



Have you ever been to a place that completely took your breath away? I'll never forget the first time I went to the Grand Canyon. As I stared out over the immense canyon, all I could do was stare and stay silent. I sat there speechless, stunned at God's creation. Or I think about the day I spent in Guam. A missionary friend took us snorkeling on a white sand beach only the locals know about. It was one of the most gorgeous beaches I've ever been on and we were there alone. It was incredible. How do you picture heaven? I think how you answer that is really important to how you live today. Does what you picture take your breath away or does it bore you? If heaven is a place where you float around on clouds singing Kumbaya for eternity, that sounds boring. It's no wonder everybody wants to go to heaven but nobody wants to die.

But, what if heaven is so much more than that? What if heaven is more real, more beautiful, and more exciting than you ever dared to imagine? For most of us, we don't think about heaven a whole lot. We are busy enough with our lives on earth. What I want to do today is encourage you to think about heaven more and in ways that may be new to you. Because in doing so, I believe you'll find strength, hope and encouragement to press on through life's difficulties today.

The Meanings of Heaven

It's Easter Sunday! We are celebrating the greatest event in all human history—the resurrection and victory of Jesus Christ over sin, Satan and death. As followers of Jesus, we believe that one day, when he returns to this earth, we too will be raised bodily from our graves. We'll experience our own resurrection. But, what happens after that? Where do we go and what are we going to do after the resurrection? We'll go to heaven. But, before we start talking about heaven, it's first important to define what heaven we are talking about.

The Bible uses the word "heaven" in six different ways. Sometimes the word heaven is used to describe the entire universe. Psalm 8:3-4 says, *"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?"* When you look up at the stars at night, you could say, "The heavens are on full display tonight." Heaven is also used to describe the spiritual realm, the invisible reality of angels and demons that we cannot see. Listen to Apostle Paul's description of this realm, *"For our struggle is not against*

flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

Heaven is also used to describe the dwelling place of God. When my younger kids ask me where does God live, I say, in heaven. God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah said, *"Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool"* (Isaiah 66:1a). Then, there is the present heaven or what theologians call the intermediate heaven. This is the place where Christians who die go right now to be in the presence of Jesus. This is an intermediate place for people to go before Christ's second return to earth. Apostle Paul tells us about this heaven, *"For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him"* (1 Thessalonians 4:14). Using the euphemism "fallen asleep," Paul speaks of those Christians who have died. He's answering the question about where those people go who have "fallen asleep in Christ." His answer is, they go to the present heaven.

It's like booking a plane ticket to New York. If you do that, you might have a layover in Atlanta. But, when you check in at SFO and the ticket counter asks where you are going, you say New York, not Atlanta. Before Jesus returns, all those who know Jesus personally will have a "layover" in the present heaven.

And this gets us to the final use of the word heaven in the Bible, the one I'll be referring to for the rest of the sermon. Most often when we talk about heaven, we mean the future heaven, the final destination for those who know and follow Jesus Christ. This is often described as the "new heavens and the new earth." What is this heaven like?

What is Heaven Like?

The best description of heaven is found in the last book of the Bible, Revelation 21-22. From this passage, I want to share with you seven descriptions of what heaven is going to be like.

Heaven is a real place

Some people think of heaven as a state of mind or a non-physical realm. It's not somewhere you go, but some esoteric, undefined reality. Apostle John describes something real. He writes,

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of

heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband (Revelation 21:1–2).

Heaven will be a real city. Later on in the chapter we read about stones, gems, and streets of gold filling the city. There are also walls and gates. There are fruit trees and a river. Heaven is a real place where our real resurrected bodies will go.

I want you to notice that heaven will come down to earth. Heaven is not just a place we will go to; it will come down to us. The earth we currently live on will be completely renewed and restored and put back into its original condition before the Fall of Adam and Eve. Because of the resurrection of Jesus, we'll also get new resurrection bodies. Heaven will not be a place for souls to float around. It's a real place with real glorified bodies. Remember what Jesus' risen body was like? People saw him. They touched him. Flesh and blood. Scars and all. People talked with Jesus and even ate with him. It was his same body but new and different. Our heavenly bodies will be the same. They will be real. Heaven will be real.

