

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

38 What Will the Believer's Experience of Heaven Be Like?

Scripture: Revelation 21:1-8

The subject we have been studying for many weeks now is one which every thoughtful person entertains from time to time. To put it out of one's mind is only to have it return again. The subject is heaven. Our concern today is with the believer's experience of this eternal state. Whenever the subject of eternity is raised, it is well to note that not a few people have no desire to live forever. This attitude is predicated on the assumption that the quality and nature of an afterlife may differ little from this life. If that is the case, it is reasonable to assume that people would think negatively about the prospects of living forever. I often think of the man who said to me, "that he had little interest in living forever. Once around is enough for me," is the way he put it.

Therefore, we are able to say that what we are led to expect in the future life is important. The Bible does speak to this subject. The information is limited but sufficient to guide our thoughts. Realizing human frailty in drawing from Scripture a complete understanding of the way this life will differ from the next, the following observations, at least, are able to be made.

I. THE CHRISTIAN IS IN ETERNITY EVERY MOMENT HE SPENDS IN TIME:

A man by the name of P.T. Forsyth has well written, "To live for eternity is much, but to live Eternity is more." The point is that a Christian is a person who lives eternally every moment. Eternal life is more a realization than it is an expectation. It is not something we qualify for at some point in the future. It is possessed even now as a gift bestowed on us by God's free grace. Let me say at this point that technically it is improper to speak of this as immortality. The immortality of which the Bible speaks pertains to the body of the believer. The Genesis story is that when Adam sinned a double punishment was levied. Man's spirit was separated from God and man's body assumed mortality. Romans 5:12 makes it clear that our bodies die because of Adam's sin, and of course we hasten to say that we see something of Adam's waywardness in all of us in our own right. The following verses indicate that our bodies are mortal. (I Corinthians 15:54; Romans 6:12; 8:11.) All men are thus mortal, believer and unbeliever alike. This is the reason Paul told Timothy (I Timothy 6:16) that only Jesus

possesses immortality. Peter enlightened the men of Israel, *"And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power."* (Acts 2:24) Believers will assume immortality at the parousia or coming again of Christ when their bodies are raised. Clothing with immortality will be at that time.

II. THE ENJOYMENT OF GOD WILL BE THE SUBSTANCE OF HEAVEN:

Notwithstanding the fact that believers are eternally alive now, they are without the benefits which make that everlasting life desirable. Few people would want to live forever if things were to remain the same for them. It remained for the masterful Paul to reason, *"For now we see through glass darkly, but then face to face."* (I Corinthians 13:12) See also I John 3:2 and Revelation 21:3. Heaven is an eternal state of perfect happiness rendered possible by the very vision of God Himself.

We often hear jokes about heaven. People speculate that when you go to heaven you will be dressed in a white robe, you will have wings coming out of your shoulder blades, and you will have a halo around your head. You will be given a custom fitted cloud and you will spend your eternity plucking a golden harp. Sometimes people reflect upon certain churchmen they have known and come to the conclusion that if such people are going to be in heaven it isn't going to be that great a place. But alas, all such reasoning is false and a very carnal view of heaven.

The important thing about heaven is that we will behold the presence of God. This has been called through the centuries the beatific vision, the vision of the beauty and presence of God. Just as the eye now sees the things of this world, so the mind will see God's own personal perfections. Instead of being merely self conscious, the soul will become God conscious; and in God we shall find that which is supremely better than all we have found to be good in this world. Someone asks, "Doesn't the idea of focusing upon God year in and year out for all eternity seem frightfully monotonous?" The point is that the idea does, but the idea is wrong. We are not to think of eternity in terms of time. Eternity is not a succession of years. It is not to be thought of as a long time. Eternity transcends time. We who are locked into time cannot comprehend fully a state of existence without time. Perhaps we might suggest an artist or enthusiast who becomes absolutely entranced by a scene of ravishing beauty and in the process becomes utterly oblivious to the passing of time. The mind proceeds to realms

not conditioned by time. This is but an analogy but I believe somewhat helpful in shedding light on the problem.

