

H • E • A • V • E • N

then • there • BIG • REAL • now •
WORSHIP • here • reward • body •
dwelling • marriage • FOREVER



H E A V E N

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H E A V E N

Contents & Schedule*

*For this sermon series, Sunday teaching will precede homegroup discussion for each study.

Introduction	1	Week Seven	31
Heaven		Heaven is for Those Not Destined for Hell	
Sermon date: September 21st		Mark 9:42-50	
		Sermon date: November 9th	
		Homegroup Discussion: Nov. 11th–Nov. 13th	
Week One	3	Week Eight	37
Heaven is for Real		Heaven is for Rewards	
Isaiah 65:17-25		1 Corinthians 3:10-15	
Sermon date: September 28th		Sermon date: November 16th	
Homegroup Discussion: Sept. 30th–Oct. 2nd		Homegroup Discussion: Nov. 18th–Nov. 20th	
Week Two	9	Week Nine	41
Heaven is for There		Heaven is for the Body	
Philippians 1:21-23		Romans 8:23-25	
Sermon date: October 5th		Sermon date: November 23rd	
Homegroup Discussion: Oct. 7th–Oct. 9th		Week Ten	45
Week Three	13	Heaven is for Worship	
Heaven is for Then		Revelation 4-5	
2 Peter 3:13		Sermon date: November 30th	
Sermon date: October 12th		Homegroup Discussion: Dec. 2nd–Dec. 4th	
Homegroup Discussion: Oct. 14th–Oct. 16th		Week Eleven	51
Week Four	17	Heaven is for Big Government	
Heaven is for Here		Isaiah 9:6-7	
Romans 8:18-25		Sermon date: December 7th	
Sermon date: October 19th		Homegroup Discussion: Dec. 9th–Dec.11th	
Homegroup Discussion: Oct. 21st–Oct. 23rd		Week Twelve:	57
Week Five	21	Heaven is for Marriage	
Heaven is for Now		Revelation 19:1-21	
Luke 17:20-21		Sermon date: December 14th	
Sermon date: October 26th		Week Thirteen	61
Homegroup Discussion: Oct. 28th–Oct. 30th		Heaven Is for Our Permanent Dwelling	
Week Six	27	Revelation 21:1–22:5	
Heaven is for our Longings		Sermon date: December 21st	
Romans 8:23-25			
Sermon date: November 2nd			
Homegroup Discussion: Nov. 4th–Nov. 6th			

Introduction

Heaven

The man who is about to sail for Australia or New Zealand as a settler, is naturally anxious to know something about his future home, its climate, its employments, its inhabitants, its ways, its customs. All these are subjects of deep interest to him. You are leaving the land of your nativity, you are going to spend the rest of your life in a new hemisphere. It would be strange indeed if you did not desire information about your new abode. Now surely, if we hope to dwell for ever in that “better country, even a heavenly one,” we ought to seek all the knowledge we can get about it. Before we go to our eternal home we should try to become acquainted with it.

J. C. Ryle

Heaven. Some surveys reveal that more Americans believe in Heaven than believe in God. And it turns out that most of us believe we will go there when we die, even if we don't believe in God! Furthermore, when we dig a little into the recesses of our minds, even in the evangelical church, we find that we have a fairly mushy, non-biblical understanding of what Heaven is, what it will be like and what we will do there. If we are honest we find it difficult to understand how Heaven will not be boring and why we should want to go there.

Randy Alcorn, who will be quoted often in this study, has written a comprehensive book titled, simply, *Heaven*. Alcorn quotes one pastor who said to him, *Whenever I think about Heaven, it makes me depressed. I'd rather just cease to exist when I die.* When the author asked him why, the skeptical pastor spoke for many of us. *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.* (Alcorn, pp. 5-6)

On the other hand Jonathan Edwards, the great preacher of the first Great Awakening longed for heaven and saw all of life as preparation for his eternal abode. *It becomes us to spend this life only as a journey toward heaven...to which we should subordinate all other concerns of life. Why should we labor for or set our hearts on anything else, but that which is our proper end and true happiness?* Indeed, Edwards' sermon, *Heaven is a World of Love*, preached in 1738 makes us yearn for the delights of heaven.

To complicate matters we are fed a steady stream of books and movies purporting to tell us something about heaven that have little or no resemblance to the Bible's teaching on our eternal destiny. These include, *Ninety-Minutes in Heaven*, *Heaven is for Real*, *The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven*, *Five People You Meet in Heaven*, *My Journey to Heaven: What I Saw and How It Changed My Life*, *A Lone Survivor*, *A Journey to Heaven—and Back*, *To Heaven and Back: A Doctor's Extraordinary Account of Her Death*. And this list is far from complete.

During the fall of 2014 our church will study the biblical doctrine of Heaven. What is Heaven? Where is Heaven? Why do we want to go there? What will we do when we get there? And, will Heaven be any fun at all?

Each week we will ask the same question: What is Heaven for? And over the next thirteen Sundays we will ponder 13 different answers to this question.

This study guide will be quite different from one of our book studies. While each week the teacher will ponder a specific passage from Scripture, our study will be more reflective and exploratory on the teaching than our typical verse-by-verse examination of a particular book.

As a church community we would do well to have three goals for this time of pondering heaven.

Throughout our biblical study of Heaven let us pray that

1. We understand heaven biblically and accurately,
2. Our understanding will bleed into a yearning for Heaven in our lives, and
3. More of us will go there because of our look into this biblical teaching.

The body of this study guide was prepared by Reed Jolley. Vijay Jayaraman prepared the prayer guides at the end of each week's study.

A Note from Vijay Regarding the Prayer Guides:

These prayer guides generally move through the categories of rejoice, repent, request, as our own Ben Patterson has taught us to do for many years. As you pray through each passage, consider what you can thank God for, what you can repent of, and what you can ask God for. The bullet points are intended to stimulate you to think in these ways as you pray.

Week One

Heaven is for Real

Isaiah 65:17-25

Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there is something great out there for me? A lot of people would say, 'This is what it is. I reached my goal, my dream. It's got to be more than this. I mean, this isn't what it's all cracked up to be.'

Tom Brady, New England Patriot quarterback on 60 Minutes

What did you learn from this passage from Sunday's sermon?

How did the teaching further your understanding of what the Bible tells us about heaven?

Why might this passage prompt you to yearn for heaven?

What questions did the sermon provoke?

In his commentary on the book of Isaiah, Barry Webb gives a title to the last section of this massive Old Testament prophecy: *Waiting for a new world: Isaiah 56-66*. This last section has the Jews returning from exile in Babylon in mind. They are coming home to a very disappointing land, now ruled by the Persian empire. Many Jews remained scattered in Babylon, Egypt and throughout the Mediterranean world. Webb writes of this part of Isaiah,

... this last part falls between the death and exaltation of the Servant of the Lord in chapter 53, and the consummation of history in the new heavens and the new earth in chapters 65-66. (Webb, p. 220)

We are going to focus on the new heavens and the new earth in chapter 65.

Before reading this passage consider a note on the biblical writer's use of language to describe the *new heavens and the new earth*. Imagine trying to describe the internet to a people group that had never heard of or experienced the seeming miracle of electricity. Or imagine trying to describe an old fashioned telephone to the same people group.

You see there is this little box on the wall with a, hmm, a handle. You put this to your ear and your mouth and begin to talk... and someone a long way away can hear you... and that person talks back and you hear your friend's voice from the other village...

How does my voice get to my friend?

Well, these things called wires, hmmm, well, they look a bit like vines, they are hung from tree to tree and your voice goes through the vines...

Are the vines hollow? Do you shout so your friend can hear?

We can see, almost immediately, the difficulty of describing one reality to a people who know nothing of the world being described. Analogies and images would be necessary to describe both what a telephone is and how it works to this primitive people group. But we should note, the analogies and images would make the telephone no less real. In fact, the telephone, we might say, is *more real* than the analogies and images used to describe it.

