

## Next? Heaven

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Philippians 1:20-26

We begin a new sermon series today that's focused on the future. What is a Christian's view of the future? Of the future of each one of us individually, of our future in the world, and the end of history? We're going to be looking at that for the next three weeks, and today we're talking about the end of life for each one of us. Listen now as we hear this reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

*It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. Phil. 1:20-26 (NRSV)*

Join me in prayer. *O God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts, God, that your word, your truth, might fall in. And then, O God, open our hands so that we might serve. Amen.*

My wife and I like to watch those true crime shows. We watched one last night, in fact, and I don't know if it was "Dateline" or "Twenty-Twenty" - they all seem to blend together. And they're all about the same thing. We have a little ritual and that's that very early in the show we determine who did it. We pronounce it right away and say, "Look, it's that guy!" They're not showing any live footage of him, it's just a photo and it's got to be him. I know it. Here's the thing. After I make my prophecy, Dee can't see it, but I go on the phone to see if I was right. I want to know the end of the story.

Sometimes my wife will come to me with a story. She'll say, "Oh, my goodness, you're not going to believe what happened today." Then she starts into all the details that lead up to the event, whatever it was. And I'm thinking, "Just how much is it going to cost? What is the bottom line here? Get to the end of the story. Whatever it is, whatever terrible thing happened and then we can back up and go through all the details. But I need to know the end of the story."

I think when we know the end of the story in our lives, we live it differently. We live it with a different confidence, a different joyful leaning in.

So I want to talk today and ask what is the end of your life? What happens when we die? The theologians and scientists and philosophers and poets and skeptics all have wrestled with that question for centuries. Different theories and conversations around the world. Most of the world believes in reincarnation, actually. What happens when we die?

Many of us grew up in the church and somehow built into us was this idea that when you die ... unfortunately, this is bad theology, but we were taught that if you're good you go to heaven and if bad...well, we won't talk about that.

The truth is that we were taught that by the grace of God, that we receive by faith, that when we die our spirits go to heaven. Is that what the Bible really says? I want us to explore that today and understand just what the Bible says about heaven.

First, I'd like to say that the Bible doesn't seem all that concerned with it. There's very little talk about going to heaven, and there's a lot of talk about resurrection, and a lot of talk about eternal life. But this idea of going to heaven is not the primary concern of Scripture. The primary concern of Scripture is getting heaven to us. You just prayed the prayer. In the Lord's Prayer it says, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." That the Kingdom of God would come around us, that we would be a part of it – right now, not someday. Not in the end, but right now. We get to be a part of eternal life, the Kingdom of God, right now, right here. And that when we choose to do that, we shall live by the principles and laws of this Kingdom, which are different from the laws of the world. That we shall choose forgiveness over vengeance. When someone asks us to walk a mile, we'll walk two miles with them. When someone asks for our coat, we'll give them our cloak. That if we're mighty, we'll bring up the lowly, even if it means us coming down. The Bible is full of ways teaching us to live by the Kingdom of God.

Now there clearly is this sense sometimes that we act like the life we live here is this sort of grind and it may feel that way sometime. Much of the music that we sing about dying and going to heaven, songs like "I'll Fly Away" and all the others grew out of the days of slavery when life was really hard. There was that sense that someday we'll be delivered from this. The primary goal though of Scripture is to help us live in a way that heaven comes to earth. Now that is to say that there is no life after death, that there is no heaven. In fact indeed there is.

Basically there are two sort of theories, ways of understanding life after death that are in Scripture. I want us to look at the first one and then a little at the second. We'll cover more about the second two weeks from now.

The first is just what we said - by the grace of God that we received through faith, that when we die our spirits go to be in heaven with Christ and our bodies remain here. The second theory - actually conversation because theory isn't the right word. The second in Scripture is that one day there will be a general resurrection of the dead. When the "trumpet" sounds the dead shall be raised and until then, there is this sense, as Paul says, we shall all sleep. That there is a sense in which there will be a moment in which we are raised from the dead and given new bodies.

