

## **“So You’re Dead...Now What?—What About Heaven?”**

Today we’re wrapping up this series of sermons called *So You’re Dead... Now What?* And an underlying concept in this whole series is that...**How you understand the afterlife affects how you live this life.** That’s why it’s important we look at this stuff. Not just because we’re curious, but because how we answer the questions about the afterlife affects what we do, how we use our time, our money, how we share our faith, how we invest our lives in others and invite them to know God. How you understand the afterlife affects how you live this life. Today we’re focusing in on heaven.

Two weeks ago I told you that when I was growing up, as a kid, I was sure I was going to hell. Pastor Mark called me Hellboy last week. What’s up with that? Anyway, growing up people told me that I was a bad seed, so I just figured that I was going to end up in hell and that was OK by me because that’s where the fun people were going to be anyway. I thought that hell was where the party was going to be. And heaven sounded so boring. Clouds, harps, everybody wearing bathrobes all the time. Actually that’s the only part sounded kind of good—hanging around in a bathrobe. Who doesn’t like to do that?

But over the years my life changed. I decided that following Jesus was a decision that led to life, real life and that’s what I wanted. I figured out that a life of destruction was empty; a life of rebellion just caused me more pain. A life of anger just made everything worse. I saw in Jesus life that really was life. Honestly I didn’t choose to follow Jesus out of fear of hell. I chose to follow Jesus because I got a glimpse of grace and forgiveness. For me, choosing to follow Jesus wasn’t about trying to get into heaven. I didn’t really care about heaven when I became a Christian. My choice to follow Jesus wasn’t about the afterlife, it was about connecting to the one that made this life make more sense.

It wasn’t until later in life, long after I’d become a follower of Jesus, that I started thinking about heaven. The death of grandparents. The deaths of church members I knew and loved. The death of friends. Because of what I do as a pastor, I deal with death regularly. And that’s made me think about heaven quite a bit over the last 15 years. And as I started thinking about it more, I’ve come to a clearer understanding, but I can’t say I’ve got all my questions answered.

In the emails you sent me, you’ve got your questions too. One man wrote, “It’ll be different, right? There will be no disappointment? I won’t be disappointed even if my best friend doesn’t make it to Heaven? I won’t regret having failed to witness to him just one more time than I did? What happens to that stuff?” One woman wrote, “We always comfort people who are grieving by saying things like their loved ones are looking down on them, would be proud of them, watching over them, etc...is there Scriptural confirmation of this or is this just human projections of how we wish it to be?” This man wrote, “Do you believe that memories and emotions survive ‘death’. That it is possible to recognize those that have passed before us? If so, why then is heaven such a pleasant place? Wouldn’t negative emotions, and bad memories, survive as well? Nothing like ‘seeing’ a lost love, or enduring jealousy and regret for eternity. Do souls ‘age’? Does a young soul mature, or are we frozen in time?” These are some really good questions.

So let’s find out what the Bible actually tells us about heaven. But before we look at how the Bible describes heaven we have to answer one key question: **Will I be me in the afterlife?** Will I keep my identity? What we know from scripture is that we will take our identities with us. You will be you, and I will be me. Paul says, **“Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12, NIV).** We will take our memories with us and the painful memories won’t bring pain because they’ll be set in the context of God’s love and comfort. The theological concept here is the concept of continuity. That in heaven you take your skills, your personality, your attributes with you. But at the same time you’re cleansed of sin, of distortions, of shame and guilt and the things that stain us. You’ll be cleansed of all that, but you will still be you and I will be me. We’ll know each other for who we really are, without sin, without pretense, without shame, we won’t need to do image management, but we will be us. That’s the theological concept of continuity that we draw from the Bible. That’s who we take to heaven.

So, how does the Bible describe heaven? The most detailed description of heaven that we have comes from the very last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. Chapter 21 describes heaven as a city of pure gold, with streets of pure gold. A place where God’s presence brings light.

It's a beautiful description but we have to understand that it's a metaphor of what heaven will be like. The streets of heaven are probably not literally paved with gold, but the only way the author here could describe something so magnificent was with overwhelming images. The stuff we value the most on earth is used to pave roads in heaven! All this is meant to get us to understand that whatever heaven is like, it's beautiful and pure, and radiant, and magnificent—beyond our imaginations.

