

The Covenant Pulpit



**“Heaven, Help Us:
Our Eternal Hope”
John 14:1-6**

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Introduction

The idea of Heaven has fallen on hard times here on earth. Many people are skeptical about heaven; others are just ambivalent. Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli in their *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* answer twenty-nine common objections to belief in heaven! Who knew there were so many arguments against heaven?

Christians themselves are not quite sure what to think of heaven. We are often afraid that if we focus too much on heaven we will no longer be any earthly good. We are also afraid of the charge of escapism, that our preoccupation with heaven is just a way to escape our responsibilities to this life and to earth. It is nothing more, skeptics say, than a necessary drug to help us cope with the difficulties and drudgeries of this life.

I have personally spoken to many Christians who admit that they do not think of heaven on a regular basis, or that it seems boring. What John Eldredge has written in his book *Journey of Desire* is unfortunately true:

“Nearly every Christian I have spoken with has some idea that eternity is an unending church service.... We have settled on an image of the never-ending sing-along in the sky, one great hymn after another, forever and ever, amen. And our heart sinks. *Forever and ever? That's it? That's the good news?* And then we sigh and feel guilty that we are not more 'spiritual.' We lose heart, and we turn once more to the present to find what life we can.”

This is partly understandable. Heaven is outside our realm of experience. We cannot see it, touch it, or taste it—at least not with our physical senses. The problem is also due to the many

myths and misconceptions out there about heaven. Even Christians are often guilty of failing to let the Bible be their authoritative source on heaven. We form our ideas from what we see in movies or on TV, or from our conversations with others. Hence this five-part sermon series on heaven. We hope to correct those misconceptions with the biblical evidence, and to inspire you to once again find hope in the exhilarating truth of heaven. The question we need to answer this morning, however, is:

Why on earth do we need to learn about heaven?

Tomorrow will be Monday, and we need to know what difference Heaven makes in our daily lives here today! We need Heaven to help us. What we will find is that far from being untrue or irrelevant, our eternal hope for tomorrow gives us help for today.

The first thing we need to mention is that **Heaven is the one thing that everyone wants**. I know that may sound ridiculous at first; however, we need to learn about heaven because I am convinced that it is the one thing that both Christians and non-Christians desperately want.

Up until this week, I have been concerned about how little people think about heaven and desire heaven; but something I read by C.S. Lewis changed everything (*Like most preachers, I struggle with the sin of wanting to be admired for my originality and brilliance, regardless of how useful those ideas may be. Yet I have to admit that there is hardly an original thought in my head. In my thinking on heaven I am especially indebted to writers like C.S. Lewis*). I think Lewis is right when he says: "There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven; but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, we have

ever desired anything else.”¹ What that means is that *heaven is the deepest desire of every person's heart, whether they know it or not*. Christian or not, people spend their entire lives trying to fulfill a deep spiritual longing. It's what gets us up in the morning and keeps us up late at night. We all want paradise. We all have an undeniable memory of Eden. We are all in our own way trying to get back home. This should not surprise us. We were made for God and for eternity. Ecclesiastes even says, “he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (3:11). Our longing for heaven is the one thing that most of us are afraid to admit and yet cannot deny. Now the fact that everyone has an innate and inescapable longing for heaven is not the same as saying that everyone is seeking for God. Let me show you what I mean.

It is a supreme irony that *even those who deny heaven's existence give their entire lives to finding it on earth*. There are very few consistent atheists or materialists. On the one hand, some will say that heaven is a myth, and yet they turn around and spend all their lives searching for satisfaction, meaning, and happiness. Their lives are consumed by a search for something more, something better, something that lasts. Or sometimes they determine to create heaven on earth through laboring to create a society that will be free from poverty, pollution, crime, alienation, and war. But all utopian endeavors have failed. The unbelieving heart does not know it or admit it, but this longing, this impelling force, is a desire for heaven. Even unbelievers pursue it in their work, their hobbies, their relationships, in creating and appreciating art, in collecting possessions, and in seeking for the elusive fountain of youth. Why is it that those who have everything still admit an

¹ *The Problem of Pain*, 149.

emptiness inside? It's because they were made for heaven, and nothing on this earth can quench that thirst.

