

Life After Death (3): Heaven

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[0 : 0 0] For most of my life, I thought of Jesus as my ticket to heaven. I knew that I needed to be right with God, and the gospel was that if I trusted in Jesus and his death for my sins, then I would go to heaven when I died.

But my faith really came alive when someone pointed out that the gospel wasn't really about me getting to heaven. The gospel is about living for God's kingdom now.

And it gave me a great purpose in life, in my work, for my family. It gave me something to live for, not only something to die for. I wonder, have you ever heard something like that?

Or maybe you've said it yourself. It's quite a common story to hear that the gospel only started to bite when it became less about the future and more about the present.

Someone said that the question that people really want answering now is less whether there's a possibility of life after death, and more whether there's a possibility of life before death.

[1 : 1 1] And the gospel says absolutely, yes, there is. The gospel gives us life here and now. We saw that last time. From the moment we put our faith in Jesus Christ, we have eternal life.

It begins here and now in this life, union with Christ, the life of the living God living in us by his Spirit. So yes, there is life now.

But I hope that we're beginning to see through our series that our lives here and now are not set over and against the promise of life then, in the future.

But rather than being an either-or, it is a both-and. And in fact, as Christians, we live our lives backwards from eternity, back into the present, so that the real wonder should be to us that, wow, the gospel gives me the hope of life forever with God, purely by his grace through faith in his Son.

And that changes everything about how I live these next few short, troublesome years on earth.

[2 : 2 5] Just listen to this eternal perspective from the Bible. Paul writes in Romans chapter 8, I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

On the scales of eternity, he's saying, grief, pain, trouble, persecution, do not even register against the glory that is still to come ahead of us.

Some of us heard from our partner, Adam, a couple of weeks ago. I wonder if you remember him speaking about how he came to be doing the work that he's doing. He spoke about a group of pastors in Iran.

And one of the things that really struck me was that he said, since he first met that group of pastors back in the 1980s, one by one, each of them had given their lives to Christ.

And Paul is saying that what they suffered in their witness and for their witness was not worth comparing with what they have now.

[3 : 3 6] Surely those brothers could have said with Paul in Philippians chapter 1, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain. To die is gain.

You're wondering, can you say that tonight? Can you share with Paul in that confession of faith? Well, only if you're convinced to the bottom of your heart that this life really is only the cover and title page of the real story that God has written for our lives.

And so I hope tonight helps us to weigh life now and life then accurately on the scales of eternity. And I hope it helps us to set the weight of our hope and our hearts on heaven.

Now, one thing to say before we begin in earnest is that when I talk about the hope of heaven, I'm only really talking about what theologians call the intermediate state.

That is the bit in between our death and Christ's return. At Shorter Catechism, question 37 asks, what benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?

[4 : 47] And the answer is this, the souls of believers are at their death, made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory.

And their bodies, being still united in Christ, do rest in their graves until the resurrection. So it's teaching when a Christian dies, our bodies and souls separate.

The soul goes straight to heaven while the body waits in the ground. But that is an in-between state. It's not our final resting place.

I say that because it's important to know that as wonderful as it is, heaven is not our final destination. Most religions teach wrongly that salvation is about our souls escaping our bodies.

As if the problem were that our physical bodies and the material world was corrupt and bad and evil, and that somehow our inner being, our soul or spirit, were pure. And if only we could escape this physical world for a purely spiritual existence.

[5 : 58] It's the same deception, actually, that underpins transgender ideology. There really is nothing new under the sun, the idea that the real ye is trapped inside a wrong and corrupt body.

But that is not Christianity. Because the Bible says that our final destination is God reuniting our bodies and souls in the resurrection to live in a renewed and glorified world.

So that salvation is about your whole person, your whole being, body and soul, being redeemed from sin and its curse. So that your body is as much ye as your soul is.

All that to say that the intermediate state then, our souls in heaven and our bodies on earth, that is an unnatural way for us to be. It's an in-between way for us to be.

And yet in his grace, God receives us into his presence in that in-between time. You remember what Jesus promised to the thief on the cross.

[7 : 09] Today, you will be with me in paradise. Today. One of you came up to me after the first sermon in this series and said this was the assurance that was maybe missing from that talk.

Today, immediately, in the presence of God, in glory. And so the hope of heaven is this, that when you die, there will be no waiting room, no purgatory, no tunnel, no soul sleep.

If you trust in Christ, you will close your eyes in death only to see him face to face. Now, how much do we really know about that?