Heaven is a holy place

Revelation 21:3 says,

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."

What dominates the description of heaven is the presence of God. Here on earth we get a taste of heaven and God's presence every now and then. When we sing worship songs we sense his presence. When we read his Word, we feel closer to him. Sometimes for no reason at all, we experience the presence of Jesus. But, in heaven, God's presence will be thick 24/7. God himself will live with his people. We will forever be in the presence of God. John writes later that there was no Temple in the city and no night, because God will be the temple and the light. So, to be in the city, to be in heaven, is to be in God himself. That's mind blowing! I'm not sure we can even really grasp what that is going to be like. Heaven is a holy place because God is there.

Heaven is a safe place

All of us live with a certain amount of fear. Anything can happen to us. Just read the news; this world is full of things that bring us anxiety and pain. Listen to this wonderful description of what God will do for us in heaven,

"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (v. 4).

Did you hear that? No tears. No death. No mourning. No crying or pain. Why will that be true? Because there will be no more sin or crime, no litter or smog, no oil spills, no sickness or disease, no gossip or fighting, no pain or death and no more heartache.

Heaven is a safe place because in the new heavens and new earth *"there was no longer any sea"* (v. 1). Wait a second, no more sea? That's a bummer! I love the ocean! But, in the Bible, the sea represents the forces of chaos. It's unpredictable. It can rise up and wipe out thousands of people like we've seen in recent years. To say there was no sea is to say that the forces of chaos are gone. No more tsunamis and earthquakes. No more jumbo jets plunging into the ocean. No more disgruntled teenagers mowing down their classmates with an automatic rifle. Heaven is a safe place.

Heaven is a big place

Verse 16 says,

"The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long."

Those measurements are roughly 1,400 square miles, the distance from Mexico to Canada or from the Appalachians to California. All who come to Jesus will be accommodated in heaven. Didn't Jesus say, *"In my Father's house, there are many dwelling places"* (John 14:2)? Heaven will also be filled with people from every nation, tribe and tongue. All different people groups of the world will be represented there. Heaven will be big enough for the full range of the world's ethnic and cultural diversity. Those cultural distinctions won't divide us the way they do today. They will be celebrated and appreciated.

Heaven is a serving place

In Revelation 22:3b it says,

"The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him."

You know what that means? We will work in heaven. For some of you work does not sound very exciting! We think that heaven will be our ultimate retirement plan. We want to retire because work is tiring! But we need to remember that God never intended our work to be exhausting. It was a result once again of the Fall that work became, well, work. Our work in heaven will be good, satisfying and helpful. There will be no "bad" jobs in heaven and God will be our boss. Can you imagine a boss that is never critical and never demeaning? A boss who is fun, encouraging, who leads well, and challenges you to be your best? Work stretches us in ways that make us smarter, wiser, and more fulfilled. Work in heaven won't be frustrating or fruitless, instead it will be completely fulfilling! What job do you think God will give you? I bet it will be one that fits you perfectly and one you'll enjoy greatly. I call dibs on being a fisherman in heaven! I'm going to be on that river catching your dinner!

Heaven is a satisfying place

John describes how abundant God provides in heaven,

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:1-2).

Not only will heaven not have **loss**, it will not have **lack**. There's abundant water and fruit. You'll be satisfied with God himself. Think about this, every need in heaven will be met. Today, 800 million people will go to sleep hungry, one in six people in the world will live in extreme poverty, under \$1 a day. These things will not be in heaven. Heaven will be a place of life, fruit, and fullness; there will be no lack, no longing, no have-nots. All will be satisfied in heaven.

Heaven is a hopeful place

This Easter, hope seems to be on short supply. Just in the past few years we've seen devastating natural disasters all over the world, intense political conflicts, war, and an unstable economy. Some of you have endured an extremely hard year of job cuts, health concerns, marriage issues, and parenting trials. How does heaven give us hope? Heaven reminds us the best is yet to come.

