

WHY WILL HEAVEN FEEL LIKE HOME? HEBREWS 11:13-16; JOHN 14:1-3

I wonder how many of you have either heard or remember the words of this old Gospel song? “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing thru, My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue; The angels beckon me from Heaven’s open door, And I can’t feel at home in this world anymore. O Lord, you know I have no friend like you. If Heaven’s not my home, then Lord, what will I do? The angels beckon me from Heaven’s open door, And I can’t feel at home in this world anymore.” (Albert E. Brumley)

There’s a lot of truth in that old song and that’s what I want us to think about today. Will Heaven feel like home? Yes, the Bible suggests the use of that image. Now I know that the word “home” gets mixed reactions from people today. For many people the word “home” immediately suggests a familiar place of love, comfort and safety. But that’s not true for everyone. For a homeless person, the word “home” means a tent, a makeshift hut made out of cardboard or maybe just an open place on a sidewalk. For another person, the word “home” evokes painful memories of abuse, neglect, broken relationships and profound unhappiness. The last place they ever want to go is home.

But God doesn’t abandon a powerful image just because we human beings have screwed it up through our sin. By way of example, we are celebrating fathers today and their powerful influence on their kids. Perhaps the most important image of God Himself is as our Heavenly Father. But you know that some people struggle with the image of God as our Father because of the incredibly negative relationship they’ve had with their earthly fathers. The answer is not getting rid of the image. Instead, God is all about restoring and redeeming powerful images that communicate important truths about our relationship with Him. As we’ll see today, one image of Heaven is as our home. But why will Heaven feel like home? As I studied and thought about how to answer that question, I came up with three answers. Here’s the first one:

HOME IS THE PLACE YOU DESIRE TO BE ABOVE ALL.

How does the old saying go? “Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home.” I love to travel, take trips, see new places and do new things. I thoroughly enjoyed the mission trip to Thailand back in January. Thank you again for making it possible for me to go! But as the trip came to an end, I longed for home again: seeing and being with Cheryl, sleeping in my own bed, eating familiar food, petting my dog, relaxing at the end of the day in front of the fireplace. For whatever reason, God has wired us up in such a way that we long for home.

I believe God gives you longings only Heaven can fulfill. While not explicit in the Bible, I see that truth implied in several passages. Back in the Old Testament we read, “... He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God’s work from beginning to end.” (Eccl 3:11 NLT) I

want us to look at some verses from Hebrews 11:13-16 where we hear about a long list of people who responded to God in faith. “They admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.... They are looking for a country of their own.... They were longing for a better country—a heavenly one.” That’s the language of a profound, intense, internal hunger or longing that only the New Heaven and the New Earth will satisfy.

Theologian Donald Bloesch says, “Our greatest affliction is not anxiety, or even guilt, but rather homesickness – a nostalgia or ineradicable yearning to be at home with God.” I don’t think you even have to be a Christian to sense that longing. Non-believers can have that longing, too, but they rarely think of it as a longing for God or a longing for Heaven. We all move through life not thinking about Heaven or eternity all that much. Maybe we do when someone close to us dies, but that’s about it. But then there come those uninvited moments – they just sneak up on you - when ordinary life and its experiences seem commonplace, unfulfilling and less than satisfying. Malcolm Muggeridge, an English writer who became a Christian late in his life, put it in this way, “I had a sense, sometimes enormously vivid, that I was a stranger in a strange land; a visitor, not a native.” Has that every happened to you?

That sense of longing is actually a gift from God. You might call it being homesick for Heaven – and that’s actually a very good thing. It means you recognize that this Earth is just not what it should be and you long for something much better. It’s to your benefit that you don’t grow comfortable in a world destined for judgment before God completely restores it. Thank God when you have those feelings that you don’t quite fit, because if you know Jesus, you don’t. I see the apostle Paul trying to describe that to the Christians living in Corinth, “For instance, we know that when these bodies of ours are taken down like tents and folded away, they will be replaced by resurrection bodies in heaven—God-made, not handmade—and we’ll never have to relocate our ‘tents’ again. Sometimes we can hardly wait to move—and so we cry out in frustration. Compared to what’s coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an unfurnished shack, and we’re tired of it! We’ve been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home, our resurrection bodies! The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what’s ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we’ll never settle for less.” (2 Cor 5:1-5 MSG)

That passage also tells us that God gives you previews of Heaven – your real home - now. How does God do that? Sometimes it’s simply through doing what you love to do and enjoy now. What do you just love doing in life right now? Listening to or playing music... gardening... playing a game or a sport... picnics, conversation or laughter with friends... taking a hike in the woods... looking at antique cars... reading a great story. Does God really want you to disdain and despise everything in this world - all of its activities and simple pleasures? I don’t think so! No, you do and enjoy those things not because you’re a sinner but because you’re a human being. Those simple pleasures are sometimes

foretastes of Heaven. What you love about this life – the clean, good and wonderful things - are the things that somehow resonate with the life you were made for. The things you love here on this Earth are not merely the best this life has to offer. They are previews of the greater life to come.