In the same way, figurative language, analogies and images are necessarily employed by the biblical writers to describe what *heaven* will be like. To say this, again, is not to say *the new heavens and the new earth* are but *spiritual realities*, or any less real than the world in which we live right now. As C. S. Lewis, among others, pondered, from the perspective of eternity we will see *the new heavens and the new earth* not as less real than the present order, but *more real*, more solid, more concrete!

With the above in mind, read Isaiah 65:17-25. If this were the only passage you had telling you about *the new heavens and a new earth*, what would you know about your future? What can we properly call heaven? What is the picture Isaiah paints of our future in these verses?

Make a list of the features of the *new heavens and new earth* to be created by God in the future.

Verse 65:18 commands the reader to be glad and rejoice forever in God's new creation. Alec Motyer points out the good news in his commentary on Isaiah,

The doubling of the imperatives is itself a guarantee of total joy, as if saying it two ways encompassed every possible joyful feeling. *For ever* indicates the final difference: the fickleness and uncertainty of 'earth's joys' now will not be so then. (Motyer, *Isaiah*, p. 529)

What does this verse, and the above quotation teach you about the joy, or lack of joy in your life?

What do we learn of God's joy in verse 19? What difference does this make?

Isaiah 65:20 might sound as though there will still be death on the *new earth* (in contrast to Isaiah 25:7-8). Again, Motyer lends insight.

This does not imply that death will still be present ... but rather affirms that over the whole of life, as we should now say from infancy to old age, the power of death will be destroyed. (Motyer, p. 530)

Look over verses 21-25 once again. Isaiah is describing life in the coming city of God, the New Jerusalem described in the latter chapters of the book of Revelation. What will life in this new city be like? What features of this new city are attractive to you?

Look at 65:17-25 in context of the whole chapter. Isaiah almost makes it sound as though, in the end, everything and everyone will be saved. But the chapter doesn't teach universalism.

From verse 8 onwards the contrast between those who are God's servants and those who are not is drawn ever more starkly. There are those who *seek* him and those who do not (10-11), and their destinies are as different as light and darkness (13-15). There are saved and lost in this chapter, there is heaven and there is hell. (Webb, p. 245)

What are the implications for our lives from these verses? How does the message of heaven and hell inform our relationship with our friends?

How does this passage give you hope for the future? Why might Isaiah 65 make you look forward to *the new heavens and a new earth*?

Reflect and respond to this note from the Gospel Transformation Bible:

Isaiah's glorious portrait must always remind us that God's restorative salvation will ultimately touch everything, from the physical to the emotional, from the social to the psychological, from the wolf to the lamb (cf. Isaiah 11:6-9)

Praying the Passage: Isaiah 65:17-25

Ponder and give thanks for the many promises in this passage, including the promise that all things will be made new (v. 17), the promise of eternal joy and gladness (v. 18), the promise of prosperity and security (vv. 21-22), the promise of fruitful and satisfying labor (v. 23), and the promise of reconciliation that extends even to the animal kingdom (v. 25)! Let the concrete images of this passage inform and enrich your thanksgiving.

Consider the weeping and mourning that is still part of this world (v. 19). Name those things that are heavy on your heart, or remember those around you who weep and mourn, even as you thank God that all weeping and mourning will one day cease.

Pray for each other by name, that you may begin to experience the beginnings of heaven now and have your eyes opened to what God has in store for you in the future. Pray for each other to experience healing (v. 19), to understand the delight that God takes in you (v. 19), and to enter into the abundant life (John 10:10) as you understand your destiny.

Notes

Week Two

Heaven is for There

Philippians 1:21-23

Our yearnings are homesickness for heaven. Our sighings are sighings for God just as children that cry themselves to sleep away from home and sob in their slumber, not knowing that they sob for their parents. The soul's inarticulate moanings are the affections, yearning for the Infinite, and having no one to tell them what ails them.

Henry Ward Beecher

What did you learn from this passage from Sunday's sermon?

How did the teaching further your understanding of what the Bible tells us about heaven?

Why might this passage prompt you to yearn for heaven?

What questions did the sermon provoke?

Philippians is one of the Apostle's *Prison Letters*. In this short epistle Paul writes a warm letter to his friends in Philippi celebrating the greatness of the gospel. Throughout there is a repeated tone of joy in Philippians.

Philippians 1:12-26 reads somewhat like a personal diary. It also is an encouraging example of true Christian living in a difficult situation. As such, these verses serve as a model for guiding Christians today in navigating the ups and downs of life. But what do these verses teach us about heaven?

They show us, especially verses 21-23 that Paul expected to be with God in heaven immediately upon death. To *depart* is to *be with Christ*.

That means that the Apostle, along with millions of believers who have died throughout history are with Jesus in heaven right now! But the *new heavens and the new earth* promised in Isaiah 65 and elsewhere in Scripture haven't yet arrived. Thus, Paul is in what we might call an *intermediate heaven*.

Look again at verses 21-23. What do we learn about this intermediate heaven?

Randy Alcorn provides helpful clarity when he writes,

The questions, *What is Heaven like?* and, *What will Heaven be like?* have two different answers. The present, intermediate Heaven is in the angelic realm, distinctly separate from Earth (though as we'll see, like having more physical qualities than we might assume). By contrast, the future Heaven will be in the human realm, on Earth. Then the dwelling place of God will also be the dwelling place of humanity, in a resurrected universe... (Alcorn, p. 45)

Or, as Anthony Hoekema writes,

The 'new Jerusalem'... does not remain in a 'heaven' far off in space, but it comes down to the renewed earth' there the redeemed will spend eternity in resurrection bodies. So heaven and earth, now separated, will then be merged: the new earth will also be heaven, since God will dwell there with his people. Glorified believers, in other words, will continue to be in heaven while they are inhabiting the new earth. (from *The Bible and the Future*, cited in Alcorn, p. 45)

But what do we know about the heaven that is out there now? What do we know about the heaven that Paul inhabits today along with your grandfather or friend who trusted in Jesus for salvation and has since died?

One thing we know for sure about the intermediate heaven is that there is a man there with a resurrected body. Stephen saw Jesus, the man Jesus, standing at the throne of God (Acts 7:55). We know from the Gospels that Jesus' resurrected body was a physical body. He points out that he is not a spirit, but that he has a body.

See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. (Luke 24:39)

We also know that he will return to the earth in the same way he ascended (Acts 1:11).

What does this tell us about the intermediate heaven?

How can, or should, this shape your anticipation of *going to heaven*, should you die before Jesus returns?

Respond to Randy Alcorn's statement,

Most views of Heaven are anti-incarnational. They fail to grasp that Heaven will be God dwelling with us—resurrected people—on the resurrected Earth. The Incarnation is about God inhabiting space and time as a human being—the new heavens and New Earth are about God making space and time his eternal home. (Alcorn, 45-46)

Praying the Passage: Philippians 1:21-23

Consider the profound statement in 1:21 that *to live is Christ and to die is gain*. Praise God that we live for Christ and not for ourselves. Thank him for all the selfish ambitions and passions from which He has saved you. Thank him that it only gets better at death!

Confess those Christ-dishonoring habits that remain in our lives. What else besides Christ do you live for? In what ways do we put our hope in this life, instead of truly believing Paul's words that *to die is gain*?

Pray for each other by name, that you may live in such a way that you may decrease and that Christ may increase (John 3:30). Pray for an intense longing in each other to be with Christ, a longing that overrules all our earthly passions and ambitions.

Notes

Week Three

Heaven is for Then

2 Peter 3:13

Nobody ever gets through the tiny gate into the secret garden. Nobody ever hears the horns of elfland, or find the faerie sea. The closest we ever get to it all is some hint or echo in a face or a painting or a concerto or a woodland glade, and then it fills us with an infinite sadness, because we know that it is lost, and that we must turn back to our traffic jams and enemas and red tape.

Thomas Howard

What did you learn from this passage from Sunday's sermon?

How did the teaching further your understanding of what the Bible tells us about heaven?

Why might this passage prompt you to yearn for heaven?

What questions did the sermon provoke?

Read 2 Peter 3:1-13. Focus on the last verse in this passage. Notice Peter's promise: *We are waiting for new heavens and a new earth.*

As we will have been and will be learning in this study of heaven, the Bible's emphasis is not so much on our *going to* heaven, but on God's bringing heaven to us!

