

But Have Eternal Life

7/7 of Series 3:16

John 3: 16

09-13-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

Today we are concluding our worship series based upon John 3:16. Let's recite the passage together: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" We have examined each phrase of the verse. Today we come to the final words: "*but have eternal life.*"

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 describes God's people as 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, however, the subject receives relatively **little attention** in the contemporary church. When I searched my files on the topic, I found ONE sermon devoted solely to heaven. So I called two friends who have also been in the ministry over twenty years. Neither one of them had a sermon on heaven. I don't recall the subject receiving much attention in seminary. And only a few books in my library address the topic. There are a variety of reasons why heaven sometimes has to wait in the contemporary church.

- 1) First, many clergy and laity grew up in a time when heaven and hell were the ultimate carrot and stick used to **coerce** people to the altar. I sat through many a revival service in my country church where the perils of hell and the rewards of heaven were vividly detailed. I struggle with getting people to heaven by scaring the other out of them!
- 2) Secondly, I think our society's fear of **death** causes us to skirt the topic. A minister once asked during a children's sermon, "What do you have to do to get to heaven?" Without hesitation, one boy answered, "Die!"

During a revival, the preacher asked everyone who wanted to go to heaven to raise a hand. Everyone in the congregation except one young man on the back raised their hands. The preacher said, "Son, don't you want to go to heaven when you die?" And the man hastily answered, "Oh, YES SIR—I just thought you were getting a trip up tonight!"

As the Kenny Chesney song puts it: "*Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody want to go right now!*"

3) A third reason heaven is neglected is because it also raises questions about **hell**. Although we know what the Bible and Christian theology teach about eternal damnation, it is not something that we feel at ease considering. For those here last Sunday, you may have noted that it just so happened that Dee Dee had to preach on this topic while I was gone. I just don't know HOW the schedule happened to occur that way. Sometimes it's GOOD to be the senior minister!

4) The fourth and perhaps best reason why people don't talk more about heaven is there's a lot we **do not know**. With the exception of questionable stories about "*near death experiences*," no one who has gone to heaven has ever returned with a travelogue description. We are reduced to describing the indescribable and explaining the incomprehensible. 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.*"

Let me say from the start that we'll end with more questions than answers today. 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.* Until that final day, 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?" We intuitively understand the nature of heaven, but it is difficult to define. Heaven is the realm where God's children will live forever in perfect communion with God and one another. Although people often refer to heaven as "*God's home*," this can be misleading. We believe that God is in all times and places. Heaven is a reality beyond space and time. In God's kingdom, the Lord rules supreme.

B) What about hell?

I mentioned earlier that one of the challenges of talking about heaven is that one must also talk about hell. The New Testament teaches that there are two eternal destinations for all 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 often avoid the subject of hell, Jesus spoke more about hell than he did heaven. One of the *Articles of Religion* in The United Methodist Book of Discipline states:

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 completely honest with you (and I normally try to be), I struggle with reconciling eternal damnation and suffering with an understanding of divine love and grace. However, it is also impossible to ignore the subject in Scripture.

C) How do I get to heaven?

As the child told the preacher, 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 . . .

Humans naturally fear death. And even the most devout Christian can fear dying. 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 imaginations. However, no one knows for certain exactly what happens when our mortal existence ends.

The Bible's witness on this is difficult to discern. The majority of Scriptural passages suggest that our spirit goes directly to dwell with God. However, we can all 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, we can be confident that our souls rest securely in God's hands.

E) The Resurrection of the Body?

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, Paul 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."*

F) Will I know and be known in heaven?

Will we maintain our own identify and personality in the afterlife? Related to this question is whether we will know others that we have loved on earth. The answer to both is "Yes." In part, 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.

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 could ever 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.

G) 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 ever side. God's glory shines from the center of the city while angels lounge on fluffy clouds, strumming their harps and polishing their halos. A friend once said: "I'm not sure what heaven is going to be like. But I am sure that I'm gonna like it!"

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. Recall 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, it means "*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

We are pilgrims traveling through this foreign land our heavenly home. However, 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! Heaven doesn't have to wait! God's kingdom is already present when we submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit's call.

In his book on John Wesley entitled The Way to Heaven, Steve Harper wrote:

“Here is one of the strengths of (John) Wesley’s theology: It has a word for eternity, but it is a word that does not divide it from time. The word for the end of the journey (and beyond) is only a climax to the word for the start of the journey and its progress. The life we live now we live by faith in Jesus Christ, and this alone paves the way for the unspeakable joys of heaven.” (p. 100)

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 for how we live today. As Christians, we affirm and look forward to heaven, but we live in the present. The party has already begun, and the banquet is prepared. Eternal life is not just *“pie in the sky by and by when I die.”* Eternal life begins now. And by God’s grace, it will never end.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life!” Amen.