

## Frequently Asked Questions: What is Heaven Like?

1/4 2011 FAQ Series

Revelation 21: 1-7

01 09 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

### Introduction to Series

This morning we begin our Winter Worship Series entitled **FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions**. The sermons are based on a congregational survey last month. During the next weeks, we will explore several faith questions, including:

- How Can I KNOW I'm Saved?
- What is God's will for my life?
- Frequently Asked Questions: An assortment of questions

We only find answers by asking questions, and our faith is strengthened by doubt that leads to God's truth. Together we can discover insight into these important topics. Today's most frequently asked question is: **"What is heaven like?"**

### Scripture: Revelation 21: 1-7

#### Introduction

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, once said in a sermon: *"I am passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God and returning to God . . . I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore."*

We all share in Wesley's desire to know the way to heaven. The Bible reveals that God's people are pilgrims traveling through this world to the next. According to 1 Peter 2: 11, we are *"aliens and strangers in the world."* We sing: *"I am bound for the promised land," "We're marching to Zion,"* and *"When we all get to heaven."*

We're marching through Emmanuel's ground to fairer worlds on high. Eternal life is our goal; heaven is journey's end. In *The Apostles' Creed*, we profess: *"I believe . . . in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting."* Amen!

#### I. Heaven Can Wait

Despite the central importance of heaven to the Christian faith, the subject receives relatively **little attention** in the contemporary church. I found ONE sermon in my files devoted solely to heaven. When I contacted eight other clergy and asked for their help, I received a number of jokes, a few illustrations, and one full-length sermon. I don't recall the subject receiving much attention in seminary. And only a few books in my library address the topic. I think there are a variety of reasons why heaven is often ignored in the modern church:

- 1) Many of us grew up in a time when heaven and hell were the ultimate carrot and stick used to **coerce** people to the altar. I attended numerous revival services in my

country church where the perils of hell and the rewards of heaven were vividly detailed. I still struggle with getting people to heaven by scaring the other out of them!

2) Talking about heaven also raises questions about **hell**. Although we know what the Bible and Christian theology teach about eternal damnation, it is not something we feel at ease considering.

3) The neglect of heaven also reflects our culture's love affair with this world. We enjoy such **materialistic abundance** that it is easy to focus on this world rather than the world-to-come. Hymnals reflect the church's theology. Earlier hymns sang about going to heaven and the delights of the afterlife. Today's hymnals—not so much. The temptation is to see ourselves as earthly settlers rather than heaven-bound pioneers.

4) Perhaps the main reason why people don't talk more about heaven is that there is a great deal that we **do not know**. With the exception of some questionable stories about "near death experiences," no one has ever returned from heaven with a travelogue description. 1 Corinthians 2: 9 says: "*No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.*" We are reduced to describing the indescribable and explaining the incomprehensible.

The German theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, said, "*The Bible tells us very little about the temperature of hell or the furniture of heaven!*" At best, we can draw broad outlines of God's promise of life everlasting. In 1 Corinthians 13: 12, Paul writes: "*Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*"

Let me say from the start that we'll end with more questions than answers today. However, there are some basic beliefs that we can affirm. Let's consider some of the questions we all have about heaven.

## II. Questions and Answers

### **A) What is heaven?**

The most basic question is "What *is* heaven?" C. S. Lewis described heaven as that remote music we're born remembering. We intuitively understand the nature of heaven, but it is difficult to define.

People often refer to heaven as "God's home;" however, this description can be misleading. We believe that God is in all times and places. Ultimately, heaven is dwelling fully in God's presence forever. The kingdom of heaven is the realm where God's children will live together in perfect communion with God and one another.

### **B) What about hell?**

Another challenge about discussing heaven is that it also raises the question of hell. The New Testament teaches that there are two eternal destinations for people: heaven or hell. Some traditions teach there is a third alternative of purgatory, but there is no compelling, Scriptural basis for this belief.

Although mainline ministers may avoid the topic, Jesus spoke more about hell than heaven. The *Articles of Religion* in The United Methodist Book of Discipline state:

*We believe all people stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and in the last day. We believe in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to endless condemnation.*

To be totally honest with you (and I typically try to be), I struggle with reconciling eternal damnation with divine grace. However, the New Testament plainly describes hell as the place of those forever alienated from God.

### **C) How do I get to heaven?**

The most important question is “How do I get to heaven?” A number of surveys indicate that over 80% of the American population believes in heaven, and about 70% plan to go there! I think this is a roadmap that we all want to possess!

During a worship service, a minister was teaching the **Children’s Sermon**. Then he made the classic mistake of asking a question. He said, “Can anyone tell me how we go to heaven?” And without hesitation, one of the little boys answered, “DIE!”

The child was absolutely right: the only way to get to heaven is to die. We must die to our old selves and be reborn as God’s children. In Jesus Christ, God acted once and for all to save us. At the cross, our sin is put to death. At the empty tomb, we are raised to new life. When we accept Christ as Savior and Lord, we receive eternal life.

Colin Williams said: *“This life is only a training ground for the one that is to come.”* The Holy Spirit is preparing us for our place in God’s kingdom. Yet the kingdom of heaven informs not only the future but also the present.

Salvation is much more than a heavenly fire insurance policy that protects us from the fires of hell. Eternal life begins the moment we become Christians. Heaven is not as disconnected from life on earth as we might first imagine. Christians have already entered into eternal life.

God gives us life, abundant life, and everlasting life. Our journey to heaven begins now, and death is but another step along the way.

### **D) What happens when I die?**

Humans naturally fear death. And even the most devout Christian can fear dying. For many, it’s not the destination but the trip between here and there that causes concern. There is much uncertainty about what happens at the moment of death. People who have near death experiences talk about floating away from their bodies towards a blinding light. Hollywood provides a variety of images that shapes our imagination. However, no one knows for certain exactly what happens when our mortal existence ends.

