

WHY DOES HEAVEN MATTER?

COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

I want to spend the next two and half months thinking with you about Heaven. Why on earth do I want to do that? Several circumstances have moved me in that direction. My mom and dad have been gone now 13 and 11 years, respectively. They were wonderful, godly people. I still miss them and sometimes I just wonder what they're doing, what it's like wherever they are and when I'll see them again. Then again, I'm getting older myself. When you're young, Heaven isn't always too interesting a subject. But, unless I live to be a very old man indeed, I'm already lived most of my life. A couple of people in our church recommended a book to me entitled *90 Minutes in Heaven* which I read last year. It's the story of a pastor in Texas who suffered a terrible car accident and was pronounced dead at the scene. But some ninety minutes later he revived. That book is really more about suffering than it is about Heaven; nevertheless, it provides fascinating insights about what happens after death.

Here's yet another factor. In twenty years of ministry before coming to this church, I presided at twenty-four funerals. In the last four years as your pastor, I've presided at or attended twenty-nine funerals. I've been forced to think a lot more about life and death and where all of us will spend eternity. Did you know that worldwide three people die every second, 180 people die every minute and nearly 11,000 people die every hour? That means that more than 250,000 people go either to Heaven or Hell every day. Isn't that amazing?

I've been discovering that our culture is fascinated about the subject of what happens to us after death. Lisa Miller is the author of a new secular book entitled *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination With the Afterlife*. She points out a growing body of research around near death experiences or NDEs. Between 9-18% of people who have been demonstratively near death have had such an experience. There are great similarities in what they report: a tunnel, a light, a gate, a door, a sense of being out of body, meeting people they know, finding themselves in the presence of God. While 80% of Americans believe in Heaven, few of us have the slightest idea what we mean by Heaven. Only 26% believe that they will have bodies in Heaven. Nearly 30% of Americans believe in reincarnation. Did you know that 21% of professed Christians believe in reincarnation even though such a viewpoint is heretical? Dinesh D'Souza, a conservative commentator, has written a new book entitled *Life after Death: The Evidence*. He says that new scientific discoveries and theories make the idea of resurrected bodies and realms like Heaven and Hell no longer outrageous even to non-believing scientists. Scientists now suggest through string theory the possibility of multiple realms, multiple dimensions and even multiple universes which makes the biblical concept of eternity intelligible to modern physicists.

Interestingly, as you read the Bible, you can't escape the conclusion that Heaven matters a great deal. I can find at least three biblical reasons why Heaven matters. First of all...

FOCUSING ON HEAVEN IS A COMMAND.

Let's read one of our primary texts today (Colossians 3:1-4). Right there we are directly commanded to set our hearts and our minds on things above. I believe the author, the apostle Paul, meant more than just spiritual, God stuff. No, he is also referring to the study of Heaven and life after death. He refers to where Christ is physically located at the present time – “the right hand of God” which is another way of referring to Heaven. The word for “set” or “seek” is a strong one. The same word is used when Jesus says, “For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.” (Luke 19:10 NLT) When Jesus told a story about a shepherd He said, “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others on the hills and go out to search for the one that is lost?” (Matthew 18:12 NLT) On another occasion, Jesus told a story about a woman who had lost a coin. He said, “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it?” (Luke 15:8 NLT) That word means to enter into a diligent, active, single minded investigation of something. Because it's in the present tense, it suggests an ongoing, continuous process, in other words, “keep seeking heaven.”

The Bible says, “...He (God) has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11 NLT) How true it is that God has “planted eternity in the human heart”! The evidence for that longing is found in every culture not just those with a heavy Christian influence. Australian aborigines think of Heaven as a distant island beyond the western horizon. Ancient beliefs in Finland, however, thought of Heaven as an island in the faraway east. Mexican, Peruvian and Polynesian culture thought of Heaven as going to the sun or moon after death. Native Americans believed their spirits would hunt the spirits of buffalo. Hindus believe that one's karma requires you to return in a different body (reincarnation) and pursue the next stage of your destiny. Some Muslims believe that if you're killed by an Israeli soldier you'll go straight to Heaven and be ministered to by 72 dark-eyed virgins. Buddhists want to disappear like a drop in the ocean losing one's own identity in the great Beyond. Yes, a few people believe in complete annihilation at the moment of death. Some New Age types hold to a kind of low grade, popular nature religion with some elements of Buddhism thrown in for good measure. At death one is absorbed into the wind and the trees. For still others, it expresses itself in an intense longing – almost like a powerful nostalgia – for a nameless utopia. Eternity indeed is planted in the human heart!