Or sometimes God gives us occasional - once in a lifetime - experiences that are glimpses of Heaven. Last week I told you about a profound worship experience I had almost 20 years ago now that I still believe was a foretaste of Heaven. Why don't those great moments in your life last longer or come more frequently? Perhaps because then you wouldn't long for Heaven as you should. As C.S. Lewis, the Christian author, wrote, "Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home." Joni Eareckson Tada, a Christian author and artist paralyzed from her neck down since her teen years, has written a great devotional book on Heaven. She writes powerfully about one of these experiences I've been describing. Why will Heaven feel like home? Because home is the place you desire to be above all. And Heaven is where you desire to be above all. Secondly...

HOME IS THE PLACE YOU BELONG.

One of the things you and I like about home is that we just fit there. It's a place of both physical and emotional comfort. But the fact remains that both Heaven and Earth are only partially your home now. Earth was created by God as a perfect environment for us, but when Adam and Eve sinned and sin entered the equation this world has become a very broken, unacceptable mockery of what God intended for it to be. That's why this Earth as it is today under the curse of sin doesn't fully feel like your home. There are things you love about life on the Earth, to be sure, but the closer you get to Jesus and the more you follow Him, the less and less it feels like you belong here.

Now the Bible says, "But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior." (Phil 3:20 NLT) So that tells me that when you become a follower of Jesus, this Earth as it is today becomes even less your home than before. Spiritually, your citizenship – your primary allegiance - even changes! You now live by Heaven's truth, Heaven's values and Heaven's priorities. To some extent you're already joined with and a part of Heaven's residents – your brothers and sisters who have died but are alive in Jesus' presence at this very moment. Heaven is not just your future home; it's in a very real sense your home right now. By the same token, you still live on this Earth. You still struggle with temptation and sin. There's still so much you don't understand about God. So Heaven being your home feels partial and incomplete, doesn't it? That's the tension you and I live with every day – both Heaven and Earth are only partially our home right now.

But I want to remind you that the New Heaven and New Earth will be fully your home one day. When you hear people sing that song, "This world is not my

home” or express that kind of thought, it’s both true and false. The world as it is right now is not your home. That’s certainly true. This is a broken, cursed and fallen planet. But we’ve been learning that an incredible merger is going to happen in the future. At some point after Jesus’ second coming, this world as we know it is going to come to an end. God will create and then join New Heaven and New Earth together and that’s going to be your home forever and ever. The Bible says, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared.... And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, ‘Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them.’” (Rev 21:1-3 NLT)

Instead of being annihilated, this world is going to be restored, redeemed and renewed to what God intended for it to be. And isn’t that what you really want after all? Nobody wants to live in a Heaven where you float around on clouds and play harps all day? Don’t you want to live forever in a physical, real world with all the beauty God originally intended for it to have and none of the ugliness of this present world? You’re going to have a resurrected, physical body for all eternity, so you will need a physical place to live. That will be a real place the Bible calls the New Earth. It will be this old Earth wonderfully restored and made perfect. The devil is not going to have the last word; God is.

Have you ever noticed how many words in the Bible start with the prefix “re”? Reconcile, redeem, restore, recover, return, renew, regenerate, resurrect. That prefix “re” means to take something that has been ruined or lost and return it to its original condition or design. That’s what God has been doing all along: restoration. Whether it’s your relationship with Him, your physical body or the literal Earth you live on, God isn’t about completely scrapping what’s there and starting from a clean slate. Instead He is finding what has been lost, liberating what has been enslaved, fixing what has been broken, and healing what has been damaged. The Bible says, “For he must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through his holy prophets.” (Acts 3:21 NLT) Why will Heaven feel like home? Because home is the place you belong. And Heaven is where you belong. Thirdly...

HOME IS THE PLACE YOU LIVE WITH LOVED ONES.

Home is where you are with the ones you love. Isn’t that what makes “home” home? They may be biological family members or other people that have become like family to you. The Bible says that you will enjoy an eternal reunion with saved loved ones. We’ve looked at those scriptures previously so I don’t want to take time today to go over them again. But I do want to remind you of this precious truth. When does Heaven begin to become interesting to you? Sometimes it is only when living on this Earth breaks your heart. When loved ones die – family, close friends – they take a part of your heart with them to

Heaven that no one and nothing can replace. When you leave the grave site of someone like that, you start longing for Heaven. My friend, if part of your heart is with your loved ones today and they are at home with the Lord, then Heaven is already home for you, too.

