



The Mysteries of
HEAVEN

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Hebrews 6 considers teachings about life after death and the reality of eternal judgment to be some of the elementary doctrines of the Christian faith. Yet, most Christians know very little about what lies beyond death's door.

In *The Mysteries of Heaven*, I try to bring clarity to mysteries beyond the grave. In this series, we learn how our earthly life magnifies either the joy of heaven or the tragedy of hell. We discover an amazing time when heaven become better. We learn when God will give us real, tangible bodies that will not age. We tackle the perplexing problem of the millennium and the thousand year reign of Christ on earth. This series also teaches us where to find hope when someone we loves dies. Two messages handle questions the church submitted about life after death.

The Mysteries of Heaven is a practical teaching that paints a captivating picture of heaven, motivates us to live for things of eternal value, and casts a vision of the glory that await God's children when their life's work is complete.

I stood on the shoulders of who inspired my thoughts and helped shape my understanding of Scripture. I owe a debt of gratitude to their work. There are too many to name but some of the particularly notable ones are: Randy Alcorn, Ron Rhodes, Erwin Lutzer, David Jeremiah, Robert Morey, John Piper, and Stanley Grenz. To them I am forever grateful.

I would like to offer special thanks to Sheryl Fastenow, my secretary, for her editorial work.

I also want to sincerely thank our church family for their attentive ears and teachable hearts. I dedicate this digital commentary to you.

Because of God's Mercy,

Kurt

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Why Study Heaven? Sign Title: Why Study Heaven?

May 16, 2010

I would like to welcome you to Faith Evangelical Free Church. My name is Pastor Kurt and I am one of the pastors. If you are new, you came on the right Sunday. This morning we start our summer teaching series on heaven. Heaven is a topic people want to learn more about. For example:

The Discovery Channel featured a series about the ten greatest mysteries in the world. “The mysteries included the lost city of Atlantis, UFO’s, Bigfoot, Stonehedge, and the Loch Ness Monster. The overwhelming number one mystery audiences were interested in was life after death.”¹

The book *Heaven* by Randy Alcorn sold a hundred-thousand copies in its first months on the market.² Sounds like people are interested in the topic.

Current estimates are that over 90 million people die every year. That means on average, three people die every second, 180 every minute, 11,000 every hour. If the Bible is right, every day 250,000 people enter eternity in either heaven or hell.³ Since I started this message, almost 500 died on planet earth.

A Harris poll discovered 82 percent of Americans believe in heaven and 63 percent expect to go there when they die, yet Americans know very little about it. While Americans are wondering about heaven, many churches are not talking about it.⁴ When asked for details about heaven, most Christians shrug their shoulders or describe clouds, harps, wings and a white robe. This doesn’t make sense to me. After all God displayed incredible creative power in making this planet in only seven days, do you think heaven, which he has worked on for thousands of years, will be boring? It is not just our culture that is interested in heaven, but so is our church family.

I first realized how much interest we had in the topic of heaven when we briefly studied it in our Hebrews series. The message was titled, “One Breath Away.” That message became the most requested messages of the entire fifty-two week series. As a church, we are hungry for details about heaven. Our culture is asking questions about heaven, so we are going to talk about it.

This morning, we are going to look at another reason to study heaven. God wants us to study it. The Bible has a lot to say about heaven and talks about it over 500 times. This morning, we will discover three reasons why God wants us to study our eternal home.

¹ Mark Hitchcock, *55 Answers to Questions about Life after Death* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2005), p.9.

² David Jeremiah, *Revealing the Mysteries of Heaven* (San Diego, CA: Turning Point Ministries, 2009), p.11.

³ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2004), p. xxi.

⁴ Cary McMullen, “Heaven: A Lot of Questions, But No One Really Knows the Answers,” *The Ledger*, 27 March 2005.

Life is brief, eternity is long.

When Billy Graham was in his nineties, he was asked in an interview what surprised him most about life. Without hesitation, he replied, "Its brevity." Life is short. It seems the older we get, the faster the time passes.

The Bible reminds us of how quickly time passes.

How frail is humanity! How short is life,... Job 14:1 (NLT)

You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath. Psalm 39:5 (NIV)

For my days vanish like smoke; Psalm 102:3 (NIV)

The New Testament also reminds us how quickly life passes.

Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. James 4:14 (NLT)

It is sobering to realize that as I speak, more than half my life may be gone. Where did it go? Unless the Lord returns, it is not just me, but my wife and three children that will also be lowered into the ground in death as our earthly existence is snuffed out like a candle. Life is brief.

Because life passes so quickly the Psalmist teaches us to pray we make wise use of our life.

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. Psalm 90:12 (ESV)

Lord, remind me how brief my time on earth will be. Remind me that my days are numbered—how fleeting my life is. Psalm 39:4 (NLT)

Because life passes quickly, the Bible tells us to be careful about wasting our life. When the Bible talks about death, it talks about it to help us learn to live wisely, to help us live keeping our lives focused on eternity. When the Bible talks about being heavenly minded, it talks about heaven so we can do some earthly good.

One of the great and Godly minds of the previous century was the Puritan, Jonathan Edwards. He did incredible good for the fame of Christ and the joy of God's people. In keeping with the Puritan habit of writing resolutions when you are young to guide your life until you are old, Jonathan Edwards framed a number of resolutions. I want to share three with you. As I read them, what struck me is the common theme of life's brevity and the importance of living with our eyes on eternity.

- Resolved, to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness, in the other world, as I possibly can.
- Resolved, that I will live so as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.

- Resolved, to endeavor to my utmost to act as I can think I should do, if I had already seen the happiness of heaven, and hell's torments.⁵

Life passes quickly. Scripture is clear, how we live in this life will have everlasting ramifications for the next. You notice that I set Edwards resolutions so you can cut them out. Homework today is to cut them out and either paste them in your Bible or put them on your dinner table and, if possible, read them at family meals this week.

True significance doesn't come from how large your bank account is when you die, though many of us will spend our entire lives trying to get the biggest one we can. I have never seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul to the grave. Unless we invest our resources for God's work, we leave it all behind. True significance only comes from knowing Jesus Christ, accepting him as the King of creation and the King of our life. Our identity with Jesus is the only thing that sustains us into eternity.

Let me show you the importance of keeping an eternal perspective. How many here know the first and last names of your maternal grandmother? How many know the first and last names of your great grandmother? Your great great grandmother? Most people don't remember them. You will die and you will not just be dead, but even your memory will be forgotten.

A few years ago my father took me to the Trucksess family grave yard behind a church in the Philadelphia area. It was weird walking among the dead where many of the headstones had my last name on it. We found the grave of the first Trucksess to come to America, seven generations ago. The original David Trucksess. I learned a few things about my heritage. First of all, my roots are Presbyterian, I am sure Pastor Clint is glad to know that. Second, he was born in 1814 and died in 1897. Third, he was President of the board of trustees of the Presbyterian church he was buried behind for 45 years. Apparently, he was quite a Godly man, but outside of this grave stone, his memory, money and significance are gone. As far as I know, this grave is the only imprint of his life that remains.

I have good news. According to the Bible, as a believer in Christ, the moment he closed his eyes on earth, he opened his eyes to see Christ and since then he is more alive now than he ever was in the 1800's.

By the way, approximately 1,500 people died since I began talking and opened up their spiritual eyes either to see Jesus or experience everlasting torment. Life is brief, eternity is long, prepare for what matters most.

Studying heaven relieves life's greatest fear.

If you are at a party, and you want to be left alone, start asking people what they think about death. It won't take long until people find someone else to talk to. While death is inevitable, nobody likes the subject. For those who don't know Christ and the good news of his forgiveness, death is a terrifying prospect.

⁵ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, pg. 5.

Consciences are plagued by the gnawing feeling there might be divine retribution for sin. While advocates of Euthanasia and abortion want us to believe we simply cease to exist, deep inside, each of us knows better.

he (God) has set eternity into man's heart. Ecclesiastes 3:11 (ESV)

The Bible is progressive revelation. That simply means that as time goes on God reveals more and more about himself, his plans for us and eternity. Since God had not revealed much about heaven, hell and eternity in the Old Testament, there was an expected fear of death that existed in that time.

The Psalmist called death a terror.

My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Psalm 55:4 (ESV)

Job called death the king of terrors.

the king of terrors Job 18:14 (ESV)

Even those who lived under the law were afraid of death. As we learned in the book of Hebrews, the day of Atonement was the holiest day of the Jewish year when all unintentional sin was atoned for. There was no sacrifice for intentional sin! People died in fear of the consequences of intentional sin.

The book of Hebrews tells us that while death is the greatest fear of life. Christ came to take away our fear of death.

and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. Hebrews 2:15 (ESV)

If you know Jesus Christ, know he came to take away the greatest fear you will ever face, the fear of death.

"Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" 1 Corinthians 15:55 (ESV)

Jesus Christ took the stinger out of death. Bible scholars tell us Paul was alluding to the lethal and excruciating sting of a scorpion. The good news is Christ extracted death's stinger and removed the triumph of the grave. Because of what Christ accomplished on the cross, as Christians, we need not fear death. Christ rose from the dead, because of what he has done for us, we will also rise from the dead and our destiny is to be in heaven with Christ. For Christians, physical death is not the end, but the opening of our eyes to beginning of experiencing life and God in a fuller and fresher way.

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"— these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 1 Corinthians 2:9-10 (ESV)

What God prepared for us in the afterlife is beyond our imagination, beyond pictures and beyond words. But what was once unknown to the people of God in the Old Testament is revealed, by the Holy Spirit, to God's apostles in

the New Testament and it is recorded in the pages of Scripture for us. We can begin to see a little of the incredible things God has for us through Christ in the New Testament Scriptures. Now, for Christians, death is an event we can anticipate with joy, not fear.

When the apostle John saw Christ in Revelations look how Jesus greeted him.

“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Revelation 1:18 (ESV)

In Jesus’ hands are the keys of death. Rather than a fearful thing, look how death is described for the Christian in the New Testament.

Death is a coming home.

Yes, we are fully confident, and we would rather be away from these earthly bodies, for then we will be at home with the Lord. 2 Corinthians 6:8 (NLT)

Home represents a place of rest, security and acceptance. As much as Paul loved his earthly home, he knew that when he died, he would be in a place that was even more home, with the Lord.

In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? John 14:2 (ESV)

What a great thought! We are coming home to dad’s house and he is making a room ready for us!

Death is a departure.

I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. Philippians 1:23 (ESV)

The word *depart* here is used of a ship loosening its moorings to sail away from a dock. Paul desired to set sail for his true home in heaven but he felt he was still needed on earth but the longing for his heavenly home was tugging at him. The phrase “with Christ” denotes a conscious, intimate, face-to-face fellowship with Jesus that Paul looked forward to experiencing.

By the way, since I began this message over 3,000 people passed into eternity. According to the Bible, it was either the realization of their greatest fear or it was the best moment of their life as they opened their eyes to a welcome home party of face to face with Jesus.

Studying heaven whets our appetite for life’s greatest joy.

Apple computer is a company adept at enticing the public. They recently released the iPad. Amazingly, they sold over a million iPads before the 3G wireless version was released to the public. Almost a million people bought the iPad before they touched the iPad.

How does a company do that? You build anticipation of joy. The more people knew about the iPad, the more people watched videos of one in use on Apple's web site, the more they could imagine themselves with one. The more they wanted one. They were even willing to buy one, sight unseen.

God wants us to try heaven the same way. He tells us a lot about heaven in the Bible to whet our appetite for it and fuel our imaginations of what heaven is like. The more we know, the more we will long to be there and live wisely to invest for our greatest joy there.

When we lose sight that God is preparing a wonderful destination for those who are his, we will start trying to create heaven on earth. When we stop seeing the biblical heaven, we try creating an earthly one. The problem is we can never approximate on earth what God creates in heaven. If we do not feed our hunger for heaven with Biblical truth, we will feed it with superficial trifles of this world.

Look with me what is in store for us in eternity.

Our relationships are in heaven.

But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me. 2 Samuel 12:23 (ESV)

When David's infant son died, he was sure he would see him again in heaven.

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 1 Thessalonians 4:14 (ESV)

Those who have passed away in Christ are with the Lord. What a great feeling to know that when we die, we will be in heaven with our brothers and sisters who trusted Christ. Think about the incredible reunion that awaits us around the throne of Jesus. I will finally meet the living David Trucksess. Do you have anyone you are looking forward to meeting?

Our inheritance is in heaven.

to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 1 Peter 1:4 (ESV)

This inheritance cannot lose value, like the stock market. It cannot rust, like your favorite car, it will not fade like the gel coat on your boat. It is an inheritance that will endure in value and last forever. What is this inheritance like? Part of it is described as...

Every spiritual blessing is ours in heaven.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,.. to the praise of his glorious grace. Ephesians 1:3, 6

We have every spiritual blessing in heaven. What does that mean? This text in Ephesians doesn't detail all the spiritual blessings we have but it tells us we are adopted brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ through the forgiveness obtained for us through Christ. Part of our purpose in eternity is to be *for the praise of God's glorious grace*. While we deserve the same wrath and punishment prepared for the devil and his angels, instead we receive incomprehensible mercy through Christ. In heaven, we are the poster children for every other spiritual and physical being of God's creation of just how lavishly loving forgiving and merciful God can be. In heaven, through Christ, we are the recipients of the grandest display of God's mercy and love that has ever been expressed in the universe.

If you think real happiness and joy is found in this world, you've got another thing coming. Nothing can approximate the joy of enjoying God's glorious grace for eternity.

and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:6-7 (ESV)

The term *seated* here means to be joined together like you join a group sitting around a camp fire. It is the same term used to describe Peter sitting around the camp fire when Jesus was in the court of the high priest. We are seated *with Christ* in the heavenly places. We are the grandest display of God's immeasurable love and kindness through Jesus.

By the way over 5,000 have entered eternity since I began talking. Death is either the realization of our greatest joys or our greatest fears.

Conclusion

One thing is clear in the Bible. The only way anyone is in heaven is through Jesus. Nobody will be in heaven unless Jesus is their savior, their king and their joy. If you have not done that, why don't you do so right now? Heaven is not a place you want to miss.

Prayer

Heavenly father, I ask for your son's death on the cross to pay for my sin. There is a lot I don't know about heaven, but I know enough to want to be there. I ask Jesus to be my savior for sin, the king in charge of my life and the joy in my heart. Amen.

One Minute After You Die

Sign Title: One Minute After You Die

May 16, 2010

If you are new to Faith E Free, I would like to welcome you. My name is Pastor Kurt and we are in the second week of our summer teaching series on *The Mysteries of Heaven*. If you were here two weeks ago, when we began this study, I showed you the epitaph from an old Trucksess family gravestone. In keeping with the epitaph theme, I want to begin by sharing one from a gravestone in Indiana.

“Pause, stranger, when you pass me by:

As you are now, so once was I.

As I am now, so you will be.

Prepare for death and follow me.”

A thoughtful person came along and scribbled his own words beneath the poem.

“To follow you, I’m not content, until I know which way you went.”⁶

What happens after we die? When we go to a funeral there is a body in the casket, but what happened to the person? What would we see if we could glimpse into the afterlife? This morning, using the Bible as our guide, we will take a glimpse beyond the grave.

To give a good answer to this question, we need to take a trip into the Old Testament then return to the New. When we finish, you will know what happens one minute after you die. Let’s begin.

Two weeks ago I introduced a big term, *Progressive Revelation*. While it sounds big, it isn’t complicated. All it means is that **God reveals more about himself, his plans and our eternity over time**. It is like a dating relationship. The more time goes by, the more you know the person. The more time passed, the more God revealed about himself and what happens to us after death. Abraham and Moses in the Old Testament couldn’t tell us as much about the afterlife as Paul could in the New. Let’s start in the Old Testament and see how God unfolds this mystery.

Sheol - Afterlife in the Old Testament

The most important word that speaks about life after death in the Old Testament is the Hebrew word *Sheol*. Unfortunately, the old King James Version of the Bible translated this Hebrew word into English in 1611 very inconsistently and inaccurately. Thirty-one times, they translated it *hell*, thirty-one times they translated it *grave*. Two times they translated it as *the pit*. As we will see, all three of these are bad translations. This created a lot of confusion about life after death that is still with us today. What went wrong in 1611?

⁶ Ron Rhodes, *The Undiscovered Country: Exploring the Wonder of Heaven and the Afterlife* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1960), pgs. 39-40.

1. **Sheol is not hell.** There is a different word for Hell. In the New Testament it is called Ghenna. Hell and Sheol are different places.

2. **Sheol means more than grave.** Sheol means a lot more than to be buried in the grave like your pet dog or hamster. There is a different word in the Hebrew for grave called *kever*. In the Bible, to go to Sheol after death was not to be buried in the grave but *to experience a conscious afterlife*.

3. **English doesn't have a good word for Sheol.** English doesn't have a good word to describe a conscious afterlife. This is probably why the King James translated it grave, because they didn't know what else to call it. To clear things up, some translations, Like the ESV and NASB just translate the Word Sheol directly.

All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave to my son." So his father wept for him. Genesis 37:35 (NIV)

All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father wept for him. Genesis 37:35 (ESV)

4. **Sheol was a place of the righteous and wicked.** As we just saw in Genesis 37:35, righteous Jacob thought he would go to Sheol, but so did people who were wicked. Korah and his rebellious followers were sent to Sheol.

So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. Numbers 16:33 (ESV)

5. **All who entered Sheol did not have the same experience.** For some, it was a region of gloom; but for others, it was a place of comfort. There are hints in the Old Testament that Sheol had different regions. Both the wicked and the righteous went to Sheol. Some ancient rabbis consider Sheol to have an upper and a lower region.

For a fire is kindled by my anger, and it burns to the depths of Sheol, devours the earth and its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains. Deuteronomy 32:22 (ESV)

The Old Testament makes a sharp distinction between the wicked and the righteous and there is the clear implication they have separate destinies in the afterlife. Even though it was clear the righteous and the wicked had different experiences in the afterlife in Sheol, I found almost nothing in the Old Testament where Godly people were positive about being in Sheol.

6. **The righteous hoped for rescue from Sheol.**

In fact, a common hope is that God would eventually rescue the righteous from Sheol.

But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me. *Selah* Psalm 49:15 (ESV)

This is why the writer of Hebrews talked about everyone, even Godly people living in fear of death.

and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.
Hebrews 2:15 (ESV)

What happened after the Old Testament? There were 400 years between when the last Old Testament book was written until the appearing of Christ. During that time the Rabbi's tried to piece together what happened in the afterlife. The Rabbi's taught that the afterlife consisted of two compartments in Sheol, one for the righteous and one for the wicked. The afterlife experience was very different for people based on how they lived. The key thing for us to remember is that Sheol is the realm of the dead and there was little understood about it other than how you lived affected where you ended up.

While the door to the afterlife was only open a crack in the Old Testament, it is thrown wide open in the New Testament. Here we have a detailed description of what happens after death.

Hades - Afterlife in the New Testament.

While the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, the New Testament was written in Greek. When the Septuagint, a Greek copy of the Hebrew Old Testament was translated slightly before Jesus was born, every occurrence of Sheol in the Old Testament was translated using the word Hades. Every Old Testament quote in our New Testament, that has the Hebrew word Sheol in it, was translated using the Greek word Hades. Sheol in Hebrew and Hades in Greek are the same thing.

Knowing this, we can see how the New Testament pulls back the curtain on what happens to people one minute after they die because we are given some very specific details about what happens to people in Hades.

In Luke 16, Jesus tells a parable to emphasize to greedy Pharisees how their fortunes may be reversed in the world to come. In this story Jesus endorsed the Rabbi's understanding of Hades and Sheol that existed in his day. That is, the belief that Hades (Sheol) had two compartments, a compartment of the righteous and a compartment of the wicked. People had a very different experience in the afterlife depending on which compartment they went to.

Let's look at Luke 16 and see what we can learn. Before we do that, I want to prepare you for something that may throw some of us off. If you have the NIV, it will use the word Hell in this passage. In the original Greek, it is Hades. This is a mistranslation in the NIV, which followed the old King James. This is one reason we will some day replace our pew Bibles with the ESV, a more precise translation. Incidentally, nobody is in hell, the final resting place of eternal punishment, until Revelation 20. We will learn more about this in the weeks ahead.

The context of Luke 16 is a rich man who habitually dressed in purple and fine linen. He lived in splendor every day until he died. His soul was taken to

Hades A beggar named Lazarus who lay at the rich man's gate every day also died and was carried to Hades. The experience of these two men was very different. Let's begin by looking at the rich man.

and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' Luke 16:23–26 (ESV)

First of all, realize this man's riches did not determine his eternal destiny, it was the choices he made in his life. We will talk more about those choices later in the sermon but for now, let us focus on the fate of the rich man. While his family was enjoying potato salad at the after funeral luncheon, look what was happening to him.

The rich man was alive and in agony.

Rather than passing out of existence one minute after we die, we are very much alive. The rich man said

And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' Luke 16:24 (ESV)

The rich man had his memory, he could recognize Lazarus as the beggar who sat outside his door for all those years. He had some kind of body because it says he had a tongue and Lazarus is said to have a finger. He was also very much alive and in pain. While the rich man's family was reading his eulogy, he was very much in agony.

There was no second chance.

And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' Luke 16:26 (ESV)

After a funeral, relatives move on from the mourning. Maybe they go out to dinner or turn on the ball game. For this man, all options for change were gone. Once we have passed through the door of death we can't pick up our suitcase and move out because we don't like the accommodations.⁷ As we will see in upcoming weeks, this agony was only the beginning of his eternity. The Bible never talks about a second chance after death. There is no such thing as purgatory. It doesn't exist.

⁷ M.R. DeHaan

He knew he deserved it.

And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' Luke 16:27–28 (ESV)

I want you to notice, this man says nothing about how unfair it is for him to be there. He complains about the pain, but he does not complain about the justice. He also knew exactly what his brothers would have to do if they were to avoid his own fate. They needed to repent of their sin. They needed to place their faith in God to forgive their sin. This man suddenly became interested in Reaching His Region and Knowing His Neighbors! He realized the most loving thing he could do was to keep anyone else from joining him. You think he would look forward to the friendship of his brother's being with him. Instead, he desperately hopes they never come. He was willing to never see them again as long as they weren't with him.

He knew what he was missing.

and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. Luke 16:23 (ESV)

This may be the greatest agony of all. The rich man could see Lazarus in comfort while he was in agony. That has to be one of the worst experiences, especially when you know there is no longer a second chance.

The unrepentant rich man was in a place of suffering, where there was no escape and he could see what he was missing, experiencing punishment he knew he deserved and from which he desperately wanted the people he loved most to avoid. Hades was not a pleasant experience for him one minute after he died.

Some of you may think this is a lot to pull from a parable. I would normally agree with you if it wasn't for the fact that Jesus was endorsing the Rabbinic view of the afterlife that existed in his day. If he wanted to debunk it, this was his chance. Secondly, there are other clear passages of Scripture that support what we just learned.

then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, 2 Peter 2:9 (ESV)

Notice that the wicked do not pass out of existence. They are kept under punishment for the day of judgment. This is the present, active, infinitive form of the verb which means the wicked are held captive in punishment continuously until the day of judgment when they are finally consigned to hell.