In verse 10 the author describes the climax of human history. *The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar...*

In the Old Testament the phrase *the day of the Lord* was used frequently to refer to the coming kingdom of God, to the time when God would finally vanquish his enemies, establish his rule and restore the earth to its intended glory. The prophets refer to this coming *day of the Lord* as a time when God will judge all nations and even his own people.

The climactic nature of this 'day' is expressed by Peter's repeated use of the word 'destruction' (vv. 7, 10, 12). Fire is the primary physical element mentioned (vv. 7, 10, 12), of such intensity that 'elements will melt in the heat'; (v. 12). It is accompanied by a 'roar', signaling an event of hyperdestructiveness which will cause the disappearance of the physical universe as presently perceived. (v. 10). (Milne, p. 289)

If all we had about the future of God's involvement with his created order was 2 Peter 3:1-12 we would fall into hopeless despair. But, note 3:13! God's wrath is not his last word.

With this in mind, consider several other Bible verses. Notice where the emphasis lies. In the future, God will restore all things. What do you find in these verses?

Matthew 9:27-28

Acts 3:19-21

Isaiah 65:17

Isaiah 66:22

Hebrews 12:26-29

With the above verses in mind consider, enjoy and discuss the following two quotations:

Many religions, including Buddhism and Hinduism, characterize the afterlife as vague and intangible. Christianity specifically refutes this notion. Biblical Christianity doesn't give up on humanity *or* the earth. (Alcorn, p. 77)

Our destiny is an earthly one: a new earth, an earth redeemed and transfigured. An earth reunited with heaven, but an earth, nevertheless.¹

¹ Paul Marshall, *Heaven Is Not My Home: Learning to Live in God's Creation*, 1998, p. 11.

Praying the Passage: 2 Peter 3:13

Ponder some characteristics of the new heaven and the new earth, some of which were outlined in our first study of Isaiah 65:17-25. Ponder that the new heaven and new earth are *the home of righteousness*. Thank God again for these things.

Hebrews 12:28 and 2 Peter 3:11 instruct us that the destruction of our present heavens and earth and the appearance of a new one ought to inspire us to holiness. Spend some time preparing yourself for the new heavens and new earth by confessing and repenting of your sins.

Pray for one another *to live holy and godly lives, looking forward to the day of God and speeding its coming* (3:11).

Notes

Week Four

Heaven is for Here

Romans 8:18-25

Notions of heaven which see your future destiny as a 'going up' to a distant, purely spiritual realm somewhere in the blue yonder therefore appear to need correction. Heaven is not so much a new world 'up there' as a new world 'down here.'

Bruce Milne

*This world is not my home I'm just a passing through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore*

This World Is Not My Home, Jim Reeves

What did you learn from this passage from Sunday's sermon?

How did the teaching further your understanding of what the Bible tells us about heaven?

Why might this passage prompt you to yearn for heaven?

What questions did the sermon provoke?

Last week we learned that we are waiting for nothing less than a new heavens and a new earth! As Randy Alcorn writes,

It is not coincidence that the first two chapters of the Bible (Genesis 1-2) begin with the creation of the heavens and the earth and the last two chapters (Revelation 21-22) begin with the re-creation of the heavens and the earth. All that was lost at the beginning will be restored at the end. And far more will be added besides. (Alcorn, p. 132)

Read and ponder Romans 8:18-23.

What do you think it means that all creation *waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed*?

What examples do you see of creation *groaning*?

The Apostle speaks of both the earth being redeemed and God's people being redeemed. What does he have in mind in our future redemption? Notice the last words of verse 23. What do these words tell us about heaven?

Consider Revelation 21:1:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

What will the *new earth* be like?

Read Isaiah 65:17-25. This is virtually the end of Isaiah's lengthy prophecy. As with most of the prophets, Isaiah uses pictorial language to describe real events. What do you learn about the *new earth* from these verses?

One truth we should glean from Romans 8, Revelation 21 and Isaiah 65 is the truth that heaven is very *earthy*. As Alcorn puts it,

God doesn't promise us a not-Earth. He promises us a New Earth. If the word Earth in this phase means anything, it means that we can expect to find earthly things there—including atmosphere, mountains, water, trees, people, houses—even cities, buildings and streets. (Alcorn, p. 79)

How should Romans 8:19-23 inform the way we should live in the world today?

Read and respond to the following quotation:

A massive assumption has been made in Western Christianity that the purpose of being a Christian is simply, or at least mainly, to “go to heaven when you die,” and texts that don’t say that but that mention heaven are read as if they did say it, and texts that say the opposite, like Romans 8:18-25 and Revelation 21-22, are simply screened out as if they didn’t exist. (Wright, p. 90)

Praying the Passage: Romans 8:18-25

Ponder the notion that our present sufferings, real as they are, *are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us* (8:18). Consider repeating 8:18 together as you tell God about all that is broken in the present heavens and present earth.

Pray for one another to *walk in the freedom of the glory of the children of God* (8:21), even as we groan and wait for our full adoption as sons (8:23). Confess and repent of the ways in which we may feel bound by sin or circumstances, or of how we find our identity outside Christ.

Ask God to fulfill His promise in redeeming all of creation. Tell him about the ways in which creation longs to be liberated from bondage to decay. Consider famines, hurricanes, tsunamis, pollution, erosion, disease, and extinction. Consider the Philippines, and other ravaged places where many of our missionaries serve. Ask God to restore and heal the creation!

Pray for one another by name to be filled with the hope that this passage offers in the midst of your present sufferings. Read verses 24-25. Pray for one another to wait patiently for this hope! Consider praying the blessing of Romans 15:13 into each others lives:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Notes

Week Five

Heaven is for Now

Luke 17:20-21

[Heaven] is somewhere you believe in... it's a beautiful place where you can sit on soft clouds and talk to other people who are there. At night you can sit next to the stars, which are the brightest of anywhere in the universe.... If you're good throughout your life, then you get to go to heaven.... When your life is finished here on earth, God sends angels down to take you to heaven to be with him.

Maria Shriver, *What's Heaven?*

What did you learn from this passage from Sunday's sermon?

How did the teaching further your understanding of what the Bible tells us about heaven?

Why might this passage prompt you to yearn for heaven?

What questions did the sermon provoke?

When we look at the first three Gospels we might be surprised to find that Jesus says little about heaven proper, but much about either the *kingdom of heaven* (in Matthew's Gospel) or the *kingdom of God*.

What is he talking about? What does Jesus mean by these curious phrases?

The kingdom of God is so important that it demands our repentance:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2)

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17)

For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:20)

The kingdom of God is difficult to enter:

Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 19:24)

And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! (Mark 10:24)

The kingdom of heaven or of God is mysterious:

And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables... (Mark 4:11)

The kingdom of God is of primary importance:

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matthew 6:33)

The kingdom of God lies in the future:

And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23)

A kingdom is the realm of the king. The place or sphere where the king rules. The Jews of Old Testament Israel were longing for the coming kingdom of God. They were yearning for the age of Messiah when he would rule and reign on earth, literally and physically. Thus when Jesus comes, proclaiming the kingdom of God or of heaven, there was great excitement.

There was, however, a shocking component to Jesus’ teaching. In addition to what we have learned above, Jesus taught something very revolutionary. Not only is the kingdom of God coming, with the arrival of Jesus, the kingdom of God had arrived! The kingdom is not only future, it is here!

But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. (Matthew 12:28)

Read Luke 17:20-21. What do you think Jesus means when he says *the kingdom of God is within you*?

If we have learned anything thus far in our study of heaven, we have learned that the Bible's emphasis is not so much that we will *go* to heaven, but that heaven, defined as a *new heavens and a new earth*, will come to us.

The implications of this are massive for Christian living. If the kingdom of heaven is both coming to us and if we are, as God's people, presently dwelling under God's rule (the kingdom of heaven here and now), then what we do in this life matters greatly.

Consider 1 Corinthians 15:58. Note, this comes at the end of a chapter promising and describing future resurrection. What does Paul say about how we should live in light of that coming kingdom of God?