We may not be able to fully conceive of what heaven is like, but one other key concept about heaven in the Bible is that...**Heaven is the restoration of paradise.** In Genesis chapters 1-3 we get this amazing picture of paradise. It's a beautiful place with the most wonderful things to eat and drink and the most wonderful things to see. God creates Adam and Eve and puts them in that paradise. Remember that paradise was lost because of human sin. But heaven is described as a return to this paradise.

In the book of Genesis we see that Adam and Eve were assigned work to do when they were in paradise, but it didn't feel like work—it wasn't hard labor. That's an important concept to me. Because work to me, means challenges and challenges are very important in life being exciting. Challenges mean growth, adventure, learning, experiencing, interacting with others, problem-solving. Challenges mean the thrill of overcoming, exploring. So heaven will be a place where, yes, there is work to do, but it's the work that really brings you joy. For me, there will be no paperwork in heaven because one of things I hate most is all the paper that needs to be read, handled, sorted, filed, and all that. Heaven is the restoration of paradise.

That helps to answer another question lots of you asked. **“Will my pets go to heaven with me?”** I did a little extra research on this because I wasn't sure. One pastor I like to listen to said, “Yes, pet will go to heaven...except for cats which are the spawn of Satan!” Sorry cat lovers! Actually most everything I read said yes. Because heaven is the restoration of paradise there will be animals there, including pets. Scripture says that God knows and cares even when a sparrow falls. And that tells us something. I fully anticipate seeing my childhood dog there, Sweetie Pie and our late cat Earty. But listen, this is not the most important thing.

Another question lots of you had about heaven was...**What kind of bodies will we have?** The apostle Paul says our earthly bodies will be destroyed but we will then be given a heavenly body, a resurrection body. But what will that be like? The answer to that comes by looking at Jesus' resurrection body. Jesus was able to appear in a room where the doors had been locked. He had the ability in his resurrection body to move around in ways that we can't now. But at the same time the apostles were able to touch him and feel him. And people recognized him. That points back to that concept of continuity from this life to the next. And Jesus was also able to eat in that form. That tells us that we'll eat in heaven--and we'll eat with joy. And I have a hunch that we won't have to worry about carbs and calories.

What about children who die? Will they remain children in heaven? What about the elderly? Will they be elderly in heaven? The Bible doesn't say. The theologian Augustine said that our resurrection bodies will be what they were in the prime of our lives, or could have been in the prime of our lives if we died as children. We won't all look alike, but the purity of heaven means that whatever our bodies look like they will please God, and us, and others. You won't feel insecure about your body, and you won't feel arrogant about it either.

When we look at Jesus' miracles we get a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven breaking into earth. His miracles help us to see what the kingdom of God will be like. So that when Jesus touches the eyes of a blind man and he's able to see, that tells us that in the kingdom of heaven there's a complete healing. Or when he touches the disabled and they're able to walk, or the leper who is healed, or when Jesus heals the man who today would have been considered mentally ill, that tells us something about the kingdom of heaven. Isn't that awesome to know when you think about your loved ones who move from this life to the next? The people we know and love who have been handicapped, maybe even from birth, they won't be handicapped in heaven. They will speak and shout and sing and dance and run.

There are lots of other questions we have about heaven and we're just not going to be able to cover all of them, but there are two more that I think are important for us to look at today. The first one is about

marriage in heaven. **Will there be marriage in heaven?** Jesus said that in heaven there is no marriage. That troubles a lot of people—well, mostly just people with happy marriages.

This is where I want to say, “Hold on a minute God. My wife, Janet, is one of the best parts of my life. I treasure her and the thought of not being married in heaven bothers me.” But here’s the way I’ve begun to understand this: when you get to heaven you have the opportunity to love everyone with a deep love. Right now we’re limited in our capacity to love. But in heaven we’ll be able to love deeply all those people that are around us. Heaven will be a place where we know our friends and we’ll have people around us that we do life together with, and one of the people might be our spouse. We’ll have a special bond that we carry into eternity with us. But there won’t be sexual intimacy in heaven.