There is one other point here concerning the importance of God's presence. It deals with the absence of loved ones in heaven. How can we possibly think of being happy without them. First, we can say that no one will be without a family in heaven because everyone will be there as part of God's family. If we are able to view one another as brothers and sisters here on earth, we may be assured that the relationship will be enhanced in heaven when we are minus the ills of this world. Secondly, we are told in II Corinthians 5:16, "*Henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more.*" If in heaven those who knew Christ after the flesh are nearer to Him, having been the object of our deepest joy on earth, He will be that much more in heaven. Earthly relationships will not be the basis of satisfaction in heaven, the Lord's immediate presence will supersede. Thirdly, in the bodily transformation which will take place according to I Corinthians 15:44, this spiritual body will not be subject to the exact relationships we knew on earth. Jesus said in Luke 20: 35-36 that the marriage relationship has no place there. Doubtless, we will know one another and be able to rejoice in what God has done in our lives. Our nature will be appropriate for the heavenly realm. (I Corinthians 15:49)

III. THERE WILL BE A MATERIAL BODY IN HEAVEN:

This is what Christians have believed for centuries notwithstanding the vast amount of philosophic speculation on the subject. Some reasoning is valid. Having said that the body is mortal because of sin, the full reparation of sin demands that the body be restored to life again and put on immortality. Having created man as a composite being, God will restore such in the afterlife. Christianity is both a spiritual and physical oriented belief. It is based upon the incarnation of the spiritual God, it gives birth to a local and visible church, it teaches/provides spiritual understanding through physical acts. All of these show consideration for man's bodily nature and are in harmony with a resurrection body. (CORRECTION: Christianity is spiritually and physically oriented.)

The bodies people have in heaven will be similar but different from the earthly bodies. First, it will be a physical body. It will be as Christ's resurrection body. In Philippians 3:20-21 we read, "*For our conversation is in heaven; from whence*

also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.” The Apostle John cites the same truth in I John 3:2, *“Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.”* To the Psalmist God revealed the truth spoken of in Psalm 17:15, *“As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake with thy likeness.”*

Because the body will be like Jesus' resurrection body it will have certain recognizable features. These are noted in the following verses which describe at least three of the Lord's post resurrection appearances. (Matthew 28:9; Luke 24:39; John 20:16, 18, 26-27) These verses assure personal identification when we are in the body of heaven. But there is also diversity in this identity. The body will have undergone a vast change, it will have been spiritualized. It will be a body of flesh and bones only, a body without blood. The function of the blood in earthly bodies is to support constantly weakening cells. The heavenly body will not need the nourishment of life giving blood. The spirit will give life to the body which will not need to be repaired, the vitality will not be constantly failing as in the natural body. The body will realize a change in state, the glorified soul ever infusing new powers into it of which we have no concept now. We may reason that food will not be necessary in heaven for the purpose of food is to restore strength. There will be no sickness, for the body will be incorruptible. There will be no sleep, for the purpose of sleep is restoration. Life in this world is a perpetual struggle against death and decay. The sequence of taking food is a kind of rebirth daily. In its immortal state the body will not be subject to these fluctuations. We conclude by saying that believers will have physical bodies in heaven, that these bodies will share sufficiently in the spiritualizing influence of Christ's resurrection that they will no longer be subject to decay or death, that they will be recognizable and composed of flesh and bones. I might also add Paul's words, *“I tell you a mystery.”* (I Corinthians 15:51) What will eventuate exactly, at this point may be known to God alone. We know merely that we will not be bodiless souls in eternity, we will have a body like the body of Jesus.

IV. THERE WILL BE DIFFERENCES IN HEAVEN:

On the one hand we are able to say there will be no difference in heaven. Anyone there will have been received through the merits of Christ and all will equally owe their salvation to the sovereign love and will of God. Here would be a good

place to say that a person's individual destiny is but the manifestation of the true state of the soul at the moment of death. What happens is that this state is eternally fixed. A person is either in God's grace or not at the moment of departure from this world. What you are now would be your eternity if you were to die right now. The Kingdom of God is within you now and simply continues at death. People that heaven receives are all able to identify with one another in this respect. Lastly, a common equation in heaven is that its residents all share the same goal: to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. There by the merits of Christ, by the sovereignty of God and for the glory of God, are what heaven's people have in common.