But what I'd like to say is that it could be both. There are a number of passages in Scripture that clearly point us to believe that there is a heaven that we can experience right now when we die. Paul said it in the passage from Philippians that we just read. "My desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you." He says it in 2 Corinthians 5: "So we are always confident even though we know that while we are home in the body we are away from the Lord. For we walk by faith and not by sight. Yet, we do have confidence and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So, whether we are at home or away we make it our aim to please him."

Perhaps the most commonly quoted passage that point toward heaven are Jesus' words directed to the thief on the cross. The thief says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus replies, "Truly you will be with me today in paradise. Today, you will be with me in paradise." Not someday - today.

There are other passages that are familiar that could be interpreted either way. Either someday or from some time from now or right at the time we die. Jesus says to his disciples, "When I go and prepare a place for you I will come again and take you to myself that where I am you may be also." Or in I Corinthians 13 you're familiar with these words, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face."

All of them are about being with Jesus. If you walk away with nothing else, I hope this is it today. The essence of heaven is not a place, not primarily this picture of paradise, the essence of heaven is a relationship. It is being with Jesus. It is being fully in the presence of God.

Now you might say to yourself, "I really need to know more than that. What's it like? Are the streets paved with gold? Is there work in heaven? Is there golf in heaven?" That last is one I often get.

The great cartoonist Gary Larson has cartoons called "The Far Side" and one of his favorite themes is heaven and hell. One is two guys sitting on clouds, harps at their side. One says to the other, "This is really boring!" I can understand that. If there's nothing to do, no work but you just sit around. Another cartoon shows a picture of heaven and of hell and in heaven a guy's playing the harp and in hell he's playing an accordion. I don't know how he comes up with these things!

But we want to know more, don't we? Here's what I will tell you with absolute full surety and confidence. I have no idea. The Scripture tells us in 1 Corinthians 2 "What no eye has seen or ear heard nor the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." We can't really know. We just have to trust him. But we do know in our hearts, implanted inside us. That passage goes on, "No eye has seen or ear heard or human heart conceived 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." That planted within us by the power of the Holy Spirit is this deep realization that God has prepared good things for us. That we go back to be with him.

The book of Ecclesiastes is one of the most depressing books in the Scripture. If I had to vote I'd tell them to leave it out. Leave that one out. Some say it was written by Solomon during a mid-life crisis. He says, "Everything is useless. Everything is vanity. It's all a chasing after the wind. I tried everything. I tried religion, I tried money, I tried family. I tried working hard. All of it is just chasing after the wind - it's pointless."

And then, he says something interesting. Even in the midst of his greatest cynicism and despair, Solomon says, "Yet God has planted eternity in the human heart." That down inside us there is this core realization that this life is not all there is.

I find it interesting that nature has these amazing examples of homing pigeons who are released and then fly away. And then they come back exactly to the place where they left. Or the whale that leaves Alaska and goes 12,000 miles to a particular cove in Cabo San Lucas and then goes back to the same place where they were. How does that happen? It's because somehow inside planted in our core is this desire to go home. We heard about it in the beautiful music today. That at the end of our lives we go home.

There are all sorts of images in the Scripture about heaven. Paradise. A city. But most often it's about going home. We know that we are just sojourners here.

Now what about the saints? Today is All Saints Day. What about others? We know that we go to be with Jesus. But what about the saints?

Now let me just be clear. A saint in Scripture is not necessarily someone who's died in the faith. We're all saints. Paul writes letters and addresses them "to the saints at Corinth" or "to the saints at Galatia" or "to the saints at Philippi." He's saying to all those who are believers in that place.

In the Roman Catholic Church a saint has a different picture. A saint is one who has been sainted because of the ability to do miracles and other things.