What about Lazarus?

Lazarus was in a place of comfort called Abraham's bosom. This would be known as the compartment of the righteous in Sheol or Hades. It was also called *Paradise*. The Bible doesn't give us as many details about this portion of Hades. Apparently it was a pretty nice place. It is a place of comfort and

companionship. So death for those who in faith trusted God to handle their sin was a good thing.

Why do you think Scripture doesn't offer us more details about Paradise? I think there are scant details about what Paradise was like because the Bible hints that Paradise changed dramatically when Christ rose from the dead.

he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. Acts 2:31 (ESV)

Apparently, when Christ died, he went to Hades but he didn't stay there. I don't think he went to the place of torment, being sinless, he wouldn't go there. He went to the place of comfort. But he didn't stay there. He rose from the dead, came back to life and after forty days ascended to heaven. Scripture leads us to believe that when he left this compartment of Hades, he did not leave alone, but took those who were in the compartment of the righteous with him to heaven when he left.

In the Old Testament we find the hope that one day God would take the souls of the righteous out of Paradise and into heaven. David writes,

For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,.. Psalm 16:10 (ESV)

But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me. Selah Psalm 49:15 (ESV)

The writer of Hebrews also talked about this. It seems the Old Testament saints didn't experience what God planned for them until Christ came and rose from the dead.

since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. Hebrews 11:40 (ESV)

When Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, he assumes that Paradise, the compartment of the righteous, is now in heaven.

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. 2 Corinthians 12:2–4 (ESV)

To understand this, you need to know there are three heavens in the Bible.

The First Heaven - The first heaven is the atmospheric heaven. This is the domain of the clouds and the birds.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth... For as the rain comes down... from heaven.” Isaiah 55:9-10

The Second Heaven - This is the domain of the heavenly bodies. It is the domain of the sun, moon, stars and planets. It is outer space.

And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years, Genesis 1:14 (ESV)

The Third Heaven - When Paul talks about the third heaven, we know it is beyond the earthly heaven and the domain of the outer space heaven. It is the place where God dwells. The important thing for us to see is that Paradise, the home of the righteous dead, is now in heaven. So apparently the dreams of the Old Testament Saints were realized. It wasn't bad being in a place of comfort, but it is much better to be in heaven. It seems they followed Christ there. For those who have trusted Christ, one minute after they die, the angels of God will also carry them to the presence of Christ in heaven.

What is heaven like?

There is a lot we could say about what heaven will be like. But stripping away all the technicalities and specific details, it boils down to this: Heaven is where Jesus is. That is the most important thing. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he said

Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 2 Corinthians 5:8 (ESV)

He wasn't excited about going to heaven, he was excited about being with Jesus.

When Paul wrote to the Philippians he didn't say he couldn't wait to get to heaven.

I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. Philippians 1:23 (ESV)

What makes heaven worth being there is Jesus. He is the only reason we have heaven. Every good thing we have for eternity, being saved from our sin, being honored and loved for eternity; it is all because Jesus chose to love us. We don't deserve any of it. Imagine the moment we see him and know we deserve eternal punishment because of our sin, but we are present in heaven and even honored in heaven, not because we deserve it, but because Jesus loves us. Jesus died for you, so you can be in heaven with him. Imagine the beauty of heaven and the tears of thankfulness as we fall into the firm embrace of Jesus and he says, “Welcome home, I love you.”

Heaven is where Jesus is, wherever Jesus is, that is where we want to be.

How can I be sure to be with Jesus?

The Bible says that one minute after we die, the path for our eternity is irrevocably sealed. Either we begin our fully deserved eternal punishment for our sin against an infinite God or we are welcomed into heaven purely because of all Jesus has done for us that we don't deserve.

The prospect of spending eternity with Christ is powerful, but it requires a decision on your part today. Those in heaven are there because

1. They have asked Jesus to be the savior for their sin through his death on the cross.
2. They have asked Jesus, who is the king of everything, to be the king of their life.
3. The greatest joy in their heart is that Jesus loves them. After all, if Jesus loves us, what else do we really need?

As I close in prayer, if you haven't made the decision to have Jesus as your savior, king and joy, I invite you to make that decision now and join me by praying with me in your heart.

Prayer

Father, I know I deserve punishment for my sin. I deserve to be like the rich man in Hades. I thank you Jesus for not leaving me there but for loving me. Thank you for dying for my sin. Right now, I ask you to be my savior, my king and my joy. Amen.

This is an exciting Sunday because heaven is an exciting place. Did you know there is a time when heaven will be better than it is now? Join us next week as we learn about when heaven gets even better. See you then.

When Heaven Gets Better

Sign Title: **When Heaven Gets Better**

June 6, 2010

If you are new to Faith, I would like to welcome you. My name is Kurt and I am one of the pastors here at Faith E Free.

You just saw a video showing some of the questions we will be answering this summer in our teaching series on the Mysteries of Heaven. Last week we answered the question, "What happens one minute after you die?"

We talked about death, the separation of the body to the grave and the soul to a place called Sheol in the Old Testament and Hades in the New Testament. For some that is a place of torment, for others it is a place of comfort and companionship. Last week we learned one particularly great joy. The resurrection of Christ brought those in Paradise, the place of comfort and companionship in Hades, home to be with Christ in heaven.

While the Scriptures hint that we will have some kind of a body in this intermediate state in the afterlife, while it will be great to be with Christ, we know the body we will have at that time is not the kind of physical body we have now. While it will be great to be in God's presence in heaven and to see the risen Jesus, it isn't God's desire for us to remain disembodied from our tangible bodies.

God's future plans involve heaven getting even better than it is now. God will eventually defeat sin, death and Satan. He will create a new heaven and a new earth where heaven and earth are not separated but they are united together as one. This is called the unshakable kingdom that will last forever.

The New Heavens and Earth will have a capital city called the New Jerusalem and our souls will be restored to physical bodies that are similar to the bodies we have now but they will be incorruptible and indestructible, that means they will last forever. At that time, we will reign under Christ and rule with Christ in the new heavens and earth. It will be that way forever. This is a pretty exciting prospect.

Next week we will study the capital city of the New Heavens and Earth called the New Jerusalem and when I return from vacation we will study our resurrection bodies and learn what it will be like to have our souls reunited with incorruptible and indestructible bodies for eternity. This morning, I want to take some time to give us a fly over of the New Heavens and the New Earth so we can learn what we have to look forward to. To begin, I want to introduce this topic by reading Revelation 20:11-21:8. This is a longer passage and I am not going to teach from it line by line but it will give us a good overview of the way God wraps things up.

Revelation 20:11-21:8

The Bible has a big picture.

If you are new to the Bible, one of the most helpful things to know is the big picture of God's plans. Conceptually, the Bible is like a shelf of books that is held up by two book ends.

Creation Past Genesis 1-2	Present Genesis 3 - Revelation 20	Creation Future Revelation 21-22
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There is a theme God introduces to us in this overview. Something good is introduced in Genesis 1-2. It ruined by sin but God sets out to restore it through Christ. When we get to Revelation 21-22 God completes his restoration process through Christ *but makes it better than it was before*.

- Original pure mankind → Fallen, corrupted, dying mankind → Vastly improved, perfect, sinless, undying, exalted through Christ mankind.
- Original pure earth → Fallen corrupted earth → Renewed, incorruptible, vastly improved sin free earth.
- Original Adam ruled the earth → Satan usurps reign from Adam, Christ (second Adam) conquers Satan's rule on earth but doesn't fully exercise his rights → Christ exercises his full rights to rule and re-delegates the right to rule to redeemed man over a vastly improved new creation.
- God is in heaven but walks with man in Garden of Eden. Earth and heaven are separate. → Man cut off from God because of sin but God restores that relationship through Jesus → God fuses heaven with new earth and God dwells with man permanently.

When God fixes things after they are broken, he makes them better than before they fell apart. Many of us know this somewhat intuitively through the Holy Spirit working in our heart when it comes to our personal life, but most of us don't know that God is not just in the business of restoring us but he is in the business of restoring the earth.

Why restore all things?

Most Christians have an incomplete view of salvation. They believe Christ came to save them from their sin so they can go to heaven rather than hell when they die and that is the end of the story. For God to stop the story line there would be for God to obtain incomplete redemption. Christ didn't die just to redeem us but as part of our restoration he will redeem everything Satan has destroyed.

and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. Acts 3:20–21 (NIV)

God doesn't concede ground to Satan, when God wins, he wins completely and victoriously and restores what Satan ruined! According to

Scripture, sin has a pervasive nature to it. It doesn't just affect us internally but it affects us externally and results in our death. It doesn't just affect us but sin affects the earth. Geological disasters are the affects of sin. Tsunamis are the result of sin. Sin doesn't just affect the earth, but it affects the entire created order. Somehow, our sin, like ripples from a rock thrown in a pond, radiates to affect areas outside our planet and to the farthest reaches of our solar system.

When God restores things, he doesn't just save our souls for heaven, he promises to restore our bodies, he will restore the earth and even the solar system will be remade free from the affects of sin.

that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Romans 8:21 (ESV)

When Christ fused himself permanently with a human body and died for sin to redeem us, he didn't just redeem us but set in motion a process to free the creation from its bondage to sin. Christ didn't die for the creation, he died for us but as part of Christ's victory over sin for us, creation will eventually enjoy the victory over sin Christ obtained.

Did you realize creation is cheering for you? When Christ pours out the full measure of his love for us at the restoration of all things, creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay as an overflow of God's love for us in his restoration of all things. This is amazing!

God does not concede ground to Satan. He restores ALL things and makes them better than they were before.

"For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring and your name remain. Isaiah 66:22 (ESV)

This new heavens and earth will be permanent. It will remain forever. There is not another step in redemption after that, it is completion of the perfect and flawless picture of redemption.

Will the earth be destroyed or renewed?

I want to dig in a little deeper to discuss something not all of us are aware of but we should talk about. Historically there is a fair amount of discussion on how God will bring about the new heavens and earth. Historic Lutherans believe God will utterly destroy our universe and make a new one from scratch because our earth is so ruined by sin. There are some gifted and respected preachers who teach this. There are some verses that at first, appear to teach this.

Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, Psalm 102:25–26 (ESV)

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. 2 Peter 3:10 (ESV)

It sounds like sin has won and God needs to throw away the entire creation and start again. The more I studied this, the more I do not believe this is right. I believe God will not destroy our planet and solar system so he can start again, but he will restore it. As we saw earlier. He will liberate creation from its bondage to decay, not destroy creation and start again.

In 2 Peter, when Peter says the earth will be burned up and dissolved, just before this passage he says it will be similar to the days of Noah when God destroyed the earth with a flood. With the flood, God didn't destroy the earth, he renewed the earth.

Interestingly, the Greek word for *new* used in the phrase *new heavens and earth* in Revelation 21 is a specific Greek word. It doesn't mean *new* as in something that never existed before but *new* as in something that already exists but now appears in a new way. It is a renewed earth, not a completely different earth.

It is a little like the TV show, *Overhaul'in* on TLC. They take an old car from the 1950's or 60's that doesn't run and should be just thrown in the junk yard and they completely restore it. They give it a new paint job, they put high performance shocks and tires on it. They put a huge engine under the hood and give it custom upholstery. By the time they are done, it is not a new car, it is the same car but it is immensely better than it was when it was driven off the show room floor fifty years ago. This is what our God will do with this creation.

If God was forced to annihilate the present cosmos because Satan and sin had so ruined creation that God could not redeem it, Satan would have won a great victory. Satan would have succeeded in so devastating God's creation that God could do nothing other than blot it out of existence.

Satan does not win victories over God. Satan is defeated. God will reveal the decisiveness of Satan's defeat when he renews, fully restores and vastly improves the very earth and the very people Satan sought to destroy.

Christ looks at Satan and says, who has the last laugh. Praise be to God who has given us the victory through the Lord Jesus Christ.

What will this new creation be like?

Sometimes I am frustrated when I hear how the New Heavens and Earth are taught. Sometimes we are told there is no use even thinking about what they will be like because it will be greater than our imaginations can conceive. I struggle with that. If there is so much discontinuity between the old creation and the new creation, how are we to anticipate it? Everything we learned this morning is that the new earth will be in continuity with our current earth but immensely improved and freed from sin. God wants to let the things we savor most about this creation whet our appetite for the new creation.

Greater creation beauty

After a long cold winter, how many of us burst with pleasure when we felt the brilliance of the sun, the warmth of the days and the magnificence of enjoying

the lakes, the food and the friendship? All those are good things in God's creation that lift our spirits. Why wouldn't he carry those same pleasures into the new creation but make them better?

I believe the continuity between the old and new creations will not just be in the experience of creation but I personally believe the best of this creation will be brought forward into the new creation and it will be brought forward not to be used for sinful purposes but for Christ's glory. Someone who likes technology wonders if there will be computers in heaven. I personally believe there will be that kind of technology but it will be used for the glory of Christ. Will there be girls softball in heaven? Will there be football and wrestling in heaven? Why not? We also have an eternity to discover and enjoy games we haven't even dreamed of. Not only do I believe there will be technology, but I believe there will be creativity in heaven. Books will still be written. Paintings will still be painted, all to the glory of Christ. It will be continual creativity to the glory of God for eternity.

I love to learn something new about God each week, I know you do too. The more I learn, the more fascinated I become. Given eternity, will any of us exhaust all there is to know about God? No! God is an infinite being. There will always be something new to learn about God for all eternity. As eternity goes on, we will become increasingly fascinated with God.

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. Psalm 145:3 (ESV)

Continual growth in joy and pleasure.

You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. Psalm 16:11 (ESV)

God is the creator of pleasure and joy. He is the creative spring from which all pleasures and joys flow. The pleasures and joys of a marriage were created by God. The pleasures of our creation were designed by God. If you like pleasure and joy, imagine pressing your face into the source of all pleasure and joy as it radiates in the new creation from the presence of Jesus.

Remember, when Christ created the original creation, he created it good and full of pleasure, the new creation will be even better and filled with greater pleasures. Because heaven and earth will be united as one, we will be able to come before God and continually experience the cascading overflow of pleasure and joy that radiates from his presence.

Freedom from the results of sin.

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Revelation 21:4 (ESV)

Imagine the removal of all the destructive affects of sin in this world. No more broken legs, no more cancer, no more death, no more violence on the streets, no more nuclear weapons, no more poison ivy or venomous snakes.

It says he wipes away every tear from their eyes. The Greek here details that this is not a collective action but an individual action where God wipes away every individual tear that we have shed as a consequence of the devastation of sin upon our lives. What an incredibly caring God we have who will give us good things!

How does this apply to me?

Have hunger for the world to come.

But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. 2 Peter 3:13 (ESV)

For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. Galatians 5:5 (ESV)

To be honest, most of us are not looking forward to heaven. In some ways, I can understand that. The Bible doesn't give us a detailed fact sheet of life in the disembodied state when we go in the current heaven today. We know it will be amazing to be with Christ, but it is hard to conceive. It is hard to long for it.

If a young Christian's life is cut short, we feel terrible because there is so much in this life they didn't get a chance to experience. We believe that once we are dead, it is too late to enjoy the pleasures of creation. That is warped thinking. We are looking forward to the physical tangible pleasures that will be ours in the new creation. Those pleasures are similar to the pleasures of this creation but they are brought to a much higher level through Christ's restoring and improving power. If you miss a pleasure in this life, you haven't missed it, you have only postponed it till eternity when you can enjoy it in an even better way.

Some people talk about needing to hug their spouse one last time before they die because once they are gone, they will never experience the embrace of their spouse again. That is simply not true. Do you think we will live on a tangible earth with tangible bodies all of which are vastly improved but God will not let us hug our spouse who is our best friend? Of course not. I love a hug from my spouse now, it will be great to have a vastly improved hug from her then!

Another way we are blind to this is the language we sometimes use about our retirement years. We talk about needing to take trips and see the wonders of the world before it is too late to do this because we are old and sick. Understand me, I am not against anyone taking a special trip or going on vacation, but sometimes the language we use sounds like we are not hungering for our future in the new creation. Maybe even worse, have we forgotten we have a future in the new creation? This life is not all there is. There will be places to go and things to see in the new world that will be similar to but even more fascinating than God's creation in this world. We will have eternity to enjoy it without ever getting sick and old!

Live life now for the greatest joy in the next.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, 2 Peter 3:11 (ESV)

Peter says live a holy and godly life now because it will influence our experience in the next. While we are saved by faith in Christ alone, not by our works. What we do for Christ and the purity with which we live our lives for Christ will affect the richness of our experience in heaven. Too many people believe that once they have given their life to Christ they can live as they please because they have a get out of jail free card for eternity. To some degree that is true but how we live now still affects the richness of our experience of joy in Christ. The more we hunger for satisfaction in Christ now, the more we will experience it later.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:19–21 (ESV)

Another way to lay up greater joy for the next world is to give to God’s glory in this world. Last summer we studied this in our *Buried Treasure* series. What we sacrificially give to Christ’s work in this world is not lost. It is transferred and invested in the next.

Don’t let the Devil keep you from grasping your future.

Satan’s desire is to blind our eyes from what we have in Christ. He doesn’t want us to learn this truth. He doesn’t want us to know how much God loves us. He wants to keep us ignorant of God’s plans for us. If Satan can keep you from grasping the good things you have in Christ, he will succeed in keeping you in bondage to sin and keep glory from going to God.

He silences worship. The more we understand God’s incredible plans and love for us, the more we are drawn to worship Christ with a heart that overflows with thankfulness and love. Worship overflows out of a heart filled with thankfulness and we can feel it in our spirit as the Holy Spirit vibrates the very rightness of the words of worship in our hearts. If Satan can keep us ignorant of God’s love and plans for us, we will not be drawn to worship God, we will be drawn to worship something else. That is called idolatry.

He keeps us firm in the grip of sin. Sinful addiction are addictions to finding satisfaction in lesser things. If you are struggling with an addiction to the empty satisfaction of something like internet porn that thrills you for a moment but leaves you empty and filled with shame the next, you are in the grip of finding satisfaction in lesser things. Understand who Christ has redeemed you to be. Picture yourself fully forgiven through Christ because the creator himself died for your sin so you can sit at the feet of the one from whom all pure pleasures and joys flow. The pleasures of Christ are greater than the empty pleasures of sin,

like internet porn. When we discover the pleasure of who we are in Christ, we will be done with the pleasures of lesser things. Satan's grip in your life because of sin will be broken because you have a greater, God glorifying pleasure.

He steals the joy of sacrifice. We sacrifice now for joy later. If Satan can keep us from realizing the joy that is ours through Christ later, there is no incentive to sacrifice.

Conclusion

As we close, I want to leave you with the central thought of this message. God will not destroy this creation, he will redeem it. He will give us a new heavens and earth to live on that will be similar to this one but it will be changed to be vastly improved. This creation eagerly awaits the application of our redemption because when that happens, as a result of our full restoration, this creation will be freed from sin and vastly improved.

My friends, are you beginning to grasp the greatness of God's love for us through Christ?

Prayer

While the New Heavens and Earth will be an incredible place, the center of the New Creation's capital city is called the New Jerusalem from which God rules the New Earth. What will it be like and what joys await us in it? Join us next week to find out.

The New Jerusalem

Sign Title: **The New Jerusalem**

June 6, 2010

If you are new to Faith, I would like to welcome you. My name is Kurt and I am one of the pastors at Faith E Free. In the summer, most of us take time for a vacation. I am taking mine next week. My family will visit my parents in Philadelphia. When we travel, it seems every highway gas station and rest stop has a rack of these: Brochures. Here are some brochures from our area: Pirates Cove Golf Course, Dickinson County Museum, Dickinson County Recreational Trails and the Daze of Okoboji Guide to Summer Fun. These brochures are designed to get us excited about visiting fun opportunities in our area.

This summer at Faith we are studying heaven. Last week we looked at the new heavens and earth that God will create for us. We learned he will completely transform our current earth and totally renew it. He will purge our universe of all the results and effects of sin so our creation will be vastly improved.

God promises that one of the ways he will ramp up earth to make it even better is he will unite heaven and earth together. Imagine how cool it will be when heaven and earth become one! Last week we learned a lot of exciting details about this new creation. This morning, we are looking at the main attraction in this new creation which is the capital city, the New Jerusalem. This is where we will live. God wants us to get excited about living there. In Revelation 21 and 22 he gives us a travelers brochure to the New Jerusalem so we can begin to taste its beauty and imagine its amazing attractions. This morning turn to Revelation 21:9-22:5 where we find our travel guide. Before we look at the city, country folk like ourselves need to know why God is so passionate about a city.

Why a city?

I grew up in New Jersey, a bedroom community to New York City. When I think of a city, I don't have the most positive impressions. I think of traffic, high prices, crime, drugs, gangs, dirt, poverty, soup kitchens and homeless shelters. Like many of you, I enjoy fields of corn and soybeans more than the city. Why would God desire the main attraction of his new creation be a city?

Cities don't have to be bad. Cities are also places of where culture thrives, they are places of creativity, entertainment, nightlife, film, sports teams, and great restaurants. Cities can be great places to live, it is just that sin is what ruins the city.

God's dream is for a city with all of the positives of society without the negatives. In the Old Testament, God had a capital city called Jerusalem. It was to be the center of God's rule on earth. It was the place of the temple where

priests served and the place of the palace where the king reigned. They did their serving and ruling all under God's authority. They were his representatives on earth. Jerusalem was intended to be a great God honoring city. The earthly Jerusalem reached its high point under David and Solomon but the kings and priests of this Jerusalem betrayed their calling and became self serving rather than God serving. They were beset by sin as it twisted their leadership. As punishment, God allowed Jerusalem, the city that was the apple of his eye, to be destroyed three times because of the people's sin. There were hopes that Jerusalem would eventually return to become a beacon of God honoring culture but God's people failed again and again returning to sin.

Eventually even the Old Testament prophets stopped talking about the revival of a God honoring city on earth. While they stopped talking about a city like this on earth, they knew God's plans would not be thwarted, they began prophesying about a God honoring city in heaven called the New Jerusalem. The prophet Ezekiel and Isaiah first prophesied about this New Jerusalem in heaven. We see this same dream alive in the writers of the New Testament.

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, Hebrews 12:22 (ESV)

But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. Galatians 4:26 (ESV)

When the apostle John is given this vision in Revelation, God says there is indeed a heavenly Jerusalem that is prepared for us and that God will eventually bring it from heaven and place it on the new heavens and earth. So, I hate to tell us country folk that God is a city person but that is what the Bible tells us. The good news is this city is like nothing we have seen before. When we pick up the newspaper in eternity, there will be nothing but good news page after page, no death, no sickness, no crying and pain. We will be reading the newspaper getting pumped up for all the good things and the new things God is up to.

So let's take a look at the travel brochure for this incredible city called the New Jerusalem. We will look at it in three concentric rings, the city, the garden, the throne. As we look at it, realize we need to use our imaginations. John is describing something beyond description.

The City

God loves architecture.

