

Finally, for the first time since I began preaching I have come up with the perfect ending to a sermon series. The past 10 weeks we have been following the promise of God from Genesis to Revelation. We discovered that the Bible addresses four fundamental questions: CREATION – FALL – REDEMPTION and RE-CREATION. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and everything in them and everything was perfect. But the disobedience of Adam and Eve brought depravity and death. Adam was taken from the dirt and to the dirt he returned. As a result of the fall, we are exiles from the garden and we too will return to the dirt. But God gave us clues pointing to a day of redemption when we would be raised up and saved from the pain of our fallen state. Salvation came through the seed of Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, and David. The prophets described a day when God would make things right by sending a deliverer, the Messiah. When Jesus asked Peter, “Who do you say that I am,” Peter responded, “You are the Christ.” You are the one God promised to deliver us and redeem us and take us back to the Garden. Last week we saw that the road of redemption is marked by suffering. Still, Paul said that one of these days old things would pass away and new things would come. The sufferings of this present time are not to be compared with what awaits those who trust in Christ. One of these days things will be like they were in the Garden. One of these days we will be taken up from out of the dirt, from out of the fall and be in right relationship with God again. One of these days the story will end happily ever after, a perfect ending to the greatest story ever told.

I want to take a few minutes this morning to think about heaven. As I have done so this week I have been under conviction that maybe we don’t think about it enough. Richard Baxter was a beloved pastor in England in the 1600s. His whole adult life was spent battling one sickness after another. He was harassed by a constant coughs, frequent nosebleeds, migraine headaches, digestive ailments, kidney stones, and gallstones. He once said that from the age of 21 he was "seldom an hour free from pain." One of the effects of this suffering was to make him intensely conscious of how temporary life is and how inevitable death is. Once, when he was 35, he was bed-bound by one of his diseases and thought he would probably not recover. He began to meditate on the joys of heaven and the age to come in preparation for leaving this world. He focused especially on "the hope of glory" and began to write his thoughts. His writings became a book (*The Saints’ Everlasting Rest*) but when, to his surprise, he recovered, he took up the practice of meditating on heaven a half hour each day because of the powerful impact it had on his life. He commended the same thing to his readers.

Others have expressed the importance of meditating on heaven:

“He whose head is in heaven need not fear to put his feet into the grave.” Matthew Henry.

“It becomes us to spend this life only as a journey toward heaven...to which we should all subordinate all other concerns of life.” Jonathan Edwards

Some people think that those who live this way are “too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.” But history disputes that claim. C.S. Lewis pointed out:

“If you read history, you will find that the 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. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither.”

The Apostle Paul says it pretty succinctly in **Colossians 3:2**: “Set your mind on the things

above, not on the things that are on earth.” Let’s see what the Bible says about “the things above.”

A lot of people carry around some serious misconceptions about heaven. They cut and paste from a hodgepodge of beliefs picked up from Greek philosophy and Hallmark cards, beliefs that are disconnected from what the Bible actually says. For example:

Top 10 Misconceptions of Heaven

- 10) The streets will be made of gold.
- 9) We will sing worship songs forever. Heaven is a never-ending sing-along in the sky.
- 8) We will have wings and fly.
- 7) We will strum harps all day long.
- 6) We will float on clouds.
- 5) We will wear white togas.
- 4) We will be disembodied spirits.
- 3) Our departed relatives are looking down and smiling at us.
- 2) We will be turned into fat babies that look like Cupid.
- 1) We will ALL be there. Sadly, that won’t be the case.

Randy Alcorn in his book on heaven quotes a person who speaks for a lot of us when he says, “Whenever I think about heaven, it makes me depressed. I’d rather just cease to exist when I die. I can’t stand the thought of that endless tedium. To float around in the clouds with nothing to do but strum a harp. It’s all so terribly boring. Heaven doesn’t sound much better than hell. I’d rather be annihilated than spend eternity in a place like that.”

What a horrible ending that would be to such a beautiful story. Fortunately these misconceptions don’t come from the Bible. The Bible paints a much different picture. In fact, God has given His imperfect people the perfect ending to a perfect story. Here are seven reasons to keep your eye on the sky:

1. We will enjoy a perfect creation. Rev. 21 describes a “New Heaven and a New Earth.” In the middle of the city described in 21:10-27 we will find the tree of life “which is in the paradise of God.” (Rev. 2:7). This is the same tree of life that was in the Garden of Eden. Ever wonder what happened to the Garden of Eden? It was not destroyed when Adam and Eve sinned. What was destroyed was their ability to live there. Remember the flaming swords of the cherubim guarding the Garden in the last verse of Genesis 3? The tree of life is still in the Garden of Eden which will be on the New Earth in the New Jerusalem on both sides of a great river. It sounds like it will be the center piece of Heaven. Maybe the Garden of Eden is a great park in the center of the Celestial City, like Central Park in New York City – with one “minor” exception: there is “No longer any sea.” (21:1). To the Jews of Jesus’ day the sea was a frightening, unpredictable place. Those who lived near the sea, the Philistines, were a frightening, unpredictable people. In John’s vision there is no more sea or no more chaos. It is no accident that the Bible refers to our future home as “paradise.” One Bible scholar points out that a paradise is not a wild place but a place that is under someone’s management. “The idea of a walled garden enclosing a carefully cultivated area of exquisite plants and animals was the most powerful symbol of paradise available to the human imagination, mingling images of the beauty of nature with the orderliness of human construction.” Alister McGrath

2. We will enjoy a perfect physical body. People often think of heaven as a spiritual or non-

physical place where spiritual non-physical beings float around. As one writer says, “Trying to develop an appetite for a disembodied existence in a non-physical Heaven is like trying to develop an appetite for gravel.” (Alcorn, p. 7) We have no appetite for gravel because we were not designed to eat gravel. We have no appetite for a disembodied experience because we were made for a physical experience. **Philippians 3:20-21**, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹ who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.” We will have bodies untouched by disease or pain.