An elderly Christian once said, "When I was a boy, I thought of heaven as a great shining city with vast walls and domes and spires with nobody in it except white-robed angels, who were strangers to me. By and by, my little brother died and I thought of a great city with walls and domes and spires, and a flock of cold, unknown angels, and one little fellow that I was acquainted with. He was the only one I knew at the time. Then another brother died, and there were now two there that I knew. As I grew older, my acquaintances began to die and the flock continually grew. But it was not until I had sent one of my own children to his heavenly Parent (God) that I began to think I had gone a little of the way in myself. A second went, a third went, a fourth went, and by that time I had so many acquaintances in heaven I did not see any more walls and domes and spires. I began to think of the residents of the celestial city. And now so many of my acquaintances have gone there, that it sometimes seems to me that I know more in heaven than I do on earth."

I thought this might be as good a place as any to address the hard question: How will you be able to have joy in Heaven knowing you have loved ones in Hell? The Bible provides no answer that I know of. Some have suggested that in Heaven you'll have no memory of unsaved loved ones because that would ruin your full enjoyment of Heaven. I can't agree with that. Memory is basic to personality. I'm quite certain that in Heaven you will remember your past life here on Earth vividly. Heaven will certainly erase and cleanse many things, but not your memory. It seems to me that happiness in Heaven won't depend on ignorance of what happened on Earth, but rather on an enhanced appreciation of God's grace and justice as we grasp all that He is and all that He has done.

So what about your loved ones in Hell? The best suggestion I've come across – but it still leaves me cold inside - is that it's possible that once God withdraws from human beings in Hell, they will no longer bear anything of His image in any way. What you love in other people – even unsaved people – is some aspect of God's image that you see in them. Perhaps in Hell they lose even that. As a result, they become less than human and are beyond pity or compassion. Yes, in one sense they are the same people, but without God they would be stripped of any and all the qualities you once loved. I know that's hard to wrap your brain around and it's only a guess. But here's what you can be certain about. You will not be ignorant of Hell, but nothing of Hell's misery will ever spoil Heaven's joy.

The Bible also says that you will enjoy eternal fellowship with your Heavenly Father. Let's look at something Jesus said in John 14:1-3. "In my Father's house..." Here are a few observations. That's a picture of Heaven as home, isn't it? I would guess that passage has given more comfort to Christians who

are dying and their grieving families than any other verses I know of. It's been pointed out that the way Jesus describes Heaven here combines the familiarity of a home with the Old Testament description of the Temple – a place with many rooms, porches and courts for crowds of people. How fitting: a home that's also a temple. Because you will have a physical body in Heaven, you will need a physical place to live. Therefore, this is more than just a pleasant metaphor about Heaven. I believe Jesus is referring to an actual physical place being built for us by God Himself. Notice also that Jesus refers to a "place" – singular – but He also mentions "many rooms" – which is plural. This suggests that Jesus is preparing a dwelling for you that's a smaller part of a larger place. This place will be your home in the most unique, complete and fulfilling way imaginable. It will be a place both spacious and intimate. But Jesus' point here is not how lavish or grand your apartment, but rather that there will room for each of Jesus' followers to join Him in our Heavenly Father's home. Why will Heaven feel like home? Because home is the place you live with loved ones. And Heaven is where you will live with loved ones – those people you have known here on Earth and, best of all, with your Heavenly Father forever and ever.

I mentioned Joni Eareckson Tada earlier in this message. She has a ministry called Joni and Friends Ministries that offers retreats for families affected by a wide range of disabilities. At end of one of these five-day retreats, a microphone was passed around so all the participants could share a couple of sentences about how meaningful and how fun the week had been. Little freckle-faced, red-haired Jeff raised his hand. The counselors were so excited to see what Jeff would say because he'd won all their hearts at this retreat. They'd been captivated by his wonderful smile and joyful spirit. Everyone leaned forward to hear his words. Jeff has profound disabilities but he took the microphone, put it right up to his mouth, and bellowed loudly, "Let's go home." He smiled, bowed and handed back the microphone. All the families roared with laughter.

Later, his mother told Joni that Jeff really missed his dad back home. His dad couldn't come to the family retreat because he had to work. Even though Jeff had had a great time - a fun-filled week - he was ready to go home because he missed his daddy. This world is pleasant enough at times. But would you really want it to go on forever just the way it is now today? I don't think so. I'm with Jeff. I miss my Daddy, my Abba Father, my Heavenly Father. There are days when my heart longs to go home. How about you? One day that will happen for each and every follower of Jesus. You will go home to Heaven.