

WHAT IS SO GREAT ABOUT HEAVEN?

Introduction

1. Today we are going to talk a little about heaven. The Bible speaks of it, though not as much as we might expect. John, in *The Revelation*, probably says more about heaven than any other Bible author, but even there, most of our questions remain unanswered. Other than John and Jesus, only one other person that I can think of in the Scripture had an experience in heaven and wrote about it. That would be the Apostle Paul and he was very reluctant to share any real details (2 Corinthians 12).
2. There are many people today who have written about their experiences of going to heaven and back. I have a couple of those books in my office. One is written by Choo Thomas called *Heaven is so Real*. She describes the multiple times Jesus stopped by her house, gave her an incorruptible body and took her to heaven with Him on various sight-seeing tours. Author Don Piper writes of his experience of traveling to heaven, in his book, *90 Minutes in Heaven*. This one, more credible than the first one I mentioned, involved the author's near-death experience following a terrible auto accident.
3. My purpose this morning is not to comment on people's experiences or do book reviews. I am using them as an introduction toward the answer to the question, "What's so great about heaven?" The answer I believe will come from our consideration of an exchange that took place between Jesus and His disciples as recorded in John 14.
4. The passage is a very familiar one. Jesus and His disciples were gathered in an upstairs room to celebrate the Passover. The disciples seemed to be on another planet in relation to what was going on. Jesus had washed their feet and had called them to love one another. As He was preparing them for His soon departure, He said, "Where I am going you cannot come." Simon Peter immediately wanted to know where Jesus was going. Jesus answered, "Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterwards." How did Peter respond? Of course! "Lord, why can't I follow you now?" Knowing something of the danger and uncertainty of the hour, Peter added, "I will lay down my life for you." Jesus then prophesies that within a few hours

Peter will actually deny that he even knows the Lord – but nevertheless Jesus did not want either Peter or the other disciples to be troubled. It is that context that He shares those familiar words of chapter 14.

5. What is so great about heaven? We are about to find out. One great thing about heaven is it is a promised place! That's right...

I. WE ARE GOING TO A PROMISED PLACE – BUT IT IS NOT ABOUT THE PROMISE

A. Promises are only as good as those who give them –

1. We have all been promised things that were never delivered. Some who made such promises to us were generally good at keeping their word, but circumstances beyond their control or mental lapses factored into the promises not being kept.
2. Some make promises they have no intention of keeping. They make them merely to pacify the immediate or to secure their own desire or to make an impression. But the bottom line is the character and motive of the promise-maker plays a large part in the probability of that one being a promise keeper. In the end, everyone breaks promises...everyone, that is, except God.

B. This promise is from one who is absolutely trustworthy. Listen carefully to what Jesus is saying. “Believe in God. Believe also in me.” Now grammatically that could be interpreted four ways as facts or commands or a combination of the two (2 commands...2 statements or 1 command and one statement). There really is no way to be sure, but here is my guess. Jesus is affirming His disciples' belief in God the Father – “You believe in God.” They did. Sometimes their faith was shaky, but they believed in God. In relation to the promises here, God could be trusted to keep His promises. After all, God is in control of circumstances and He never has mental lapses and His intentions are always pure. His character is flawless. So Jesus says to the disciples, “You believe in God. Believe also in me.” Why? “Because God is uniquely my Father and I am the same essence. Since you can and do believe Him, believe also in me.”

C. This one would only promise that which was certain – The promise involves being with Jesus, presumably in the Father's House forever. The problem for the disciples was fear of being alone, without Jesus. When He begins to speak of going away from them that was unsettling. He was their leader, their teacher. They cared about Him. Remember Thomas? In John 11, when the disciples learned of Lazarus' death, Jesus was going to go to the funeral. Lazarus lived close to Jerusalem. Many in Jerusalem wanted Jesus

dead – and Jesus had already told the disciples that He would be killed in Jerusalem. Going to Jerusalem was not a good idea as far as the disciples could see. Yet Thomas said, “Let us also go that we may die with Him.” Thomas would rather die with Jesus than to live without Him! When Jesus was put to death, Thomas surely must have said, “I knew it! I knew it! He died and left me alone!” Thomas’ greatest fear was realized. That is why he refused to acknowledge the growing rumors of Jesus’ resurrection. He was despondent. He was alive without Jesus. If he starts to believe that maybe Jesus is alive and it turns out to be false, he couldn’t take it. So he refused to believe the resurrection accounts until he had absolute personal proof. Here Jesus calms their fears. “I am going away, but I am going away with you in mind and I am coming back for you. And I will bring you back to myself.” That is a promise the disciples could live with – but they doubted! Don’t doubt His Word. You believe God. Believe also in Him! He promised a place. We call it heaven. But it is not really about the promise. Maybe it is about the place! After all...

