383

When Jesus said to the thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in *Paradise*” (Luke 23:43), he used a word that was originally a Persian word for a nobleman’s park or garden, the most beautiful place anyone in the ancient world could imagine. If we want to understand what heaven is like, we will not investigate what a rich man’s property in the ancient Near east was like; we will try to imagine what it might mean to be *with Jesus*.

...Paul pictures Christ coming “with the sound of God’s trumpet” (I Thessalonians 4:16). Paul’s point is sure not that God will blow a big God-sized horn but that a great victory is coming.

When Jesus mentions “my house has many dwelling places” in John, a phrase which has led many people to think of heaven as a kind of place where you’ve won the lottery, mansions on every corner, he is not speaking of houses as buildings, he is speaking of places to abide, heart and soul.

It is the confusion these metaphors create that is one of the reasons why I try and always avoid them when it comes to death- you know- phrases like “lost” or “passed” or “transitioned” or “no longer with us,” instead seeking to speak the truth as best I can when it happens, that they died, for it is this that is the truest understanding that we have.

Which is a similar approach taken in the historical confessions of the Presbyterian Church, for they remind us that Jesus did speak about a physical, bodily resurrection that will happen someday, as Jesus was bodily resurrected at Easter- not just spiritually resurrected but bodily resurrected. As one study on heaven says, “The Bible tells us that Jesus was raised from the dead and that the dead will be raised, but it does not tell us the mechanics.”⁸

And, so, having heard all of this, it may be time to consider what I am asked most often. Will heaven be a place where you get to have a great re-union? Will it be like in the movie *Coco*, a great celebration and gathering of those we have loved and missed? The answer is that I don’t know. The Bible does not tell us so. But that does not mean it is not true. What we are told is that there will be a time when all tears will be wiped from our eyes, there is no mourning, and crying and pain will be no more,⁹ and that’s good enough for me.

So. Now.

What DO we know about heaven?

We know that most often in the Bible it is referring to the here and now.

⁸ Blickenstaff, page 3.

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/life-after-death/>

If there is a Presbyterian narrative about life after death, this is it: When you die, your soul goes to be with God, where it enjoys God’s glory and waits for the final judgment. At the final judgment bodies are reunited with souls, and eternal rewards and punishments are handed out. As the Scots Confession notes, final judgment is also “the time of refreshing and restitution of all things.” And it is clearly the case that both the Scots Confession and the Westminster Confession of Faith want to orient the present-day life of believers around this future.

⁹ Revelation 21: 4 “he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”

Rob Bell, in his book Love Wins, made more famous for what he said about hell than what he said about heaven, writes this:¹⁰

Sometimes, when Jesus used the word “heaven” he was simply referring to God, using the word as a substitute for the name of God.

Second, sometimes when Jesus spoke of heaven, he was referring to the future coming together of heaven and earth in what he and his contemporaries called life in the ages to come. And then third—and this is where things get really, really interesting—when Jesus talked about heaven, he was talking about our present *eternal, intense, real* experiences of joy, peace, and love in this life, this side of death *and* the ages to come. Heaven for Jesus wasn’t just “someday;” it was a present reality. Jesus blurs the lines, inviting the rich man, and us, in the merging of heaven and earth, the future and present, *here and now*.

To say it again, eternal life is less about a kind of time that starts when we die, and more about a quality and vitality or life lived now in connection to God.

Eternal life doesn’t start when we die;
it starts now.

We know that heaven is about what is now as much as it is about what is ahead.
And we know that whatever it is, we do it together.

Shirley Guthrie again,

Heaven is an eternal life of genuine, completely free realization of our humanity in a new heaven and a new earth, lived for us by Jesus Christ (true God *and* true human being), and promised and worked in us by God’s life renewing Holy Spirit. It is the eternal life of the self-fulfillment that comes in loving, praising, and serving God, and in living in peace with fellow human beings.... coming to rest or peace with your true selves as we live in free and open community with them.

It is like the parable of the long spoons, first found in writings many centuries ago, which you might have, are likely to have, heard before— a story that has parallels in many different religions and traditions, in which a man inquired about the secret to happiness and eternal life.

God showed the man two doors. Inside the first one, in the middle of the room, was a large round table with a large pot of stew. It smelled delicious and made the man’s mouth water, but the people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished. They were holding spoons with very long handles and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths.

God then showed the man what was behind the second door. At first glance, the room appeared exactly the same. There was the large round table with the large pot of wonderful stew that made the man’s mouth water. The people had the same long-handled spoons, but they were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking, eating easily with the long-handled spoons because they had learned the secret, they had to feed one another.

¹⁰ Rob Bell, Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived, (New York: Harper One, 2011) pages 58-59.

Whatever heaven is, we are here, there together.

Heaven is about what is now as much as it is about what is ahead.

And whatever it is, we are here, there together.

We also know that heaven is much bigger than we can imagine.

In John Jesus speaks of sheep that are his that we do not know. (John 10:16)

In Matthew 25 (32) we are told that all of the nations will be gathered before God in the final days. Not just the believers, but all of the people.

And so, when we think of heaven, we are reminded that God's grace and love are bigger than we can imagine, and that we stand in the final days only by God's grace. Our task is not to decide who will be where, our task is to love and welcome.

This has been particularly present in my mind this week with two high-profile individuals dying by suicide, and some suggesting that this places them outside of God's grace.

There is a saying that some people will never be happy in heaven unless they also know who isn't there, but the gospel compels us in the other direction, to recognize that **we are all**, only, going to make it because of God's grace.

If we are uncomfortable with others receiving the same grace we have received, it says far more about us than it does about God.

Heaven is about what is now as much as it is about what is ahead.

And whatever it is, we are here, there together.

We also know that heaven is much bigger than we can imagine.

And finally, it is smaller than we can imagine, too.

In our passage from John today, when Jesus says "I go and prepare a place for you" this is not an abstract general pronouncement, it is personal.¹¹ A reminder that God's love is not general, it is personal.

In his funeral sermon for a friend and colleague, Professor Patrick Miller said,¹² "[Heaven is a symbol] for the conviction that our final destiny is in God's care.... What matters in all of this is the Christian claim — and I believe it to be true with all my heart — that we are forever held in the arms of God. That is true before we were born; that will be true after we have died and our bodies have disappeared.... God completes our lives beyond this life, whether we have died young or old, have suffered or lived well. Underneath, now and forever, are the everlasting arms, and they will keep us.... where I hope and believe I will be and you will be."

¹¹ Morse, 118.

¹² From the sermon preached at the funeral of the Reverend George McMaster at Druid Hills Church in Atlanta, Ga., by Dr. Patrick D. Miller, Professor of Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. <https://pres-outlook.org/2005/10/heaven/>

And maybe that's the best way for us to end this sermon that has far more questions than answers. With the reminder that the best way for us to be faithful, to understand heaven, is to lean. Lean on one another. Lean on faith. Lean on God. Lean on the everlasting arms.

What a fellowship, what a joy divine,¹³
Leaning on the everlasting arms;
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.
Oh, how sweet to walk in this pilgrim way,
Oh, how bright the path grows from day to day,
What have I to dread, what have I to fear,
I have blessed peace with my Lord so near,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.
Leaning, leaning,
Safe and secure from all alarms;
Leaning, leaning,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.

Amen.

¹³ "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," by E. A. Hoffman in 1894.
https://hymnary.org/text/what_a_fellowship_what_a_joy_divine