And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. Revelation 21:10–11 (ESV)

The summer of my freshman year in high school, I traveled on a missions trip to Europe. While there I saw some great European cathedrals. Even though I was young, I found them amazing. They were huge, they had intricate details carved into the walls and ceilings. I can't even imagine how they built the place without power tools and a front end loader. These old cathedrals had design,

symmetry, beautiful stain glass windows, they are amazing and being in one leaves you with a sense of awe.

The reason we love beautiful architecture is because we are created in the image of God. God loves decor, lighting, he loves beauty, symmetry and creativity. God loves creative architecture. This is why we paint the walls in our home, this is why ladies want to wear nice clothes and the color of our car matters so much to us, because we are image bearers of God. God loves beauty and creativity and so do we. This is why we are repulsed by state subsidized housing where everything is a box, the walls are all white and there are only fluorescent light bulbs. We can't stand when beauty is destroyed because we are image bearers of God.

The New Jerusalem is the most stunningly beautiful, defying description city ever. It radiates God's glory like a huge light bulb. God loves beauty and architecture and here are both of them at their finest!

God loves meaningful architecture.

It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. Revelation 21:12–14 (ESV)

God didn't design this city randomly, everything about it has meaning, everything about the design preaches something about the designer and his plan. It is the city for the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament people of God, just looking at it tells us that. There is significance to everything in the New Jerusalem because everything there preaches something about God's plans, his goodness and his love for us.

God loves grand architecture.

And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel's measurement. Revelation 21:15–17 (ESV)

The city's exact dimensions are measured by an angel and reported to be 12,000 stadia, the equivalent of 1,400 miles in length, width and height. Even though these proportions may have symbolic importance, this doesn't mean they can't be literal. In fact, v.17 emphasizes the dimensions are given in *man's measurement*. If the city really has these dimensions it would be a metropolis

that would stretch from Canada to Mexico and from the Appalachian Mountains to the California border.

Even more astounding is the city's height, 1,400 miles. Some suggest the city may not be a cube but is a pyramid. Even if that is true, it is quite a large place. Nobody will feel crowded! The ground level of the city is nearly 2 million square miles. This is 40 times larger than England and 15,000 times larger than London. Remember, that is just ground level. If the city is also a 1,400 mile high cube and if each story is twelve feet high, that means it will have 600,000 levels. Now I realize it is possible these are figurative numbers, not literal dimensions. Either way, the place is huge and has plenty of space for believers of all time.

The Golden City in Revelation

The new Jerusalem in Revelation 21:9-27 is a square 12,000 stadia (approximately 1,380 miles) on each side.



God is into doing big things. He is not going to make us feel cramped for eternity like we are taking an eternal road trip in sub-compact car. Everything about the New Jerusalem displays God's greatness. Realize this is just the capital city, there is the rest of the renewed planet the capital city sits on that displays God's greatness.

God loves beautiful architecture.

The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass... And the city has no need

of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. Revelation 21:18–21, 23 (ESV)

While the city is clear as glass, it is still bursting with color. It looks like God went crazy with his jewelry box. Are there any ladies here who like precious stones? That's good, you are very biblical because God likes them too. Any ladies here who are into pearls? You are going to like heaven because the gates to this city are huge pearls. Guys, I just want to warn you, if the woman in your life starts pushing you to buy her a precious stone after this sermon just realize she is trying to be biblical and prepare for eternity.



What really makes the New Jerusalem incredible is not just picturing it with all these rocks that are clear as glass on the outside of the city but picturing the radiance of God shining through it from the inside. The city is like a super high intensity multicolored disco ball from a roller rink as God's glory shines right through it and shafts of multicolored light purge the new creation of any darkness. It is so intense that there is no need of a sun!

God is lavish, he is extravagant. Everything in this city is first rate, beautiful, glorious, the drywall wasn't made in China, the streets aren't going to crack like concrete, they are pure gold. Everything is first rate beauty.

The city has no temple.

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. Revelation 21:22 (ESV)

The temple is where we go to worship God. In heaven, we don't need to go to a temple to worship, we just go to God. Imagine telling your friends, "I am on my way to worship. I am going to go to the throne and cheer in front of Jesus for an hour.

Imagine what it will be like to pray in the new creation. You don't have to get down on your knees, you just go and see Jesus and say, "Hey Jesus, it is Kurt again, can I hang out with you for a bit, I want to talk about some stuff."

I am not making this stuff up. This is literally what it says in the Bible.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. 1 Corinthians 13:12 (ESV)

The city is secure.

By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. Revelation 21:24–27 (ESV)

In the ancient world the purpose of the gates were for the cities protection. The gates were shut at night to keep the creeps and thieves from slipping into the city and stealing the law ornaments and taking the rims off cars. The gates of the New Jerusalem are never shut because the city is totally secure. The city is like Juneau, Alaska where during a season of the year, the sun never goes down, except I am sure it will be a lot warmer. Personally, I am hoping we can wear shorts. There is no night there because the light comes from God's glory and that doesn't fade. God just radiates for eternity without losing a watt of brightness. He doesn't burn out after 600 hours like a light bulb. 24 hours a day we can go swimming, hiking, take a trip, see friends, go out for coffee. My daughter, who keeps on insisting she needs a night light finally won't need one!

In case you didn't realize, there will be more culture to the New Heavens and Earth than just this city. There will be nations that exist. They will bring their glory and honor into the city all the time. It is like China is making stuff and constantly shipping it to us but there is no trade deficit or unemployment. It is like everyone gets free iPhone 4's all to the glory of God. We don't know who will populate these nations, we just know they will be there.

We don't have to worry about any evil entering the city because at this point everyone who has rejected Christ and his renewing power is thrown into the lake of fire where Jesus punishes them day and night. Imagine what it will be like. A newspaper with nothing but good news to report throughout the city every day of the week. No more cops or Forensic files on TV. No more sleazy magazines and kinky internet popups, no sickness, no poverty, no evil, no death. It is the city that never sleeps but it is the place we want to be.

The Garden

Revelation next takes us from describing the city, to like a tightening ring on the target. We move from the city to looking at the garden in the center of the city. Has everyone planted their garden this year? We have a few tomato plants growing in our neighbors yard. I love gardens and flowers. God knows that in a city, we need a garden to refresh us. That is why they put central park in the center of Manhattan. They were just being biblical.

This garden is like the garden of Eden from Genesis but it is restored and vastly improved.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. Revelation 22:1-3 (ESV)

Center of the garden is the throne of God and the lamb, Jesus Christ. It seems this throne is the highest place in the city because from under the throne an enormous river explodes. Some of you who were hoping for beach front

property by the sea won't find it in heaven. While there is no sea, there will be a river. Anybody like the sound of rushing water? Babbling brooks? Of course you do, because you were created in the image of God. God made us to enjoy these kind of things. Just as water releases life now, we can picture the water of life invigorating life then.

Alongside the river that runs right down the middle of the garden in the center of the city are trees. What tree specifically? The Tree of Life. That tree was back in Genesis near the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If we had partaken of the Tree of Life after eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, we would have been stuck living in sin forever. God graciously kicked us out of the garden to keep us from this tree so we would die. It would be a real bummer to live forever in sin. But now, God has renewed and vastly improved the earth and us so we are free from sin. Eating from the Tree of Life and living forever sounds like a great idea.

Some of you say, "I don't like fruit." You will. This will be great fruit. You will eat your fruit and veggies to the glory of God. This is a special tree. It is like a fruit-of-the-month tree. One month apple, next month orange then cherry and banana. We don't have to get bored with this tree. Can't you see the Tree of Life wall calendar we will have.

The leaves are for the healing of the nations. What does that mean. I thought sin was obliterated at this point. I don't have a perfect answer on this one but here is what I think. The word for healing in the Greek is *therapia*. This is where we get our word therapy from. It means health and wellness. I think these leaves don't free the nations from sin but they help insure relational smoothness. This tree is like putting oil in your engine, the leaves makes the nations run smoothly.

The Throne.

Smack center of everything is the Father and Jesus, the son, the lamb who made this all possible. I told you before that Jesus is the center of everything and here he is in heaven, the very center of the city.

This past week we voted in a primary election. It seems every candidate telling us that they will clean up corruption, push back Washington insiders and make Iowa a great place to live. While we should vote for candidates we believe will bring the most glory to God, there is never a time when politics and society will run smoothly on planet earth until we get to the New Jerusalem when Jesus is in charge of everything.

Conclusion

After looking at the brochure of the New Jerusalem, what do you think? Does it sound like a pretty sweet place to live? It sounds like a great place to spend eternity, especially when you consider that the only other option is that we spend eternity packed up to our neck in roofing tar and burning sulfur in hell.

Unfortunately, most of the world will not be in the New Jerusalem. Unfortunately, some people in this room will not be there.

How can I go there?

But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. Revelation 21:27 (ESV)

Nothing False or Detestable - This is a pure city so any kind of impurity and sin will not be there. The problem is that if we are honest, that is true for all of us. We are unclean, we are false and not always true. We don't belong in the city. We belong in hell with boiling roofing tar for eternity. If that is true for all of us, how does anybody get into the New Jerusalem?

Lamb's Book of Life - The good news is that while we deserve hell, God loves us so much that he sent Jesus, his own son, to die for us. When we repent of our sin and ask Jesus' death on the cross to pay for our sin, our names are written in the Lamb's book of life. That is what brings us to the New Jerusalem for eternity. But there is still one more qualification beyond having Jesus as your savior.

Jesus the Center of Everything - In the city, the Father and the Son are the center of everything. The people that belong in the city are those who desire for Jesus to be the center of their lives. That is why they just fit into the New Jerusalem, where Jesus is the center of all things.

We are a church that wants everyone to know God loves them, we want everyone to repent of their sin, to trust in Christ for salvation and to place him at the center of everything in their life. We are a church that wants to populate the New Jerusalem. As I close, I am going to prayer and I invite you today to repent of your sin, ask Jesus to be your savior and invite him to be the center of all things in your heart. If you have never done that, I invite you to join me in that prayer in your heart today.

Prayer

One of the things we will do in heaven is eat and enjoy food to the glory of God. This morning, we are going to practice that. I invite you to stay for our BBQ ribs, chicken and pork lunch.

A Better Body

Sign Title: Anybody want a better body?

July 4, 2010

Anybody suffering from a crippling disease like MS, Diabetes, Parkinson's, Arthritis, Lupus or another auto-immune disorder? Anybody in a battle with a disease like heart disease or cancer? Anybody look in the mirror and wish they could shed a few pounds? Are there any ladies who are so satisfied with their appearance that they wouldn't dare wear cosmetics because they would only ruin your appearance? It looks like everyone has the same wish. We all wish we had a better body, especially as we get older and our body begins to break down.

I would like to thank you for coming to worship with us. If you are new, my name is Kurt and I am one of the pastors. This summer we are studying the Mysteries of Heaven and learning what God has in store for his children after they die. Earlier in this series we learned that while our body dies, our souls never cease to exist but they go to be with Christ, which the apostle Paul says, is better by far. Earlier in this series we learned God will not allow Satan to enjoy the victory of destroying this planet and our bodies. Revelation 21-22 tells us some incredibly good news. God will eventually remake and renew this planet so it is free from sin. When God remakes this creation it will be very similar to what it is like now but it will be vastly improved. We learned a principle. *Whatever God renews, he always improves.* Some day that will include this earth.

Just like God will renew the earth, some day he will also renew and vastly improve our bodies. We were created to be a body and a soul that exists as one. We were created to live on earth and bring glory to God in our work and life. For us to fully achieve the purpose God created us for, we need a new earth and a new body to live with on that new earth.

Since getting a new and improved body is something everyone is looking forward to, we are taking this morning to learn what our new bodies will be like. You are probably wondering how we can do that. God gives us a snapshot of what our resurrection bodies will be like by looking at Christ's body after his resurrection.

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. 1 John 3:2 (ESV)

Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. 1 Corinthians 15:49 (ESV)

This morning I am dividing the message into three parts. First, we will learn ways our new body will be similar to the one we have now, then we will learn ways our new body will be different. Then we will apply this to our life.

How will our bodies be similar?

Will we get a new body or a renewed old one?

How new will our new bodies be? What do you think? We all wrestle with these questions. We have an old car and the transmission blows. We have to make a decision. Do we buy a new car or fix the old one? Will we get a completely new body or an old one that was fixed? If people are buried in the grave it sounds reasonable to get the old body back through resurrection but what about people who were blown up in war or people who were eaten by sharks so parts of their body ended up all over the ocean? Doesn't it sound like it is stretching things a bit to think they will get their same bodies and DNA back? How can we determine the answer? Let's look at Christ's body, the prototype, for our answer.

See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." Luke 24:39 (ESV)

Jesus said,...

Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days... the temple he had spoken of was his body. John 2:19, 21

The Westminster Larger Catechism states.

The self-same bodies of the dead which were laid in the grave, being then again united to their souls forever, shall be raised up by the power of Christ.

Will our resurrection bodies be the same bodies we have today? Yes! How will God do this if our bodies were cremated, dismembered in war or digested by sharks? I don't know. But I do know that if the power of God raised Christ from the dead, it will be no trouble for God to regather the particles of our body that are scattered around the globe and reassemble them. God tells Ezekiel to preach to a valley of dry bones and God's word causes the bones to reassemble themselves and flesh to come on them resurrecting a vast army. What seems impossible for us, is not impossible for God.

Will we have our old memories?

How do we get our answer? Did Christ have his memory after his resurrection? If you look at how Christ interacted with Mary Magdalene, Thomas and Peter after he rose from the dead, we find he remembered everything about his earthly life with them. He picked up his relationships right where he left off. Why wouldn't this be the way it will be for us if we will be like him? Why wouldn't we have the same memories and relational histories? Why couldn't we pick up our relationships right where we left off?

Will we eat?

When we came home from vacation, our neighbors put in our refrigerator a serving bowl full of some kind of a cold tomato soup with cilantro. The taste was a unique combination of fresh salsa and cold soup. Manifique! One of the great pleasures in life is food. God designed food to be a pleasure to enjoy. I know this will stretch the imagination for some of us but in our new bodies, why

wouldn't we eat? Food, and the enjoyment of it, is a good part of this creation. Why wouldn't it be part of the next? Did Christ eat in his resurrected body? Yes!

In fact, John 21 tells us Jesus even cooked breakfast for his disciples! Luke tells us that one time when Jesus appeared to his disciples and they were so freaked out because he materialized right in front of them, to prove it was really him, not a ghost, he ate!

And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them. Luke 24:40–43 (ESV)

The Bible is emphatic, we will eat and drink in our resurrected bodies. The Bible goes out of its way to keep us from embracing the very misconceptions that so many of us have about eternity. We think eternity will be like Jacob Marley appearing to Ebenezer Scrooge. We think we will be like the ghosts of Christmas past. The Bible says that is absolutely not true. The new heavens and new earth are physical. We will partake in the very God glorifying pleasures on this earth that we enjoy. Eating is a big one of them.

Just to help you out a bit here, eternity is not about portion controlled, Lean Cuisine meals.

Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." Revelation 19:9 (ESV)

What do people do at a wedding supper? They eat, they talk, they celebrate and then they eat more. When it comes to wedding parties, we do a poor job of celebrating. In the Middle East, wedding parties lasted for a week. This is talking about the wedding supper of the Lamb. In that supper, we aren't the guests, we are the bride. We need to look forward to eating real food in the new heavens and earth and eating lots of it.

Will we gain weight? I don't think so, but that is just speculation. I suspect our metabolisms will be vastly improved so we can enjoy food and give thanks to God for it, not be incapacitated by it.

Will the food taste the same?

What is your favorite food? Spaghetti? Lasagna? What is your favorite dessert? There is some food that is so good we drool when we smell it cooking in the kitchen. So this is an important question, will my favorite food will be there? Will they have New York style pizza in the new creation? Well, yes, our favorite foods will be there, but I am sorry to tell you, they won't taste like they do on this earth. (*pause*) Whatever God remakes, he vastly improves. The taste of the food will be much better than it is now and our taste buds will also be new and vastly improved in our new and improved bodies.

This week, when you have a great meal, remind yourself that on the New Heaven and Earth you can have it all over again, but it will taste much better.

Best of all, I don't think we will have to worry about gaining weight on it. We can eat like we were teenagers again.

Will we still have our gender, identity and race?

According to what I read on the new heavens and new earth, some people think we will be neutered cherubs or pasty white apparitions. What do you think? Wrong! By the way, some people in the early church tried that. They were the Manichaeans. They were Christoplatonists who believed the flesh was evil and spirit was good. Thankfully they were quickly condemned as heretics because our flesh and gender is good, God created both of them. The Bible tells us that we will always have our gender, even in our resurrected bodies.

Did Jesus still have his gender when he rose from the dead? Of course!

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." John 20:15 (ESV)

It is not just *gender* that Christ retained, but it was his *identity*. Mary recognized him when she heard his voice. The times where Jesus wasn't recognized after his resurrection we find people were kept from recognizing him for a short period of time. We will not just retain our gender and our identity but we will retain our race. I don't know if you realize this but God created different races. He did it for his glory. God loves variety. He didn't create one race as superior and another as inferior, he made us different because God likes diversity.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, Revelation 7:9 (ESV)

How could John say that if he didn't recognize people of different races around the throne.

Will we be able to materialize where we want?

So far, in learning about our resurrection bodies, we are taking our cue from what Jesus was like in his resurrection body. One of the things Jesus could do is he had the Star Trek transporter room thing down pat because he could just show up places, even if the room was locked, he didn't have to knock.

And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. Luke 24:31 (ESV)

As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. Luke 24:36–37 (ESV)

Will we be able to teleport ourselves wherever and whenever we want? Many people think we will be able to do this. I am not sure. Christ's ability to appear any place may be a function of his deity, not his resurrected humanity. I

don't know for sure, we may still need to walk places. After all, why would the New Jerusalem have streets of gold if nobody needed a street?

I want you to realize there is a lot of stuff about our new bodies similar to our old bodies except they are played out to perfection. This is very important because without knowing this we can not have a hunger for heaven. All we know is earth and we love the earth and we love having our bodies. No earth and no body is not the way we were designed to be. We live for a perfect earth and body and that is what we will have.

How will our resurrection bodies be different?

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul gives us a list of ways our bodies will be different.

Our bodies will be immortal.

What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. 1 Corinthians 15:42 (ESV)

Our bodies are not designed to last forever. We are like a carton of milk, we have a "Best if used by" stamp because these bodies go rotten. While time will pass on the new heaven and earth, our bodies will not wear out with the passing of time. Remember, this is the way we were intended to be. Look at the Old Testament genealogies. It was not unusual to have people living 700 to 900 years. In fact, Adam only died shortly before Noah's father came on the scene. People were hanging around a long-time with sin on this earth, why wouldn't they be immortal if there was no sin on the earth and we can eat from the tree of life? So when God gives us a new body, he gives us a spiritual body, not a natural body and the spiritual body, while it looks just like this one and is composed of the same substance as this one, will not wear out like this one. So yes, we will get to be teenagers again.

We will be filled with power.

It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. 1 Corinthians 15:43 (ESV)

Paul's point is that when we die, we succumb to weakness. The older we get, the weaker we are. I can not lift the weight I used to lift. As I discovered this week, I can not jog the distance I used to run. I can't even stay awake long enough to watch David Letterman. My kids tuck me into bed and read me a story. The older we get, the weaker we become.

The great part about our resurrection bodies is they are filled with power. The word for power here is *dunamis* from where we get our word dynamite. *Dunamis* means achieving power, it means capability. Our new bodies will be pulsating with capability and energy. Do you like to write? You will have incredible writing abilities. Do you like to find joy in creating, in designing, in cooking. We will have tons of energy and the ability to do that. Much of our limitations come from fatigue or mental incapacity. That will be transformed so the defining characteristic of our body is not weakness but power.

We will radiate glory.

It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. 1 Corinthians 15:43 (ESV)

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body,...
Philippians 3:20–21 (ESV)

We established that Christ's resurrected body, before his ascension to heaven, was quite normal in appearance. But what did Christ's body become like after he ascended and he was glorified? Look what Jesus looked like when John saw him in heaven in Revelation.

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Revelation 1:12–18 (ESV)

What was Jesus like when he appeared to Paul?

"As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' Acts 22:6–8 (ESV)

When Jesus went to heaven, he was glorified and now he lets the glory of his divinity radiate through his humanity. While on earth after his resurrection, he still veiled his glory. As John says in Revelation 22:23, Jesus's glory is the very light of the new creation. Did you know that one way we will be different in our resurrection body is that it appears we will shine too? This shouldn't surprise us that those who are in Christ's presence will partake of his brightness. Hebrews 2 says that we will reign and rule in the new creation as little kings and queens under Christ. We may have a glow to our glory, just like Christ has a glow to His. Of course, the glow of our glory, as his adopted brothers and sister, will be much less than his.

Even if we don't glow in and of ourselves, it is possible that we may get charged up from being in Christ's presence like human glow-in-the-dark night sticks. That is what happened to Moses when he received the Ten Commandments from God on Mt. Sinai. Nobody needed a flashlight, they just asked Moses to come into the room.

What difference does this make?

I know some of you are saying, what difference does this make for me. I feel like I can win at a game of heavenly trivial pursuit but I need something that helps me today. Brothers and sisters, I am happy you are wondering how this applies. *(pause)* This changes everything!

The frailties of our earthly bodies build a desire for the health, power and vitality we will have in our resurrection bodies.

This week, when you feel the arthritis in your fingers or you feel the pain in your knees or the weakness in your back and the fatigue after work and you need new glasses because you can't see and you have to buy a hearing aide because you can't hear; say to yourself. I may be wearing out and getting old but because of Jesus, one day this self-same body will take on its resurrected form and it won't wear out, grow old and need pills, potions, cremes and injections. We will put the doctors out of business.

When sin threatens to destroy the physical pleasures we have in our earthly bodies, we have the promise of even greater physical pleasures in the new creation with our resurrection bodies.

Some day when the doctor diagnoses you with cancer or MS or Parkinsons or heart disease or an auto-immune disease or one of the millions of life-robbing physical-destroying diseases that Satan is giddy over because it ruins our bodies. You get to laugh at it. Pagans watch the movie "The Bucket List" and say they better get it all in before they die, brother and sister, we will get it all in after we die because we have a new creation and a new body to do it with.

If the Lord chooses to bring us to glory through a terminal disease or a car accident, do we grieve? Of course we grieve.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 1 Thessalonians 4:13 (ESV)

We grieve with hope! We are getting new bodies and a new earth where we can pick up our relationships right where we left off and we can live forever.

The joys experienced in this life bait our imagination for the even greater joys we will have in the next.

This week, when you are just bursting with joy at the taste of the food, the beauty of the lake, the wonder of the green fields and the blue sky and you just love God's creation. Remember, this isn't as good as it gets. It gets better. What we have now is sin tainted, rotting, dying and ruined compared to the wonder of the new creation and the increased capacity we will have to enjoy it. That is where we are going.

Anybody want a new body? Through Jesus, we have a new and improved one right around the corner.

Let's pray

Hell

Sign Title: Why Eternal, Conscious Punishment Is Not Enough

July 11, 2010

If you are new to Faith EFC, I would like to welcome you. My name is Kurt and I am one of the pastors. This morning we are talking about one of the most controversial topics in the Christian faith. It is a topic that many good Christians get wrong. It is a hard and sobering topic. It won't surprise me if some of you walk out this morning. It won't surprise me if this week I get nasty emails from people who just don't think what I am saying can possibly be true of our loving God.