3. We will enjoy a perfect spiritual experience. Just as the New Heaven and the New Earth will share some resemblance to this earth, we experience occasional glimpses of spiritual life and vitality that reflect life in heaven but now they are obscured by the fog of sin. We “see through a glass darkly” but we do see. Some day we will see face to face. Paul goes on to say: “Now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.” **1**

Corinthians 13:12 We will know then just as God fully knows each one of us now.

John likens our relationship to Jesus as that of a bride and groom in v. 9. What is it about weddings that move people to tears? There is something within us that is stirred by the thought of a young man and woman joining their lives together and becoming one. Marriage is one of God’s better ideas. When it’s working right it helps us understand the spiritual intimacy we will experience some day in a restored world.

God not only plans to restore the earth but He also plans to restore the kind of relationship Adam and Eve had in the beginning. Redemption is not adding something that wasn’t there before but it is restoring the intimacy and vitality previously enjoyed in the Garden. The only thing redemption adds is the remedy for sin. Once sin is removed then we experience all the “re’s” of the Bible: Redemption, Restoration, Recovery, Renewal, Regeneration, and Resurrection.

4. We will enjoy a perfect family. Heaven is described as a city. What do you think of when you think of a city? Traffic, smog, crime? The city of God will not have any of those things but it will have people; people who get together for fellowship and meals, and work? We will live in a city built for millions of citizens rather than a Garden for two. Heaven is a real place but it is not just about where you are but who you’re with. We will be with our brothers and sisters. We even receive a new family name. “He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.” **Revelation 3:12**

5. We will enjoy a perfect home. In John 14 Jesus said, **John 14:1-3** "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. ² "In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. ³ "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also." Heaven is a place, a dwelling place. If it were not so, Jesus would have told us. Our future “place” will bear some resemblance to our current place. Since this same John speaks about a “New Earth” in Revelation then we can expect to find earthly things there like

mountains, water, trees, houses and streets. It's just that our place will be a perfect place in a perfect location. Even God knows the three rules of real estate...location, location, location.

6. We will enjoy perfect flavors from the tree of life....22:1-2. Just as Jesus joined His disciples for a meal after the resurrection, our resurrected bodies will not only be capable of eating and drinking but we will have resurrected taste buds. I can't wait to taste the wine that Jesus made at the wedding in Cana! Food isn't just functional. You've been to a fancy restaurant where it's not just about the nutritional value of the food it's about "presentation." You could throw every meal in a blender and get the nutrition you need but what a joy to sit down and not only taste but see and smell the food we eat. One of the joys of Thanksgiving Day is the smell of the turkey in the oven. I did a funeral last week and the man who participated with me in the message said, "Hope is the feeling you get when the cake is just about to come out of the oven."

7. We will enjoy the perfect ending. Everything will be made new...21:5. John tells us that God will come down to a New Heaven and a New Earth to live with us forever. This is the perfect ending to the story and it fits beautifully with everything we read in the Bible. According to God's original plan He came down to the earth He created to walk with Adam and Eve in a perfect relationship. He could have taken them to where He was but He didn't. The image presented in scripture is that we will be taken "up" temporarily until the New Heaven and the New Earth are prepared for us and then they will "come down" along with God who will "dwell among us." 21:3.

Within every human heart God has placed the desire for a resurrected life in a resurrected body with a resurrected Jesus on a resurrected earth. We can experience the fulfillment of that desire but let me remind you that the story does have alternate endings. It will not end well for some...21:7-8.

So how will YOUR story end? There is no reason to live the rest of your time on this earth wondering where you will be for eternity. I have been authorized to extend to you the invitation of 22:17 – Come! Heaven is offered to you at no cost. The reason is that Jesus has already paid the price for us. Everything you have ever wanted awaits you if you will simply open your hand and receive the gift of life.

I've kept a prayer card from last week reads, "Pray that I can let go of the sadness and anger and resentment that I have carried for my entire life. Help me to give it to God." Such an honest request from one who groans along with all creation as we wait to be restored. If you feel that way be comforted by the knowledge that there is a cure. Some day we will leave this sad place and enter a place where there is not anger and resentment. For now, keep your eyes on that distant shore.

In 1952 Florence Chadwick attempted to swim the 26 miles from Catalina Island to the shore of Southern California. She had already successfully swam the English Channel so this shouldn't have been too hard for her. But the weather was foggy and cold. She could hardly see the boats that accompany her. After 15 hours Florence begged to be taken out of the water. When she was safely in the boat she suddenly realized that she was less than a half mile from shore. The next day she said, "All I could see was the fog...I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it."

This morning we have the perfect way to express our appreciation for the perfect ending. We

are going to demonstrate our faith by participating in the practice Jesus instituted for us until He returns. He ate a final meal with His disciples and said, "*I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.*" (Luke 22:18). Some day we will share a meal with Jesus in heaven. Until then we keep this hope alive through these symbols of a greater reality to come.

"The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning." *The Last Battle*