

“Who Art in Heaven”

Matthew 6:5-15

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It is virtually impossible to find any society in ancient or modern times that has NOT believed in the immortality of the human soul, and this includes the Aborigines, Eskimos, and Druids; the Greeks, the Romans, and the Persians; the Hindus, Buddhists, Shintoists, Taoists, Confucianists, and the myriad tribes of Africa in addition to the Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Hear, for instance, the words of Socrates:

*Let a man be of good cheer about his soul, if only it be arrayed in its proper jewels- in temperance and justice, nobility and truth. Thus adorned it will be ready, when the hour comes, to start on its journey to the other world. And there it will dwell in mansions far fairer than here; it will be like going from captivity to home.*

For the English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, the crown of his life’s work was his poem “In Memoriam,” a requiem for his dear friend from Cambridge, Arthur Hallam, who died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1833. Written over a period of seventeen years, it is Tennyson’s argument of the soul’s victory against death. The poem was a great favorite of Queen Victoria who found it to be a source of solace after the death of Prince Albert in 1861: “Next to the Bible,” she said, “*In Memoriam* is my comfort.” Tennyson ended his poem with lines expressive of his certainty that his friend still lived:

*Dear heavenly friend, that canst not die,  
Mine, mine, for ever, ever mine.*

. . . . .

*Far off thou art, but ever nigh;  
I have thee still, and I rejoice;  
I prosper, circled with thy voice;  
I shall not lose thee tho’ I die.*

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Robert G. Ingersoll was one of the most famous men in all America. He was a highly-regarded political leader but his GREATEST renown came for his public oratory and his outspoken defense of agnosticism. Though the son of a Presbyterian minister, he rebelled against the religion of his youth and spent the remainder of his life passionately defending the importance of free-thought. When his brother Ebon died in 1879, he had prepared an address to be read for the occasion. But when it was time for him to deliver it, he was too overcome with emotion to speak. He tried to hide his deep anguish behind his eye-glasses but he could not do it, eventually bowing his head upon his brother’s coffin in uncontrollable grief. It was only after some delay and the greatest efforts at self-mastery that Ingersoll was able to finish reading his address, which he concluded with these words:

*Life is a narrow vale between the cold and barren peaks of two eternities. We strive in vain to look beyond the heights. We cry aloud, and the only answer is the echo of a wailing cry. From the voiceless lips of the unreplying dead there comes no word; but in the night of death hope sees a star and listening love can hear the rustle of a wing. He who sleeps here, when dying, mistaking the approach of death for the return of health, whispered with his latest breath, "I am*

*better now." Let us believe, in spite of doubts and dogmas and tears and fears, that these dear words are true of all the countless dead.*

Thus, even the great Ingersoll had to admit that for all his questioning of the reality of God and of the afterlife, when forced to come face-to-face with the ultimacy and resoluteness of death, he could not surrender his hidden hope that his brother's life would not end there in that casket for even in the presence of death "hope sees a star and listening love can hear the rustle of a wing."

It seems undeniable that without hope of some kind, our lives would be hell on earth. Without hope, they would be dull, meaningless, lacking joy, and full of despair. Probably nothing symbolizes human hope better than one's yearnings for heaven- our visions of a life without want and suffering and strife in a world without end. I suspect that this relentless longing for a new and better world is actually a divine impulse, that it is part of the image of God within all of us.

Some years ago, *Newsweek Magazine* devoted five pages to the subject of "Heaven." Kenneth Woodward, who was then its religion editor, cited a Gallup poll which revealed that 77% of Americans believed there was a heaven and that 76% of them thought they had a good or excellent chance of getting there. Substantially fewer, 58% believed there was a hell and only 6% thought they had a good or excellent chance of getting there. When asked what heaven might be like, 91% said it would be peaceful; 83% thought they would be with God; 77% believed they would see people they know; 74% were convinced there will be humor; and 32% said that they'd be the same age in heaven as when they died on earth.

Though people have no difficulty believing in a heaven, everybody seems to have a different interpretation of what that heaven will be. For those who suffer from cancer, heaven is freedom from pain and the continued wasting away of their bodies. To many of the elderly, their GREATEST fear is that heaven is a place without their husbands or wives, fathers or mothers, sons or daughters. They want to know they won't be alone but surrounded by persons they love but who have since died. When I was a minister in Iowa, I had a member--Dorothy Sohner—who was 105 and she would ask me at least once every time I visited, "David, why does God continue to keep me around? I'm not afraid to die. I just want to close my eyes and wake up again and see Jesus and of course my Russ who I miss so very much"- Russ being her husband who had passed away many years earlier. The point is that ALL of us carry deep within ourselves a dream, a vision, a hope which we refuse to let die, and that dream is a constant source of consolation to us that often carries us through some of the darkest periods of our life. It is a vision of perfect peace and absolute love and THIS is our vision of heaven.

