

## **ARE YOU LOOKING FORWARD TO HEAVEN? 2 PETER 3:11-14; 2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18**

Are you looking forward to Heaven? That depends, doesn't it? When you contrast what we often assume about Heaven with what the Bible says about Heaven, it's easy to see why even some Christians don't look forward to Heaven. We assume Heaven has nothing to do with this Earth. The Bible says it will be this Earth restored and renewed. We assume it will be unfamiliar and otherworldly. The Bible says it will be familiar and earthly. We assume we will be disembodied. The Bible says we will have resurrected bodies. We assume Heaven will feel foreign. The Bible says it will feel like home. We assume we'll leave all of our favorite things behind. The Bible suggests that we'll retain the good and find the very best ahead. We assume everything in Heaven will be strange and unknown. The Bible suggests a wonderful blend of the old and the new. We assume we'll have nothing to do. The Bible says we'll worship, serve, rule and rest. Let's face, we often assume Heaven will be downright boring. The Bible implies Heaven will be endlessly fascinating.

I appreciate each of you who've told me that you've found this message series on *Heaven: A Restored Place for Redeemed People* helpful, encouraging, or inspiring in some way. I can't tell you what a blessing it's been for me to study all of this stuff and then put together the messages week by week. But, as they say, all good things must come to an end! Now, that's true of life on this Earth as we know it today, but that will not be true of life in Heaven. All good things will not come to an end; instead, they will go on and on forever. But I wanted to close this message series by asking a question, "Are you looking forward to Heaven?"

The Bible says, "Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth." (Col 3:1-2 NLT) Those words - "set" and "think" - are in the imperative tense; so this isn't just a suggestion, it's a command. Once you become a follower of Jesus your ultimate allegiance and loyalty changes. Looking forward to Heaven is actually a sign that you're really a follower of Jesus. The Bible says, "Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them." (Heb 11:16 NLT) That describes genuine followers of Jesus across the centuries – they are the ones who look forward to Heaven. But the next phrase – "therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God" – implies that longing for Heaven is evidence that you are truly one of God's children. Heaven is forever; therefore, it simply matters more than all the other temporary stuff that calls for your attention in this life. If it isn't eternal, it can never matter as much as Heaven. So, then, are you looking forward to Heaven? If so, how you will change in at least three ways. First of all, if you are truly looking forward to Heaven ...

### **HOW YOU LIVE LIFE WILL CHANGE.**

In what ways? Well, for one thing, what you do for Jesus matters more not less. Knowing that the present world is going to end and then be resurrected and restored into a place known as the New Heavens and the New Earth should profoundly affect your daily behavior. Here's one Bible passage that underlines that thought – 2 Peter 3:11-14. Anything and everything that you do because you love Jesus – whether it's something public or private – matters a great deal. Every stumbling effort to witness for Jesus, every time you resist temptation, every time you repent and ask for God's forgiveness, every gesture of concern and compassion for someone in need, every attempt to open your heart in worship, every time you choose to obey the Lord no matter how hard it is, every time you sacrifice money, time or energy to advance God's mission in this world, every prayer no matter how simple, how basic, how unprofessional it sounds, everything which flows out of your faith relationship with God Himself will find its place in the New Heavens and the New Earth. It all matters.

Keeping your spiritual priorities straight and remaining faithful in this life will get you rewarded in the next life. Isn't that the implication when Jesus said this? "When you put on a luncheon or a banquet... don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you." (Lk 14:12-14 NLT) Looking forward to Heaven means that you will find increasingly generous ways to give away your time, your talent and your treasure in this life to whatever build's God Kingdom, because it has an effect in the next life. Again, Jesus said, "Don't store up treasures here on earth.... Store your treasures in heaven...." (Mt 6:19-20 NLT) Moses put up with a lot of heartache but persevered through it all – why? – "because he was looking ahead to his reward." (Heb 11:26 NIV)

You might think that's a kind of selfish, unspiritual way of looking at life, but the Bible commends it. Over and over again you are encouraged to make the most of any and every opportunity to live today in light of eternity. The Bible says, "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil." (Eph 5:15-16 NIV) This incredible, cosmic revolution that began with the resurrection of Jesus some 2,000 years ago has its living, breathing outposts in you and me. You're on the frontlines, so to speak, of all that God wants to do and will do. God has decided to make each of His followers an integral part of His ultimate plan to restore all things to what He originally designed.