Nevertheless, there will be differences among heaven's people. The whole concept of rewards for faithfulness would be meaningless if believers were to share alike. (I Corinthians 3:12-15; II Corinthians 5:10; Matthew 5:12, Matthew 25:14-28; Luke 19:11-24) record the mind of the Lord regarding faithfulness in service. The parable of the talents makes it clear that where there is unequal ability but equal faithfulness, the reward will be the same. The parable of the pounds teaches that where there is equal ability but unequal faithfulness, the reward will be measured accordingly. We need not be concerned about jealousy in heaven over the divine distribution of rewards because this is a prideful attitude and in heaven the believer is delivered from sin in every form. The Book of Revelation informs us, *"And there shall in no wise enter any thing that defileth."* (22:1) Evidently, all will not have the same attainment in terms of reflecting God's glory or of enjoying Him. Their capacity will be reduced, but each will have all he is capable of containing. (I Corinthians 15:41-42) Another passage which indicates the likelihood of differences is the statement of Jesus' reply to the disciples regarding where they will sit in the kingdom. (Matthew 19:27-30) Jesus said, *"the first will be last, and the last shall be first."*

V. PEOPLE WILL BE ACTIVE IN HEAVEN:

The notion of people in heaven being on some sort of everlasting holiday is not Scriptural. There will be more to do than play the harp. In describing the activities of those in heaven it may be said first that they will rest. *"Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord, that they may rest from their labors."* (Revelation 14:13) Secondly, people in heaven will serve the Lord. A Divine industry will mark the people in heaven. (Revelation 22:3) The precise nature of this service is not known, but it will be a reflection of the way we have served here below. (Matthew 25:21; Luke 19:17; I Corinthians 6:2; II Timothy 2:12; Revelation 2:27;

5:10) It appears some will possess much authority so as to rule over others and over cities. (Matthew 25:23; Luke 19:17, 22:30; I Corinthians 6:2)

VI. THE GRIEF WE EXPERIENCE IN THIS WORLD WILL NOT BE KNOWN IN HEAVEN:

One way the Bible describes what heaven will be like is by naming those experiences which prevent our being happy on earth. Thus, heaven can be described in negative terms. There will be no sickness or pain. (Revelation 22:2) There will be no hunger or thirst. (Psalm 36:8, 46:4; Isaiah 49:10; Revelation 7:16-17, 22:1-2) There will be no sorrow or crying or tears. (Isaiah 25:8, 35:10, 51:11, 65:19, Revelation 21:4) There will be no sea. (Revelation 21:1; Ecclesiastes 1:7; Isaiah 57:20) People love the sea and wonder why heaven will be a place where there is no sea. To John who was writing from Patmos the raging sea may have spoken of storms, restlessness and separation. Viewed in this way we can appreciate the fact that there will be no sea in heaven. There will be no death. (I Corinthians 15:26; Revelation 20:14; 21:4) The grave will be closed forever. There will be no sin. (Revelation 22:3) There will be no night. (Revelation 22:5) All that is associated with night will be gone. Fear, loneliness, danger, weariness, even the need for sleep, these will be no more. The Bible also describes heaven in a positive way. There will be perfect knowledge according to I Corinthians 13:9-12. We will see reality face to face as the Amplified version has it. There will be perfection and beauty. (Revelation 21:1-21) There will be fullness of joy. (Psalms 16:11, 21:6, 36:8; Matthew 25:21) There will be no more good byes in heaven. (II Samuel 12:23; I Thessalonians 4:13-18)

VII. THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY TO GO TO HEAVEN:

Historic Christianity has always been exclusive at this point. There is only one way. We do not go to heaven by virtue of our church affiliation, confirmation, baptism, or good works. These are but an expression, ideally, of what is immeasurably more important. The way is described in Acts 20:21. *"Testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ."* May you be heaven bound because you have done what God has asked you to do.

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