God Himself has placed in people everywhere a desire for Heaven, so learning about Heaven is an act of obedience. Let's read another scripture. (Philippians 3:20-21). Notice that it doesn't say that your citizenship “will be” in Heaven. Your citizenship in Heaven is right now in the present. Your residence in Heaven is future, to be sure, but your citizenship is now. The clear implication is that Heaven is central and important to your life right now and today. In his second

letter, the apostle Peter writes about the coming day of the Lord in the future when God will bring everything to a glorious fulfillment. Peter says, “So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.” (2 Peter 3:14 NIV) Well, that’s the question, isn’t it? Are you looking forward to Heaven? If so, what exactly are you looking forward to?

Many evangelical Christians in the last 50 years – I’ve lived those years so I know – have been all but obsessed with the Second Coming of Jesus. There’s no end of books, movies and other materials about such subjects as the Antichrist, the tribulation, the rapture and the Millennium. Now the Second Coming of Jesus is an important doctrine – I certainly believe in it – but the Bible puts far more emphasis on what will happen after the Second Coming – the creation of the new Heavens and the new Earth. That’s what most of our study is going to be about.

The climax of history is not the Second Coming of Jesus or the Millennium. It is the creation of a new Heaven and a new Earth by God Himself - a restored place for redeemed and resurrected people. Here’s the central truth I want you to capture out of this message series: God has never given up on His original plan for human beings to dwell on Earth with Him. We will see – if you haven’t seen it already - that all Christians will experience a resurrection of their physical bodies and will spend eternity with God in a physical, literal new Heaven and upon a new Earth. We’ve heard it already in the Philippians passage we read earlier and here it is again, “But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior. He will take our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own, using the same power with which he will bring everything under his control.” (Philippians 3:20-21 NLT) Now, here’s a second reason why heaven matters.

LEARNING ABOUT HEAVEN DESTROYS DANGEROUS MYTHS.

Despite the fact that Christians have been a dominant part of American life and culture since our country began, most Americans have no idea what the Bible really teaches about Heaven. A few years ago, Maria Shriver, the niece of President John F. Kennedy and the current First Lady of California wrote a book about Heaven for children. The book is called *What’s Heaven* and it has lots of pictures of fluffy clouds and blue skies. Here’s part of the text of that book, “[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 up to Heaven to be with him.... [And Grandma is] alive in me.... Most important, she taught me to believe in myself.... She’s in a safe place, with the stars, with God and with the angels.... She is watching over us from up there....” That is more or less exactly what

millions of people in America have come to believe, to accept as truth and even to pass on to their kids. Almost everything Maria Shriver says there is either contradicted by the Bible or can't be supported by anything in the Bible.

Some myths about Heaven seem more ridiculous than dangerous. For example, some people believe that when you die, God turns you into an angel. Movies made that myth popular – for instance, Clarence in *It's A Wonderful Life*. No, angels are a completely different order of God's creation. You aren't turned into an angel and angels aren't turned into human beings. Or, how about the myth that heaven is a kind of boring place. Some people depict Heaven as a kind of unending church service – a place where you sing hymns and choruses forever and ever and ever while strumming on a harp. Maybe they give you a break every now and then to polish the streets of gold. *Far Side* cartoonist Gary Larson might have captured it best when he depicted a man with angel wings and a halo sitting on a cloud doing nothing with no one nearby. He has the look of someone marooned on a desert island with absolutely nothing to do. A caption reveals his inner thoughts: "Wish I'd brought a magazine."

But even seemingly harmless myths can be dangerous. The Bible says this about Satan: "And he spoke terrible words of blasphemy against God, slandering his name and his dwelling—that is, those who dwell in heaven." (Revelation 13:6 NLT) That verse tells me that Satan slanders three things: God's Person, God's people and God's place. Think about it. He has every reason to spread the lie that Heaven is a boring, unappealing place. That would rob you of any joy and anticipation when you think about Heaven. You'd be content just to set your mind on this world. Why even share your faith about going to Heaven if you're not sure you even want to be there?

Probably the most dangerous myth about Heaven is the belief that you will be a disembodied spirit floating around forever. The fact is that many people resist the biblical picture of bodily resurrection of the dead and literal life on a new Earth or of a future state that is physical and literal. Even Christians have bought into the myth that only your soul needs to be saved and that you'll spend eternity as a kind of ghost in a less than physical realm. Randy Alcorn calls this "Christoplatonism." He's written one of the best books on Heaven you'll ever read entitled simply *Heaven*. "Christoplatonism" is a view of reality that attempts to combine Christian beliefs with the Greek philosophy of Plato. Plato taught that reality is fundamentally something ideal or abstract. The physical body is a liability. It opposes or imprisons the soul; therefore, the spirit's highest destiny is to be forever free from the body. Everything material – including the Earth we live on – is evil and can only hold us back. It has resulted in two wrong but contradictory views of life and living. One is asceticism which is the denial of physical pleasures such as food or sex because they're evil. The other is hedonism which says indulge in everything because it doesn't matter anyway.