II. WE ARE GOING TO A PREPARED PLACE – BUT IT IS NOT ABOUT THE PLACE (but let’s talk about the place)

A. It is the Father’s big house (So much for a mansion)!

1. When I was a kid, we sometimes sang in church “Mansion on a Hilltop” (***I’m satisfied with just a cottage below- A little silver and a little gold. But in that city where the ransomed will shine- I want a gold one that’s silver lined. I’ve got a mansion just over the hilltop- In that bright land where we’ll never grow old. And some day yonder we will never more wander- But walk on streets that are purest gold***). Other than being a bit over the top materially it is a nice contrast – but it not really a mansion...
2. There are some attempts in Scripture to tell of the indescribable beauty of heaven, but this passage is not one of them. The word that is translated “mansions” in the KJV is the Greek word “abode” meaning “rooms” or “dwelling places.” The point Jesus is making is that we will be able forever to live with Him in the Father’s House.
3. Sometimes the kids in Adventure Club sing the song, “Its My Father’s House.” “Come and go with me to my Father’s House...it’s a big, big house with lots and lots of rooms, with a big, big table with lots and lots of food, a big, big yard where we can play football (I don’t know about that one) – a big, big house. It’s my

Father's House." Actually that is probably closer to the Biblical picture than the Mansions song, but they both still may be missing the main point.

4. Jesus told us that His Father House has many rooms – enough rooms – but it is not really about the house!

B. It is being prepared for us (What does that mean)?

1. The disciples did not appear to be concerned about wealth in their eternal inheritance. They were upset at the prospect of losing Jesus! Comfort was taken that though He was going away, one day they would be reunited with Him.
2. It is a popular teaching from verse 2 that Jesus was returning to the Father so that He could get the place ready for us. Much is made of the time between His ascension and now and how incredible it must be if it is taking so long to make it ready. (The argument goes something like this: He brought the world in all of its splendor into existence in six days but He has been making my place ready for 2000 years – so it must be something really incredible). That is not really the point. Jesus was saying, "I am returning to the Father's house, and this very return, which includes My redemptive work, is the means by which your place is prepared." Also one could say that Jesus is preparing a place for His followers by preparing His followers for that place.
3. It is a prepared place, but it is not really about the place. If we are going to a place with many rooms, maybe it is about the people!

III. WE ARE GOING TO A POPULATED PLACE – BUT IT IS NOT ABOUT THE PEOPLE

- A. "Many rooms" does suggest many people! There are two pictures painted in the Bible that may at first glance appear contradictory. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke of the way to eternal life and the way to eternal destruction. **Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.** And yet we are told in the Revelation of the multitude of the redeemed that no one could number from every tribe and tongue and nation surrounding the throne. It is pretty clear that only a minority will be in heaven – but it will be a whole bunch of people! It will be awesome.
- B. "You" is plural – this is a community affair! Modern English does not distinguish "you" as a singular or plural. "You" could be either. Old English and Greek did make the

distinction. In Old English generally “you” was singular and “ye” was plural. I suppose we could translate verse 3 as “And if I go and prepare a place for you all, I will come again and take you all...” The point is there will be a lot of people in heaven.

1. Many of the books written about heaven emphasize the fact that we will see our loved ones there. I think that is reasonable given texts like 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. There seems to be something of a reunion atmosphere. But we must also note that there will be some big changes. Relationships will be different. (Husband/wife relationships will not be the same. As Randy Alcorn has suggested, marriage is not altogether dissolved, but will be one, that is the grand union between Christ and His church. Remember Paul's statement to the Ephesians - **"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.** This is where that fits.
2. Family relationships will apparently be less exclusive. I am not sure there will be any strangers to us in heaven). When Jesus was told by some that his family was waiting outside to see Him, He responded, **"My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."** Clearly the relationships will be better. There will be no insider/outsider groups. There will be no estrangements, no hard feelings toward one another or attempts to avoid certain people. There will be no petty rivalries or jealous competitions. There will be no sin, no conflict, no misunderstanding. Everything will be perfect in every way. As good as all of that sounds, even that is not the best thing about heaven.
3. The best thing about heaven – and you know this already – is really about one person...