While for some of us this will be very unsettling, for all of us, today is important because it will change the way we think about God, the world and those around us. Welcome to a sermon on hell.

In previous generations, the reality of hell and God's wrath was a common topic. Today, hell has all but disappeared from the scene and it is a topic that most preachers find too hot to handle. Even when we share the good news about Jesus Christ we don't talk about hell. People say, "Come to Christ, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." When people come to Christ and they don't win the lotto and their marriage struggles, they think we were lying about Jesus! When was the last time you heard, "Come to Christ, God loves you and if you reject him you will face judgment and eternal punishment for your sin." Nobody wants to say that anymore, but it is the truth!

When was the last time you heard an entire sermon on the unvarnished reality of hell? My guess is that today is your first one, so let's begin.

This morning, we are going to dive into this topic and look at it in five pieces.

Hell Defined

Hell - The place of eternal, conscious, just torment at the hand of Christ.

As I mentioned, many people struggle with this definition because it is difficult to reconcile this kind of hell with the loving God we hear about each week in the pulpit. God's love for us through Christ is something we need to hear but sometimes we fail to give a balanced picture of God. Just as real as God's love and mercy is his justice and wrath. If we were to pile up the passages that talk about God's love and make another pile of passages that talk about God's wrath, which one do you think would be bigger? I think it would be the pile that talks about God's wrath against sin. The Bible has a lot to say about this so we shouldn't ignore it.

While God's wrath and punishment against sin has a sense of rightness, the definition of hell seems to go way beyond fair. How can God justify eternally tormenting people for a few bad choices they made in a limited life of 80 years? What about the millions of good and kind people around the world who will be in

hell simply because they have not heard of Christ? That strains God's credibility. It looks like our loving God went off the deep end and is declaring capital punishment for minor traffic violations. It just doesn't make sense. Let's see if our definition can stand under pressure.

Hell Defended

Many modern theologians don't like our definition because it feels too harsh and unreasonable. They try to tone hell down and make hell a happier place to be. While I don't expect anyone to know the names of the theological minds behind this assaulting on the traditional understanding of hell, I know all of us are familiar with people who think these things. Maybe you even you have a wrong view of hell.

Universalism - Taking eternity out of hell

This is the belief that hell will not last forever and eventually everyone will arrive safely to heaven. They reason that since Christ died for all people, it logically follows that eventually, all will be saved. Even Satan will one day be happy in heaven. Universalists view hell as a kind of purgatory. It is a temporary place you go to pay for your sins. Once the guilt of our sins is purged we get a promotion to heaven. They believe everyone will eventually be in heaven, it is just some of us get there faster than others.

At first, this sounds good. It is the way many things work in this world, you rob a store, you spend 2 years in jail. Once that is paid for, you move on and are free. The problem is that while it sounds reasonable, it isn't what the Bible tells us is true. The Bible *always* describes hell as eternal, not temporary.

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Daniel 12:2 (ESV)

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels... And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'" Matthew 25:41, 46 (ESV)

And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. Matthew 12:32 (ESV)

Regarding the eventual salvation of the devil and the fallen angels, many of us know instinctively, from our study in the book of Hebrews, that Satan can not be saved. The devil and his angels fell and, as part of their fall, they were able to deceive Adam and Eve into sin and take the human race into the consequences of sin and death. Christ took on a human body to die for and redeem a portion of humanity. Christ didn't join himself with a demonic body to die and save demons, he died to save us. Satan and the demons will never be saved. They will be tormented eternally.

and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Revelation 20:10 (ESV)

So while thinking of hell as a place to burn off the guilt of our sin appears to make hell a little happier, according to the Bible, hell is permanent punishment, not temporary. While the universalists try to take the eternal out of hell, another group called the Annihilationists are trying to take the consciousness out of punishment.

Annihilationism - Taking the consciousness out of punishment.

This group says that while all will not be saved, nobody will exist in conscious torment forever. They believe God will resurrect the wicked to judge them; they are thrown into the lake of fire and there they will be consumed and cease to exist. The righteous through Christ will be granted eternal life, whereas everyone else is granted eternal death and annihilation from existence. It seems much fairer to punish people into annihilation rather than maintain them in a state of eternal torment.

The problem is, when you check what the Bible says, the option of a happier hell where people experience punishment into annihilation is not what Scripture teaches. There are a number of verses that clearly teach us those in hell are tormented but never destroyed.

he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." Revelation 14:10–11 (ESV)

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, 2 Thessalonians 1:9 (ESV)

The Greek word for *destruction* in 2 Thessalonians is not *annihilation* but *unavoidable stress and torment*. Notice, it is not just human beings who are tortured but not annihilated for eternity but it is the devil and his angels that are in the same position.

and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Revelation 20:10 (ESV)

It is clear! Not everyone will be saved. Some will experience eternal punishment in hell from which they will never be released and while they are tormented in the fires of hell, they will never be consumed.

While the eternalness and consciousness of hell doesn't feel fair, that is what the Bible teaches. To say anything else is to contort the text beyond the range of the greatest circus acrobats. I know this does not seem fair. While eternal, conscious punishment does not feel fair, that isn't the question. The real question we need to answer is, "Is it fair?" Is eternal, conscious punishment the right punishment for those who either reject Christ outright or die without knowing him?

From our perspective, everlasting punishment is disproportionate to the offenses we commit. God appears cruel and vindictive. We are told the purpose of punishment is always redemptive. Rehabilitation is the goal of prison sentences. A place of endless punishment without the possibility of parole doesn't seem fair. That is our perspective of the fairness of hell. While I can't answer all of your questions on the fairness of hell, I think if I can answer some of them if we look at hell from God's perspective.

Hell's punishments just response to our sinful choices.

In the beginning of this series we learned that after we die, those who have trusted Christ go to be with Christ. Those who die without Christ go to a place of torment called Hades. We learned this is not hell proper but is more like a holding place. At the end of time everyone will be resurrected and judged individually.

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. Revelation 20:12 (ESV)

No one is saved by works. Salvation is a gift of God that we cannot earn or deserve. BUT; for the unsaved, the way they live their life will be the basis for their final judgment. In other words, everyone will be rightly judged on the basis of what they did with what they knew about Christ and their built in sense of morality.

Those without specific knowledge about Christ will be judged by what they knew about God from the light of nature and their own consciences.

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. Romans 1:20 (ESV)

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. Romans 2:14–16 (ESV)

This does not mean anyone will be in heaven apart from trusting in Christ. The general revelation given to us through nature and our consciences is not enough to save us, it is only enough to condemn us. A personal knowledge of, and trust in, Christ is what is needed for salvation.

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:12 (ESV)

Whatever the degree of punishment people receive in hell, it will be a just response to the sins they have committed in their lives that they knew full well were wrong. The only people who will receive mercy and not justice on that final

day will be those who have trusted in Christ on the cross, who took the punishment they deserve to receive. Those who do not believe in Christ, either because they have not heard of him or they rejected him outright, will receive justice that fits the sins they committed.

Either way, God will be glorified, either for his undeserved mercy and grace toward us through Christ or as he delivers his fully deserved and perfect wrath upon those in hell, they will glorify him as they receive only what they deserve.

Lest you think hell won't be too bad for good people, think of how accurately and completely God's judgement will be. Every day and every thought of our lives will be analyzed in minute detail. The hidden thoughts and secret motives of each day will be accounted for. The words spoken in secret will be made public, the intentions of peoples heart's will be exposed. There will be no attorney to get people off the hook, no loopholes to escape the wheels of divine justice, just crystal clear, indisputable facts and justice.

The balance of justice will be so complete that every porno addict will wish he had never looked at even one sleazy web site. The thief will wish he had never stolen his friends pencil in 5th grade. The adulterer will wish she had never considered thoughts of another man outside of her marriage vows. Not having those initial thoughts wouldn't save them, but it would make their eternal existence in hell slightly more bearable because there would be less they will be eternally punished for.

Remember that before God, nothing will be misinterpreted. There is no such thing as an extenuating circumstance. There is just perfect and pure justice for sins. The more heinous the crime, the more heinous the punishment.

While the thought of anyone standing naked in body, mind, motives before God is unsettling, it is also comforting. We all watch Forensic Files and Unsolved Mysteries. We all read the newspapers that are littered with stories of rape, child abuse, murders, extortion and bribes. Rest assured! One day there will be no unsolved mysteries. Every sin will be justly repaid. Final justice will be served. No torment in hell will be considered cruel. Cruelty is giving people what they don't deserve. The torments of hell will be considered just. God will punish people with what they do deserve. The good moral upstanding citizen who dies without Christ will not be punished as severely as Hitler; but, they will both be punished.

Hell's punishments are not enough to atone for sin.

The reason why hell is eternal is because everyone apart from Christ is eternally guilty. Hear this carefully. *No amount of human suffering can ever pay the price for sin.* While eternal torment is deserved because of sin, that torment doesn't pay for sin. If any amount of our suffering could erase even the most insignificant sin, then those in hell would eventually be freed because their debt would be paid. All the goodness of humanity and the suffering of humanity if added together from the beginning of time until the end of time, can not pay the

price of so much as a single sin. That is why hell is eternal. While punishment is deserved, it doesn't pay the price for sin and relieve us from our guilt against an infinite God.

The sufferings of hell are eternal because the one we have sinned against is infinite. The only sacrifice that can atone for infinite guilt is one of infinite worth. The only sacrifice for sin of infinite worth is Jesus Christ. That is why he is the only sacrifice for sin.

Hell's punishments feel offensive because we don't understand the seriousness of our sin.

Jonathon Edwards said the reason we find hell so offensive is because we are insensitive to the filth of our sin. The seriousness of our sin is determined by the greatness of the one we sin against. Sin is rebellion against an infinite being that deserves an infinite penalty. We can argue with God and buck him all we want but we can not change who he is.

It is like a mouse trying to push back an earth mover or a row boat trying to cut off a battle ship. We can't change who God is and the seriousness of what our sin is against him.

Thankfully, God has other qualities besides his wrath. He is also full of love and mercy. He sent his son to die for our sins. He sent the only payment sufficient to atone for sin against God and that is a payment God himself supplied with His Son. That is what God did for us through Jesus Christ. As it says in Ephesians 2, even though we are *dead in our sin*, fully deserving punishment and judgment, *he made us alive through Christ Jesus*. Did we accept Christ as our savior? Yes and No. We chose Christ because God breathed spiritual life into our dead souls so we can see Christ for who he is and trust him. God gets all the glory, either for the fully deserved punishment people receive in hell or the undeserved mercy we have received through Christ who brings us to heaven.

Hell Described

What is the torment of hell like? To understand we need to understand that in Greek there are three different words that are frequently translated as hell in our English Bible.

- **Sheol or Hades** - For those of you who were here earlier in the series, you learned of a place called Sheol or Hades. This is where people without Christ go when they die. It is not hell proper, it is a temporary place of punishment before the final resurrection and judgment of the dead.
- **Tartus** - 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 give us another Greek word that is sometimes translated as hell in our Bibles. The Greek word is Tartus. Tartus is not hell. It is a temporary holding place of punishment where God has confined particularly evil angels until the final judgment.
- **Gehenna** - Gehenna is the Greek for Hell. Sometimes it is also referred to as the lake of fire. The word Gehenna in the Greek literally means, "The Valley of Hinnom." This valley is a physical location outside of Jerusalem that used to be

a place of pagan worship and human sacrifice. The Jews turned it into a huge garbage dump that stunk, was filled with rot and always had fires that were burning. It was a horrid place. When Jesus describes hell as

‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ Mark 9:48 (ESV)

He is literally making a reference to what it was like in the Valley of Hinnom where the worms and the fires literally do not die. In the Jewish mind and in the words of Jesus, that terrible place was foreshadowing the ultimate hell, the lake of fire.

Will there be literal fire in hell?

When we think of hell, we think of fire since Christ spoke of the “fires of hell” and in Revelation we read about, “the lake of fire.” Will hell really be fire? There is no reason it couldn’t be literal fire. Remember eventually everyone is resurrected and given indestructible bodies. We get indestructible bodies to live on the new heavens and earth, everyone else gets indestructible bodies to exist forever in hell. They could literally be constantly burning but never consumed. While I don’t want to downplay the torments of a literal eternal fire, that may not be the worst torment of hell. The worst torment may be Christ removing his restraining influence from sin in a persons life and letting their own sins torment them for eternity. The drug addict will be tormented for eternity, desperate for a fix. The porn addicts passions may be hotter than hell but they will never be fulfilled. The burden of guilt and shame for a wasted life will never be lifted. That may be a greater torment than the fires of hell.

Who is in charge of hell?

When we think about hell, we think of the devil with his pointy tail and pitchfork leading the tormenting. Is that true? Sorry, the devil and the demons are being tormented. They are not doing the tormenting. Who do you think is in charge of the torments of hell? Jesus and his angels.

he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. Revelation 14:10 (NIV)

Just as Jesus is the center of the New Creation, he is the king over the lake of fire. All things center on Jesus.

far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, Ephesians 1:21–22 (ESV)

You may remember from previous studies that rules, authorities, powers and dominions are rabbinic classifications for levels of angels. Christ is in charge over all angels, fallen and good, in this age and the age to come. Christ has all things under his feet. Christ is head over all things. He is even head over hell.

Will we be able to see people tormented in hell?

I do not know. In the Old Testament, God sometimes invited his people to watch the destruction of the wicked. We may be able to see the torments of hell. How can we be happy in heaven if we can see the torments of hell? I do not know. This strains the imagination, but in heaven we will see things from God's perspective and everyone, even those in hell, will acknowledge the eternal punishment they are receiving is nothing more and nothing less than they deserve. Those in hell will glorify Christ for giving them what they deserve. We will glorify God even more in heaven if we see what we deserve in hell but instead we are given dizzying levels of mercy and grace by our adoption to be Christ's brothers and sisters. Glory goes to God for his just wrath against sin. Glory goes to God for the greatest act of mercy and grace ever given.

Hell Applied

I know a number of you have your heads spinning. This is deep stuff. It is stuff we don't usually talk about but if we don't get this straight, we will walk with a spiritual limp. I invite you to hit the web this week, reread my manuscript and think this through. It will do you spiritual good. Before we leave this morning, let's talk about how we can apply this?

Change our thinking about what we deserve. Nobody is good and deserving of heaven but everyone is evil and deserving of hell. There is no such thing as a good person. As Romans 3 says, there is no one righteous, not even one. Until we get that straight our entire world view will be messed up. We will never understand why Christ is the only option, not one of many.

Let God take care of justice. One of the things we get bent out of shape with is we want justice after someone wrongs us. Our courts are filled with people taking others to task. I am not saying Christians should never go to court but I am saying we need to leave room for God's justice.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." Romans 12:19 (ESV)

Nobody gets away with anything. The unsolved crimes will be solved and the murders punished.

Tell people about Jesus. How can we save people from hell? Tell people about Jesus. Everyone is spiritually dead. The whole message of God loving us and Christ dying for us is foolishness to people. **But** it is the way God breaths spiritual life into dead souls. We save people from hell by telling them of the love God has for them through Jesus and God uses that knowledge about Jesus to light their spiritual fire. It may seem foolish, it may not be slick, but it is the means God uses to breath life into dead souls.

Let's pray

Eternal Rewards

Sign Title: How my earthly choices make an eternal difference

July 18, 2010

If you are new to Faith EFC, I would like to welcome you. My name is Kurt and I am one of the pastors. Last week we talked about Hell and the reality of eternal, conscious punishment of those who do not know Christ. The existence of Hell, as the Bible defines it, is probably the most controversial topic of our Christian faith because Hell is horrible. This week we move from the most controversial topic in our faith to what may be the most neglected topic, the doctrine of eternal rewards. Just like a watered down understanding of hell will hurt us, so will ignorance of the eternal rewards God offers us. What we learn this morning will change the way you live your life.

Let me introduce this topic to you with a little story. I went to a Christian college in Pennsylvania. While it is a Christian college, and many of the students know Christ, that didn't mean the temptations of being young and single were absent from the school. One acquaintance of mine was tired of the sexual restrictions our faith has and he decided to be sexually active with his girlfriend. He knew it was against God's desire for his life to be sexually active outside of marriage but he found a way to justify it in his mind. It would be OK, wasn't it God's job to forgive him anyway? What do you think? Could he sin without worry of consequences because God will always forgive?

Let's talk about something a little closer to home. What about the man or the woman who struggles with internet pornography? Statistics tells us a number of us in the room are struggling with that. Is it as simple as asking God to forgive us and walking away free from any consequences until days or weeks later when it happens again? Is our slate wiped clean by Christ so we don't have to worry about our sin tampering with our eternal destiny? After all, isn't it God's job to forgive us.

What about the Billy Grahams of this world who work hard for Christ? They sacrifice much of their lives for Christ and maybe even die for Christ. In eternity, how will they compare to the Christian couch potatoes? Will everyone's experience of heaven be the same? While we wish heaven's joy was the same for everyone, intrinsically something tells us it won't be. What will be the difference? That is the subject of our discussion this morning, the doctrine of eternal rewards.

We have misconceptions about final judgment.

In one sense, as Christians, our sins are forgiven and separated from us, otherwise we couldn't be in heaven.

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. John 5:24 (ESV)

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
Romans 8:1 (ESV)

Through Christ, we are forgiven for our sins. They are separated from us as far as the East is from the West (Psalm 103:12) but...

My life will not escape serious review.

I know this is hard to hear, but we need to rid our minds of the cherished hope that our failures will never return to haunt us. I am not talking about our failures and sins before we knew Christ. I am talking about our willful sins after we knew Christ. Even as Christians, our lives are seriously reviewed by God.

Remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira who lied about the price of a piece of property they sold? They wanted to keep some of the profit for themselves. While they could have kept whatever they wanted from the sale, it was a lie to say they gave all the money and appear more generous than they were. Were they Christians? Of course! That didn't mean their lives would escape a serious review. God struck them dead for their dishonesty.

King David, who committed the twin sins of adultery and murder, was judged for his sin even after he confessed it and was assured of God's forgiveness.

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child who is born to you shall die." 2 Samuel 12:13–14 (ESV)

If Ananias and Sapphira remind us God judges us for unconfessed sin, David reminds us that God judges us for sins that have been confessed and forgiven.

Paul reminds us that if God doesn't judge us for our willful sins on earth, even though we are forgiven Christians, he will judge us for our lives when we get to heaven.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. 2 Corinthians 5:10 (ESV)

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God;...So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. Romans 14:10, 12 (ESV)

While all Christians are forgiven through Christ, that doesn't mean God will not review our lives and reward us accordingly. We must not conclude that every Christian will do well when they stand before Christ. Many of us might stand before Him in shame as we understand the immense cost Christ paid for our sin and the wonder of the rewards offered to us that we will not receive because of our willful sin, even though it is forgiven sin.

Just as there are degrees of punishment in hell, there will be degrees of reward in heaven. What we do with our life for the fame of Christ now will have a ripple affect that will cross into eternity.

I am forgiven for my sins, but it still matters how I live.

The Bible is very clear there is only one way to be in heaven. It is faith in Christ that saves us.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV)

BUT, while the Bible is also clear we are not saved by our works, that does not mean we are not to work. The works we do after we come to Christ are special to God.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10 (ESV)

As Christians, we must remember that after coming to Christ, we are not saved to sit, we are saved to work. God gives to each of us gifts and talents to serve him. Using our gifts and talents for the fame of Christ is the work God calls us to do.

Hebrews 12 also reminds us that we are not just to work for Christ but sometimes God *tests* us. Sometimes God puts particularly stressful situations into our life to build our character and grow our reliance on him. Anyone been there before? If we pass the test well, he will give us greater responsibility for him on earth, but he also promises to reward us with greater responsibilities in heaven.

So while I am not saved by my works, I am still to work for Christ by serving him with my gifts and talents and passing the tests he puts us through with flying colors because we have a growing reliance on Jesus through them.

Rewards are a legitimate motivation for serving Christ.

Some will say we should serve God out of love for what he has done for us in Christ and for love alone. Personally, I agree, we should. The more we understand what Christ has done for us, the more we will want to serve Christ out of love. Amazingly, God doesn't want to motivate us with just a greater comprehension of his love. It is God's idea to also motivate us to serve him with the prospect of an eternal reward. Eternal rewards for how we live and how well we suffer are God's idea, not ours.

If you think of it, this really isn't a bad idea. God built us to be motivated by the prospect of a reward. Think of all the training and discipline that goes into getting a silly piece of plastic and wood for the Vince Lombardi trophy? How do businesses motivate their best salesmen? A trip to Hawaii, as a reward. If those are rewards that motivate people on earth, imagine the motivation that is ours when we look at the real trophy in heaven.

Motivating people with the prospect of an eternal reward is not something new. That is what motivated Moses.

choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. Hebrews 11:25–26 (ESV)

Jesus motivated people by the prospect of an eternal reward.

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great,... Luke 6:35 (ESV)

This life is a training ground for the real life in the next. As Christians, how we live our life now will be rewarded by Christ in the next life, either to our shame as we realize what we lost, or to our joy as we realize what we have gained. The person I am today is preparing me to be the person I will be for eternity.

What do eternal rewards look like?

We regain more than we lost.

Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. Matthew 19:28–29 (ESV)

The clear message is those who, for the sake of Christ, were deprived of the joy of their children or their homes or their families or they took a lower paying job, they will be repayed with much greater things than they left behind. Every sacrifice we make for Christ is truly not a sacrifice in the scheme of eternity. God promises to repay us.

We often think of missionaries as the great sacrificers. Look at all they give up for the sake of the gospel to live in a foreign land far away from those they know and love. A missionary is not someone who is boring and doesn’t like pleasure. A missionary is someone who is a pleasure addict and wants God to pay them back with greater pleasure.

We gain greater glory with Christ.

The Spirit himself bears witness to our spirit that we are God’s children. And if children, then heirs (namely, heirs of God and also fellow heirs with Christ) – if indeed we suffer with him so we may also be glorified with him. For I consider that our present sufferings cannot even be compared to the glory that will be revealed to us. Romans 8:16–18 (NET)

I used a different translation because it is hard to show what is happening in the text. It says that because we are God’s children, we are heirs with Christ. Because Christ suffered the supreme sacrifice of himself in obedience to the Father’s will, he was given the place of highest exaltation and glory in heaven, the right hand of God the father. He is so glorified that the light he emits in the new creation replaces the light of the sun. Paul says that as brothers and sisters

of Christ, if God puts us in a position where we have to suffer for Christ, remember that in eternity, the exact opposite will happen to us as our reward. The more we suffer with Christ, the more glorious we will be in heaven.

So when you find yourself suffering for Christ, take heart, the more we suffer for Christ, the greater the glory you will receive eternally.

We gain greater rulership with Christ.

And he said to him, 'Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities.' Luke 19:17 (ESV)

In this parable in Luke 19, the clear teaching is that those who were faithful with what God entrusted them with in this life will be rewarded with even greater responsibilities in the next life.