Respond to the following quotations by N. T. Wright:

What we can and must do in the present, if we are obedient to the gospel, if we are following Jesus, and if we are indwelt, energized, and directed by the Spirit, is to build *for* the kingdom.... You are not oiling the wheels of a machine that's about to roll over a cliff. You are not restoring a great painting that's shortly going to be thrown on the fire. You are not planting roses in a garden that's about to be dug up for a building site. You are—strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself—accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God's new world.

Wright goes on,

Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world – all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make. That is the logic of the mission of God. (Wright, p. 208)

What does this mean for you? Discuss with your homegroup how you might live differently because of both the presence and the future of the *kingdom of heaven*.

Praying the Passage: Luke 17:20-21

Praise God that the kingdom of God is already within us. Probe the implications of this in your thanksgiving. Thank God for His Holy Spirit in us, as a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance, for the Spirit testifying with our spirits that we are the children of God, for the fellowship of the saints and fellowship with him, for eyes to see and ears to hear spiritual realities, and for power to be His witnesses and accomplish God's purposes on earth.

Confess the ways in which we de-emphasize or disbelieve the promise of God's kingdom already within us, focusing inordinately on the future. Perhaps we are preoccupied with end-times prophecy, or fail to believe that His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3), or fail to take hold of the life that is truly life (1 Timothy 6:19).

Pray for one another to believe the promises of God and lay hold of eternal life *now!*

Notes

Week Six

Heaven is for Our Longings

Romans 8:23-25

And as He spoke, He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*

What did you learn from this passage from Sunday's sermon?

How did the teaching further your understanding of what the Bible tells us about heaven?

Why might this passage prompt you to yearn for heaven?

What questions did the sermon provoke?

In Hebrews 11 the author takes us on a tour of the hall of fame of faith. In verse after verse we read of the faith of men and women in the Old Testament era. At one point the author of the letter tells us,

...they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. (Hebrews 11:16, NIV)

No matter how difficult or how charmed our lives are, we want more. There is something we long for which no meal, no travel, no relationship can ultimately satisfy. Rightly interpreted, this inner desire, this deep gulf between our own joy and that elusive *something* should make us yearn for heaven.

As C. S. Lewis put it,

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in the world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

Read Romans 8:18-25. We have already looked at this passage in our study, *Heaven is for Here* (week four). Here we learn that the creation is not alone in *groaning*. The disciples of Christ *groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons...*

Think and talk about your own groanings, your own unfulfilled yearnings.

How does this passage, in context, speak to you personally?

What do we learn about our future from these verses? What will heaven be like? Consider the following quotation from A. A. Hodge, theologian from the 19th century.

Heaven, as the eternal home of the divine man and of all the redeemed members of the human race, must necessarily be thoroughly human in its structure, conditions, and activities. Its joys and activities must all be rational, moral, emotional, voluntary and active. There must be the exercise of all the faculties, the gratification of all tastes, the development of all talent capacities, the realization of all ideals. The reason, the intellectual curiosity, the imagination, the aesthetic instincts, the holy affections, the social affinities, the inexhaustible resources of strength and power native to the human soul must all find in heaven exercise and satisfaction. Then, there must always be a goal of endeavor before us, even future ... Heaven will prove the consummate flower and fruit of the whole creation and of all history of the universe.

A. A. Hodge

Perhaps it doesn't go too far to say that Paul's main point in this passage is that our adoption by God himself (8:15, 23) assures us that our deepest longings will be satisfied in the future. Heaven will be the time and place where our final adoption is realized!

This is a part of the larger biblical story. We were all orphans, alienated from God, without a true family. We were estranged from our Heavenly Father by virtue of Adam's sin (Romans 5:12) and in Christ we have been adopted into the family of God (Ephesians 1:5). Romans 8 speaks to the fulfillment of our yearning to be truly home, to be in a family that is whole and perfect.

Pastor and author Dan Schaeffer claims our thoughts of heaven have a direct bearing on the way we live our lives in the present. He writes,

It is a mistake to believe that our thoughts of heaven are irrelevant to our present lives. It is precisely your belief or doubt about the reality of heaven that drives many of your most important decisions and values. (Schaeffer, p. 12)

Reconsider Schaeffer's statement above. Since we have been adopted by God himself, how might our church and our families approach the practice of adoption?

We have many in our church community who have adopted children and many are waiting to adopt. How can the rest of us, married and single, who haven't adopted children support those who have? What might your homegroup do for a family who has adopted one or more children?

Praying the Passage: Romans 8:23-25

Thank God for the Holy Spirit who lives in you, and causes you to groan for our adoption as sons and the redemption of our bodies. Tell God what you are groaning for and looking forward to, and thank him that it will be fulfilled.

Confess a satisfaction with earthly things that can never satisfy. Confess the ways in which, to use the words of C.S. Lewis, "we are far too easily pleased, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us."

Pray for those who have adopted children, as they groan for those children to be healed of the past, and to embrace their new families. Pray for an adoption culture in our church that glorifies God, and causes all of us to wait even more eagerly for our own adoption as sons.

Pray once again for one another, for our staff and elders, and our missionaries to be filled with hope as we groan. Once again, read 8:24-25, and consider praying the blessing of Romans 15:13 into each others' lives:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Notes

Week Seven

Heaven is for Those Not Destined for Hell

Mark 9:42-50

The safest road to hell is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.

C. S. Lewis

A study of heaven would not be complete without at least a brief look into hell.

As Bruce Milne writes,

Since Jesus believed in hell, it should be part of our mental furniture also, as the form of judgment which will befall those rejected by God on the coming day of judgment. We too need to embrace the awfulness of hell.... Jesus cannot be Lord if we do not submit to his teaching, and that includes, among other things, his teaching concerning the reality and the awfulness of hell. (Milne, p. 156)

What did you learn from this passage from Sunday's sermon?

How did the teaching further your understanding of what the Bible tells us about heaven?

Why might this passage prompt you to yearn for heaven?

What questions did the sermon provoke?

Hell is largely an embarrassment to believers in the 21st century. We don't speak comfortably about hell with our friends who don't worship Jesus and we tend to be uncomfortable with the biblical doctrine of hell even when we chat with other believers. Hell seems harsh, out of date and something of a relic of the past. Hell seems like a remnant from the Middle Ages or for a few

snake-handling fundamentalists preaching fire and damnation deep in Mississippi on a hot summer night. Surely the program of a loving God would not include a hell in which people actually dwell for eternity!

But when we turn to the teaching of Jesus, clearly, he believed in hell.

Read Mark 9:42-50. This passage is a more than a bit shocking at points, but we should be careful not to miss the main point: *Better to drown in the deepest sea than to cause 'one of these little ones' to sin.* If nothing else we learn about the seriousness and consequences of sin.

Make a list of the things Jesus says about hell.

It has been pointed out that this is one of the fullest accounts Jesus gives on hell. Notice three specific terms Jesus uses.

Fire (vv. 44, 48, 49)

Hell (vv. 43, 45, 48)

The word *gehenna* in Greek comes from the Hebrew words *ge-hinnom*, meaning *the valley of Hinnom*. *This was the valley just south of the Jerusalem temple and in the Old Testament it had associations with child sacrifice to the God Moloch (see 2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chronicles 28:3; etc.)* During the time of Josiah the valley was further defiled when the king made it a place to dispose of the bodies of criminals (2 Kings 23:10).

Salt (v. 49)

The final allusion to fire links it to salt. This sentence is a bridge into several sayings about salt gathered in verse 50. The linkage is not crystal clear... The idea of fire's purifying property is probably in mind, along with the reminder that the true disciple cannot contemplate the judgment of the wicked without recognizing that he or she will also face a searing test. (Milne, p. 147)

These images are, as one writer puts it, *necessarily metaphorical*. Elsewhere hell is referred to as a place of darkness or as *outer darkness* (Matthew 8:12, 22:13, 25:30; 2 Peter 2:17). Hell is also

referred to as a *lake of fire* (Revelation 19:20, 20:10) and a place where one will be *beaten with many blows* and where there will be *weeping and gnashing of teeth* (Luke 12:47; Matthew 8:12).