Well, not much, but what God has revealed to us, he has revealed for our knowing, for our living, not only for it to be on the kind of periphery of our existence, but for us to grasp here and now.

There is so much, isn't there? So much that we wish he had told us about heaven, and yet what he has told us, he has told us for living now.

[8 : 21] So, we're going to do what we did last time. Three points. First, our heads, then our hearts, then our lives. Beginning with our heads. And the point that heaven is the home of God.

What is heaven? What is it? When Solomon finished building God's house, the temple, he prayed, but will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built.

So, hear this. God is so great that even heaven is not great enough to contain him. Isaiah says, heaven is his throne, earth is his footstool.

So, heaven does not contain God like his habitat. God is everywhere. And so, a starting definition of heaven might be this, the created realm where God's presence is most fully, perfectly revealed.

But I don't know what you picture, okay, when you think of that. What comes to mind? I guess what's left of heaven in our popular imagination is sort of cloudy skies and pearly gates.

[9 : 34] But where in the Bible do we get the clearest picture of heaven? Well, you probably wouldn't guess, would you, the book of Exodus? But that is where the Bible says we get the clearest picture of heaven in a tent in the desert.

You remember this? God instructed Moses to build him a special tent so that he could come and live in the camp with his people like his people.

The tent, the tabernacle, it's called. But Moses didn't design the tent. Remember this? God says in Exodus 25, make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you.

So the tabernacle is built, okay, with cloth and metal and wood, but it's based on a heavenly blueprint, a pattern that God revealed to Moses to build it on.

What is that pattern? It has different courts, the outer courtyard, then inside of that, the holy place, and then inside of that, the most holy place, the holy of holies.

[10 : 46] I've heard it described as a kitchen, a dining room, and a throne room. It's a bit easier for us to think about, isn't it? So the sacrifices were killed and burned in the courtyard, the kitchen, and then the blood and the choice parts, the bread of the presence, the incense were brought into the dining room, the holy place where the priests would eat in the presence of God.

And then once every year, the high priest would go in on the day of atonement to the throne room of God, the holy of holies, where God was enthroned above the carved wings of the cherubim on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant.

And what would he do? He would bring the blood of the Lamb slain to atone for sins, and he would sprinkle it beneath God's throne, on the mercy seat, on the top of the Ark of the Covenant.

And Hebrews 9, reflecting on that pattern, calls it a copy of the heavenly things. So it speaks of heaven as the true tabernacle, or the true holy of holies.

This is Hebrews 9. When Christ came as the high priest of the good things that are now here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say not a part of this creation.

[12 : 15] He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves. But listen, he entered the most holy place once for all by his own blood, so obtaining eternal redemption.

So what's he saying? When Christ died and rose again and went into heaven, he did what the high priest used to do in the tabernacle, but really, actually, that he came into the real throne room of God in heaven with his own blood to atone for the sins of his people fully and finally.

Which means what? If the tabernacle is a copy or a pattern of the heavenly things, it means this, that as the tabernacle revolved around God and his throne and the blood of the Lamb, so heaven revolves around God and his throne and the blood of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

Exodus is near the beginning of the Bible. What does John see at the end of the Bible in Revelation? There before me was a door standing open in heaven.

At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was, what, a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. Then, in chapter 5, then what does he see?

[13 : 44] Then I saw a lamb looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne. What is he describing? He's describing the reality in heaven that the tabernacle was a shadow or a pattern or a copy of on earth.

God on his throne and the Lamb, Jesus Christ, sacrificed to take away the sins of the world. Friends, if we understood our Old Testaments, that wouldn't surprise us that heaven is like that, that the throne of God is the centerpiece of heaven.

There's a great album. I actually listened to it on my way back up from Dundee. It's That Good by a group called Salos based on the book of Hebrews. At this point in the book of Hebrews, in chapter 9, they sing these words.

Now, the point in what we're saying and the point of what we've said is that we have a priest who is seated in heaven. He's gone in to present. He's gone into the tent, but a place not made by men.

There are shadows on the ground and it makes you think there's a light up above in the sky. The light shines down and the darkness speaks of a tree and a heavenly height.

[15 : 05] Do you see the light in the shadows of the Old Testament, the true throne room? What do you think when you picture heaven? Well, friends, if God and his throne and the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ are not the center and the fullness of heaven to us, then we are not thinking of a real heaven.