So what do we stand to gain at the Judgment Seat of God? We will regain all we have lost for Christ plus many times more, the more we have suffered for Christ, the greater the glory we will have and the more faithful we are with the money talents and resources God entrusts us with today, the more he will entrust us to rule over in eternity.

How can I squander my rewards?

The Bible doesn't just talk about the rewards we stand to gain in Christ, it talks about how we can lose them.

Failing to build with quality on the foundation of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul writes to the Corinthians about the new Christian teachers they have in town. Apparently they are doing a great job of drawing a crowd. They are entertaining fellas. Paul is concerned because while they are drawing a crowd, it doesn't look like they are maturing people in Christ. He warns that what a church or ministry is all about will be revealed by God.

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. 1 Corinthians 3:12–15 (ESV)

The quality of what we build with our lives for Christ will someday be revealed. The things that are ultimately worthless will be burned up and the things that are spiritually valuable will stand up. This is a great reminder for us in church leadership about the importance of what we preach and how we grow the church. We are trying to build a church that is passionate for Christ before we are trying to build a crowd.

I find this a very sobering thought.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. James 3:1 (ESV)

Want to make your judgment tougher at the judgment seat of Christ? Teach the church, lead a Faith University class or work with the youth group. The teachers of Christ's Word will be judged with greater strictness.

Willful sin squanders my reward.

knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. Colossians 3:24–25 (ESV)

Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Romans 2:3 (ESV)

Remember, my friend who was the college student involved in pre-marital sex? He was involved in sex because he wants joy and pleasure. God doesn't blame him for wanting pleasure and joy. The problem is that he was squandering the much greater joy and pleasure that God wants to give him as a reward for saying, "No." The reward to sexual purity is better than sex or it wouldn't be considered a reward! Think about that the next time you are tempted by sin. The reward for saying, "No" to the temptation is better than any pleasure the sin of the temptation can bring.

How can I gain more reward?

Joyful acceptance of persecution.

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:11–12 (ESV)

When we pay a price for following Christ, God notes it and promises to reward us for it in heaven. When you are at school and they laugh at you because you went to a "before school Bible study" or you are at work and you are denied a promotion because of your faith; accept it joyfully. Every time we suffer for Christ, rejoice knowing that God will reward us for suffering well for him.

This was the attitude of the disciples when they suffered. They were giving each other high-fives after they went through it.

Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. Acts 5:41 (ESV)

Financial generosity in the name of Christ.

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:19–21 (ESV)

God promises to reward us for our generosity towards him. The financial sacrifices we make toward Christ's kingdom and the fame of his name are never

lost, they are only relocated and returned to us at a much greater interest rate. The best investment going is God's kingdom. If you want to learn more about this, check the web-site out. I taught a whole series on this called, "Buried Treasure."

Practical care for those in need.

He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." Luke 14:12–14 (ESV)

When we help those in need, Christ will reward us by repaying us when we help people who can't repay us. What a great motivation for generosity towards those who are poor and weak. We don't get this. That is why there is not a sign up list we fight over to do nursing home and hospital visits. We don't realize God *promises* to reward us for those kind of things.

Joyful acceptance of the suffering God ordains.

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 1:6–7 (ESV)

At different times, all of us will suffer. For some of us, it will be physical suffering, like cancer. For others of us, it will be the unexpected loss of a job we love. For others, it could be a wound in our family through the rebellion of a spouse or a child. God ordains that we will suffer trials as Christians. The reason he allow trials is so the genuineness of our faith will be tested and therefore seen by others. When we are put in the vice and squeezed, what is really important to us on the inside shows up on the outside. Those who love Christ in the midst of suffering draw closer to him in those trials, for those whose faith is a charade, they will fall away from Christ when they suffer.

Now notice what Peter says will happen to those who suffer successfully for Christ. There will be praise, glory and honor when Christ comes. If we suffer well, it will add to our eternal reward.

Hearty work in my vocation.

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. Colossians 3:23–24 (ESV)

Did you realize that we can heap up eternal reward tomorrow on the job by simply standing out from the crowd and doing our best at work? How we work where we work goes towards our eternal reward. Half-baked work and half-done jobs will result in less eternal reward.

Every good thing I do goes towards my reward.

knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. Ephesians 6:8 (ESV)

Every good thing we do we will receive back from the Lord. Nothing will fail to be rewarded. Isn't this an incredible motivation? God desires to reward us! Live for the reward.

Squandered opportunities and willful sin, while forgiven, will result in a loss of reward. There will be decreased joy, and decreased rulership and decreased glory. The more passionately we follow Christ, the richer our reward will be.

When will I get my reward?

This is a good question. There are a number of different understandings on this. Some believe there are three times of judgment found in Scripture. A time of judgment for the nations, a judgment for Christians and a judgment for unbelievers. Myself, cut me some grace on this if you don't agree with me, I believe there is only one great final judgment before we enter our eternal state where believers will be rewarded. Those without Christ will be assigned to varying degrees of punishment in hell and those who are forgiven through Christ will be given varying rewards to enjoy for eternity on the New Heavens and Earth. Some of the Bible scholars here may disagree with me on this and that is OK.

...he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” Acts 17:30–31 (ESV)

Eventually we will discover who is right about when this judgment takes place. While the Bible is not crystal clear on the time believers receive their rewards, what it is crystal clear is that we will be rewarded and our rewards will be beyond what we imagined.

Conclusion

When we think of Jesus coming back for us, think of him coming with his rewards.

“Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. Revelation 22:12 (NIV)

Let's pray

Father, I know that some people here this morning are feeling pretty crummy. They didn't even know there were rewards you are wanting to give us. I pray for them, that from this day forward they would serve you with zeal knowing that you desire to richly reward them in eternity.

I know other people this morning didn't think their holiness would impact eternity. They didn't know that holiness now will be richly rewarded by you

forever. They didn't know that saying, "No" to the pleasures of sin now is guaranteed to be rewarded by even greater pleasures from you for eternity.

Others didn't realize the sheer joy of sacrifice. They didn't know that whatever they give up for Christ now will be richly repaid many times over by you in eternity.

Jesus, even though you don't have to offer us eternal rewards for our life and that it is motivation enough to serve you just for who you are and what you have done for us, thank you for offering to reward us and wanting to give us that reward.

We want this new understanding of your goodness and your rewards to change the way we live, not just today, but for the rest of our life. Amen

The Millennium

Sign Title: The Millennium - What on earth is it?

July 25, 2010

I would like to welcome you to Faith Evangelical Free Church. My name is Kurt and I am one of the pastors. This summer we are in a teaching series entitled, "The Mysteries of Heaven." In previous weeks we looked at some of the big pieces the Bible teaches about what happens after life.

- **New Heavens and New Earth** - We talked about the future existence of a new heaven and earth that are combined together so God's home is with man forever.
- **Hell** - We talked about the reality of real, conscious, eternal punishment for those who die apart from Christ called, "Hell."
- **Eternal Rewards** - We talked about how we don't just have Christ for eternity but in eternity God desires to reward us for how we live for Christ now.
- **Resurrection Bodies** - We looked at the reality of our resurrection bodies and that we will not be like *Casper the Friendly Ghost* but we will have real, tangible, perfect, eternal bodies

These are some of the clear, undisputed pieces about what happens after life. If you have built a puzzle, you know having the pieces is not the problem, it is fitting them together that is the challenge. What makes a puzzle especially difficult is when you think you have all the pieces and when you put them together you realize one is missing. This morning, we are going to put these big pieces of the end time puzzle together. Just so you don't think this will be easy, we will introduce you to a piece we are missing.

How do I put together the eternity puzzle?

At first, putting the pieces of the puzzle together looks easy. The Bible appears to tell us things will move along until they get really bad and then Christ will return. When he returns, everything happens at once. Everyone gets their indestructible bodies. Jesus judges people to give them either their eternal reward or their just punishment in hell. This earth is renewed. The new heavens and earth are ushered in and we go off into eternity to live happily-ever-after. At least those in heaven live happily-ever-after. There are many passages in the Bible that seem to teach this.

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Daniel 12:2 (ESV)
having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. Acts 24:15 (ESV)

Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of

life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. John 5:28–29 (ESV)

This is the simplest way to put these pieces together and it appears to be the most logical. This is a view called Amillennialism. Even though you can't spell it, write it down. Later, I will explain what it means.

Amillennialism



Amillennialism believes everything happens at one. It is neat, clean and pretty simple. The problem is there is a passage in Revelation that confuses what, at first, appears to be a very straightforward answer.

Revelation 20:1-6

It looks like there is another piece to our puzzle. The Bible says there will be a 1,000 year period before the new heavens and earth are created where this world will experience incredible peace and prosperity because Christ will reign over it and we will reign under Christ and with Christ in our resurrection bodies. This 1,000 year period is often called the Millennium. All millennium means is latin for thousand years. Mille means thousand, annum means years. This is a period on earth that, while not as great as the new heavens and earth, this earth will be much better than it is now. The earth will be much more like it was intended to be. Satan will be bound and will not be able to ruin people and the planet. At the end of the thousand years, Satan will be released. As you can imagine, after being bound for a thousand years, he is pretty fired up to make

trouble. He will gather together people on earth who have only outwardly submitted to Christ's rule to wage war on Christ and his followers. There will be a decisive battle. Satan will be defeated. Satan will be thrown into the Lake of Fire, the unbelievers will be raised, judged and thrown into the Lake of Fire along with him. Then the New Heavens and Earth will begin.

All of a sudden, instead of everything occurring at once, it looks like God is stretching things out a bit and messing up our neat, simple plans. The clearest teaching of a millennium period on earth with Christ in charge is Revelation 20:1-6. You have to know that since Revelation is an apocalyptic book of the Bible, it uses symbols and signs to get its meaning across so there is debate on what it means. Since Revelation is so hard to understand, understanding the millennium is difficult and it is a monkey wrench for Bible scholars. Some Christians don't know what to do with Revelation 20 so they ignore it and claim there will be no literal thousand year reign of Christ on earth. Other Christians built their whole understanding of the Bible around the millennium and Revelation 20. What should we do with this new piece that is given to us right before the end of Scripture? Will there be an earthly reign of Christ on this earth with his saints? Let's look at it.

While Revelation 20 is the only explicit teaching about a millennium, there are other passages of Scripture that hint at a two stage inauguration of Christ's kingdom instead of one.

But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 1 Corinthians 15:23–25 (ESV)

When Paul writes about the resurrection body, he divides the in-breaking of God's kingdom into three stages. First was Christ at his resurrection. Then when Christ returns, those who belong to him. Then comes the end when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule, authority and power. Remember, *rule, authority and power* is rabbinic language for the different ranks of angels. This is saying Jesus must reign until he conquers Satan and his posse and throws them into the Lake of Fire. So Paul breaks things into two stages, not one. There is the resurrection of believers first, then later in time there is a resurrection of unbelievers.

Not only are there hints of this in the New Testament, there are hints of this in the Old Testament. There are prophecies that need a much better earth to be fulfilled but they could not be fulfilled in the new heavens and the new earth.

No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed. Isaiah 65:20 (ESV)

In this prophecy, there is a time when people shall die 100 years old and be considered young. That can't be true of the new heavens and the new earth

because people will not die there, but today we die a lot younger than 100. This could only be true of a better earth, an intermediary kingdom.

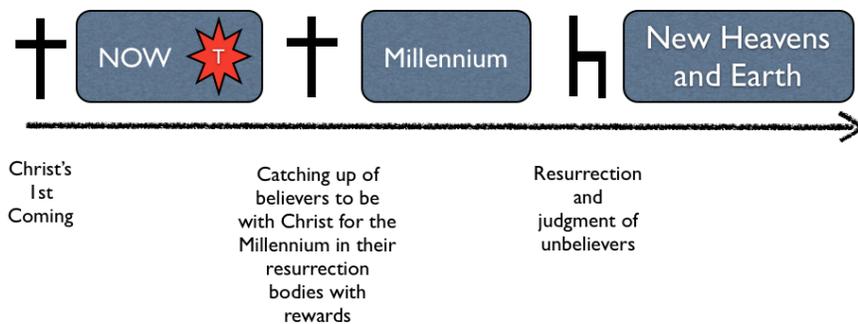
The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Isaiah 11:6–9 (ESV)

This talks about the peace that will exist in the animal kingdom. The Discovery Channel will have to re-film their whole “Planet Earth” series because the animals won’t kill each other any more! It is hard to picture this in the new heavens and the new earth because it talks about the nursing child playing over the hole of the cobra. In the New Heavens and Earth, there won’t be nursing children because people won’t be having kids. It says at this time *the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord*. It sounds like the intermediary kingdom where Christ is reigning on *this* earth.

So it looks like we have a new piece on the puzzle board. It doesn’t look like God will wrap everything up in one decisive moment but there will be an intermediary kingdom of Christ ruling for a thousand years on earth.

Historic Premillennialism

Historic Premillennialism



What makes this difficult for many people to swallow is there is only one explicit teaching on this kingdom and it is found in Revelation. That being said, that doesn't mean it is not true. The tower of Babel is only talked about once in Genesis. I don't see anybody claiming they don't believe it was true. There was a somewhat similar situation at the end of the Old Testament era. The entire Old Testament has no explicit teaching that Christ would come twice, once as a suffering servant who would die and rise again to earn our salvation and later as a conquering King. The first and second comings of Christ were only hinted at by the prophets. Christ's first coming as a suffering savior was only hinted at by God. It was only after he came when people looked back and realized how God put things together. If God chose to leave the manner of Christ's first coming a little obscure for us, why could he not choose to leave the manner of his second coming a little obscure.

While Revelation 20 has some things that are figurative in it, other things are clear.

The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.
Revelation 20:5–6 (ESV)

Apparently, there *are* two resurrections. The resurrection of God's kids who will reign with him for a millennium, and then a resurrection of everyone else.

What are we to do with the verses that appear to teach one great resurrection? Lets read them again carefully.

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Daniel 12:2 (ESV)
having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. Acts 24:15 (ESV)

Notice these verses technically say everyone will be resurrected. It doesn't say everyone will be resurrected *at the same time*.

Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. John 5:28–29 (ESV)

The same is true of this verse. At first it looks like it is talking about one hour and one resurrection but as we read the back end of the verse, it talks about two resurrections. One resurrection of life and one resurrection of judgment.

So let me recap. There are some Christians who believe there will be just one general resurrection at the end of time. They are called Amillennialists. That just means they believe in no literal millennium. There is another group of Christians that believe there will be two resurrections. One for God's kids when

Christ first returns and they will reign with Christ on planet earth for a thousand years and there will be another resurrection of unbelievers at the end of the millennial period. As God's kids, we will have our resurrection bodies and our rewards and we will rule with Christ and under Christ on this earth during the millennial kingdom, not just in the new heavens and earth.

Where are we at as a denomination on this issue? In the Free church, we are premillennialists. The reason our denomination believes in a literal millennium is that while it is not *as clearly* outlined in the Bible as many other things are; never-the-less, it is there. We want to conform our beliefs to the Bible, not conform the Bible to our beliefs.

Just so you don't think everything on this topic is too easy, you need to know, there is another option out there for premillennialists. Some premillennialists are historical premillennialists, like I just described, and others are Dispensational premillennialists. The most obvious difference between them is the answer to the question, "Will we be here for the great tribulation?"

Dispensational Premillennialists

What is the great tribulation and will we be there? The expression "great tribulation" comes from Matthew 24:21.

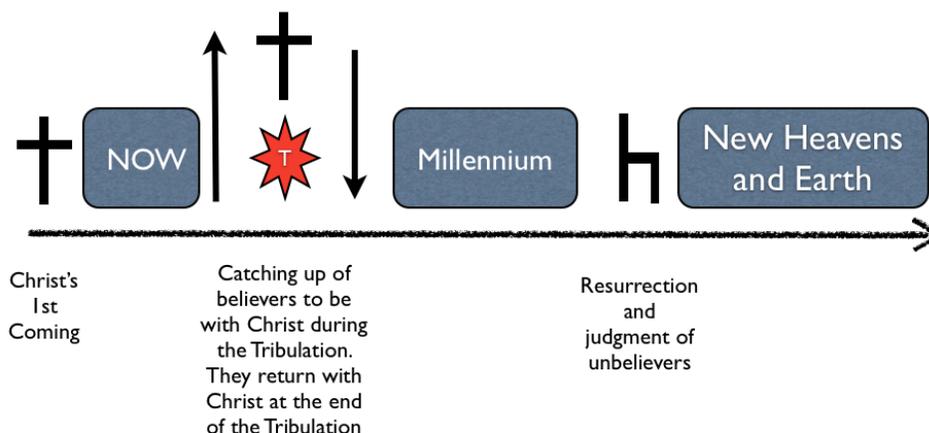
For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. Matthew 24:21 (ESV)

Everyone believes Christ will return *after* the tribulation.

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. Matthew 24:29–30 (ESV)

But in the 1800's, a variety of premillennialism developed that held to an additional return of Christ which they believed would happen before the tribulation to take the church out of the world. John Darby was the man began this belief. He was a prolific writer who wrote 41 books and when he died fifteen-hundred congregations followed his teachings. He did a great job for the gospel in the United Kingdom and ultimately in America. One of his followers was a man named Scofield who wrote the Scofield reference Bible which sold over 3 million copies. The notes in the Scofield Bible explain Darby's views on how the end times will unfold. Another follower was Charles Ryrie who wrote the Ryrie reference Bible. For those of you who are younger, you may have read the "Left Behind" Series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. They are also followers of Darby's dispensational version of premillennialism. Scofield, Ryrie and Lindsey had a huge influence on American Christianity and through their writing cast the majority of Christians views on how the end-times will unfold.

Dispensational Premillennialism



The main difference between Dispensational premillennialism and Historic premillennialism is that dispensational premillennialism believes there will be a secret return of Christ, just before the great tribulation to remove Christians from the earth called which they call, “The Rapture”. As far as I can tell, this secret rapture is not found in the Bible. Why do they believe it is there? They believe that because Christians are not objects of God’s wrath and the time of the tribulation will be a time of God pouring out his wrath, we as Christians will not experience it.

Now for those of you who hold this position, cut me slack, go easy on me and hear me through. We learned in Hebrews 12 that while, as Christians, we are not objects of God’s wrath, that doesn’t mean we are exempt from suffering. Many times God puts us through suffering to discipline us, to purify us and to mature us. Search the Scriptures, I cannot find anything that tells us there will be a secret rapture of the church to take Christians out of the world before the tribulation. Matthew 24 is pretty clear we will be here for it. The passages Scofield and Ryrie use to support a secret rapture do not say it directly. It is inferred.

I also believe that behind the argument of a pretribulation rapture is a desire to preserve a distinction between God’s plan for Israel and the church. Old School dispensational theology believes God has two plans. One for the church and one for Israel. They believe parts of our Bible refer to the church and we should listen to those, other parts refer to Israel and we can ignore those. While not every dispensationalist believes this, that is true of traditional

dispensationalists. Traditional dispensationalism believes the church will be taken up into heaven to be with Christ during the tribulation and Israel will endure the tribulation before they enter the millennial kingdom.

I don't see in Scripture that God has a completely separate plan for national Israel and the church. Romans 11 tells us God is not done with national Israel but God doesn't give us many details of what he is up to with national Israel. I believe Scripture tells us there is one people of God through Christ, both Jews and Gentiles, not two separate people with separate plans.

One of the verses used to support a secret rapture before the tribulation is 1 Thessalonians 4:17, but read it in context and it is hard to find a secret rapture of Christians.

For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 (ESV)

If this is supposed to be a secret rapture where nobody but the saints know what is going on when everyone wakes up one morning and a quarter of the planet is gone, I find it hard to believe it is secret. It says that when Christ returns for believers there will be a cry of command, the voice of an archangel and the trumpet of God. This doesn't sound quiet to me! It seems this talks about Christ returning at the end of the tribulation to set up his kingdom in the millennium.

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 1 Corinthians 15:51–52 (ESV)

Here we have the last trumpet. That is a loud thing, not a secret thing and this is when we are raised. It looks like a pretty loud and significant event when Christ returns for us and sets up his millennial kingdom after the rapture, not before. Notice that it says when Christ returns it is the last trumpet. It is hard to believe there will be another trumpet seven years later after this.

Now I realize some of you hold to this view. As I said earlier, please cut me grace on this one. There is much more that could be said.

You are probably wondering, which view do I hold? I am a historic premillennialist though I have learned to be pretty humble about it. I read very widely for this message and thought very deeply. I have a great deal of respect for all the positions I mentioned. There is much more to this discussion than you know. What concerns me most on this subject is Christians who hold any of these positions with an arrogance that causes them to look down on the other positions. If you take time to think seriously and read widely on this subject you will see that none of these views on how the pieces of the end-times puzzle fit

together is air tight. There is a measure to this whole topic where God leaves a sense of mystery to exactly how things will unfold. If you want to dive in and learn more about this topic here are a few books I suggest you read.

- [Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond](#) by Darrell Bock
- [The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views](#) by Robert Clouse
- [The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options](#) by Stanley Grenz

What do I need to remember?

Have humility - The pieces are clear, the way the pieces come together is not as clear. The millennium piece of reigning with Christ on earth is not as clear as the others, but it is there. Be humble about this.

Christ IS coming again - Nobody argues about this. No matter what you think on these issues, it is clear we end up in the new creation with Christ.

Keep the millennium in perspective - While I am not downing the millennium because it will be a great thing to reign and rule with Christ on planet earth for what may be a literal thousand years, that being said, it is nothing compared to being with Christ for eternity in the new heavens and earth. The Millennium is only an appetizer, the New Creation is the main meal. As I studied this topic, it seems to me there is a disproportionate amount of thought and writing which has gone into the Millennium and not nearly enough into the New Heavens and Earth. That is why we started with the new heavens and earth in this series. That is very clear and that is where we are going.

How we live now will determine our real life then - This life is not real life. It is only the life that determines how we will really live. The reward we receive for how we live in this life will be given to us in the Millennium, not just for eternity in the new creation.

Those who can't believe
Sign Title: **What about those who can't believe?**

August 1, 2010

Welcome to Faith Evangelical Free Church. My name is Kurt and I am one of the pastors. This summer we are in a series called, "The Mysteries of Heaven." We are learning what happens to people after they die. For the last few weeks we looked at what the Bible says are the big things we need to know about life after death. We looked at the new creation, the new bodies we will receive, the reality of hell and the incentive of eternal reward for Christians in heaven. Those messages were the foundation we will build the rest of this series upon. If you missed those messages, I encourage you to go on our web site at www.faithefree.com to review them.

Today, we are making a decisive shift. We are moving from understanding the realities of eternity to answering the real-life questions you have about eternity. For the last two weeks I circulated a "Build your own sermon" response card. I wanted to know the real-life questions you have about heaven.

First, I want to thank you for the great thought you put into those questions. As a pastor, you gave me many good questions. In the next few weeks, I look forward to answering many of them. Some of the most common questions you gave me revolve around the question of those who *can't* believe. What happens to them? Look over my shoulder and let me show you some of those questions.