What kind of picture of hell emerges with all of the above images in mind? Describe what you know of hell from these verses?

One further, troubling, truth about hell emerges in the pages of the Bible. Its duration is for eternity. Consider the following:

Isaiah 66:24

Daniel 12:1-2

Matthew 3:12

Matthew 25:41

2 Thessalonians 1:9

Hebrews 6:1-2

Jude 7, 13

Bruce Milne wrestles with both the intensity and duration of the biblical teaching on hell in his book *The Message of Heaven and Hell*. He concludes by writing,

... hell is eternal in its duration. That means hell is strenuously and assiduously to be avoided. On that there can be no question, and the language of Jesus on this point is particularly eloquent and awesomely solemn. (Milne, p. 159)

What are the practical implications of Mark 9:42-50? What are the implications for our own lives? What are the implications for our sharing the good news with our friends and colleagues?

Praying the Passage: Mark 9:42-50

Thank God for the clarity of His warnings in the scriptures, and for your having heard them. Thank God for all from which He has saved you.

Confess any tendency to minimize warnings of hell, and how this may cause indifference to the plight of those around us. Tell God the ways in which this doctrine troubles you, and ask him for wisdom to understand both *the kindness and the severity of God* (Romans 11:22).

Confess, silently or out loud, ways in which you have caused *little ones* or other believers to sin. Name some of those regrets, and ask God to forgive and heal.

Pray for each other and the church to recapture a sense of missionary urgency both locally and globally. Pray for family, friends, and people groups that their destiny may be heaven instead of hell. Consider Paul's words in 1 Timothy 2:1-6.

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

Notes

Week Eight

Heaven is for Rewards

1 Corinthians 3:10-15

It becomes us to spend this life only as a journey toward heaven...to which we should subordinate all other concerns of life. Why should we labor for or set our hearts on anything else, but that which is our proper and true happiness?

Jonathan Edwards

What did you learn from this passage from Sunday's sermon?

How did the teaching further your understanding of what the Bible tells us about heaven?

Why might this passage prompt you to yearn for heaven?

What questions did the sermon provoke?

It could be fair to say that most evangelicals in America see heaven as a pass-fail affair. Either you make it or you don't. If you get in, heaven is like Disneyland, all the rides are included. Heaven is kind of like children's sports, everyone on the team gets a trophy regardless of how the team did.

But the scriptures present a different picture. While it is true, all the redeemed will enjoy heaven for eternity without qualification, there are rewards for those more faithful in this life.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:10-15

This passage is about the labor of church building. Paul says that a day of judgment is coming, and on that day everyone's *work* will be tested.

Verses 10-15 have been misused by many to prove a point Paul wasn't concerned about. Some wrestling with the Calvinist-Arminian debate as to whether a believer can lose his or her salvation will point to this text to support one position or other. Some in the Roman Catholic tradition

use this paragraph to teach a doctrine of purgatory. But these debates are entirely beside Paul's concern in this passage. Again, Paul is warning those in the Corinthian church that their efforts within the church will be judged by God!

Think about what this paragraph teaches, indirectly, about the importance of the church. We are *fellow workers* with God, called to serve his purposes. He will judge our work examining its eternal durability! Sunday School teachers, homegroup leaders, small-group leaders, those who disciple other believers, those who pick up the phone to encourage another believer, each of these is involved in a profound work of God. As one commentator notes,

If we are involved, therefore, in building up the life of God's church, we need to pray both that our good resolutions and our acts of faith may be impregnated with the power and grace of God, and that our motivation may be solely that the name of Jesus Christ may be glorified. If that is the character of our Christian service, we shall *receive a reward*.¹

Do you pray for God's will to be done and for his purposes to be accomplished in Santa Barbara Community Church? Be sure to reserve time to do this as a homegroup. Let us be careful not to "play church," but to "be the church" in the power of God's Spirit.

1 Corinthians 3:15 teaches that God will judge your work. Read this verse carefully. It doesn't teach that your work will affect your salvation. Paul goes out of his way to point out that believers are secure with regard to their salvation. But the believer's work for God will be scrutinized. Is this a new concept to you? In what ways does this motivate you?

1 David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, Intersity Press, p. 60.

We can draw a distinction between what has been called *a judgment of faith* and *a judgment of works*.

The judgment of faith is the judgment we face when we die. This judgment determines whether we go to heaven or hell upon death. As Randy Alcorn writes,

This initial judgment depends not on our works but on our faith. It is not about what we've done during our lives but about what Christ has done for us. If we accept Christ's atoning death for us, then when God judges us after we die, he sees his Son's sacrifice for us, not our sin. Salvation is a free gift, to which we can contribute absolutely nothing (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). (Alcorn, p. 47)

On the other hand, the Bible teaches that there will be a final judgment or a judgment of works at the end of all history. At this last judgment everyone, believers and unbelievers alike will give an account to God of their deeds whether good or bad. Consider the following scriptures with this in mind. What do they say about the way in which we should live our lives?

Romans 14:10-12

1 Corinthians 9:23-27

James 1:12

1 Peter 5:2-4

Ephesians 6:8

Luke 6:22-23

Matthew 19:21

Respond to the following quotation by Randy Alcorn. If this is true, what changes might you need to make in your life?

Our works do not affect our salvation, but they do affect our reward. Rewards are about our work for God, empowered by his Spirit. Rewards are conditional, dependent on our faithfulness (2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 2:26-28, 3:21). (Alcorn, p. 47)

Praying the Passage: 1 Corinthians 3:10-15

Praise God for the foundation of Jesus Christ that has already been laid. Thank God that we are invited to participate in the building of God's church, and that He has prepared good works in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10).

Confess the ways in which you have attempted to build with wood, straw, and hay, perhaps through selfish ambition, prayer-less self-sufficiency, or mere human effort. Ask God's forgiveness, and re-consecrate yourself to use only the best building materials!

Pray for yourself and one another by name to serve God faithfully and to receive a rich eternal reward as a result. Consider that even your "secular" job is an opportunity for reward if done unto Christ as your true master (Colossians 3:23-25).

Remember to pray for our pastors, staff, elders, and missionaries, that they would build with the best building materials and receive a rich reward from Jesus their Master.

Notes

Week Nine

Heaven is for the Body

Romans 8:23-25

I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia so much is because it sometimes looked a little like this.

C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*

We were created *from* the earth to live *on* the earth. Our hope isn't that we'll be delivered *from* our bodies but *into* new bodies, and into the new world where we'll live with Jesus.

Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*

What did you learn from this passage from Sunday's sermon?

How did the teaching further your understanding of what the Bible tells us about heaven?

Why might this passage prompt you to yearn for heaven?

What questions did the sermon provoke?

The Christian doctrine of resurrection changes everything! The Christian hope is not only that a man in the first century died and was raised from the dead, but that we too will be raised, bodily, to eternal life. This truth is at the center of Christian hope.

Read Romans 8:18-25. Notice how Paul's statement on *the redemption of our bodies*, is connected to the redemption of the earth.

As the earth will be redeemed so also our very bodies will be redeemed. The implications, again, are startling and far-reaching. When a faithful loved one dies it is not true to say, I had my last hug on such-and-such a day. We will hug again after our bodies are redeemed. Neither is it accurate to say of a deceased believer, Well that was the last time I'll see Joe

on earth. Again, the Christian hope forbids us to talk or think like this. The doctrine of the believer's resurrection give us very practical hope.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:35-49.

This passage of Paul's letter is somewhat confusing. Let's focus on what is clear. Paul is proclaiming to the Corinthians that their very bodies will be raised *in glory* (v. 43)!

Keep the following chart in mind as you read verses 42-45:

EARTHLY BODY	RESURRECTION BODY
Sown a perishable body	Raised an imperishable body
Sown in dishonor	Raised in glory
Sown in weakness	Raised in power
Sown a natural body	Raised a spiritual body

Verse 49 contains a clue as to what our resurrected bodies will be like. Discuss this in your homegroup.