Joni Eareckson Tada, who became a quadriplegic as a result of a diving accident over 30 years ago, has experienced more than her share of pain and heartache. Most recently she's been fighting cancer. She wrote, "Heaven has become my heart's home, the place where I will finally belong. The place where I will get a brand new body...In the world's finale something so glorious is going to happen that it will atone for every single tear we've ever cried. God is going to give us the key that will make sense out of what now seems to be such senseless suffering. Heaven is going to be a place of no more disappointment, no more grief but joy. Heaven's joy."

Heaven is a hopeful place for Joni and for us because the promise of heaven is God will make all things new and we will be changed in the blink of an eye. In another one of his letters Apostle John wrote, **"...when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is"** (1 John 3:2). So seeing Jesus will change us into his likeness and being changed will allow us to continue to see him face to face. Nothing can be more satisfying and hopeful than becoming more like Jesus.

Can You Know You are Going to Heaven?

There's a new movie out called, *Heaven Is For Real*. I haven't seen the movie, but I read the book. It was at the top *The New York Times* list of bestsellers for some time. *Heaven Is For Real* is written by pastor Todd Burpo and it tells the story of his son Colton who, at age 4, supposedly visited heaven. His visit came while he was on the operating table after suffering a burst appendix. The book is very engaging and emotional, but I also think we need to

be careful with books and movies like this. We shouldn't need a 4-year-old to tell us if heaven is for real; the Bible's been saying that for thousands of years.

That being said, there is a powerful story in the book I want to share. Colton's dad, Pastor Todd Burpo, took his family to a funeral he was presiding over. When they got to the door of the sanctuary, Colton asked his dad what the box was by the stage. Todd writes:

I tried to keep it simple. "That's the casket. The man who died is inside it."

Suddenly, Colton's face gathered into that same knot of intense concern. He slammed his fist on his thighs, then pointed one finger at the casket and said in a near shout, "Did that man have Jesus?!"

Sonja's eyes popped wide; and we both glanced at the sanctuary doorway, terrified the family inside could hear our son.

"He HAD to! He HAD to!" Colton went on. "He can't get into heaven if he didn't have Jesus in his heart!"

Sonja grabbed Colton by the shoulders and tried to shush him. But he was not shush-able. Now nearly in tears, Colton twisted in her arms and yelled at me, "He HAD to know Jesus, Dad!" (pg. 59).

Can you know for sure you are going to heaven? The Bible's answer is a resounding **yes**. Apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans and in chapter 10:10-11, he summarizes exactly how to go to heaven, **"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, 'Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.'"** Colton was right. The ticket to heaven is having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

The good news of Christianity, what we call the Gospel, is that you and I are sinners. We are deeply flawed people. The problem is according to the Bible only perfect people get into heaven. Anyone here perfect? See, no one has lived up to his or her own personal standards and morality, yet alone God's holy standard of perfection. We've all missed the mark, and the Bible says that the penalty for sin is eternal death and separation from God. But God, in his love and mercy, provided a way out, a rescue plan. He sent his one and only Son into the world, to die in our place for our sin and to pay the price of sin that we could not pay. We call that redemption. Jesus was the perfect and final sacrifice for sin fully paying the debt we owed to God. He was buried in a tomb and in three days he rose from the grave. The tomb was empty, his body was gone.

If you are not a Christian, there are only three things God wants you to do this morning. First, accept his love for you. Put down your guard and accept what Jesus did for you. Jesus **loves** you. You are not here by accident this morning. Second, believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead. That is what it means to have faith in Jesus Christ. It's trusting in who God is and what he did for you in Jesus. Third, commit your life to Jesus. I am not talking about becoming more religious. I am talking about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Today you can invite Jesus into your life to be Lord and Savior. If you do that, heaven will be your home forever.

I want to close with a challenge for us all. Pastor John Piper says something really important about heaven that I'll end with. He writes, "The critical question for our generation—and for every generation—is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food

you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ were not there? "

The best part about heaven is we will finally be with Jesus. You know what the first thing I am going to do when I get to heaven? I'm going to run into his arms. How about you?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1400-N