- For those who have never heard the message of Jesus Christ, how does it work if they never even had a chance? Will they go to hell for eternity just because of where they lived? - *What about those who can't believe because they never heard?*
- What about aborted babies or miscarriages? What about the severely mentally handicapped - *What about those who can't believe because they never became old enough to hear the message and believe?*
- Is the age of accountability such that, for example, 11 years, 3 months, 25 days and 56.67892 seconds. Before that they went to heaven. After that they go to hell? - *(That is my favorite question in the bunch.) Is there an age of accountability?*

Today we will answer these questions: What about those who never heard? What about those who can't hear? When is someone old enough to hear?

What about those who never heard?

Before we answer this question, we need to make sure we are all on the same page about real issues in life.

The Universal Problem is Sin.

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, Romans 3:23 (ESV)

The Bible is absolutely clear that the human problem is not the difference between the middle class and the upper class. It is not the political party of the man in the White House. The problem is not what we have or even what we don't have. The real problem for every human being is sin. Every one of us is in rebellion against God. Rather than honoring God, we worship ourselves. This is the problem in every culture, in every period of history and in every place from the Bahamas to Alaska. There was never an aboriginal people on the Discovery Channel where they needed teaching on how to lie or how to steal. Everyone is built that way. The universal problem of sin gives everyone the same feeling; separation from God.

but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. Isaiah 59:2 (ESV)

This is why everyone gropes for God and people everywhere worship some kind of a God but they do not know him. He is distant. Our sinfulness separates us from God. Even as Christians we know this experience. Has anyone willfully sinned against God and afterwards felt like your prayers never went higher than the ceiling? (You don't have to raise your hand on this one.) You felt your sin separating you from God. As Christians that doesn't mean God disowns us when we sin but the joy that is part of our relationship with God is stifled as we can feel the disappointment of our heavenly father. It is time and repentance that allows that experience of God's joy to return. So understand, the universal problem is sin and sin brings separation from God.

The Universal Solution is Jesus.

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 1 Timothy 2:5 (ESV)

The Scriptures are clear. There is no other way to God other than through his son. Jesus died as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin.

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12 (ESV)

Jesus is the exclusive solution for sin in America, in Mozambique, in Croatia, in Latvia, in Iraq and in Sudan. There is one problem for mankind and one solution for all men. The Bible reminds us that Christ is the source of salvation for all cultures and all people.

And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth." Revelation 5:9–10 (ESV)

Heaven will not be filled with white anglo-saxons. God loves diversity and the greater the diversity in heaven, the more glory that goes to Jesus. The Scriptures tell us sin is the universal problem and that faith in Christ for our sins is the universal solution. Those are the important foundation stones for us to build on but as we are focusing on those who haven't heard about Jesus. Since they never heard about Jesus, how can they reject Jesus?

Everyone knowingly and willingly sins against God.

The Bible is clear that God *justly* condemns everyone for their sin. Even if they have not heard about Jesus, because *everyone knows God exists from the light of nature and their own consciences*, yet they choose to rebel against him anyway, they are justly condemned. According to god, atheists don't exist.

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. Romans 1:20 (ESV)

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. Romans 2:14–16 (ESV)

What everyone knows about God from nature and from the light of their own consciences *is enough to condemn them eternally*. Everyone knows right and wrong but chooses to sin. This is why unreached people in the jungles of the Amazon are still guilty of sin. They knew of God through nature and they knew of right and wrong through their consciences, but they chose to violate their consciences and sin. They may not understand the depth of their sinfulness apart from the Bible but they know the reality of their sinfulness so they are justly condemned before God as deserving of eternal separation from God's beauty and holiness.

Apart from Christ, everyone will be justly punished in Hell.

Behind our question about those who haven't heard is really a question about the justice of God. How can God justly condemn anyone to hell simply because they never had a chance to trust in Jesus? Lest you run amuck, remember the justice of God is what demands eternal separation from God in the first place.

Something else we learned in our study of Hell in previous weeks is very important here. We don't need to worry about God being unfair. God is all about fairness. Even in hell God is just and fair. There are degrees of punishment in hell. Hell is God's just response to man's willfully chosen sinful choices.

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead

were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.
Revelation 20:12 (ESV)

The murdering power mongers of this world like Hitler and Osama-bin Laden will be punished in hell with a greater intensity than the good, moral citizen who never knew Christ but tried to live as a role model for good in their society. The Bible is clear that the choices we make in this life impact our eternity. Those who dive to deeper depths in earth depravities will be justly reflected in greater degrees of torment for eternity in hell.

If you want to know what is unfair, that is heaven. Nobody will be in heaven apart from getting what they don't deserve. Hell is about people getting what they deserve, heaven is getting what we don't deserve.

Can anyone be saved without literally hearing the Gospel?

I answered this question in a message I delivered in the fall called, "[Christ - The Focus of All Saving Faith](#)." If you want a more extensive answer to this question, I encourage you to hop onto the www.christ2Rculture.com web site to read this message. This morning, I will just recap a portion of it.

I want to start with a story given to us in Acts 10 and 11 about a Gentile centurion in the Roman army named Cornelius. This is how the Bible describes him.

a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. Acts 10:2

Without question, Cornelius was one top notch religious guy. Was Cornelius on his way to heaven or on his way to hell? Even though Cornelius was a great religious guy, he was on his way to Hell. Why do I say that? Read the text of the Bible and it tells you that Cornelius was not in a saving relationship with God.

If we go to Acts 11, Peter summarizes what a supernatural visitation from an angel told Cornelius to do.

And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' Acts 11:13-14 (ESV)

Now, here is the question. Was good, moral Cornelius saved before hearing of God's grace through Jesus? No! I think Luke is emphasizing this. No matter how morally good people are, *it is not enough to save them*. God's sole chosen means to save people is through the verbal witness of the mouths of his people. God may work supernaturally to get his people together with others who need to hear, but it is always a witness from the mouths of his people that God uses to spark faith in the lives of others. People do not just wake up one day and discover they are a Christian through osmosis.

So is God in the business of saving people apart from sending people to tell others about Jesus? Absolutely not.

You say this isn't fair. I beg to differ. God is totally fair. Remember that everyone will be judged fairly on the basis of what they have done before they enter hell so the punishment of hell is fair for their sin. With Christ, God moves beyond fair to merciful and gracious and instead of giving us what we deserve, *he gives us what we don't deserve* and the way God has chosen to extend his grace is exclusively through the witness of his people.

Paul is also adamant about this in Romans as he hits us with a series of rhetorical questions.

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” Romans 10:13–15 (ESV)

First, “*How can they call upon him whom they have not believed?*” This rules out the argument that people can call upon Christ without believing in Christ. In other words, people have to believe in Christ so they can call upon him.

Second, “*And how are they to believe in him whom they have never heard?*” This shows us that the only way to believe in Christ is to hear about Christ. This rules out the argument that a person might have saving faith without knowing or trusting in Christ.

Third, “*How are they to hear without a preacher?*” This reminds us that the only way to hear about Christ is if someone tells them about Christ.

This is why missions is such a big deal. Our missions team is not just a group of people who write checks but our missions team is strategizing how we can bring the gospel to places it has never been heard before.

Our friends and neighbors can not be saved unless someone tells them about Jesus. God wants to use our mouths to do it. There is no other way shown to us in Scripture.

What about those who can't hear?

This is a very difficult and sensitive topic. Anyone who has attended the funeral of a child knows the incredible depth of grief that is laid upon the heart of a parent. I have walked with parents down that dark corridor at a child's funeral and it is much more somber than the death of someone in their nineties. What happens to children when they die? How can they be responsible for rejecting a Christ they never heard or they were too young to understand?

All infants are sinful. (inductive)

Maybe some of you are following the exchange taking place in the paper over infant baptism. Two churches are fighting each other on this. What amazed me is that one church said infants do not need to be baptized because infants are innocent, not sinful. I don't know about you but nature itself has proven that one wrong. Just wait till a child can talk and what is the first word out of their mouth? "No!" In fact, if it wasn't that they were so small, they would be quite dangerous!



It is not just experience that proves infants are sinful but the Bible also tells us this.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Psalm 51:5 (ESV)

This is not saying the Psalmist's mother was a prostitute. It is saying that even from the moment of conception, he was sinful. So the Bible says children are born with a sinful nature, even when we look at them in the crib and we change their first diaper, their nature is sinful, not pure.

The Bible doesn't just say children are sinful explicitly but the Bible reminds us of the sinfulness of children implicitly. The only reason people die is a result of sin. If a child dies, it is because they are sinful. Look how Paul makes the argument that death is evidence for sinfulness.

...But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam,... Romans 5:13–14 (NIV)

If salvation is by faith in Christ alone, which, according to the Scripture, is something we must hear about to believe in, and infants do not have the capacity to hear and understand, it looks like no infants will be in heaven because they can not have faith in Christ and be saved.

All children are sinful.

But before we draw that conclusion, let's dig a little deeper. There are some passages of Scripture that lead us to believe *some* infants were saved even before they were born.

God can save infants before birth. (Inductive)

Speaking about John the Baptist it says:

he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. Luke 1:15 (ESV)

In the gospel of Luke, “being filled with the Spirit” is something Luke only ascribes in his gospel to those who have spiritual life. Luke leads us to believe John the Baptist was saved even before he was born.

Hundreds of years before John the Baptist, David wrote

Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother’s breasts. On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother’s womb you have been my God. Psalm 22:9–10 (ESV)

Evidently, David had a saving faith in God even from his mother’s womb. These verses make it very unlikely that all infants who die are lost. If John the Baptist and David appear to be saved in infancy, could not God save others in infancy? From what we have seen we cannot claim God saves *every* infant who dies but that God can and some evidence leads us to believe he does draw some infants to him while they are yet in the womb. This is not because of the goodness of the child but it can only be by the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

God can save infants before birth.

There is still one more piece of evidence we need to bring to the table as we unravel this puzzle.

Inability to reject God through nature and conscience appears to make a difference.

Everyone is sinful from conception and how we live matters in the final judgment. Infants who die, while born in sin, have not had a chance to live in sin and reject God through creation and conscience. Remember what we learned earlier in Romans 1:20

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. Romans 1:20 (ESV)

In other words: if an individual does not have access to the revelation of God’s glory through nature and the capacity to understand right and wrong, Paul *implies* that in their judgment before God, *they have a type of excuse*. Paul’s point is that even though we are under the penalty of everlasting judgment because of the fall of Adam and our sinful nature, nevertheless *the Scriptures hint that God only executes this judgment on those who have the capacity to see his glory and understand his will*.

The Scriptures do not shout this loudly, they imply softly that those who did not have a chance to reject God through nature and conscience are saved as a special act of God’s mercy through Christ. I think God in God’s wisdom does not state this explicitly because man in his sinfulness would use this as justification for abortion. This is why there are no specific chapters and verses that say this. Yet for those who look more deeply and try to press into feeling God’s character, we see scraps of evidence in Scripture that lead us to believe God extends

special grace through Christ to those who never become old enough to reject him through nature and conscience.

God hints at special goodness towards those who could not reject him in nature.

The example of David's two sons.

One example where we can see this is King David's reaction to the death of two of his children. When Absalom died after living as a murderer of his own brother and rebelling against father and planning to murder him, look how David reacted.

And the king was deeply moved and went up to the chamber over the gate and wept. And as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" 2 Samuel 18:33 (ESV)

David had incredible grief for the son that was the black sheep night-mare of the family. But look at how David reacted to the death of his infant child.

He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." 2 Samuel 12:22-23 (ESV)

David was confident he would be with God for eternity *and his infant son would be with him*. Let me emphasize this again. The Bible *hints* that those who die without the ability to reject God through nature or conscience will be in heaven. That isn't because they are innocent but that God in his mercy chooses to save them through Christ. This is not explicitly stated but there are bits of evidence that lead us this way.

Remember even our ability to understand the gospel as adults is a special act of God's mercy to us through Christ. Apart from God making us spiritually alive, we can hear God's Word preached all day and it will be foolishness to us. When God, in a special act of mercy toward us through Christ sparks spiritual life, God's word is no longer foolishness but it is the fuel God uses to keep the spiritual fire in our hearts burning hot.

In my research I ran across a quote by Charles Spurgeon that I think really puts this together well.

It is not that God chooses someone to salvation because they are going to die in infancy. Rather, He has ordained that only those who have been chosen for salvation will be allowed to die in infancy. God's justice in condemnation will be most clearly seen by allowing those who will not be saved to demonstrate their inherent sinfulness through willful, knowing transgression.

In other words, those who are not chosen by God for salvation are allowed to live, and demonstrate their rejection of God.

This helps us answer our final questions about the age of accountability.

When is someone old enough to hear?

The age of accountability is different for everyone. Accountability comes when we know what is right and we willfully choose what is wrong.

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin. James 4:17 (ESV)

Can we pin-point an exact moment for this? Of course not! I think this is a mystery that is best left in God's court to answer. We must remember that in all God's judgments, he is fair, and sometimes he is merciful and gracious. He never punishes anyone more than they deserve.

Conclusion

What should we walk away with today?

Those who die apart from Christ perish no matter where they live. They perish justly. Eternal condemnation is what everyone deserves. Yes, there will be varying degrees of punishment in hell but it is still eternal condemnation.

The proclamation of the gospel is the only means God uses to bring people into saving faith. Can God use dreams and visions to save people? God can use dreams, visions and even angelic visitations as part of the salvation process. He did that with Cornelius. Remember, it wasn't the dream or vision that saved Cornelius. God sent an angelic visitation to guide Cornelius to Peter so he could hear the gospel and be saved. I don't see Scriptural precedence for God using other Christians without someone sharing the gospel message with them.

The Scriptures *hints* that those who die in infancy are saved. The argument for this is more implicit than explicit. It appears that God, in his incredible goodness, chooses to save those who die in infancy. Those whom God has not chosen to save, he allowed to mature and demonstrate their sinfulness. I am not going to die on this one because the Scriptures, are not definitive on this. We just have to trust in God's goodness and his character.

Overcoming Grief

Sign Title: Overcoming Grief - Comfort For Those Left Behind

August 8, 2010

On November 8th, 1994, Scott Willis and his wife, Janet, were traveling with six of their nine children on Highway I-94 near Milwaukee when a piece of metal fell from the truck ahead of them. Scott had no choice but to let the object pass under his vehicle. The result was the rear gas tank exploded on their mini-van and five of the six children with them died instantly in the flames. The sixth child, Benjamin, died a few hours later.

Scott and Janet sustained burns but they were able to escape from the vehicle. Standing on the side of the road, watching their children die in the raging inferno, Scott said to Janet, "*This is the moment for which we are prepared.*" What a strange reaction to the death of their children. As Christians, what held their soul in that dark hour? Today we will find the answer.

This summer, we are in a series called, "The Mysteries of Heaven." We are learning what the Bible says about life after death. Today, we are taking a slight deviation from our series. Rather than learning more about what happens to us after we die, we are focusing on helping those left behind. As I look back on my twenty years as a pastor, the death of a child or a spouse leaves some of the most hurtful wounds I have seen in those left behind. Some people can not go on. Where can we find some measure of rest for grieving hearts? Where is comfort found for those left behind?

To find an answer, let's think a little more about what happened to the Willis family. Most people believe what happened to them was a tragic accident. I don't want to come across insensitive but, according to the Bible, is that true? Was the death of six of the Willis children purely an accident that was out of God's control?

This may upset some of us, but I am going to say it anyway. What we call an accident, according to the Bible, is nothing less than a well planned act of God.

Think of all the events that had to converge for the Willis' tragedy.

- If only they had started their trip one minute earlier, or one minute later.
- If only the truck was at a different location on the expressway.
- If only the piece of metal had fallen moments before or moments later.
- If only the metal tumbled into the ditch rather than lodging itself between the gas tank and road at just the right time.

All of us have our list of "if onlys."

- If only we had called the doctor sooner, she wouldn't have died of cancer.

- If only the road department had salted that part of the highway, she wouldn't have slid off the road.
- If only she had noticed the lump sooner.
- If only they had operated sooner, if only they hadn't operated.

I want you to know that God is bigger than our mistakes. God is bigger than our oversights. God was not taken by surprise when a piece of steel fell randomly from a truck on the expressway. We must remember that events that are completely out of our control are firmly in His control.

We have the word *accident* in our vocabulary, God doesn't. Seemingly random accidents, ill health, or even death at the hand of an enemy - are all means God uses to bring his children home to him. God entrusts *his* children to *his* care. *God's children can only die according to God's timetable.* Nothing can happen to God's children unless God ordains it to happen, that includes death.

This morning, I want to give you two things you can rest in when you are faced with the death of someone you love that will give us a measure of comfort as we try to overcome grief. I just explained to you the first point. When someone we love dies, we need to rest in God's providence.

Rest in the Providence of God.

God's children die at just the right time.

To explain what it means to rest in God's providence when someone we love dies, let's look at the death of Jesus.

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. John 13:1 (ESV)

This was the hour into which was compacted the agony of Gethsemane, the betrayal of Judas and his excruciating death on the cross. Interestingly, we read before this that while others wanted Jesus out of the picture, they could do nothing to him because *his hour had not yet come.*

So they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come. John 7:30 (ESV)

These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come. John 8:20 (ESV)

Here is the what I want us to notice. *Until his hour came, Christ's enemies were powerless against him.* Jesus came to earth at the hour appointed by his father, he would return to heaven at the hour appointed by his father. Nothing could make Jesus die sooner than God planned. Jesus was bullet proof until the father decided it was the hour to bring him home. If Jesus was bullet-proof until the father decided it was time for him to come home, why wouldn't we, as Christ's brothers and sisters, also be bullet-proof until the hour when God says it is time for us to come home?

Even in the process of his death, John 19:33 tells us Jesus died more quickly than most. He died at the exact hour the Passover lamb was sacrificed. He died right on schedule because he was the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world.

This does not mean we all get to go and eat high cholesterol food because a plugged artery may be the means God uses to bring us home to him but we know that no accident or scheme of man can destroy us until God decides it is time for us to come home to him.

God's children die when their work is complete.

Jesus died young at the age of thirty-three. I always wondered why he died young. If I was in charge of planning his life, why not fifty-three? He could have spent more years healing and maybe we would have more in our gospels to learn about Jesus. No doubt, people living in the ancient world wondered why Christ died when he did. Why did Jesus die at a young age?

I think the answer is that Christ died after he completed the work His heavenly father gave him to accomplish.

I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.
John 17:4 (ESV)

I don't think this is just true about Christ, I believe this is true of us as Christians. We are here to accomplish the work God gave us to do. We may think we have until age eighty-three to do that work but God's plan may be that we bring it to completion at the age of thirty-three and then he will take us home. God may say our work is done, long before we are old and frail.

Some of God's best servants died at an early age but they died when they were finished with their work. They couldn't have died a moment before. Keith Green didn't die young, he died when he was finished with his work. Rich Mullens didn't die young, he died when God decided he was finished with his work. No matter how tragic or senseless the death of a Christian appears to us, we need to know that Satan did not frustrate the mission God planned for them to accomplish.

Knowing this provides a measure of peace to the widow who unexpectedly loses her husband 6 months after he retires. It provides peace to the mother who loses her teenage daughter in a traffic accident. Our plans and desires are that they would live much longer. It is good to have those plans and desires, we just need to realize that God's purpose for their life might be completed long before ours and when their life is completed, God's plans were not frustrated.

This seems especially hard to imagine with the death of a child. It seems like a mockery of life itself when a young boy or girl dies before they have experienced the joy of accomplishment. It is like putting a period before a sentence is written. A child's short life can fulfill the will of God. Though we do not understand it, that little one has "finished the work God has given him (or her) to do."

April 20, 1999 two high school students walked into Columbine High and murdered twelve students and one teacher, cutting them down in the prime of their life. Two of the students killed that day were Cassie Bernell and Rachel Scott, both followers of Christ. While I don't want to lessen the pain or the tragedy of their death, we need to know that nothing could happen to them that day if their life's work was not complete and God hadn't decided to call them home. Let me say it again. Satan can not derail the mission God gives his children to complete.

God's children cannot be derailed by Satan's schemes.

Of course, this does not release Dylan Klebold or Eric Harris from the responsibility of their actions. Before God they will be held responsible for their actions and as we learned in previous weeks, their experience of hell will be justly harsher as murderers. God allowed their murderous actions to accomplish the will he had for Cassie and Rachel. Neither Eric, Dylan nor Satan thwarted the plans and work God had for Cassie and Rachel's life, God only used Eric and Dylan's murderous intentions to complete the plan.

This reminds me of the book of Job. Job went through all kinds of agonies and tortures but Satan needed to ask God's permission to touch Job. Nothing happened to Job that God did not ordain. That isn't just true of sickness and pain but it is also true about death.

It is the same thing with the death of Christ. God used the murderous desires of the religious leaders in Christ's day to complete his plans, not to thwart them.

They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Acts 4:28 (NIV)

If Christ's could only be murdered according to God's plan and according to God's time, why should we think that a believer who is gunned down in a murder, or dies when only a few days old or dies in a nursing home at a ripe old age, is any less under the care of God. No evil tragedy can keep God from accomplishing the work he has given us to do through our lives.

The one who knows the number of hairs on our head and sees the sparrow fall has the destiny of every one of our days in His loving hands.

Our death is just as meticulously planned as the death of Christ. God even uses the plans of evil men, who think they succeed in the destruction of God's children, for his glory, just like he did with Christ, his son. That doesn't mean God releases evil men from the guilt of their murderous heart but that God's purposes are never frustrated, even when his saints face death.

This is incredibly important. It is the only way to release us from the false guilt and dark remorse that hangs over our head. If only I had not sent my child to school that day. If only they had studied the night before so they didn't need to study in the library over lunch. If only we had never moved. According to God, everything occurs within the circle of God's divine providence.

The immediate cause of death may be any of a number of things but the ultimate cause of death is God. Just as he gives life, he has the right to take it away. He ascribes to us the plan our lives are to fulfill and he has the right to take us home once the plan is accomplished. We can trust in him.

God's children die in the right way.

It is not just the time of death that is ordained by God, so is the means of death. Christ told Peter how he would die

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.” John 21:18–19 (ESV)

Church tradition tells us that in old age, Peter was tied to a cross, had his hands stretched out and he was crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to die in the same way as Christ. Can anyone deny that Christ chose the way Peter was to die?

Most likely, our death will not be by crucifixion but we know that the way we die will be God's choice. It is his choice for how we will glorify him. Christ reminds us, we are not to fear the way we die, the real fear is what happens after we die.

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Matthew 10:28 (ESV)

Knowing the tragedy of death is not out of God's control and that God will use it to accomplish his purpose through our lives brings a measure of comfort in the face of grief. But it is not just the power of God's control that comforts us, it is the disposition of his heart.

Rest in the Goodness of God.

The problem with resting in God's providence is it feels like God is evil or uncaring when we are lost in the darkness of those painful hours. We need to also rest in something that doesn't feel true, but we know is true, God's goodness.

When George Mueller spoke at his wife's funeral, he gave a simple three point sermon from Psalm 119:68.

You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees. Psalm 119:68 (NIV)

These were the three points of his sermon.

- God was good in giving her to me.
- God was good in letting me have her as long as he did.
- God was good in taking her from me.