If heaven is not first and foremost God's home, then it is only in our imagination, which is another way of saying that heaven is not first and foremost about us, our comfort, our rest, our wholeness.

Heaven is first and foremost about God, his worship, his throne, his glory. A preacher in America in the 1700s, Jonathan Edwards, he preached a sermon called Heaven, A World of Love.

And he begins by saying this, Here I remark that the God of love himself dwells in heaven. Heaven is the palace or the presence chamber of the high and holy one whose name is love and who is both the cause and source of all holy love.

In short, he's saying that heaven is only heaven. Heaven is only a world of love because heaven is the home of God himself. I've heard people say to me things like this, I don't believe in a God, but I hope if there turns out to be a God, I hope I've lived a good enough life that I will be in heaven when I die.

[16 : 42] I hope now we see how ridiculous a thing that is to say because if heaven is the home of God, it revolves around his throne, well then, if you have ignored God and not wanted God in your life, what makes you think that you would be at home in heaven with him?

If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, don't make this mistake. If you don't want to know God now, don't imagine that you will want to be with him then because heaven is his home and therefore it is the home of those who love him and make him the center of reality, the center of our lives.

You need to rest your faith and hope fully in Jesus and his death for your sins, for heaven to mean anything to you, anything.

That way of thinking, it shows us how deeply us-centered our popular idea of heaven is, not only, I think, out in the world, but also perhaps, perhaps in the church. You think, when, if ever, do we speak about heaven?

Well, when we're speaking about our hope of heaven, the wholeness that we expect to receive in heaven, the hope of seeing loved ones in heaven, our hope of heaven for us, all wonderful, wonderful true things.

[18 : 11] But the Bible says the main thing we need to know about heaven is that it is God's home and that when we die, we will be gathered into God's throne room, into the Holy of Holies. And what will that be like for me and you?

You think of two magnets. The closer they are held together, the stronger the pull between them. Well, so it will be for me and you that as we are drawn closer to the throne of God, so the pull on our hearts will grow ever, ever stronger so that we will not spend our time in heaven on our own pleasures and pastimes, but falling down before the throne of God to worship him.

And part of the wonder of heaven is that we will never grow tired of that. We will never grow tired of that because there he will be our God, our King, our sacrifice, the reason that we can be there.

We will worship him for the Lamb is all the glory in Emmanuel's land. Heaven is God's home. But what about heaven's hope?

This is our second point, the sure and the certain hope that we have of being in heaven if our trust is in Christ. So this point is really aiming at what our hearts hope in for the future.

[19 : 33] Let me read again, this time from the Westminster Confession of Faith. verse 1. The bodies of men after death return to dust and see corruption, but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to the God who gave them.

The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the redemption of their bodies.

That is the glorious hope of every believer in Christ. And the fact that we can even read that and speak about that and think about that now is only because the Lamb is there slain, because Jesus has died for our sins to satisfy God's wrath against us.

We would not have a hope of entering his presence in that way, apart from Jesus' death in our place. I wonder if you picked up that wonderful paradox in Revelation chapter 7.

How do the saints wash their robes white and clean? They are washed white in the blood of the Lamb. Blood that washes clean.

[20 : 54] That is the blood of Jesus. And so our glorious hope is all the more precious, isn't it, knowing it is a free gift from God, which we receive only by faith in Jesus Christ.

We do not do anything to deserve heaven. We receive it from God as a gift, and we receive it the very moment that we die. Now, we couldn't read Revelation chapter 6 as well, but if we'd had time, we'd have read about the seals of history being opened by Jesus one by one.

We would have read about war and poverty and disease and death running rampant across the earth under God's curse. That is not a vision of the future. That is a vision of life now, a history unfolding under the sovereignty of King Jesus.

But in 6 verse 9, we read this, when he opened the fifth seal. I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

They called out in a loud voice, how long, sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood. Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

[22 : 19] What is it depicting? It is depicting the souls of the faithful who have died in the course of history, purified and given rest while they wait for the full number of the church to be gathered to God.

And heaven is the place where Christ gathers us while we wait for the end of history. That is the hope of every Christian. And in chapter 7 that we read, we get a view of the great multitude in heaven that no one could count from every nation and tribe and people and language dressed in those white robes and standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

And how many are there? Too many to count, says John. Too many to count, more than the sand on the seashore, more than the stars in the sky.

The Bible gives us the assurance that heaven is for every believer in Christ, secured. So that the crowd John sees in heaven is made up of every believer from the beginning of the world.