Now I realize that I just lost a whole bunch of you. You’re sitting here saying, “Aaron, I was with you about all the great things in heaven until you said there won’t be sexual intimacy! What’s up with that?” C.S. Lewis talked about it this way: If you were to try to describe physical intimacy to a child they might ask you, “Is it as good as candy?” Because candy is the greatest thing they can imagine—they could not conceive of something better. And for adults, as far as physical touch, sex might be the apex of our experience on earth, and we worry we won’t get any in heaven. But listen, in heaven sex will be replaced by something better. I don’t know what that is, but I know that God invented sex and I don’t think he’d throw that out without replacing it with something even better.

So, while I’m a little apprehensive about not being married in heaven, and not having sexual intimacy as we know it, I’m going to trust God on this and that in his wisdom he has things greater in store for us, me and Janet, in the kingdom of Heaven.

The next question has to do with the connection between heaven and earth. **Can we talk to the dead and can they talk to us?** When it comes to talking with the dead, the Bible says that we are connected to those who’ve gone before us in Christ. It’s called the communion of the Saints; the cloud of witnesses. They’re serving God in heaven and we’re serving God on earth. But when it comes to talking to the dead, I think we have to be very careful about this. Now, there’s nothing wrong with going to the cemetery and standing at the grave of someone you love and talking to them. I think that’s therapeutic. And maybe, once in a while, God says to your loved one, “Come and listen, I want you to hear this.” But I think that’s the exception.

My mom’s parents died when they were in their 50’s. They were very faithful people, very loving, kind people. And I never knew them. But I’m sure that there were times in my life, special times, when God said to them, “There’s something special happening that you won’t want to miss, a graduation, an ordination, a wedding, a birth of a grandbaby, that you need to see.” I’m speculating on this. But some of you have told me stories of when a deceased loved one has spoken to you. So it seems that sometimes God allows that to happen, but that’s not the norm. The Bible tells us that we’re not to perform séances or seek out mediums to talk with the dead. Why? Because God wants us to focus on the living, not the dead, so we’re prohibited from doing that. It’s unhealthy.

Let’s move on to this big question: **Why does heaven really matter?** Remember, how you understand the afterlife affects how you live this life. Our vision of Heaven gives us hope. And hope is so important. Hope affects your physical well-being, your mental well-being, it affects your relationships, and heaven is the ultimate triumph of hope. Hope in the face of our own deaths. Hope in the face of the death of people we love. Hope because we know the reality of heaven, we know we will see those loved ones again.

There is hope in the face of wars, pandemics, financial crises. Because of heaven we don’t let doom and gloom overcome us. No matter how dark the circumstances might be there is hope because of the promise of everlasting life. How you understand heaven, the afterlife, affects how you live this life.

The vision of heaven that God’s given us is a place where there is no more poverty, no more war, no more pain, no more injustice. And if that’s what heaven looks like, and you are a follower of Jesus, and you’re heading toward that vision, then you start working towards that here on earth!

When we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” That’s what that means. We work toward seeing the realities of heaven lived out on earth. We’re not just waiting idly until we get to go to heaven! No! We’re working down here to make it like up there!

Jennifer Statler has a vision of the people of Saint Paul's working with the kids of our city who are at risk of dropping out, getting swept into a drug culture, and ending up in prison or dead. What would it look like for several hundred of us to work at befriending kids, mentoring kids, tutoring kids, working to keep kids in school through graduation, and work with their parents in getting clean and sober? That's a vision of heaven on earth--up there coming down here. Our belief in heaven changes how we live here. We're not just waiting, we're working.

God gives you a vision of heaven. The question is, what will you do with it? Will you pursue that vision your whole life or will you pretend like it's not really there? Will you try to get to know the one you're going to stand before on the last day, or will you ignore him? Will you know what this vision of heaven looks like and try to make it a reality here on earth the best you can, or will you just forget about it? Will you develop the drive to tell others about your faith so they can end up there too? God's desire in placing that vision of heaven in front of you that you would be drawn to that vision, and run the race that's been set before you with perseverance until you see Jesus face to face. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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