The majority of Scriptural passages SUGGEST that our spirit goes directly to dwell with God. Then on the Last Day, our bodies will be restored. However, the Bible’s witness on this topic is difficult to discern. This is short hand for, “I don’t know!”

We can claim Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 1: 12: *“Because I know whom I have believed and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.”* Whatever occurs at death, our souls rest secure in God’s hands.

When they were young, our children would occasionally wakeup in the middle of the night from bad dreams. I would hear the thump-thump-thump of tiny feet running on

the floor. Then a small body would vault into bed between us. Although they were afraid of the night, they knew that we waited for them at the end of the dark hall. In the same way, our heavenly Father awaits us on the far side of death's door. Do not be afraid.

#### **E) WILL I KNOW AND BE KNOWN?**

People often wonder if our identity will be preserved in heaven; and a corollary to this question is whether we will know others. The short answer to both questions is YES.

Despite popular theology that has been influenced by a Greek concept of immortality, the Bible does not teach that we have a body that encapsulates an immortal soul. Instead, we are body/soul creations. The Bible teaches that our entire being will be resurrected into new life.

In the Apostles' Creed, we affirm a belief in "*the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.*" The resurrection of the body first of all refers to Jesus' resurrection from the dead. However, believers are also given the promise of a new body that will differ dramatically from our present physical limitations.

Paul used the analogy of a seed sown in the ground, resulting in a rich harvest. In 1 Corinthians 15: 42-44, he wrote:

*So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."*

Our belief in the resurrection of the body points to an understanding that God honors and cherishes who we are as unique individuals. Christ affirms that every part of us is worth saving. In God's kingdom, everybody is somebody . . . and some body; and death is not going to stop that. After death, you will still be you, and I will still be me—just a new and improved version.

So I'm figuring on having Arnold Schwartzegger's younger body, Cam Newton's athletic ability, Tom Cruise's face, Paul Newman's eyes, and Hugh Jackman's charisma. And, of course, my own adorable personality!

We will also recognize loved ones present in heaven. However, our earthly relationships will be deepened and transformed by God's grace into something infinitely more valuable and worthwhile than we can presently imagine.

One of the comforting images often used at funeral is the reunion we anticipate with family and friends. All of God's people will be gathered before his throne. And we will never know the meaning of loneliness, separation, or grief again.

One of the FAQ survey questions asked if our **pets** go to heaven. The Scriptures are silent on this subject; however, Isaiah's prophecy about God's coming kingdom described the wolf and the lamb lying down together. So I believe that my Yorkshire Terrier will certainly make it! But I figure that roaches, mosquitoes, and snakes will be cast into the lake of unquenchable fire! Can I get an "Amen?!?"

#### **F) What is heaven like?**

This question sparks our imaginations. Our minds are filled with images inspired by songs, movies, books, and Scriptural passages. We imagine walking through the Pearly Gates on streets of gold with heavenly mansions on every side. God's glory shines from the center of the city while angels lounge on fluffy clouds, strumming their harps and polishing their halos.

Ultimately, the question is unanswerable and the reality is inexpressible. Even Jesus resorted to images, metaphors, and parables when describing heaven. Time and again he said, "*The kingdom of heaven is LIKE . . . .*"

Heaven is complete communion with God. We will praise and worship his holy name. The Heidelberg Catechism states: "*Humanity's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy God forever.*" But don't worry heaven is going to be far more than an everlasting church service! Think of those moments that make us feel the most, joyful, content, and fulfilled. Those times when we experience what it truly means to be the people God created us to be. This is but a hint and foretaste of what we anticipate in heaven.

My favorite description of heaven comes from Revelation 21: 3-4. John records:

*I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

Most of all, I believe that it will be like going **home**. Jesus promised: "*There are many homes up there where my Father lives; and I am going to prepare them for your coming. When everything is ready, then I will come and get you, so that you can always be with me where I am.*" (John 14: 1-4, *Living Bible*)

Arnold Schopenhauer said: "*Every parting gives us a foretaste of death; every coming together again a foretaste of resurrection.*" Our homecomings give us a glimpse of heaven itself.

The German language has a word that I will not even attempt to pronounce (*weltschmerz*). However, one translation is "*a homesickness for a place you're never been before.*" This vividly describes the Christian experience traveling as pilgrims through this foreign land to our heavenly home.

## Conclusion

Christian author, Max Lucado, tells a story about flying home to San Antonio one evening. When the airplane landed, one could hear the clicks of people unfastening their seatbelts. No one paid any attention to the stewardess announcing, "Please remain in your seats until the plane comes to a complete stop at the terminal." People were standing up, opening the overhead compartments, and getting ready to depart.

Why? It was because they had arrived home. Their final destination certainly was not the airplane—it was a means of transportation to someplace better. They wanted to get off the plane and go home to the people they loved.

None of the flight attendants had to convince people to get out of their seats. No one said, "Hey, I want to stay on the plane for a few more hours. The food is really good. The seats are comfy. I want to stay!" No, they could not wait to get off.

So why do we clutch to this world? This is not final destination. Heaven is our true home, and Christians cannot wait to arrive.

We are pilgrims traveling through this foreign land our heavenly home. Along the way, we are called to live in the here and now for God. We dare not be so heaven bound that we're no earthly good! And the good news is that heaven doesn't have to wait! God's kingdom is already present when we submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit's call.

What we do in this life prepares us for the next. Heaven and hell are not so much rewards and punishments as they are consequences of how we live today. As Christians, we affirm and look forward to heaven, but we live in the present where we encounter "*foretastes of glory divine.*" Eternal life begins in the here and now. And by God's grace, it will never end.

Amen.