Ponder and personalize this. What will your redeemed body be like? If we are going to receive glorified, perfected bodies, what does that mean? How old will you be in your redeemed body? What will your contours reveal? Will you be short? Tall? Rotund? Skinny?

John Piper shows how our understanding of creation and our understanding of our bodies are intricately linked together.

What happens to our bodies and what happens to the creation go together. And what happens to our bodies is not annihilation but redemption.... Our bodies will be redeemed, restored, made new, not thrown away. And so it is with the heavens and the earth.¹

¹ John Piper, *Future Grace*, p. 378.

The biblical teaching of the resurrection of the body changes everything. Just as we are to care for the earth because it is God's earth and he will restore it to glory, so also we are to care for and use our physical bodies to the glory of God.

Read and discuss 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 in context of the whole chapter. What does this teach us about how we should view our bodies right now?

Enjoy, celebrate and personalize the following quotation by Joni Eareckson Tada.

I still can hardly believe it. I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed in righteousness – powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope this gives someone spinal-cord injured like me? Or someone who is cerebral palsied, brain-injured, or who has multiple sclerosis? Imagine the hope this gives someone who is manic-depressive. No other religion, no other philosophy promises new bodies, hearts, and minds. Only in the Gospel of Christ do hurting people find such incredible hope.²

Praying the Passage: Romans 8:23-25

Thank God for your physical body, even as you groan for its full redemption. Marvel at the miracle of limbs and lungs, brain and blood, hearts, hair, kidneys, livers, cells, skin, teeth, DNA, neurons, muscles, and so much more! Consider that God lovingly created your individual body, as revealed by the words of Psalm 139:13-16 (NIV):

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

Confess, silently or aloud, the ways in which you have failed to honor God with your body (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Pray for one another and the larger body of Christ as we see our present bodies waste away. Pray for concerns such as those who have watched their loved ones die as their bodies are destroyed by cancer, accidents, or old age. Pray that our church would overflow with hope as we anticipate the redemption of our bodies.

² Joni Eareckson Tada, *Heaven, Your Real Home*, p. 53.

Notes

Week Ten

Heaven is for Worship

Revelations 4-5

We will constantly be more amazed with God, more in love with God, and thus ever more relishing his presence and our relationship with him. Our experience of God will never reach its consummation. We will never finally arrive, as if upon reaching a peak we discover there is nothing beyond. Our experience of God will never become stale. It will deepen and develop, intensify and amplify, unfold and increase, broaden and balloon.

Sam Storms

Think of yourself just as a seed patiently waiting in the earth; waiting to come up a flower in the Gardner's good time, up to the real world, a real awakening. I suppose that our whole present life, looked back on from there, will seem only a drowsy half-waking. We are here in the land of dreams. But the cock-crow is coming.

C. S. Lewis, *Letters to an American Lady*

What did you learn from this passage from Sunday's sermon?

How did the teaching further your understanding of what the Bible tells us about heaven?

Why might this passage prompt you to yearn for heaven?

What questions did the sermon provoke?

Over these weeks during which we have been pondering heaven we have found that heaven isn't so much a place *out there* but a redeemed universe *everywhere*. Heaven, hopefully, has taken on earthly dimensions in our hearts and minds. We expect to work and to play and to eat and drink on a redeemed earth and we expect to do so bodily as real men and women. Accordingly, the old stereotype of heaven as one long interminable worship service has been broken down.

But while heaven will be more than an eternal worship service, it will not be less.

God himself says so through the prophet Isaiah.

“I ...am about to come and gather the people of all nations and languages, and they will come and see my glory....As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,” declares the Lord, “so will your name and descendants endure. From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,” says the Lord. (Isaiah 66:18, 22-23)

We read of this worship service in Revelation 4-5.

Read these two chapters, only 25 verses, aloud.

Remember, John’s book of Revelation is *apocalyptic* in tone. We read Revelation and find ourselves thinking, “What is this!!!???” First-century readers, however, were accustomed to reading literature which was similar to what we find in the last book of the Bible. Writers of apocalyptic¹ literature understood the world to be in a hopeless predicament. Only God’s direct intervention would suffice to make things better. Exuberant symbolism was employed in these writings (monsters, dragons, stars, demons, bowls of wrath, etc.) to make the point that God’s intervention was close at hand.

Make a few notes on what stands out as you read.

These 25 verses paint a picture of what we will be doing in the new heavens and the new Earth. The scene of these two chapters (twenty-five verses) is nothing less than stupendous. The picture becomes that of the entire universe busy in worship. Worship is what we will do forever as we surround the throne of God himself. One commentator refers to a *radius of praise* which draws our attention continually to the center where the Father and the Christ share the throne of the cosmos.²

1 “Apocalyptic” comes from a Greek word which means “unveiling.” The first word of Revelation, in Greek, is *apocalupsis*.

2 Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation*, Intervarsity Press, 1986, p. 69.

List the images of verse 4:3. What is John's portrait of God trying to convey?

In 4:10 we meet the twenty-four elders for the first time in Revelation. One commentator claims there are thirteen different views of the identity of these elders. It is probably best to see a reference to the complete people of God. The twenty-four elders represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles, i.e., the people of the old covenant and the new covenant.

Verses 4:6b-8 describe *four living creatures*. We see something similar in Ezekiel 1:5-25 and Isaiah 6:3. One commentator explains,

They, like the elders and angels, are heavenly creatures of the highest order involved with the worship and government of God.³

What are we to make of the descriptions of these four creatures in 4:7? It seems John uses the *noblest, strongest, wisest and swiftest in animate Nature*. *Nature, including Man, is represented before the Throne, taking its part in the fulfillment of the Divine Will, and the worship of the Divine Majesty.* (Henry Swete)

What is the role of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders? What do they do? On what basis do they offer their worship?

John does something in Revelation 5 that is unique. He calls Jesus *the Lion of the tribe of Judah* (5:5). We find this expression, along with the phrase *the Root of David*, only here in the Bible. But notice the combination of these images of strength with weakness. When John turns to see this Lion what does he see (v. 6)?

Revelation 4-5 are profound chapters about worship. These verses give us a glimpse of what we will do forever. When we worship we are rehearsing for eternity. Read and discuss the following quotation by Eugene Peterson:

³ Dennis Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, p. 463.

In worship God gathers his people to himself as center: “The Lord reigns” (Psalm 93:1). Worship is a meeting at the center so that our lives are centered in God and not lived eccentrically. We worship so that we live in response to and from this center, the living God. Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives. We move in either frightened panic or deluded lethargy as we are, in turn, alarmed by specters and soothed by placebos. If there is no center, there is no circumference. People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness, epidemic in the world, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose.

Will we always be on our faces at Christ’s feet, worshipping Jesus? Yes and no. Yes, because heaven is full of the presence of the triune God of the universe. Yes, we will always be worshipping God. But no, we will not be sitting on soft seats in a heavenly sanctuary wondering how long the service is going to last. Heaven will not be boring!

Alcorn explains:

Scripture says we’ll be doing many other things—living in dwelling places, eating and drinking, reigning with Christ, and working for him. Scripture depicts people standing, walking, traveling in and out of the city, and gathering at feasts. When doing these things, we won’t be on our faces before Christ. Nevertheless, all that we do will be an act of worship ... Have you ever spent a day or several hours when you sensed the presence of God as you hiked, worked, gardened, drove, read, or did the dishes? Those are foretastes of Heaven—not because we are doing nothing but worshiping, but because we are worshiping God as we do everything else. (Alcorn, pp. 196-197)

Those worshipping in Revelation 4-5 are not doing so out of fear and obligation, but rather out of a natural response causing joy and satisfaction. They cannot help but worship, they are in the presence of the Living God! Start doing now what you will be doing then! Praise!

Praying the Passage: Revelation 4 and 5

Consider having someone read 4:1-8a aloud. Spend a few minutes in silence, imagining what this scene might have looked like. Then say together the praise from v. 8b: *"Holy, holy, holy..."* Amplify this praise with your own words or those from other portions of scripture.