Another ironic truth is that *those who do believe in heaven often mistake it for the things of earth*. Even Christians try to satisfy this desire for heaven with the things of earth. I've heard many Christians say that heaven seems boring, or that they want to experience things here on earth first, and then they will enjoy heaven. The lyrics to a song by the popular crossover Country star Kenny Chesney sums up how many people feel about heaven:

*"Everybody wants to go to heaven,
Spread their wings and fly away;
Everybody wants to go to heaven,
But nobody wants to go now."*

Why is that? Well, I think that we tend to think that heaven is not much more enjoyable than earth. More importantly, I think we are tempted to find what only heaven can offer in the things of this life. If we look at the biblical teaching on heaven though, we will find that there is nothing in this earth that will be able to compare with it.

On the last night Jesus had with his disciples, he shared with them on the topic of heaven. We find that passage in The Gospel according to John, chapter 14, verses 1 through 6:

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. 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? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we

know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

The second thing we need to know, which this passage teaches us, is that **Heaven helps us live by faith in *this* life.** Jesus was preparing the disciples for life without him. He was about to return to the Father by way of the cross and the tomb. These were critical moments for preparing them to live between his going and his returning. He taught on several things that night, but he began his discourse with the truth about Heaven. The amazing thing is that he wanted the disciples to see how Heaven could help them live on earth. He told them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me" (v. 1). We see there that the hope of Heaven is intended to help us live by faith in this life. It's not irrelevant, it is crucial. The picture Jesus paints is far from boring, but a captivating and compelling image of the paradise for which we are all looking. Jesus' teaching on Heaven here shows us a few things about what it means to live by faith in this life.

First, we see this life for what it is. When we keep Heaven in view, this life stays in proper focus. This life is *short*. The mortality rate for human beings is 100%. We need to remember that. Philip of Macedon, the Father of Alexander the Great, commissioned a servant to stand in his presence each day to tell him, "Philip, you will die!"² In Psalm 39:4 David reflected on the brevity of life and prayed:

"O LORD, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,

² Cited by Randy Alcorn in *Heaven*, p. xix.

and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!"

Compared to eternity, this life is just a blip on the screen. When measured against eternity, this life is no longer than the width of my hand. I am just a breath, and then—poof!—I'm gone. But then eternity begins.

Secondly, this life is *not all there is*. Jesus reinforces the truth of Heaven's existence when he says, "If it were not so, would I have told you?" (v. 2). Jesus speaks of Heaven with the same clarity and familiarity that you and I would use to describe our childhood home. Jesus knows Heaven is real. He came from there. He also uses concrete and everyday images to make Heaven tangible for us. It is like a house, a very big house, with many rooms. It is a place, and there is a place there for each of God's children.

Thirdly, this life is *full of trouble*. We need to be careful to not confuse heaven with earth. Although the reality of God's kingdom and his salvation have broken into this world, the full promises of heaven are still in the distance. In the meantime, we will have trouble and hardship here. Jesus encouraged them to keep their hearts from being troubled because he knew they would face troubling circumstances. Later in his discourse he told them, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). And so as real as Heaven is, we cannot expect to enjoy it fully in this life. We must wait for it by faith. If we do, it will strengthen us to carry on.

The second way that Heaven helps us live by faith in this life is that *we see human beings for who are they are*. People are immortal. There are no "ordinary" people. Because they are

made for eternity, they will spend eternity either inside the Father's house or outside it. No one has put it better than C.S. Lewis:

"It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship.... All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations....There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal."³

Every person we come in contact with is worthy of our love, respect, and our witness. If we see them in light of eternity, we will treat our neighbors as immortal beings, created by God, and destined for one of two ultimate realities.

Lastly, Heaven helps us see "the weight of glory" that outweighs everything in this life. In 2 Corinthians 4:17, The Apostle Paul tells us that "this slight and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." In other words, Heaven will so far outweigh anything we may experience in this life. He also reiterated this point in Romans 8:18: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

Although Jesus did not tell us everything about Heaven, he gave us just enough of a glimpse that we can see why the Apostle Paul considered Heaven to be incomparably greater than this life. He compared Heaven to a large, palatial home

³ *The Weight of Glory*, p. 46.

that belonged to God the Father. It will be family, acceptance, love, and belonging, which we all long for in this life. Everything will be provided out of the wealth of God. Secondly, Jesus told us that we will be *with* Christ. Someone has said that the one who has everything and has God has no more than he who has only God. This is going to be the eternal bliss that we seek, being with Christ and where he is. Thinking on this great truth, the Apostle Paul exclaimed, "So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk not by faith, but by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:6-7). Death will be a great homecoming in which we finally arrive at what Richard Baxter called, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*. We will finally be home. Which brings us to the final way that Heaven helps us.