And they are waiting, aren't they, for every believer to be gathered to the end of the world, the full number of the church. You think of heaven, I wonder, as a crowded place.

[23 : 41] You think of it, there are more Christians in heaven than there are people on earth. Why? Because while the church grows and shrinks in different times and places in the world, while the church in heaven only grows and never shrinks, this is the church triumphant.

They are gathered to the throne of God and none can be snatched from his hand. The whole church is there. And this is what, part of what makes our gathered worship on a Sunday so precious to us.

God tells us to gather on the Lord's Day to worship him as his church. And as we do, we gather not only with each other here, but we gather with the whole gathered church.

What do I mean? Listen to Hebrews 12. Where does it say we come to worship? Not to a building. Where does it say you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

[25 : 11] We often say, don't we, Christian worship has no kind of earthly center, that we have no special place or special building that we have to go to worship God.

But it struck me this week that that is not because Christian worship has no center. It is because the center of Christian worship is heaven, no place in this world.

Wherever we meet to worship God, we are gathering to Christ who is in heaven. And so as we gather in a normal Sunday evening like we are here tonight, we do so with the whole church gathered into his presence.

Did you know when you come to church like you are now, you have come to where the angels worship? that you have come to where the spirits of the righteous made perfect sing praise?

Because you have come to God and his throne and to Christ on his throne. We sing sometimes, don't we, for we on earth have union with God the three in one and mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is one.

[26 : 27] because the whole church in heaven and on earth gathers to worship around the throne of God in heaven. So that the closest we get to heaven on earth is not a holiday in the Caribbean nor is it a big Christian conference.

The closest we get to heaven on earth is coming to your ordinary church on a normal Sunday with your ordinary brothers and sisters to worship God.

This, this, this is as close as we get to heaven here and now. And so the difference tonight between those in heaven and us here is not location so much as proximity.

They are nearer in his presence. That's what the confession is talking about when it says they are received into the highest heavens where they behold the face of God in light and glory.

And friends, that will be you when you die. If your hope is in Christ. So let every Sunday strengthen that hope yet another week closer to heaven.

[27 : 34] Another Sunday closer to Christ. That's what those in heaven are waiting for, isn't it? Until the full number of their brothers and sisters are gathered through death into the near presence of the Lord Jesus.

Jesus. But what will be new for us there? Well, most importantly, this. We will be without sin.

Being there made perfect in holiness. To the day we die, every thought, every word, every action that we do or think or say is tainted by sin because we are sinful.

We do not know what it means not to sin. But then, the Bible says, we will not know what it means to sin. Not only will we choose not to sin, but it will be as impossible for us to sin then as it is impossible for us not to sin now.

How will that be? Well, there is no purgatory in the Bible. Let me assure you of that. But the idea seems to be this, that the mere sight of Jesus' face unveiled, what theologians call the beatific or the beautiful vision, that sight of him itself will cleanse us completely.

[28 : 59] Such is his beauty and purity and power so that when we see him as he is, then we will be like him. And so, face to face with Christ, our love and our desire for God and his will will be our only love and our only desire.

It's easy to miss in such a short and rich prayer, but think of the third petition of the Lord's prayer. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

As it is. Heaven is a place of sinlessness, obedience to God, love of his will. We will be without sin. We will also be without the consequences or the curse of sin.

You hear again the experience of the souls in heaven from Revelation chapter 7. Never again will they hunger. Never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat, for the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd. Another wonderful paradox, isn't it?

[30 : 06] The lamb our shepherd and he will lead them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. No more pain, no more shame, no more suffering, no more grief anymore, no more crying, no more dying because we will have the lamb for our shepherd.

We will be in the presence of the living God and so we will be free of the curse forever. The presence and the consequences of sin will be gone from our lives, never to return.

And that is the hope of every Christian believer here and now. Friends, how often do we think of that wonderful hope? It is more really than we can possibly take in, isn't it?

But that is the promise of God in Christ. How does that help us to live our lives today? Here's our final point, heaven's help. Heaven's help.

With our hope set on a real heaven, how then do we live here and now? Well, we live heaven-ready lives. Pastoral ministry has sometimes been described as preparing people for death.

[31 : 28] Preparing people for death. I don't know what you think about that. It maybe sounds quite morbid, but what I can say is that from your deathbed, it becomes quite clear that all of life up to that point has simply been a preparation.