But in this case, saints continue after they die as saints. So, what about them? The truth is, if you think about it logically, if the essence of heaven is being with Jesus, and we're all with Jesus, then aren't we all together.

There's one question that people ask me often. It comes when they've lost someone so special to them that their hearts are broken because they've loved them so much. Seldom do they ask, "Are they with God?" Never has anyone asked me, "Are there streets of gold? Is there work in heaven? Is there pain in heaven?" No one has ever asked me that. But here's what they ask: "Will I see them again? Am I going to know them? Can they see me now?"

The Scripture is really clear that what we do on earth impacts what happens in heaven. We don't live in two worlds like the ancient Greek gods. They were concerned with humanity, they had all sorts of games, affairs and all sorts of things between one another. Human beings just went on about their business.

No, not at all. The picture we get in heaven is what happens on earth makes an impact in heaven. Jesus tells the parable about one sheep who wanders off. Then he says, "There's more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who have no need of repentance." One sinner repenting creates a party in heaven. Of course they're watching us.

The passage that is usually used for us is from Hebrews chapters 11 and 12. In Hebrews 11 the author explains all the saints who've gone before - Abraham, Moses and all of those who have died in the faith. Then in chapter 12 he uses the image of a race, that we run that all of those witnesses are there, cheering us on. "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

Kerry Nelson, the pastor at Faith Lutheran said something that really spoke to me. He said, "We often think that the saints are up in heaven, far away in heaven. But they are just over our heads, cheering us on."

I have to tell you that today, on All Saints Day, I think about that. It means a lot to me that Dr. Jim Moore is right over my head, cheering me on. It means a lot to me that Martha Loyd is interceding for me, just like she prayed for me every day. It means a lot to me that Kathryn Jager is cheering on our confirmands in sixth, seventh and eighth grade, praying for them, encouraging them, just like she did for three decades. It means a lot to me that as we worship today Ed Gerlach is playing his saxophone right along with us.

I suspect you've lost someone you love. I want you to know they're right over your head as you run the race that is set before you, cheering you on.

Now, the Scripture does speak of a day of a general resurrection. The greatest discussion about life after death is indeed this notion of resurrection. That there will be a day when we will be given a body that is different than the kind of body we have now. You can't decide if you want to have your 18-year-old body or your 30-year-old body, or your 60-year-old body. No, it's an altogether different body, one that can never die. Paul uses of the image where you plant a seed and a different kind of plant comes up. And when we die, we're planted in a different kind of body comes up. We are raised in a different kind of body.

The notion that we might just sleep until that day is troubling to some. Let me ask you this question: "How many of you want to go to heaven?" Raise your hands if you want to go to heaven. That's a pretty good group, pretty good. I'd say the majority. How many of you want to go to heaven right now! Well, not as good a turnout. Not as interested in that.

Now, let me ask this. If heaven is this awesome amazing place, why don't you want to go right now? Wouldn't it be awesome though to know that all your life you work in labor for the Kingdom of God? You lean in so that love and justice triumphs over hate and injustice. You live by these principles of the Kingdom, working hard to bring the Kingdom to pass right here on earth. Then one day you go to sleep. And when you wake up, it's all done. It's all done. Sin is defeated. Injustice is no longer, disease is gone. Pain and mourning are no more. That all the work you did in the days you were here were not in vain. But, in fact, God finished the work and you got to be a part of it. That's awesome. That will come someday.

But until then we know the end of the story for us. We know that heaven awaits. That we will go home. That we will go be with Jesus in relationship. And that until that day comes, we will run the race set before us, knowing that the saints are cheering us on.

Let's pray together. *Gracious and loving God, we confess that we sometimes wonder about the end of the story. So we ask that you strengthen our faith, speak into our hearts with your Holy Spirit and reveal to us just a glimpse of what the future holds for us. Help us to hear the voices of the saints, singing along with us, cheering us along as we race on our journey. Until that day we go home and wait until that day when you make everything perfect. In the name of Christ we pray, Amen.*