IV. WE ARE GOING TO BE WITH JESUS – THAT'S WHY HEAVEN IS SO GREAT!

- A. “I will come again and take you...” “TO MYSELF!” I would have expected Jesus to say, “I will come again and take you to heaven or to the Father’s House, but that is not what He said. What did Jesus mean when He said, “I will come again and take you to myself?” Was He talking about His resurrection from the dead? That could be but He would actually leave them again in a few weeks when He ascended into heaven. Was He talking about His return to earth – His second coming? That is possible, particularly for those who will still be alive when He comes, but those who have died

will actually accompany Him at His coming. So in that sense He is coming with them, not coming for them. Was He speaking of coming to us to take us home when we die? Perhaps. When the poor man in Jesus' story in Luke 16 died, angels came and escorted him to Abraham's side. But that was prior to the redeemed being brought to the Father House. Later when Stephen was stoned, the text in Acts says that Stephen "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God..." We probably cannot be certain of the specifics, but does this not sound very good? ***I will come again and take you to myself!***

- B. "Where I am, you (will) be also" – Heaven will be heaven because Jesus will be there. Heaven is a promised place occupied with redeemed people, but mostly heaven is about the Savior. For eternity we have the promise of the presence of Christ. I am not suggesting that we will be unimpressed with heaven's wonders. Randy Alcorn writes, ***"Suppose you're sick. Your friend brings a meal. What meets your needs – the meal or the friend? Both. Of course without your friend there would be no meal; but even without a meal, you would still treasure your friendship. Hence your friend is both your higher pleasure and the source of your secondary pleasure (the meal). Likewise God is the source of all lesser goods, so that when they satisfy us, it's God himself who satisfies us.*** Alcorn goes on to tell the story of a blind boy and a king. ***In The Happiness of Heaven, published in 1871, Father J. Boudreau tells of a kindhearted king who finds a blind, destitute orphan boy while hunting in a forest. The king takes the boy to his palace, adopts him as his own son, and provides for his care. He sees that the boy received the finest education. The boy is extremely grateful, and he loves the king, his new father, with all his heart. When the boy turns twenty, a surgeon performs an operation on his eyes and for the first time he is able to see. This boy, once a starving orphan, has for some years been a royal prince, at home in the king's palace. But something wonderful has happened, something far greater than the magnificent food, gardens, libraries, music and wonders of the palace. The boy is finally able to see the father he loves. Boudreau writes, "I will not attempt to describe the joys that will overwhelm the soul of this fortunate young man when he first sees that king, of whom manly beauty, goodness, power and magnificence he has heard so much. Nor will I attempt to describe the other joys which fill his soul when he beholds his own personal beauty, and the magnificence of his princely garments whereof he had also heard so***

much heretofore. Much less will I attempt to picture his exquisite and unspeakable happiness when he sees himself adopted into the royal family honored and loved by all, together with all the pleasures within his reach..." When we see His face, we will be overflowing with His knowledge, made beautiful with His beauty, rich with His wealth, holy with His holiness and as the psalmist said, **"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). And one of my favorites from Asaph – **"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).

Conclusion

1. It has been no secret to any of you that the best thing about heaven is seeing and being with Jesus. But we have left out an important section of this brief text. Just as the best thing about heaven is Jesus, the only way to heaven is Jesus. You knew that too, didn't you? There is one thing that bothers me though.
2. I would have assumed that the disciples of Jesus, having walked with Him for around three years, would also have known, but they appear to have been bewildered. "You know the way", says Jesus. But our fearful friend Thomas interrupts with "We don't even know where you are going. How could we possibly know the way?" Jesus again answers, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He is not the way shower. He is the way maker. He does not show us the path. He is the path. He does not give us a map. He comes and takes us to the Father's House.
3. I have often said to grieving people. When you feel lost and all alone and you don't know where to turn, He's the way. And when you don't know who or what to believe, He's the truth. And when you don't know how to live and you are afraid to die, He is the life. He is our Savior now and our Sovereign for eternity. Heaven is a lot of wonderful things, but most importantly it is about seeing and being with Jesus, forever!