Because in the face of death, all of life falls away like sand through a sieve. And all that is left is what you have prepared to answer this question, what will happen to me now?

What will happen to me now? You have either spent your life preparing for that moment or you haven't. And friends, you do not know when that question is going to come to you.

You live as if it will be years away or decades away. But you do not know that it won't be tomorrow or next week or next month.

And let me tell you, it is one thing, isn't it, to know in your head that Christ has secured heaven for you. It is quite another thing to be assured in your heart that Christ has secured heaven for you.

[32 : 40] Because when death comes, our hearts will be gripped either by that eternal hope or by a dreadful fear. That is all that will be left.

And so, if the fear of death troubles you now, please come and speak with me because I would love to speak with you about that. The gospel tells us you do not need to fear death if your trust is in Christ.

It gives us that assurance to take hold of. It would be a wonderful thing to help you to take hold of that wonderful promise. But if you don't fear death, let me ask, why don't you?

Is it actually, is it because you've grafted this promise of heaven in your heart or is it simply because it hasn't crossed your mind? Brothers and sisters, are you preparing to die well however and whenever death comes to you?

Are you storing up this hope in your heart? Are you setting your hope on heaven ready to say tomorrow or next week or next month to live as Christ to die as gain?

[33 : 51] To die as gain. You think if you were asked to give your life for Christ like those brothers in Iran, what would you say? How would you feel?

Paul says this, we are confident. We are confident and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. Do you have that confidence? Now is the time to have it.

Not then. Now is the time to live heaven ready. Not then. So how do we prepare for heaven? Paul goes on in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, so we make it our goal to please him whether we are at home in the body or away from it.

Since we will be without sin and we will sinlessly serve him, Paul says we live our lives now to please him. Again, we don't love and live perfectly in this life.

We will sin but heaven is never a reason in the Bible to live carelessly or thoughtlessly or to embrace our sin or selfishly. We can't say I'm going to heaven anyway so it doesn't matter how I live now.

[35 : 02] Paul says the opposite. Since we live for heaven, therefore we live to please the Lord. and we do that only when we consciously set our hope on heaven.

You're on a long hike. What do you do? You check the map. You lift your eyes up to the horizon. You fix your heart on the destination.

You're on a long hike. You just have your eyes on the ground watching the next step, the next step. You soon lose heart, don't you? So it is in the Christian life. We will lose heart for the journey if we have not set our heart upon the destination.

And so if we trudge along, we won't be surprised, will we, if we soon lose steam in the Christian life? Rather, let us set our hearts on the hope of heaven where we are going.

Let's finish where we started in Colossians chapter 3. Since then, you have been raised with Christ. Set your hearts on things above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

[36 : 12] Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things, for you died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. Friends, Christ is in heaven.

And so if you are a Christian, heaven is therefore the center of gravity for your world. Heaven is your magnetic north. So turn to it.

Set your heart upon it. Think about it. Pray it and thank God for it and you will live for it. What can it mean to be heavenly minded if heaven never crosses our minds?

There's a saying, isn't there, that you can be too heavenly minded to be any earthly use. I wonder if perhaps we have become too earthly minded to be of any heavenly use.

Friends, heaven is not an afterthought in the Christian life. It is not wishful thinking. God has revealed that we will be there. He has taught us what it is.

[37 : 16] He has given us hope. He has met us here tonight as we gather around his throne in heaven. So let's set our hearts upon it and press on to the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Let's pray for that together now. God, our Father, how we thank you for the promise of your word that the suffering now does not compare with the glory that is to come for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Our Father, how we thank you for the promise that we will be with you upon our death, that death has no victory, that death has lost its sting because of the resurrection and the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Father, I pray that you would rid our hearts of fear by your perfect love. Lord, for those who fear death tonight, Lord, that by Christ and by his spirit, Lord, you would give hope in place of fear.

Father, we pray that you would set our hearts upon Christ in heaven. Lord, we pray that this wonderful truth would transform our lives here and now, that we would set a far greater weight on what awaits us than what we are going through.

[38 : 54] Lord, that we would set a far greater weight on our service, our love for you, our dwelling there with you, Lord, than any pleasure, any comfort in this life.

Lord, how we thank you for the witness of those who have loved not their lives even unto death. Father, we pray that should you ever require our lives, that we would be ready to yield them.

But more than that, we pray for all the days when you do not require our lives, that we would be ready for death. Oh, Lord, set our hearts on Christ and fill us with his spirit.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.