I want you to notice something. He didn't start from his emotions or even his circumstances. Both of those change every day. He started from something he knew would never change, the goodness of God. Even when we don't see it, in times of darkness and despair, we know it is still true.

This is one of the great mistakes we make. We think God is good if we have a lot of money in the bank. We think God is good if we have an Escalade in the driveway. We think God is good if we have a perfect marriage or if our children are getting straight A's in school and playing on a varsity sport. We say God is good when all is good. What happens when things change? What happens when your daughter's face is smashed through a windshield in a head on collision with a drunk driver? What happens when you come home and your spouse tells you she has a terminal disease? What happens when you are fired and go month after month looking for a job. Can you still say, "God is good?"

The goodness of God doesn't change. He loves us, he sent his son to die for us. Even when tragedy unfolds around us and evil raises its flag of victory in our lives, God is good, his love for us is sure. Our circumstances may have changed, but God hasn't. Everything can change, but there is one thing that doesn't change. God is good. He loves us.

Conclusion

At the age of twenty-six, Lina Berg was accompanying her father aboard a ship across Lake Vattern in Sweden on route to the city of Gothenburg. The ship gave an unexpected lurch when it was hit by a rogue wave and Lina's dearly loved father, a devout Christian, fell overboard and drowned in front of her eyes. From her broken heart she wrote a song many of us have sung. I want to read the lines of her song. As I read, I want you to listen for how she sought to rest her heart in the two things we talked about today, God's providence and his goodness.

Day by day with each passing moment,
Strength I find to meet my trials here;
Trusting in my Father's wise bestowment, (*providence*)
I've no cause for worry or for fear. (*providence*)

He whose heart is kind beyond all measure (*goodness*)
Gives unto each day what He deems best - (*goodness*)
Lovingly, its part of pain and pleasure, (*goodness*)
Mingling toil with peace and rest.

Every day the Lord Himself is near me
With a special mercy for each hour; (*goodness*)
All my cares he fain would bear, and cheer me,
He whose name is Counselor and Pow'r.

The protection of His child and treasure (*providence*)
Is a charge that on Himself He laid; (*providence*)

“As thy days, your strength shall be in measure,”
This the pledge to me He made.

Remarkably, Lina had confidence that the death of her father, which many would simply ascribe to an accident on a wind-blown ship was a carefully planned act of God. Her father’s work was done and that was God’s chosen method of calling him home.

Questions About Heaven

Sign Title: Your Questions About Heaven

August 15, 2010

I want to welcome you to Faith Evangelical Free Church. My name is Kurt. I am one of the pastors. Hebrews 6 says teachings about life after death and eternal judgment are some of the basics of our Christian faith. Unfortunately, many Christians know little about either one of these. This summer we set out to change that with our teaching series, "The Mysteries of Heaven." If you were here for earlier messages in the series, you know we adopt a no-holds-barred approach to what the Bible says about the realities of Heaven and Hell. Our goal is to keep our finger in the text and let God talk through His word.

While I have tried to keep the cookies on the bottom shelf throughout this series, I know that some of the messages could be considered challenging. As we enter August, and the series winds down, we are taking a little more interactive approach. Earlier in the series I circulated a "Build Your Own Sermon" card. I wanted to know questions you had about life after death that we had not answered. You gave me some great questions. For the next two weeks I will be answering many of them. I think you will like this so let's jump in.

What is Purgatory?

The Roman Catholic church teaches about place of punishment after death called purgatory. The Protestant church doesn't teach it. Where did purgatory come from? The doctrine developed during the Middle Ages and was cemented into the official teachings of the Catholic Church during the reformation when the reformers protested its teaching because it wasn't found in the Bible. At the council of Trent, which culminated in 1563, the Catholic church declared the existence of purgatory an official teaching of the Catholic church and those who reject the doctrine of purgatory were accursed.

What is purgatory? The Catholic church teaches that those who die at peace with the church, but who are not yet perfect, (which is everyone) must undergo a time of purifying suffering before entering heaven. Because some sins are more grievous than others, the length of time and the degree of punishment people experience in purgatory varies with each person. The Catholic church teaches that gifts to the church (Isn't that convenient!), prayers by priests, masses offered in memory of relatives or friends can shorten or eliminate time in purgatory. Of course, the pope has a "get out of purgatory free card" which he can use at any time. I don't know why he doesn't use it for everyone and just eliminate all that pain and suffering but that is beyond the scope of this message.

There is an interesting story about purgatory that took place in the middle ages. It involved a man named Johann Tetzel who went around the country side selling something called *indulgences*. These are the rough equivalent of "get out of purgatory free passes" for dead relatives. It was his way of raising money for

a church building project. He had a little catch phrase he used to snooker people out of their cash and it went like this, “As soon as a coin in the coffer rings; the soul from purgatory springs.” Pretty catchy!

The question to ask about purgatory is, “Does the Bible say anything about it?” and for Tetzel “Does the Bible say you can buy your way out of it?” The answer is a resounding, “No!” Not one verse in the Bible supports teaching purgatory. The only supportive text is found in the Apocrypha, which are some extra books the Catholic church added to the Bible!

The apocryphal passage the Catholic church uses to support purgatory is 2 Maccabees 12:43-45. In the context, Judas Maccabaeus leads his Jewish army against an enemy army. A few of the Jewish soldiers were killed in the conflict. As Judas’ troops recover the bodies for burial they discover that each of the dead men concealed a small idol under his tunic. Judas believes that is the reason they lost their lives. In what looks like a noble gesture, Judas urges some of his soldiers to take an offering to Jerusalem and offer a sacrifice for their sin. The passage concludes with these words.

This is why he had this atonement sacrifice offered for the dead, so that they might be released from their sins.” 2 Maccabees 12:45 (NJB)

There are two serious problems. First, the book of Maccabees is not accepted as Scripture. It is only accepted in the Catholic church as Scripture and then only 1,500 years after the Bible was established. That makes it very shaky ground on which to establish such a major doctrine. Secondly, even if Maccabees was Scripture, the men killed in the battle were guilty of idolatry, which in Catholic theology is a mortal sin and sends people directly to hell, not purgatory.

Another obvious problem is the very concept of purgatory completely denies everything the Bible teaches about what Christ did for us.

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. Hebrews 7:25 (ESV)

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 1 John 1:7 (ESV)

Purgatory doesn’t purify, Christ’s blood purifies what we could never do with our own efforts.

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, 1 Peter 3:18 (NIV)

We don’t have to work off our sins to get to God; Christ’s death tore down the wall that separates us from the Father.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
Romans 8:1 (ESV)

No condemnation! No charge of accusation! Christ paid for all of our sin. The belief in purgatory arose when leaders in the Roman Catholic Church couldn't grasp the greatness of salvation itself. I think I feel a song coming on. Let me tell you the words. *Jesus paid it ALL. All to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain. He washed it white as snow!* Thank goodness there is no purgatory!

What is Soul Sleep?

If you've had a discussion with the Jehovah's Witnesses or Seventh-day Adventists, you have probably been exposed to the concept of soul-sleep. The argument supporting soul-sleep goes like this: *A human being is a unity; the body and soul together make a person. Therefore, if the body ceases to function so does the soul.* Those who believe in soul-sleep believe that after death the body and soul sleep together until they are awakened at the resurrection when people are either welcomed to eternal glory or they face the judgment of hell. At first glance, this feels like it makes sense.

One of the places Jehovah's Witnesses buttress soul sleep from in the Bible is Ecclesiastes.

For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing... Ecclesiastes 9:5 (ESV)

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going. Ecclesiastes 9:10 (ESV)

How are we to answer these verses? The answer comes when you *read these verses in context.* Context is the key for understanding. Solomon, the writer of Ecclesiastes says the book of Ecclesiastes is about everything he "*observed*"... "*under the sun.*" The book of Ecclesiastes is what Solomon observed happens to people and it is written from that perspective. Dead people no longer function on earth. They do no work or planning. *That doesn't mean their spirit's cease to function.* In fact, the book of Ecclesiastes closes with these words.

and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Ecclesiastes 12:7 (ESV)

The book of Ecclesiastes says the spirit returns to God at death, it doesn't say the spirit sleeps in the ground with the body.

Some solid Christians have embraced beliefs similar to soul-sleep. They believe we are simply dead until Christ returns and wakes us up at the resurrection. Because we have no consciousness during that time, it *seems like* we are immediately in Christ's presence when we die. There are some verses they use to bolster that belief. One of them is 1 Corinthians 15:51.

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 1 Corinthians 15:51 (ESV)

How are we to think about this? First, remember that *context is king*. We learn what things mean by reading them in their context. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is arguing with people who believed there was no bodily resurrection. Paul is adamant that God does not intend us to be wandering spirits but we will eventually get our self-same bodies back as honest-to-goodness resurrection bodies, just as Christ has a resurrection body, so will we when Christ returns. Paul was saying nothing about the spirit being asleep but only the body being in the grave. In other parts of the Bible, Paul says very clearly that *our souls do not sleep in the ground*.

Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 2 Corinthians 5:8 (ESV)

I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. Philippians 1:23 (ESV)

After the moment of death, we are very much awake. Either we are with Christ because of our trust in him, which secures the forgiveness of our sin, or we are in Hades, in torment, awaiting our final judgment and consignment to hell. Our souls never sleep. After death, we won't need a pillow.

Does it matter if I am cremated or buried?

What do you think the answer is? "No!" That is right. Ultimately, it doesn't matter. If you want my opinion, I counsel people toward burial rather than cremation because of what it says about the body. Our bodies are precious and they are going to be raised from the dead. I know our dead bodies decompose. I know in a hundred years buried bodies will be just as much dirt as cremated bodies. We're talking about the symbolic significance of a body stretched out in a coffin, looked at, and then laid to rest in burial. It is a horrible thought to think of a wife or child or father being incinerated in the flames.

The idea of burning a body feels out of sync with the high value God places on our body. God created us to live as a body and soul together. Death and the separation of the soul from the body is a consequence of sin. God promises he's going to push back the affects of sin and resurrect our bodies and re-unite our souls to them. There will be a continuity between what we are now and the resurrection body we will receive when Christ returns. The Bible says our resurrection body will be the self-same body we have now but restored and vastly improved.

We don't want to symbolically destroy the body. We want to symbolically put the body to rest while it waits for the resurrection. There is interesting history in the early church over this issue. Roman society practiced cremation as a means of disposing of the dead. The early church placed a high value on the body because our bodies will be resurrected, just as Christ's body. Cremation symbolically pictured hell, not resurrection and restoration. As a desire to honor

the body, early Christians followed the Jewish custom of burial rather than cremation. Since Christians were generally poor, they couldn't buy large portions of real estate for graveyards. In an effort to conserve land, rather than bury the dead just below the surface of the ground, the Christians dug deep making burial chambers. The catacombs were created!

The idea of honoring the body and burying it as if it was sleeping has its roots in Scripture.

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Daniel 12:2 (ESV)

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 1 Corinthians 15:51 (ESV)

So the picture in the New Testament is the dead are asleep in the ground while their spirits are with Christ. When Christ returns our self-same bodies will be resurrected from the dead and transformed into our glorious bodies and reunited with our spirit.

I have probably overstated my case and made anyone who had a loved one cremated feel guilty. That was not my intention. Let's go back where we started. It is not ultimately an issue that matters. God can resurrect a body if it is cremated or if it is buried. It is a matter of symbolism. It is a way of communicating the ultra-cool reality of the real bodily resurrection through Christ. We will be in the new heavens and earth eternally in our resurrected and glorified body. That is the good news the Bible wants us to use our funerals to proclaim; forgiveness and resurrection through Jesus!

How can I desire heaven when I know I won't be married to my wife there?

I understand this question. I have thought about it myself. There are times when affections for Cindy are so strong that the thought of not being married to her in heaven is actually painful. I can't imagine happiness in heaven without being married to her. But the Bible is clear, we will not be married in heaven.

And Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, Luke 20:34–35 (ESV)

How are we to imagine happiness in heaven without marriage to the spouse we love? The Bible tells us that the delights of our marriage are just appetizers of a much greater intimacy that will exist between us and Christ in heaven. The intimacy and delight we find so pleasing in marital happiness is to whet our appetite for the much greater intimacy and joy that will exist between us and Christ for eternity. You are wondering where I am getting this from. The Bible, of course! Look how Paul summarizes his teachings on marriage in Ephesians 5.

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. Ephesians 5:31–32 (ESV)

Of course that does not mean we won't know our spouse in heaven. We will have our memories together. We will still have relational intimacy but the institution of marriage and the perks that go with it will not exist. That is hard for me to imagine but the Bible says that having Christ will be better than the intimacy and satisfaction of having sex. If having Christ is that good, it is definitely something we can look forward to!

I think something else we need to remember is that Christ is the fountainhead of all joy. Occasionally, I talk to people who attend church as if it was some type of obligation to get out of the way so they can get to the real joy on the weekend. That is warped thinking. We don't *have to* attend church, we *get to* attend church. We *get to* come together and get our joy filled up by enjoying the source of all joy, Christ. The most refreshing thing we can do is come to church and enjoy ourselves by exploring, thinking and relating around Christ. Other joys are good, but they are, by definition, secondary and the enjoyment of them is better when we enjoy Christ first.

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Psalm 73:25–26 (ESV)

So back to our thoughts about marriage in heaven. We won't have marriage as we know it now in heaven. We will be married to Christ. But everything we love about marriage will still be there, just that it will be better than anything earthly marriage can offer.

Will there be animals in the new heavens and earth?

I am sure this question came from one of our children. We have been asking the kids this week if “Pudding”, our cat or one like her, will be in heaven. Let's find out. A picture of God's future judgment was seen in the past with God's judgment upon sin with the Flood and Noah's ark. When God saved Noah's family from the destruction of the Flood, he also saved some animals.

And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female. Genesis 6:19 (ESV)

God's plan for the earth after the Flood involved animals. It seems reasonable to conclude that God's plan for the renewed earth after the future judgment may include animals. The apostle Peter saw God's judgment and rescue with the ark as a picture of God's future judgment and rescue. If it included animals in the past, might it not include animals in the future?

For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored

up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. 2 Peter 3:5–7 (ESV)

Peter sees a direct parallel between God's past judgment with water and his future judgment with fire.

Paul sees the scope of God's redemption extended to the whole earth, that would include animals.

that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Romans 8:21 (ESV)

Not just mankind but all of creation is linked together in the destructive curse of sin and they are linked together in Christ's blessing and restoration. I expect to see animals in heaven. I won't go to the wall on this one, but it is possible.

Will we eat meat in heaven?

Does anyone love to fire up the grill and throw some steaks on it? I tried the vegan thing for a while, it just didn't fit. I love my meat. If we love steak, will we still have it on the new heavens and earth where there is no more death?

Let's start by looking at how God originally designed the food chain to function.

And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. Genesis 1:29–30 (ESV)

Originally, did God provide steak? No! God didn't provide meat as an option for food until after the flood.

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Genesis 9:3 (ESV)

Did animals die between Adam's fall and Noah's ark. Yes, they did. The Bible tells us that Abel, the second child of Adam and Eve, sacrificed an animal in his worship to God. Even though animals died before the flood, the Bible doesn't tell us people were given meat to eat until after the flood. So the real bummer for the carnivores among us is that God created us to be herbavores. If the new heavens and earth are like our current earth was originally designed to be, I believe we will go back to the way things were. Sorry, no more steak!

That being said, we must remember that everything God remakes, he vastly improves. So while I believe the tomatoes, cucumbers, and corn from our gardens in the new creation will taste better than anything we ever grew on this earth, I don't think God will eliminate the taste of steak. If steak is a product of the fall, and it tastes so good, perhaps God will somehow create new and vastly improved steak for us to eat that won't require death. I don't know the answer. I

just know I like meat and I think God will have a way of bringing that taste to the new creation.

Will we learn in heaven?

I sometimes hear people say, “I don’t understand how that works so I will have to wait till I get to heaven to figure it out because when I get there *I will know everything*.” Is it true? Will we really know everything in heaven?

The simple answer, “No!” When we die, we will see things much more clearly and we will know much more than we do now but we will not know *everything* in Heaven. God alone knows everything, it is a function of his omniscience. If we knew everything in heaven, we would be God!

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I *know* in part; then I shall *know fully, even as I have been fully known*. 1 Corinthians 13:12 (ESV)

In Paul’s day, mirrors were nothing like what we have today. Mirrors in the ancient world were just polished pieces of metal that gave a poor reflection. He is contrasting a fuzzy picture with a much clearer picture. In heaven we will have a much clearer picture, not an omniscient picture. The words “know” and “known” in this verse use a Greek word for knowledge that never means absolute knowledge. This verse does not mean we will know everything but it means we will know things in a much fuller way, without errors and misconceptions. It doesn’t mean we will know everything.

It is a good thing we won’t know everything in heaven. One of the things I love to do is learn something new. Every one of us likes new things. At Faith EFC, we like to explore the Bible and learn *new things* about God every weekend rather than contenting ourselves with the spiritual doggie bags of our childhood.

Many people do not realize that, in heaven, we will continue to learn. A Gallop poll asked people if we would learn things in heaven and only 18% of the responders thought we would.⁸ One of the new things we will continually learn is more about God.

and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that *in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus*. Ephesians 2:6–7 (ESV)

For all eternity we will continue to expand our knowledge of just how incredible God’s grace and kindness to us through Jesus actually is. Go to church every weekend for eternity and we will keep learning more about God and his life for us through Christ. Nothing needs to be recycled. Remember, it was God who designed us to be learners. God does not want us to stop learning!

Something important to remember is called the *doctrine of continuity*. What we learn on earth, we will carry over into heaven. Just like we will have our earthly memories in heaven, we will have our earthly knowledge. What we learn

⁸ Colleen McDannell and Benhard Lang. *Heaven: A History*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. pg. 307.

about God now and what you learn in life will carry over to eternity where we can build on it!

Conclusion

I love learning more and more about God's love for us through Christ. My prayer for us as a church is that we would be continually learning more about God's love for us through Christ and as we do, we would become more satisfied and secure in him. Before I close in prayer I want you to know that next week we are continuing our little mini-series on inside of this series called "Questions About Heaven". We will start off next week with a question many of you asked. "Can we trust near-death experiences?" Let's pray.

More Questions About Heaven

Sign Title: More Questions About Heaven

August 22, 2010

I want to welcome you to Faith Evangelical Free Church. My name is Kurt and I am one of the pastors. This summer, we are in a series called, "The Mysteries of Heaven." As our summer series winds down, we are taking time to answer some of the questions about heaven you submitted earlier in the series. Last week, we looked at some of those questions and this week we will consider a few more. Next week, we will wrap everything up.

A few of you told me you are anxious to jump right in, so that is what we will do. This first question is a popular one.

Should I trust near-death experiences?

Some people claim they died and returned to life to tell us about it. The book which brought near-death experiences to the forefront of our culture was *Life after Life* by Raymond Moody. It is a book of interviews from people who died but were resuscitated. The stories have a similar pattern to them. The person hears the doctors pronounce them dead; they float out of their body and they watch the doctor working on their corpse. While in this disembodied state, they meet dead relatives and a "being of light." Reluctantly, they are forced to return to their body when it is resuscitated.

An even more sensational book on near-death experiences that hit the number one spot on almost every best-seller list is *Embraced by the Light* by Betty Eadie. In her book, she gives a fascinating account of her visit beyond the grave. She claims that in this near-death experience she met Christ and she even dedicates her book to him.

"To the Light, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom I owe all that I have. He is the 'staff' that I lean on; without Him I would fail."

It sounds impressive. How much should we trust of her beyond the grave experience? Since her book ranked #1 on the New York Times Best Seller list, you know many people found her story compelling and credible. Should we?

If we dig a little deeper into her book and learn about the Jesus she dedicates it to, we find it is not the same Jesus we recognize. Eadie describes the Jesus she met as a benevolent being of light that surrounded her so that she could not tell *where her light stopped and his began*. She says the Jesus she met was separate from the Father and would do nothing to offend her. This Jesus says this Jesus told her there was no reason to regret past deeds, for we are not sinful creatures. Her Jesus told her we are actually "spirit beings" who assisted the father in the creation of the world. She says this Jesus told her she had a past life and a premortal existence. That means she existed before she

was created. Betty rounds it off by saying something especially revealing, “I knew that I was worthy to embrace Him.”⁹

Betty’s Jesus doesn’t sound like the same Jesus we meet in the Bible. A closer reading of her book reveals that her Jesus is not unique but was drawn from the book of Mormon and the teachings of Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism.

Now I know some people who read her book will say, “Here is a woman who has been through death and come back to tell about it, shouldn’t we listen to her?” My answer is, that we evaluate the truth of what she says based upon what the Bible says it true. We don’t evaluate the truth of the Bible based on what she says happened to her. If her teachings about Christ are in harmony with what God says in Bible, we can accept them, if not, we need to toss them out with the morning trash. The Bible warns us many people will try and deceive us.

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. Galatians 1:8–9 (ESV)

Betty Eadie goes right after the heart of the gospel. She says there is no sin and therefore Jesus never came to die for our sin!

I am very skeptical about near death experiences. I am not saying they can’t happen, I am just skeptical. Many of the near-death experiences we read about in pop-culture material portray death as a warm, wonderful experience filled with light and no fear of judgment. For example, according to Betty Eadie, *there is no hell or punishment for sin to concern ourselves with*¹⁰. To me, that sounds like Satan’s deliberate attempt to deceive people about what lies beyond death’s door. The fear of death and the reality of personal accountability before God has moved *many* people to place their faith in Christ for forgiveness. If people believe there is no fear of death, why repent and trust in Christ in the face of death? I believe Satan gives some people positive near-death experiences so her can use their story to remove other people’s fear of death and their opportunity for repentance.

While the most popular books on near-death experiences almost uniformly portray death and a positive, warm experience, there are other books that reveal the exact opposite, and for understandable reasons, they didn’t make the New York Times Best Seller List. On my shelves, I have a book by medical doctor Maurice Rawlings entitled, *To Hell and Back*. He describes terrifying near-death stories where revived patients trembled in fear because of torment, darkness and agony they faced at death’s door. Rawlings claims his stories are more reliable than many others because they were gained almost immediately following a

⁹ Betty J. Eadie and Curtis Taylor, *Embraced by the Light* (Placerville, Calif.: Gold Leaf, 1992).

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betty_Eadie

patients resuscitation. We need to remember, not all near-death experiences are positive.

Does this mean every near-death experience is a scheme of Satan and his angels to extinguish the fear of death and the desire for repentance and trust in Christ? No, not necessarily.

The Bible records a few people who came back to life after a near death or even an actual death experience. Interestingly, none of them talked about it or wrote best-selling books.

Lazarus was genuinely dead, yet we don't hear anything about his after-death experience. Apparently he missed an opportunity to make a lot of money.

Some think Paul died when he talks about being caught up into paradise in 2 Corinthians 12. There he says he heard "inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak." Since he said it happened fourteen years before writing to the church at Corinth, there is at least some evidence that the event coincided with his experience at Lystra. There he was stoned, dragged out of the city and presumed dead (Acts 14:19-20). If he did die and then revived, this account could be classified as a near-death experience, or even a revived-from-death experience; yet he wasn't permitted to talk about it.