Now there have been a number of popular books on the subject that continue to top the Christian bestseller lists which some sociologists have referred to as a "heaven tourism" memoir. Within the past decade, there has been *90 Minutes In Heaven* by Texas pastor Don Piper in which he recounts the marvels of heaven he experienced during his alleged sojourn there following a near-fatal automobile accident, and *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back*, detailing a four-year old's time in heaven as told to his pastor father. But what IS the Bible's vision of heaven? It is actually a concept that has evolved over the centuries and even includes material from several ancient traditions. Abraham, we are told, "looked to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God," and Job could affirm amidst all his sufferings: "For I know that my redeemer lives, and that he shall stand at the

last day upon the earth: And though worms may destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another." The Jews did not believe in heaven but rather "sheol"- a shadowy chamber in the underworld which served as the abode of the dead. But with the later prophets, we see the Day the Lord--a day in which sin and death will be put away and all God's people shall live in peace with one another--begin to grow and take on greater significance. Isaiah said he longed for the day when:

*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. <sup>9</sup> They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*

and Daniel spoke of an age when:

*Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.*

Though the New Testament speaks again and again of this hope, it does not give a clear or full picture of what our permanent home will be. Some verses suggest a new order on a transformed earth while other passages suggest that the perfect order will not be on earth but in heaven where the multitudes stand before the throne of God and praise him and the Lamb for giving them salvation. In the Book of Revelation, the concluding book of the Bible, we read how the Apostle John was exiled to the island of Patmos where God gave him a vision of a new heaven and a new earth- one in which there was to be no more disease or death and God would wipe away every tear. It was a dream that sustained the early church during periods of some of her greatest persecution and it has CONTINUED to sustain the church for the past two thousand years- the hope that one day we would dwell in a new life in which peace and love and wholeness would be without end. HOWEVER, it is important to remember that what the Bible offers us is purely symbolic and NOT to be taken literally, that it represents for us the PERFECT IDEAL or the HIGHEST DREAMS AND ASPIRATIONS of the human soul. The fact is that what awaits God's people will be a THOUSAND times more beautiful and wondrous than what the Bible describes and what we could ever conceive in our own limited imaginations.

Now there's something I'd like to point out about the opening verse of The Lord's Prayer, that often gets overlooked. When we pray "Our Father, who art in Heaven," we are immediately presented with a theological conundrum, a seeming contradiction. As we saw last week, when we repeat "Our Father," we are addressing God in the MOST INTIMATE of terms. It begins by suggesting we are speaking to One who reveals himself to be imminently or immediately present to us, someone as close as the hair on our head or the air we breathe. However, when we pray, "Who art in heaven," it suggests something altogether DIFFERENT- that God is not actually near and dear to us AT ALL but as distant as God can be from us, that rather than being present to us along with our immediate needs or pressing concerns, this "Father" of ours is instead safely ensconced "IN HEAVEN" somewhere. We are given the impression that rather than God being RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW as the one who makes us—his children--the objects of his ULTIMATE DESIRE, it seems we're forced to talk to God as though through some kind of an invisible speaker phone and that we won't REALLY have that

intimate encounter we all long for until we have finally died and are in heaven OURSELVES. Is this REALLY what prayer is all about! I don't want to talk to God "IN HEAVEN!" I want to make contact with God IN THE HERE AND NOW, with a God SO CLOSE that he can even feel my deepest fears and hear my unspoken thoughts. I want to be able to pray, "Our Father-you who are so intimate that you are not only before and behind, below and above, but even WITHIN me, hallowed be thy name!"

However, this seeming contradiction is resolved if we conceive of "heaven," not in SPATIAL terms, that is, as a specific locale residing up in the sky, off in the heavenlies, but rather in RELATIONAL terms. It is to think of heaven as that rare privilege we members of God's creation share by abiding in THE MOST SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP THERE IS. Even to Jesus, heaven remained a great mystery, but one he viewed, not as a place where one might enjoy endless material pleasure but rather as a form of life involving eternal communion with the Living God. When in the beginning of his prayer he so scandalously addresses Jehovah as Father, a salutation no good Jew would EVER dare use, he employs as personal a greeting as there is and thus precisely reveals this relational connection between them.

Of course, many men have helped bring children into this world without taking any kind of responsibility for them, that is, without providing the love and support, the protection and instruction their offspring require. In no way do they qualify in any sense to be their father. On the other hand, there are those who have no biological connection to children and yet have fulfilled the highest demands that any parent possibly could toward them. As their provider and protector, their mentor and caregiver, they have been "fathers" and "mothers" in the best sense of the word. This is what a TRUE father DOES and God becomes its GREATEST model and exemplar by demonstrating his OWN love and care and oversight towards HIS son, Jesus.