Consider getting on your knees (or falling prostrate) just as the 24 elders do in 4:10. Say together the praise of 4:11. Add to this your own words or other portions of scripture.

Thank God for the Lamb who was slain, and who is worthy to open the scroll! Consider saying together the song in 5:9: *"You are worthy..."*

Marvel that every creature in heaven, and on earth and under the earth gives praise to the Lamb (5:13)! Pray for friends, family, and people groups that they would willingly join this chorus now. Pray for God to add to our number those that are being saved.

50

T E N

Notes

Week Eleven

Heaven is for Big Government

Isaiah 9:6-7

All societies construct their own images of heaven. Most imagine a wondrous city or a verdant garden where human beings come face to face with God. But the heaven that is apparently popular with readers these days is nothing more than an excellent therapy session.

David Brooks responding to *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*

What did you learn from this passage from Sunday's sermon?

How did the teaching further your understanding of what the Bible tells us about heaven?

Why might this passage prompt you to yearn for heaven?

What questions did the sermon provoke?

Scripture tells us we have a lot to look forward to when God creates the new heavens and the new earth. We will experience abundance and prosperity, life without death, harmony in the natural world, human relations without rancor. Drought and war will be no more, peace and freedom will be our constant companions. This vision of the future depends on the rule and reign of God on earth. The reign of Messiah will involve,

The defense of the poor and the exploited (Isaiah 11:1-10)

Harmony in the animal kingdom where the wolf and lamb and leopard will sleep near the goat (Isaiah 11:6).

The gates of the city of God will always be open for there are no enemies to keep out (Isaiah 60:11, Revelation 21:24-26).

When messiah rules our days of grief and mourning will end (Isaiah 60:19-20).

We should take delight in the picture of the future painted by Isaiah!

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness. ...no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress....They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity, for they shall be the offspring of the blessed of the Lord, and their descendants with them. Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall graze together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent’s food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,” says the Lord. (Isaiah 65:17-19, 21, 25)

Read Isaiah 9:6-7. This is a famous, Advent, passage from the prophet. This passage was written to people living in the eighth century before Christ. At one level this is a prophecy of a coming redeemer, perhaps a political figure, and the people probably expected that redeemer to come soon. But, at another level, the words of this prophecy are so over-the-top that they could only be fulfilled by a divine messiah!

Look at 9:6. To put it differently, the titles are so grand that no earthly ruler can be in Isaiah’s mind. *Wonderful Counselor* means, literally, *a wonder of a counselor*. *Mighty God* means *God of a hero*. *Everlasting Father* is literally *father of eternity*. As Old Testament scholar Barry Webb points out, *In the final analysis the languages of verse 6 can apply only to one who is God incarnate*. (Webb, p. 69)

Verse 7 is deeply significant for our study of the new heavens and the new earth. Here we learn that the government of Messiah will always be expanding, it will always be growing bigger! Furthermore, this ever-expansive government is a good thing!

So, in what sense is God’s government going to expand in the age to come? The government of Messiah will expand as we, his people, occupy our positions of responsibility in the coming age.

Consider the following Scriptures that speak of God’s people reigning *with* him in the new heavens and the new earth.

1 Corinthians 6:2-3

2 Timothy 2:12

Revelation 2:26-27

Revelation 3:21

Revelation 5:10

Revelation 22:5

One of the wonderful implications of the truth that we will reign with God on the new earth is that we will have meaningful government jobs!

The government of the New Earth won't be a democracy. It won't be majority rule, and it won't be driven by opinion poll. Instead, every citizen of Heaven will have an appointed role, one that fulfills him or her and contributes to the whole. No one will "fall through the cracks" in God's Kingdom. No one will feel worthless or insignificant. (Alcorn, p. 219)

Some might protest that the new heavens and the new earth will not need government. Authority will be unnecessary in a world without sin. Again, Alcorn lends insight.

The need for government didn't come about as a result of sin. God governed the universe before Satan fell. Likewise, he created mankind as his image-bearers, with the capacity for ruling, and before Adam and Eve sinned, God specifically commanded them to rule the earth. Ruling isn't a bad thing, it's a good thing. God has called us to it and has equipped us for it—to rule the earth, rule it well, and find pleasure in ruling it. Because we're sinners, power tends to corrupt us. But on the New Earth there will be no sin. Therefore, all ruling will be just and benevolent, devoid of abuse, corruption, or lust for power. (Alcorn, p. 222)

How does this study, along with last week's teaching affect you? Have you ever thought of yourself as a future ruler? Why is this a difficult idea to grasp?

What is God's purpose for all people? Consider Genesis 1:26-28 to help you answer this question. How does Isaiah 9:7 show the fulfillment of this purpose?

Do you feel reluctant to share God's rule in the future? If so, how do you think God would respond to your aversion?

In what ways might God be grooming you for leadership in the future? Consider Romans 8:16-17.

Respond to this fitting quotation at the end of our study:

Service is a reward, not a punishment. This idea is foreign to people who dislike their work and only put up with it until retirement. We think that faithful work should be rewarded by a vacation for the rest of our lives. But God offers us something very different: more work, more responsibilities, increased opportunities, along with greater abilities, resources, wisdom, and empowerment. We will have sharp minds, strong bodies, clear purpose, and unabated joy. The more we serve Christ now, the greater our capacity will be to serve him in Heaven. (Alcorn, p. 234)

How are you living your life in such a way so as to increase your capacity for service in heaven?

Praying the Passage: Isaiah 9:6-7

Thank God that Jesus will rule and reign and that we will rule with him. Praise God for all His attributes in verse 6. Praise God that His reign will only increase, and that His zeal will accomplish this!

Pray for one another that Christ may rule and reign in every corner of your lives. Pray for Christ to rule and reign over every aspect of our church life. Name ministries, staff, elders, missionaries. Pray for one another that you would be faithful to Christ, that you would overcome, and that you would be fit to reign *with* Christ forever and ever.

Pray for the expansion of the gospel and of Christ's rule and reign to every tribe and tongue and language and nation, and to every corner of the universe.

Notes

Week Twelve

Heaven is for Marriage

Revelation 19:1-21

Travelling to heaven and back is where it's at today. Don Piper spent ninety minutes there and sold four million copies of his account. Colton Burpo doesn't know how long he was there, but his travel diary has surpassed 6 million copies sold, with a kids' edition accounting for another half million. Bill Wiese obviously booked his trip on the wrong website and found himself in hell, which did, well, hellish things to his sales figures. Still, *23 Minutes in Hell* sold better than if he had described a journey to, say, Detroit, and he even saw his book hit the bestseller lists for a few weeks. There have been others as well, and together they have established afterlife travel journals as a whole new genre in Christian publishing—a genre that is selling like hotcakes...

Tim Challies

As they increase in the knowledge of God and of the works of God, the more they will see of his excellency; and the more they see of his excellency...the more will they love him; and the more they love God, the more delight and happiness...will they have in him.

Jonathan Edwards

What did you learn from this passage from Sunday's sermon?

How did the teaching further your understanding of what the Bible tells us about heaven?

Why might this passage prompt you to yearn for heaven?

What questions did the sermon provoke?

How fitting that the Bible ends with a feast, a marriage supper! The story begins in a garden with abundant food and ends *in heaven* with *the marriage supper of the Lamb* (19:9).

Read Revelation 19. Remember what we learned about the kind of writing John employs in this book (you may want to go back and review week ten).

Notice the four *hallelujahs* of this chapter. The word *hallelujah* occurs only here in the Bible. The word is really a Hebrew word creeping in to our English Bible. It means, *praise Yahweh*, or, *praise the Lord*. When we say “Hallelujah,” we are not uttering a religious cliché. To the contrary, *hallelujah* is both a command (*praise God*) and an exultation (*praise God*). With a single word we declare the greatness of God and his worthiness to be praised. Why is God worthy of our praise in Revelation 19?

Verses 6-10 bring us to the wedding of the bride (the church) and the bridegroom (Christ). In a sense we could see this as the climax of the story told in Scripture. Adam and Eve are separate from God by virtue of sin. Here the long story comes to its conclusion. God’s people are finally united in marriage (the most intimate metaphor possible) with the God who has loved them through the ages.