Near-death experiences may be a true representation of what happens the first few moments after death but they must be scrutinized to see if they conform to the Biblical picture of the after-life. Remember - *and this is important - Satan, who masquerades as an angel of light, will try to replicate any positive near-death experiences Christians may have.* Satan wants everyone to think our relationship to Christ has no bearing on our eternity.

Some positive near-death experiences are clearly demonic because they sharply contradict the core teachings of the Bible. One example is Betty Eadie. She says the Jesus she met told her everyone will be equally welcomed into eternity, no matter how they lived. She said this Jesus told her there is no judgment for how we lived. That cuts against everything the New Testament teaches.

The near-death experiences that are most reliable are probably the ones we *don't* hear about.

Will Christians who commit suicide go to heaven?

Kirk's son was David's wrestling partner. As fathers across the mat, we became good friends rooting for our boys. Our families enjoyed eating together at restaurants after wrestling tournaments. Kirk would occasionally ask me questions about our faith and one afternoon he called me with a question about suicide. His daughter was in a suicide prevention workshop at school and the parents of a child who took his life were there. They were confident their son was in heaven. Kirk's daughter didn't understand how he could be. She said to her father, "How can he go to heaven? He is a murderer, he killed himself." What do you think the answer is? Will Christians who commit suicide go to

heaven? Yes! There is nothing unique about the final act of life that nullifies our salvation. The final season of life, with all its battles and failures, is not the only season of life that will bear witness of our relationship with Christ.

For example, suppose tonight, after an exhausting week, my sinful nature got the best of my desire to please Christ. In a display of anger and selfishness, I yell at my wife and children, slam the door, press the pedal to the metal on my truck and fly down route 71 on my way out of town. Barreling out of control down the highway, I lose control and cross over the double yellow line. I run first into a semi-truck and am killed in an instant. Would I go to heaven?

Unless I was a hypocrite for the last forty-two years of my Christian life, the answer is yes. For these reasons:

- Jesus Christ, died for my sins and bore the wrath of God in my place. All my sins are forgiven, even the last one.
- Jesus Christ lived a perfect life of obedience so that by his obedience many sinners would be counted righteous through their faith in him, that includes me.
- His sacrifice for my sin and his righteousness are mine by faith alone, that is true on the good days, and the bad days.
- If the last season of my life is so dark that I die by my own sin, that season is not the only season that God takes into account for the evidence that my faith was real.

Now, I know this unsettles some of us because you think I am understating the seriousness of suicide. I am not understanding the seriousness of suicide, I am clearly stating the greatness of our salvation through Christ. Salvation is bigger than suicide. Is suicide a tragedy? Yes!! It is a huge tragedy. Rather than leaving a legacy of trust in Christ for others to follow, those who commit suicide leave a legacy of cowardly shame. Christians who commit suicide squander an eternal reward that is much greater than any earthly pain or suffering they were called upon by God to endure. Yes, suicide is a tragedy that some Christians give in to during seasons of overwhelming darkness, and sorrow. It doesn't forfeit their salvation. It certainly forfeits eternal rewards and scars those they love.

Who are the 144,000 in Revelation?

This question is a little germane to the topic of heaven since it focuses on understanding an issue in the book of Revelation. It is still a good question that a number of you were interested in so we will deal with it today.

To answer this question, I need to give you some background on understanding the book of Revelation. Revelation is apocalyptic literature so it is a completely different type of book to read. Through church history, there are four distinct ways it is interpreted. Let me explain them to you. Even if we don't end up with a great answer on the 144,000, you will at least know how to read Revelation.

Historicist View - Those who subscribe to this view see the Book of Revelation as a prewritten chronological record of the course of history from the time of the apostles to the end of the world. They see the book of Revelation as a time-line of world events.

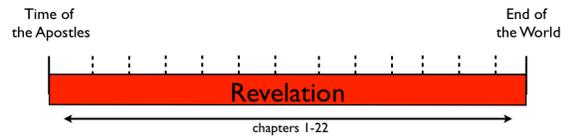
Preterist View - Those who subscribe to this view believe Revelation's prophecies were fulfilled in the ancient past. They believe The first nineteen chapter focus on the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. They believe Revelation should be treated like we treat every other New Testament letter. It was originally intended for the audience of its day. Chapters 20-22 focus on the ancient audiences hope, the return of Christ.

Futurist View - This is the opposite of the Preterist approach. The futurist believes that everything after chapter 3 will be fulfilled in the distant future during the Great Tribulation, right before the return of Christ to establish his millennial kingdom. They believe everything after chapter 3 refers to the future because you don't hear the church talked about after chapter 3.

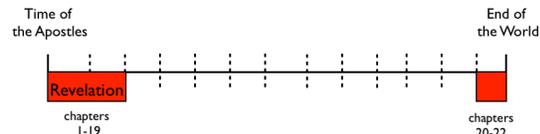
Spiritual View - This approach does not try to assign individual fulfillments to Revelation in history but takes Revelation to be a pictorial drama that depicts spiritual realities in the conflict between Christ and Satan played out on the battlefield of the church and the world. Many people who adopt this view see similarities in Revelation to Greek drama

because it is a book with seven acts that have seven scenes in them. The key

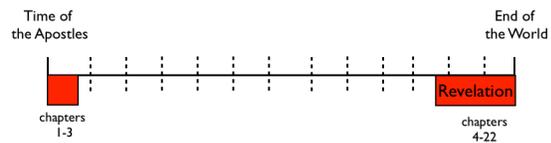
Historicist View
(Revelation is chronological history)



Preterist View
(written primarily for the ancient audience)

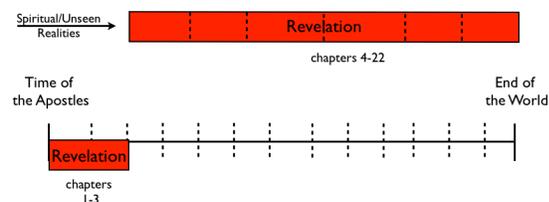


Futurist View
(after chapter 3, it focuses on the tribulation and end of time)



Spiritual View

(Revelation is written like a Greek drama with 7 acts of 7 scenes depicting the conflict between Christ and Satan, and the church and world powers)



thing to remember is that rather than attaching dates and times to everything, they see Revelation as a picture of the bigger spiritual conflict.

Why did I go into that? It wasn't to bore you! I want you to see why Revelation is a difficult book and why Christians have different understanding of what things mean in Revelation. While the first three chapters and the last three chapters of Revelation are relatively clear, it is the middle chapters that produce the most discussion. When it comes, to understanding who the 144,000 are in Revelation, know they are mentioned in Revelation 7 and 14, two tough chapters to understand in the center of the book. Let's look at how these four view understand the 144,000 in Revelation.

The Historicists - They see the 144,000 as a symbolic number representing the entire church.

The Preterists - They see the 144,000 as a symbolic number but it represents the full number of Jewish Christians who escaped the city of Jerusalem before its destruction in A.D. 70.

The Futurists - They see the 144,000 as a literal number of Jewish people who come to Christ during the great tribulation before the end of the world. They are sealed by God for protection from the later plagues in Revelation. While the Bible doesn't say this, most futurists believe these 144,000 Jewish Christians will be actively involved in sharing Christ during the tribulation period. Hal Lindsey, who calls them, "The 144,000 Jewish Billy Grahams."

The Spiritualists - They believe the number 144,000 is a symbolic number. It represents 10 cubed, which represents completeness. The 144 is twelve multiplied by twelve. The twelve represents the twelve Old Testament tribes of God and the twelve New Testament apostles of Christ. They understand the 144,000 to represent symbolically the true church of all time of both the Old and New Testaments.

The Jehovah's Witnesses - This one is a freeby we will throw in for the fun of it because if the Jehovah's Witnesses come to your door, they will talk about the 144,000. They believe the 144,000 are the total number of people who will be in heaven beginning from the apostles down to modern times. They believe the 144,000 were filled up in 1935 and after that everybody else is a second class citizen and won't be in heaven. That's a real bummer!

You probably want to know what I believe. I believe 144,000 is a symbolic number representing the full number of the people of God from every tribe and nation. The reason I believe this is because right afterwards it says this.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" Revelation 7:9–10 (ESV)

Revelation is not an easy book. That doesn't mean we shouldn't read it or study it. God promises a blessing to those who study it. I am studying it in my own personal study now and being challenged by it. If nothing else, I want you to understand why Revelation is understood by people different ways.

After death, is there another chance to be saved?

This question was asked earlier in the series by a man on his way out the door. He heard the Bible said we had a second chance. What do you think the answer is? "No."

Luke 16 tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus after they die. We talked about this story in the message entitled, "One Minute After You Die." Lazarus went to a place called Abraham's bosom in Hades, a place of comfort. The rich man went to a place of torment in Hades. The text says that a great chasm separated the two. What does it say about second chances?

And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' Luke 16:26 (ESV)

No second chances. Last week, we learned the Bible says nothing about purgatory. You are either saved completely and fully by Christ when you die, or you are eternally separated from him. No second chances.

The only exception I can think of would be infants, that is, if you could call it an exception. We learned earlier in this series that the Bible does not explicitly say infants are saved as a special act of God through Christ, it hints that is true. As we learned when we studied this, there are good reasons God would choose not to say that explicitly. If he did, those with evil intents would use it as justification to destroy children's lives. As I said, this really isn't a second chance issue but it is the only other way, outside of making a conscious decision for Christ, that I am aware people can be saved.

Will we sleep in our resurrection bodies?

Last week, on the way out the door, a boy about age seven asked me this question. It is a good question. Since we will have perfect bodies in heaven, will we need to sleep? It seems reasonable to conclude that some of the qualities of our earthly body will continue to be true about our heavenly, resurrected bodies.

Adam and Eve were created perfect and sinless. Do you think they slept? They probably did. Sleep is not an imperfection but appears to be part of the God designed rhythm for life.

Sleep is also one of life's great pleasures. A good night's sleep is a gift from God. I believe we may need it. If we do need it, we will enjoy it and be refreshed by it. Why not?

Will we work in heaven?

The idea of working in heaven doesn't sound inviting. Many people don't like their jobs. They are ready to follow Steve Slater's example, pull the rip cord on the emergency escape shoot, and quite their job with two beers in hand.

The Bible gives us a different picture. We were designed to work. Adam was to work.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. Genesis 2:15 (ESV)

Work was part of God's original plan for Adam and Eve, even before the fall. Work wasn't created to be a curse. The curse of sin is what ruined work and made it menial, tedious, and frustrating.

"...cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground,..." Genesis 3:17-19 (ESV)

On the New Earth, work will be transformed into even better than what God intended it to be.

No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. Revelation 22:3 (NIV)

Serve is a verb. Servants are actively involved in carrying out the tasks of their master. In heaven, we will have work to do. It will be satisfying and enriching work that we can't wait to get back to. In heaven, we will create, accomplish, set goals and fulfill them - all to God's glory and our joy. Think about this. Unemployed people are unhappy people. What could be better than joyful, fulfilling work?

Will there be oceans on the New Earth?

One of the confusing, and apparently disappointing, verses we studied in this series was about the new heavens and earth.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. Revelation 21:1 (ESV)

When we read this, we think there will be no more warm, inviting waters, no more surfing, no more fun at the beach and no more fishing. That sounds more like bad news, rather than good.

When the Bible was written, people heard these words differently. In the ancient world, "there will be no more sea," meant there will be no more cold, treacherous waters that destroy ships and drown loved ones. People in the ancient world were afraid of the sea. Remember, they had no compass, they had no sonar, they had no radar, their ships were little wooden vessels that were tossed about corks on the waves and stormy seas.

Even if this passage means there will literally be no more oceans, that doesn't mean there will be no more large bodies of water. For those of us in the Iowa Great Lakes area, this is good news. Revelation tells us of a great river that flows from under God's throne and runs throughout the capital city of the New Jerusalem. Where do flowing rivers go? Do you think the river ends up in a lake somewhere? Do you think it will be big lake since it is a mighty river?

I believe there will be lakes on the New Earth. This is great news for those of us who love to Jet Ski, water ski, swim, boat and just plain old relax around the water.

If we engage our imagination a bit, I think we can have a little fun here. Last week, we learned there will probably be animals in the new creation. God saved animals during his last judgement nothing will keep him from doing it again if he wants. Do you think God will only save only land animals? Do you think he might bring sea animals into the new creation? If everything in the new creation is vastly improved, what do you think it would be like to go scuba diving and see the colors of the fish? What do you think it would be like to ride on the back of a dolphin or play with a whale? If there is no more death in the new creation, there would be nothing to fear from the sharks or predator animals. In fact, they would be our friends! As we learned in Hebrews, we will be the kings and queens of God's new creation ruling with Christ and under Christ. The amazing and even more glorious animals of this new creation will be there for God's glory and our joy. For a moment, imagine what a day at the lake would be like!

Conclusion

Next week is the last week in this series. The title of the message is, "The Hope of Heaven." We are going to take what we learned about heaven and show how these heavenly realities make an every day earthly difference. I look forward to seeing you next week as we wrap things up.

The Hope of Heaven

Sign Title: **The Hope of Heaven**

August 29, 2010

I want to welcome you to Faith Evangelical Free Church. My name is Kurt and I am one of the pastors. This summer we are in a teaching series entitled, "The Mysteries of Heaven." This morning, we finish the series. At the end of the message, I have some exciting things to share with you about the next series that begins two weeks from today.

In this series, we learned a lot about heaven. We learned about the amazing joys that await us in heaven and about the conscious, eternal punishment of hell. We discovered the beauty of the new creation, where heaven and the new earth are combined and we live on a real tangible earth with God for all of eternity. We learned about our resurrection bodies; bodies characterized by strength and power, not aches and pains. We tackled the millennial maze and learned about the earthly thousand year reign of Christ. We learned many mind expanding truths about heaven.

I know some were thinking, "Pastor, why did we spend a whole summer on the topic of heaven? We should have studied something more practical. I have real issues on earth. I will worry about heaven when I get there. As Wayne Martindale said, "If you're thinking about the heavenly streets of gold, aren't you likely to forget about the potholes in the streets of Chicago."¹¹

I understand those concerns. I think they would be reasonable objections; if we didn't have the New Testament. The New Testament spends significant time talking about eternal issues. One in every thirteen verses in the New Testament mentions the return of Christ.¹² Why do you think the New Testament says so much about heavenly things?

What we know about heaven, has everything to do with how we live on earth. Instead of the study of heaven disconnecting us from the way to live life, it teaches us how to live. Our study of heaven should have changed us in many practical ways. In what way did this study of heaven change us? This morning, I want to briefly review a few of them.

It released us from our fear of death.

Imagine, this morning, a terrorist held us hostage as a church. He marched to the front of the sanctuary with his AK-47, a turban wrapped around his head and a strip of large caliber ammunition slung over his shoulder. At gunpoint, he threatens to kill us one by one, unless he receives several million dollars ransom.

¹¹ Wayne Martindale, *Beyond the Shadowlands: C.S. Lewis on Heaven and Hell*, pgs. 46-47.

¹² Anderson, C. *Opening up 2 Peter*. pg. 105.

While I am not trivializing anyone's death, who in the room should be afraid of dying? The terrorist holding the gun! Can you imagine how this might play out? It would be one frustrated terrorist with a room full of people that, while not desiring death, were not held in his grip by their fear of it. Imagine a room of two-hundred people evangelizing the terrorist, urging him to repent of his sin and trust in Christ, before he gets shot by the S.W.A.T. team!

Death is painful and it is an enemy. But for those who know Jesus, death is not a fear.

He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. Isaiah 25:8 (ESV)

The apostle Paul echoes Isaiah.

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" 1 Corinthians 15:54–55 (ESV)

This summer, while studying heaven, I hope you gained a new perspective on death. In the face of death, we have nothing to fear.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? Romans 8:35 (ESV)

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, 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. Romans 8:38–39 (ESV)

Death will not separate us from God's love, it will usher us into his presence.

It brought purpose to our lives.

This summer, as we studied heaven, did you find yourself reconsidering how you spend your time? Did you begin to make a purchase and think, "In light of eternity, this is pretty foolish?" I found myself thinking that. Knowing the truth about heaven and how our earthly choices make an eternal difference, brings a sense of purpose to how we make choices in our life. It changes the way we spend our time, money, and energy. It brings clarity to our choices as we begin making them in light of how we can make an eternal difference.

I am not saying the study of heaven should lead us to avoid all earthly pleasures, we just begin to think with greater clarity about the eternal value of our choices.

After all, if we believe we will spend an eternity in a world of unending beauty and adventure, how can we be content to think that real joy is spending our evenings in front of the television watching sitcoms and football games? Even if you keep your eyes off the impurities, knowing that heaven is just around

the corner, and that every sacrifice and investment we make will be paid back by Christ in a way that eclipses earthly sacrifices, that changes us. It gets us up out of our Lazy-Boy recliners, it prompts us to turn off the television and it compels us to live for things that make an eternal difference. What are those things?

God's Word and people. Spending time in God's Word and investing in people will pay off in eternity and bring us an eternal joy that outweighs the difficulty of earthly sacrifice or the half-baked happiness of a television rerun.

This is the purpose and drive that motivated Paul as he lived his life.

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 3:13–14 (ESV)

What are you living your life for? What are you seeking? I hope our study of heaven brought focus and clarity to your life. I hope it taught you how to live for greater things.

It motivated us for purity.

While heaven motivates us for rewards, knowing that we will stand before Christ, the audience of one, and give an account for how we lived, that motivates us for purity.

If you are struggling with a secret sin, I can tell you one of the fastest ways to break sin's grip. Confess it to someone who cares about you and ask them to hold you accountable. That sin will scatter light a cockroach when the lights go on. Knowing we are accountable to Christ and we will stand before him to give an answer for how we live is a powerful motivation for purity.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.
Romans 14:10–12 (ESV)

While we are forgiven of our sin, we learned we will still give an account of our lives to God. Peter also talks about how the anticipation of the return of Christ and standing before him motivates us for purity.

Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, ... But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. 2 Peter 3:11–14 (ESV)

Anticipating standing before Christ is what motivates us to live spotless lives. It is what empowers us to stick through a difficult marriage, it keeps us persevering in the hard task of caring for an ailing parent or child, it keeps us at a

demanding job. That is why Moses stuck with the tough job God gave him of leading the Israelites. He was living thinking about eternity.

He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. Hebrews 11:26 (ESV)

Knowing where we are going and before whom we will stand provides powerful motivation for purity. After all, if we really believe we're going to live forever in a realm where Christ is the center of all things, and that will bring us joy, and if we believe righteous living will bring happiness, why wouldn't we choose to get a head start by Christ-centered righteous living today?

And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. 1 John 3:3 (ESV)

Randy Alcorn has a great illustration of this.

If my wedding date is on the calendar, and I'm thinking of the person I'm going to marry, I shouldn't be an easy target for seduction. Likewise, when I've meditated on Heaven, sin is terribly unappealing. It's when my mind drifts from Heaven that sin appears attractive. Thinking about heaven leads to holiness and purity. Our high tolerance for sin testifies of our failure to prepare for Heaven.¹³

I hope you found this study of heaven giving you a greater passion for holiness and purity.

It motivated us to seek greater joy and delight.

Following Christ is not a call to abstain from joy and delight but it is a call to, by faith, delay joy and delight now for a much better joy and delight later. The better we comprehend the pleasures that await us in eternity, the greater our ability to forego the lesser pleasures we are offered now. The more clearly we conceive, through the eye of faith, the possessions that will be ours on the new heavens and earth, the more gladly we can give away our possessions now to store up for our future. When we realize the power that will be ours as rulers in God's Kingdom, a power we could not handle in our sinful nature but a power we can only handle with perfected natures, we will gladly forgo the pursuit of power now as we anticipate the power entrusted to us then.

Studying heaven doesn't discourage us from pleasure and joy, it teaches us to live for greater pleasures and joys than anything this world can offer.

I hope this summer, you have learned to seek greater pleasures and joys than anything this world can provide.

It gives us hearts filled with thankfulness.

Studying heaven vitalizes our spirits with an attitude of thankfulness in spite of our circumstances.

¹³ Randy Alcorn. *Heaven*. pg. 471.

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, Hebrews 12:28 (ESV)

The more we study heaven, the more thankful we become for what God gave us through Christ. This world is not our home. We have a home in heaven with Christ that will last forever. How can our hearts not overflow with thankfulness? Rather than hitching our happiness to our finances, our health, or our success, all of which rise and fall like the ocean tide, everything about us is shackled to Christ, his love for us and our eternal home. None of those things change. We can always be thankful because no matter what hand we are dealt in the card game of life, through Jesus, we win in the end. How much better could it get?

I hope this summer, as we studied heaven, you developed a thankful heart.

It taught us to live wisely.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matthew 6:19–21 (ESV)

We covered this last summer and we covered this a few weeks ago. The choices we make in this life will have eternal ramifications. The money we give to God’s kingdom is laid up in heaven as an eternal investment. It is our eternal retirement account that always has a better rate of return than any earthly one can offer. As we studied heaven, we learned how to wisely live for it and invest for it.

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life. 1 Timothy 6:17–19 (ESV)

This is the same idea. The generous living and giving of our earthly lives now, will always provide us with a much greater eternal reward than. If that wasn’t true, why would it be called a reward?

The same is true when it comes to turning away from sin. When we are tempted by sin, it looks enticing. Before we studied heaven, we told ourselves we would turn away from sin because it was the right thing to do, it was the pleasing thing to do. If we chose to sin, it was not right, but, of course, Christ would forgive us.

In this series, we learned there is much more to this equation. God promises to reward us for our righteous living. He *desires* to reward us when we

turn away from sin. When we choose to give in to sin, we forfeit a measure of our eternal reward, a reward that would be much more satisfying than any temporary earthly pleasure that sin can provide. If this wasn't true, eternal rewards wouldn't be rewards. Choosing to turn away from sin will always be rewarded by Christ in a way that far exceeds any price we pay now.

Every choice to honor Christ is never a choice for less joy but for more. It is never a choice for a boring, drab existence. It is *always* a choice for a better one.

When we started this series, I shared with you three resolutions Jonathan Edwards had about how he would live his life. As I read them this week, I noticed they were resolutions to live wisely. Resolutions to make wise earthly choices based on what is true about eternal realities.

- Resolved, to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness, in the other world, as I possibly can.
- Resolved, that I will live so as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.
- Resolved, to endeavor to my utmost to act as I can think I should do, if I had already seen the happiness of heaven, and hell's torments.¹⁴

We have seen the happiness of heaven and the torments of hell. Let us also choose to live wisely now that we know them.

Conclusion

This morning, we began by talking about how the study of heaven can feel so irrelevant to real world problems. We learned the opposite is true. It is by the study of heaven and the future that we can learn to live wisely today. I like the way C. S. Lewis put it.

If you have read history, you will find that those Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this world.

To summarize this series, let me remind you of what we learned from our study of the book of Hebrews, we were created for one person, that person is Jesus. In this study, we learned we were created for one place, that place is Heaven. I hope our study of it did you practical good as we seek to live wisely and lay up our treasure in heaven.



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¹⁴ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, pg. 5.

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