Far more than a reward for good behavior, Jesus viewed heaven as essentially consisting of this kind of vital relationship, that it was the believer's TRUE home and our ULTIMATE human destiny. It is to be incorporated into God's family with God as our Father and Christ himself as our brother, sharing the same status and privileges HE HIMSELF had been accorded. Rather than a PLACE, it is to regard heaven first and foremost as a PERSON and to live in a most dynamic and intimate relationship WITH this person who is none other than Jesus Christ himself, God's own Son. It was THROUGH him we first discovered who God is and as we CONTINUE to abide WITH him, we experience and abide with GOD. Thus, we can say that wherever Jesus is found, THAT is where heaven begins. Wherever Christ is, there is release from fear, release from guilt, release from hatred and pride and jealousy and self-love. He replaces such destructive passions with his own love, his peace, his gentleness, his self-control- and THAT is the start of heaven in our lives. Christ breaks the power of those things that make our lives a living hell in order to give us a fresh start in life, a whole new beginning with God's own values filling our heart. And if we think of God in such relational terms, then it really doesn't matter WHERE heaven is or WHAT it may in fact look like. After that, such questions simply become moot or inconsequential.

Scripture is clear, that heaven does not start once we die but begins in the HERE AND NOW- in our fellowship with Christ and with one another- with OTHER members of the family of God. The first fruits of heaven begin in the PRESENT as we discover the richness of loving and being loved by others, beginning with the primacy of our relationship to JESUS CHRIST HIMSELF. To commit ourselves to the Body of Christ, to discover real fellowship in the

presence of Christ, to worship our Lord and Savior with a single heart and common voice- THIS is in fact where heaven begins for us.

Finally, regardless of WHERE heaven is or WHAT it may subsequently look like, we know that heaven in the end is a relationship that will create and foster an environment of perfect justice and righteousness, where sin and death will be no more and Christ himself shall dry our tears. Then in that day, that kingdom—CHRIST’S kingdom--which we pray for each Sunday to come, the one in which God's will is to be done, shall finally be realized. God's law will no longer be etched upon stone tablets but inscribed upon the soft flesh of our hearts. Instead of rebelling, we will live in glad obedience to our Lord, with our love for him matched by our love for one another.

THIS then is our hope- believed by faith, witnessed to by Christ in his Word, and attested to by his Spirit in our hearts. It was the hope for which the early church believed in, even suffered and died for, and it is a hope God keeps alive in our hearts TODAY. That very same promise which sustained the hope of Abraham and Job and Isaiah, which carried the Israelites through years of exile and enemy occupation, which enabled the disciples and early church to persevere amidst all their persecution, which inspired Luther, Calvin, and Knox and emboldened the great martyrs of the faith- that same promise is now offered to US. And we are told that if we TOO hold onto that dream and never let go of it, our OWN faith shall be renewed, enabling US to remain faithful and strong in the midst of life’s trials and tribulations- even the WORST of them.

My friends, as people of faith, this is not some grand fiction concocted from out of our own wild imaginations, nor are we merely “hoping against hope” here out of our great fear of the unknown, of what lies beyond death’s door. This is the PROMISE OF GOD and it is one God makes to his children THIS VERY MORNING- the pledge that in spite of the lack of clarity and all the unanswered questions we still have, we are loved with an everlasting love and that nothing—no NOTHING--will ever separate us from either his presence or his love- and that INCLUDES death! It is this PROMISE that makes heaven a reality for us for REGARDLESS of what may lie on the other side of that great mystery we call “death,” we CAN be assured that he who holds our hand on THIS side of it pledges he will no less be clasping it on the OTHER side AS WELL. Hence, I no longer speculate as to WHAT heaven may look like or WHERE it will be for I am now MORE concerned with WHO it is that knows my name and of his assurance that he will never leave or forsake me. It is the same promise found in those immortal words by St. Paul to the church in Rome when he asked:

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Thus, therein lies the secret of heaven: it is to KNOW HIM and to LIVE EACH DAY with this hope firmly fixed on our minds and in our hearts- nothing more and nothing less. Yes, heaven CAN be ours this morning- that is, if we TOO grasp this promise and never let it go. Let us pray . . .

*Heavenly Father, we are unworthy of your love and of the many blessings we have found ourselves the recipients of. Help us to remain humble and contrite before you. May we never become so HEAVENLY-minded that we are of no earthly good, or so EARTHLY-minded that we no longer take thought of our promised inheritance. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*