Heaven helps us find our way home. After Jesus' heartfelt and clear description of Heaven, Thomas chimes in. Thank God for doubting Thomas. He is always asking the questions that everyone has is too afraid to ask. Thomas says, "Lord, we do not know where you are going, How can we know the way?" (v. 5). It's actually a great question. It reveals Thomas' unbelief and less than erudite understanding of who Jesus is, but it helps us wrestle with the most basic question of how we get to Heaven.

Thomas' question was based on good logic. *If we do not know the place, how can we know the way?* If I told you to meet me in Tick Bite, North Carolina, could you get there? No, because you do not know where it is (nor does hardly anyone else), much less how to get there. Randy Alcorn in his book *Heaven* tells us to imagine being a part of a NASA team

preparing for a five-year trip to Mars. Then imagine that just before liftoff one of your fellow astronauts asks you, "What do you know about Mars?" You shrug your shoulders and say, "Nothing. We never talked about it. I guess we'll find out when we get there." Would that make you confident and excited to face the journey? Hardly. If we are going to get to Heaven, it would make sense to know something about it. You cannot Mapquest Heaven, and your Garmin will not get you there either.

Heaven is one of two options for our eternal destiny. There is no *tertium quid*. Eternity is an "either-or" destination. There is an infinite chasm that separates Heaven and Hell. We cannot have both Heaven and Hell, much less a third option in between. Things do not just "work out" in the end. We are not justified by death. Death is not the heroic act that earns you a place in the Father's house. So back to Thomas' question: How do we find our way?

Jesus answers Thomas' question with his typical patience and compassion: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (v. 6). *Christ is the only way to the deepest desire of our hearts.* Heaven is the deepest desire of everyone's hearts, and Heaven is a real place. However, the only way to get there is through Jesus Christ. There are no shortcuts, no bypasses. All roads do not lead to God or to Heaven. Jesus is not a postmodern. He is frustratingly intolerant when it comes to his identity. He calls Heaven, "*my Father's house,*" and claims that "*I go to prepare a place for you.*" Lest we incorrectly think that Jesus is offering himself as one of many ways to Heaven, Jesus caps it all off with the exclusive, "No one comes to the Father, except through me."

Jesus has the right to say this because he is God and was with God from the beginning (John 1:1). He came from the Father and returned to the Father. But he went the same way that you and I will. He passed through the gates of death. We all live in fear of death. Woody Allen once quipped, "I am not afraid to die; I just don't want to be there when it happens!" Jesus Christ, though, faced death and conquered it. The writer of Hebrews explains that "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Jesus Christ came to pass through death on his way to eternity, so that those who place their faith in him will find him the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He earned Heaven for us by his death and resurrection; we receive it through believing in him.

Conclusion: Keep Your Eyes on the Shore

As a young woman, Florence Chadwick was the first woman to swim both directions across the English Channel. On July 4, 1952, she attempted to swim the twenty-six-mile stretch from Catalina Island to the California mainland. The water was cold and thick fog settled in. Men had to follow her in boats to shoot at the sharks that approached her. Florence became tired and demoralized. Her mother cheered her on as Americans watched on television. Finally, after swimming for over fifteen hours, Florence asked to be taken out of the water. She soon realized that she stopped just a half-mile from the shore. She later told reporters, *"All I could see was the fog. Look, I'm not excusing myself, but I think if I could have seen the shore, I would*

have made it."⁴ We need to keep our eyes on the shore. The hope of Heaven is true, and if we keep our eyes on it, God will strengthen our faith as he cheers us on to our eternal home.

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⁴ Chadwick's story is told by Brian Cavanaugh in *A Fresh Packet of Sower's Seeds* and also at <http://www.answers.com/topic/florence-chadwick>.