Read the following Scripture passages (at least one of them will be shocking). Notice the way Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea and Paul use the metaphor of marriage to characterize God’s relationship with his people. What does each of these passages teach you about God and his love for his people? How do they illumine Revelation 19? Most important, what do these passages, along with Revelation 19, teach us about the new heavens and the new earth?

Isaiah 54:1-8

Ezekiel 16:1-15ff.

Hosea 2:1-9ff.

Ephesians 5:25-32

Why is “marriage” such a powerful metaphor for the end of the Bible’s story? Why is this a good image for the believer’s joy?

In a previous chapter the apostle John spoke of the Great Prostitute (17:4). Here he speaks of the cherished Bride of Christ. Notice the contrast between the prostitute's attire and the bride's wedding gown. Compare 17:4 with 19:7-8. In what ways are you preparing for your wedding?

In our time and culture a man and a woman become "engaged" before their wedding. The engagement is a time to plan the wedding, find housing and get to know your future in-laws. An engagement is easily terminated without shame or social recrimination. In the first century couples were betrothed. This was as good as being married in the eyes of the community. Recall Joseph's reaction when he found out Mary was pregnant. Though they were only *betrothed* Joseph *resolved to divorce her quietly* (Matthew 1:19).

The church is *betrothed* to her Lord. She is as good as married, though still waiting for the marriage ceremony. Re-read the quotation by Jonathan Edwards at the beginning of this study. Revelation 19 describes the time when we will be most satisfied in God.

Verse 9 looks forward to a feast, *the wedding supper of the Lamb*. The Old Testament background for a future feast is found in Isaiah 25:6.

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine — the best of meats and the finest of wines.

We rehearse this coming feast week by week when we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God." After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. (Luke 22:14ff.)

Celebrate the Lord's Supper as a homegroup. Worship the Lamb of God as you look forward to the wedding feast which is still to come. Look forward, together, to the new heavens and the new earth.

Praying the Passage: Revelation 19:1-21

Read 19:1-8 out loud. Add your own “hallelujah” prayers and praises to those in this passage. Marvel that the perfect God of the universe uses the intimate metaphor of marriage for His relationship to His people. Thank God that He will perfect us, marry us, and call us His bride!

Consider in verse 7 that the bride has made herself ready. Confess to God and to one another your sins and those of the larger body that keep us from being ready. Pray for God’s church to be holy and ready for the wedding!

Contrast Revelation 19:8, where the righteous deeds of the saints are *fine linen*, with Isaiah 64:6, where all our righteous deeds are as *polluted garments* (ESV) or *filthy rags* (NIV)! Thank God that He has redeemed us, and made it possible for us to please him with our deeds. Pray for one another to be clothed with righteous deeds even now.

Notes

Week Thirteen

Heaven is for our Permanent Dwelling

Revelation 21:1–22:5

Now she had got a start, and she went on and told me all about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was to go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever. So I didn't think much of it.

Huck Finn describing what he learned about heaven from his guardian, Miss Watson

Christian, meditate much on heaven, it will help thee to press on, and to forget the toil of the way. This vale of tears is but the pathway to the better country: this world of woe is but the stepping-stone to a world of bliss. And, after death, what cometh? What wonder-world will open upon our astonished sight?

Charles Spurgeon

What did you learn from this passage from Sunday's sermon?

How did the teaching further your understanding of what the Bible tells us about heaven?

Why might this passage prompt you to yearn for heaven?

What questions did the sermon provoke?

If you want to read a biblical description of heaven there is no better passage than Revelation 21:1—22:5. Many have pointed out that we probably don't ponder this passage correctly because to do so requires us to read the rest of John's Revelation that precedes this grand climax to his book.

Nevertheless, read Revelation 21:1—22:5. Keep the following in mind as you read.

We notice right away how drastically different this is from all those would-be Christian scenarios in which the end of the story is the Christian going off to heaven as a soul, naked and unadorned, to meet its maker in fear and trembling. As in Philippians 3, it is not we who go to heaven, it is heaven that comes to earth; indeed it is the church itself, the heavenly Jerusalem, that comes down to earth. This is the ultimate rejection of ... every worldview that sees the final goal as the separation of the world from God, of the physical from the spiritual, of earth from heaven. It is the final answer to the Lord's Prayer, that God's kingdom will come and his will be done on earth as in heaven. (Wright, p. 104)

Make note of those things that excite you as you read. Why are you longing for heaven? Enjoy. Wonder. Marvel. Praise.

In many ways these chapters form the conclusion not only to the book of Revelation but to the entire Bible. The Old Covenant did not turn out too well. The promise made early in Israel's history did not come to fruition in the earthly city of Jerusalem.

I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. (Leviticus 26:11-12)

God blessed Israel but the nation repeatedly responded by lapsing into idolatry. The prophets (Isaiah—Malachi in the Old Testament) warned the nation to repent. Israel did not repent. The prophets then foretold the future judgment of God. But, each of the prophetic books contain a note of hope. In the future, God will restore his blessing not only on Israel but on all the nations.

"Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more." (Isaiah 65:17-19)

In 21:1 the word *new* is significant. John could have used one of two Greek words here. The normal word for new is *neos*. This word signifies what was not there before, or, what has only just arisen or appeared. But John uses a different word, *kainos*. This refers to what is new in nature, different from the usual, impressive, better than the old, superior in value or attraction.¹ In other words, John is not predicting a series of heavens and earths. This is God's final restoration of his creation.

Read Revelation 21:1-8 Scan these verses. What is specifically new about the *new heaven* and *new earth*? Share your list with your group. How will heaven be different from the present era. What makes heaven and earth new?

Look carefully at verses 21:3-4. This is the second time God himself speaks in Revelation. How does this passage bring to a conclusion the story of the Bible (Hint: think about Genesis 2-3)?

We have asked this before in our study of heaven: *Will heaven be boring?* Based on these verses how would you answer this question? What will we do in heaven?

Verses 1-4 contain the perfect conclusion to the pages of Scripture. Adam and Eve were compelled to leave the Garden lest they eat from the tree of life and live forever (Genesis 3:23-24). Here the people of God are invited back, not to a garden but to a city, a symbol of safety, social interaction, commerce, activity and joy. And again, we find *the tree of life*.

Probe these verses. What do we learn of the purposes and fruitfulness of this tree?

¹ Gerhard Kittle, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3, p. 447.

Perhaps a good conclusion and to our study of heaven comes from a children's story. The seventh book of the Narnia tales by C.S. Lewis looks forward to the revelation of God's glory, in a word, to heaven. Read and enjoy.

And as he spoke he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page; now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read; which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.

C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*

Praying the Passage: Revelation 21:1-22:5

Reflect on and praise God for the extravagant blessings of the new earth and new heaven outlined for us in 21:1-8! Consider that God shall make us beautiful and marry us, his people (21:2), that He will make his dwelling with us (21:3), that He will wipe away our tears and heal our pain (21:4), that all things will become new (21:5), and that we will drink and never again thirst (21:6 and see also John 6:35)! Thank God for these and how we long for them to be fulfilled.

Consider the rich details of the new Jerusalem. Reflect on and give thanks for its attributes in 21:10-27. Consider the exhortation of Psalm 48:12-14.

Walk about Zion, go around her, count her towers, consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation. For this God is our God forever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end.

Ponder the stunning statement in 22:3: *No longer will there be any curse*. All that began with Adam is now reversed! Pray for the suffering world and the suffering church. Pray for people groups that still have not heard the gospel and still live under the curse. Pray for laborers for the harvest and for the nations to be redeemed and healed.

Consider singing Isaac Watts' great Christmas carol *Joy to the World*, which celebrates the second coming of Christ and the end of the curse.

Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room. And heaven and nature sing.
And heaven and nature sing. And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.

Joy to the world! The Savior reigns. Let men their songs employ.
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy. Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

No more let sin and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground.
He comes to make His blessings flow, far as the curse is found.
Far as the curse is found. Far as, far as the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness, and wonders of His love,
And wonders of is love. And wonders, wonders of His love.

Notes