As we're going to see, the Bible assumes your body isn't just a shell for your soul to inhabit. It's a good and essential aspect of your personhood. Yes, both your body and soul have been marred by sin and both need to be redeemed by Jesus. But Heaven doesn't mean the absence of your body, but rather the attainment of a new sinless body and spirit. Moreover, the Earth isn't intrinsically evil but was made by God's own hand for us. It was God who made food and water, eating and drinking, marriage and sex, friendship and games, art and music, celebration and laughter. Jesus didn't die and rise again to give a bunch of ghosts a refuge in some kind of fairy land. He died and rose again to restore the fullness of humanity to you and me – spirit and body – in a very real, physical place. Let Philippians 3:20-21 (MSG) wash over you again: "But there's far more to life for us. We're citizens of high heaven! We're waiting the arrival of the Savior, the Master, Jesus Christ, who will transform our earthy bodies into glorious bodies like his own. He'll make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him."

Why is this so important? It reveals the absolute triumph of our sovereign God. I can't improve on the insights of theologian Anthony Hoekema when he writes, "If the resurrection body were...non-physical, the devil would have won a great victory.... Then it would indeed seem that matter had become intrinsically evil so that it had to be banished.... But matter is not evil; it is part of God's good creation. Therefore, the goal of God's redemption is the resurrection of the physical body, and the creation of a new earth on which his redeemed people can live and serve God forever with glorified bodies. Thus the universe will not be destroyed but renewed, and God will win the victory." Here's a final reason why heaven matters.

THINKING ABOUT HEAVEN AFFECTS LIFE TODAY.

Another way of saying it is this: What you think about tomorrow powerfully affects how you live today. Or how you think about the future changes how you live in the present. Let me offer just a few biblical examples of this principle. A biblical view of heaven will give you all the motivation you need to serve the Lord enthusiastically your whole life long. After discussing the importance of the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection body, Paul writes these words in conclusion, "With all this going for us, my dear, dear friends, stand your ground. And don't hold back. Throw yourselves into the work of the Master, confident that nothing you do for him is a waste of time or effort." (1 Corinthians 15:58 MSG) Everything done for Jesus and in His Name matters!

A biblical view of heaven will strengthen your desire to live a life that pleases God. "And so, dear friends, while you are waiting for these things to happen, make every effort to be found living peaceful lives that are pure and blameless in his sight." (2 Peter 3:14 NLT) A biblical view of heaven will even change your view of sex. "...But you can't say that our bodies were made for sexual immorality. They were made for the Lord, and the Lord cares about our bodies.

And God will raise us from the dead by his power, just as he raised our Lord from the dead.” (1 Corinthians 6:13-14 NLT) Paul connects being sexually moral now with your resurrection body then. How you manage the personal use of your time, talent and treasure is affected by a biblical view of heaven. Jesus said, “Don't hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or—worse!—stolen by burglars. Stockpile treasure in heaven, where it's safe from moth and rust and burglars.” (Matthew 6:19-20 MSG)

A biblical view of heaven will provide God's perspective on the suffering you are inevitably going to have in life. “Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.” (Romans 8:18 NLT) Paul suggests that any and all suffering is more bearable because of what's ahead. A biblical view of heaven will change how you look at death itself. “We are people of flesh and blood. That is why Jesus became one of us. He died to destroy the devil, who had power over death. But he also died to rescue all of us who live each day in fear of dying.” (Hebrews 2:14-15 CEV) You're not supposed to like or welcome death, but because of God's promises you don't have to fear it. That's just a sample of how thinking about heaven correctly will affect your life today. It changes everything! I agree with theologian Herman Ridderbos when he said, “We cannot understand biblical revelation, human history, or the events of our own lives if we don't grasp God's plan for the new heavens and the New Earth.” That's why heaven matters!

In 1952, young Florence Chadwick stepped into the Pacific Ocean off Catalina Island determined to swim to the shore of mainland California. She was already the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways. The weather was chilly and foggy. It was hard to see the boats accompanying her. Still, she swam for fifteen hours. Florence begged to be taken out of the water along the way even though her mother, in a boat alongside of her, told her she was close and that she could make it. Finally, physically and emotionally exhausted, she stopped swimming and was pulled out. It wasn't until she was on the boat that she discovered the shore – the California coastline - was less than half a mile away. At a news conference the next day, she said, “All I could see was the fog.... I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it.”

“I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it.” For every follower of Jesus, the shore is Jesus Himself and being with Him in a place that He has prepared for us and where we will live with Him forever – the New Heavens and the New Earth. If you can keep your eye on your eternal home then despite the fog of life today, the Holy Spirit will comfort you, energize you and encourage you along your journey.