Now, that leads me to a second implication of how living life will change if you are truly looking forward to Heaven. This world matters more and not less. That might sound contradictory. It's easy to conclude that because Heaven is coming, Heaven is perfect and Heaven is eternal that this world – which is passing away in its current form, which is corrupt, which is temporary - should matter less and less to you. Just the reverse is true. C.S. Lewis put it exactly right when he

said, "If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.... [They] left their mark on earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither." Yes, you're a citizen of Heaven right now, but you're not a resident yet! You are called to demonstrate through your actions, your words, your involvements and your efforts the message that this is indeed your Father's world and you intend to be part of its ultimate redemption and restoration. Once a well known Christian was asked if he was an optimist or a pessimist about the future of humanity. I loved his answer. He said, "I am neither an optimist or a pessimist. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead!" When Jesus rose from the dead, it set in motion God's inevitable triumph. Everything you do in the power of the risen Lord Jesus Christ and by His Spirit right now today is not wasted. It will last all the way into God's new world.

So today, you are called to resist evil as part and parcel of looking forward to Heaven. I think of the curse of abortion that still plagues both our country and our world. But I also think of the unspeakable evil of things like human trafficking or children dying of hunger and neglect. I think of places around the world that are full of terrible injustice in one way or another. You and I are called to resist evil as an essential part of anticipating Heaven. The Bible tells you both to hate and to love this world. A contradiction? Not really. You are to hate the world that is cursed by sin, but love the world that God originally created. It reminds me of the situation that decent German citizens experienced under the Nazi regime. Did they love or hate their homeland, Germany? Both. They came to hate the Nazi government, but they knew there was a better Germany buried under that tide of evil. Some of them made efforts to save Jewish people. It was their love for Germany that fueled their opposition to Nazi Germany. Likewise, your love for God's Earth can and should fuel your opposition to fallen Earth.

By the same token, today you are called to help fix whatever can be fixed. This idea that the world is in such a mess that you should just give up on it and sit passively while it literally goes to hell is not something the Holy Spirit ever asks you to do. Actually, that's a form of Gnosticism – the Christian faith's ancient enemy. "We're just passing through... this world is irrelevant... the only thing that matters is getting your disembodied soul and other disembodied souls to Heaven when you die." That's not Christianity. Instead, Christians need to be at the forefront of things like caring about the environment. I'm well aware that there are environmentalists who are anything but Christian, but that's no reason to give up caring about God's creation. After all, this is my Father's world; how dare anyone treat it like a big garbage dump! Christians should be at the forefront of providing disaster relief and efforts to alleviate the suffering of those with AIDS in Africa. Fixing whatever can be fixed isn't just about supporting causes. When you're a godly attorney, a godly teacher, a godly business person, a godly parent – doing whatever you do with love and a deep understanding of

God's desire for integrity – you look forward to Heaven. Of course, you can't fix everything, but by God's grace you can fix some things. Of course, only God can build God's Kingdom, but precisely how does He do that? Through His people.

There's a third manifestation of how living your life will change when you look forward to Heaven. People will matter more not less. So, what does that look like? Well, if Heaven is real and only those who trust in Jesus get in, you will be asking God for more and more opportunities to share the good news of what Jesus has done with those in your circle of influence who have not yet heard it or really understood it. It will also mean that you have a growing commitment to the local church not less of one. Many American Christians think it's unimportant to have a vital, committed, ongoing relationship with a group of other Christians. Bless their hearts; they don't understand the first thing about Heaven, do they? It's a community with a capital C! If you are looking forward to Heaven, you will be part of a local church now – participating fully in its worship, fellowship and service. It will also mean relating to every human being in light of Heaven. Again, C.S. Lewis puts it all too memorably, "Remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would strongly be tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal."

You can have either a lifeboat theology or an ark theology. Think first of the *Titanic*, the doomed ocean liner. You can think of this world as the *Titanic* that's hit the iceberg of sin. There's no other alternative but to abandon ship and get in a lifeboat. God has given up on it and is only concerned with the survival of His people. Any attempt to make a difference in this world is so much arranging of the deck chairs – useless and irrelevant. Get in the lifeboat, help others get in the lifeboat and sail on until you get to Heaven where all will be well. That's lifeboat theology. Think secondly of Noah's ark. It not only saved people but it preserved God's other creatures, too. It didn't just look to escape, but instead to rebuild and restore the Earth God created. Once the flood waters subsided, Noah was commanded to fill the Earth and rule it. That's ark theology. Which sounds more biblical to you? Are you looking forward to Heaven? Secondly, if you are truly looking forward to Heaven:

### **HOW YOU DEAL WITH SUFFERING WILL CHANGE.**

How so? Well, you recognize that all suffering is temporary. That's a wonderful truth! In describing Heaven, the Bible says, "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." (Rev. 21:4 NIV) Those of you in wheelchairs today

will not need them in Heaven. Those of you with cancer today will be cancer free for all eternity in Heaven. The effects of abusive treatment some of you still struggle under today will disappear in Heaven. Those of you who struggle every day against terrible addictions will be completely free of them in Heaven. Those of you who still feel the stab of grief because a loved one is in Heaven will never have that again because you will be with that person. Those in other countries martyred because of their faith in Jesus will be honored in Heaven for all eternity. Jesus Himself put it like this, "... 'God blesses you who are poor, for the Kingdom of God is yours. God blesses you who are hungry now, for you will be satisfied. God blesses you who weep now, for in due time you will laugh. What blessings await you when people hate you and exclude you and mock you and curse you as evil because you follow the Son of Man. When that happens, be happy! Yes, leap for joy! For a great reward awaits you in heaven....'" (Lk 6:20-23 NLT)

Secondly, you recognize that all suffering is endurable. The Bible says, "... when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing." (James 1:2-4 NLT) It also says, "So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while." (1 Pt 1:6 NLT) No, God doesn't expect you to enjoy suffering, but because of the reality of Heaven you can rejoice in the midst of it. Looking forward to Heaven doesn't get rid of suffering and it doesn't eliminate the pain of suffering, it simply lessens its impact by helping us get a whole new perspective.

Thirdly, you recognize that all suffering is purposeful. Look with me at this passage in the Bible – 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. Paul is saying there among other things that in the hands of God all suffering can have a good and eternal purpose in your life. What on earth can give you a perspective like that? Heaven – only Heaven! Randy Alcorn says, "Christ is not simply preparing a place for us: He is preparing us for that place." The Bible says, "Even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered." (Heb. 5:8 NLT) If that was true of Jesus, than perhaps you have things to learn as well that only suffering can teach you. In fact, the Bible does say, "Instead, be very glad—for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world." (1 Pt 4:13 NLT) If you are looking forward to Heaven, there's a final manifestation I'd like to mention:

### **HOW YOU APPROACH AGING AND DYING WILL CHANGE.**

We are blessed to have many older people in our congregation. Some of them already know this, but it needs to be heard again by all of us. If you're looking forward to heaven, you live as if the best is yet to be because it is. I'm old enough now not to be able to do things I was once able to do. Aging can be a disheartening, discouraging experience unless I remember that my peak as a

person made in God's image and redeemed by Jesus' shed blood never does happen in this life. That will only happen in Heaven. You are not past your prime, because you won't experience the best you can be until you get to Heaven. When you're looking forward to Heaven, you can age with contentment, without envy, without regret and even with rejoicing because you know there is a whole lot more ahead. Ladies and gentlemen, it can get a whole lot better than the best you've experienced in this life and it will!

And then, if you're looking forward to heaven, you live as if to die is gain because it is. The apostle Paul said, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Ph 1:21 NIV) Have you noticed that we sometimes refer to being in Heaven as "the afterlife"? But what is life as God intended and where are you going to experience it fully? In the New Heaven and the New Earth you will be enjoying forever what life on Earth was intended to be. Since only in Heaven will you finally experience life at its best, isn't it more accurate to call your present existence "beforelife"? Dwight L. Moody, the great evangelist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, made this memorable statement late in his life: "Some day you will read in the papers that D.L. Moody... is dead. Don't you believe one word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now. I shall have gone higher up, that's all – out of this old clay tenement into a house that is immortal; a body that death cannot touch, that sin cannot taint, a body fashioned like His glorious body."

God doesn't expect you to be nonchalant about your own death. He understands that you have very natural fears and concerns about it. After all, death was never something God intended for you to experience. We simply need to think about Heaven more often so that we can get God's perspective on death more often. Someone has observed that as a Christian the day you die will be the best day you've ever lived. Think about that. But it won't be the best day you will ever live. The day that Jesus raises your body from the dead and unites it again with your spirit and you move on to live forever in the New Heavens and the New Earth - that day will be better by far. What a day – what a day – that will be!

When Ben Zoba was quite young, he had heard more than one sermon about the importance of surrendering his life to Christ. Ben was a great kid – unusually selfless and kind – who everyone just expected to give his life to Jesus quickly and easily. It disturbed his mom and dad when Ben stubbornly resisted their invitations to give his life to Christ. He would offer no explanations; he would simply tell them in his preschool English that he wasn't ready. He resisted for several months. Then, one morning as the whole family sat around the kitchen table eating their Cheerios, little Ben announced that he was ready to give his life to Christ. He then got up from the table and went upstairs. Mom and Dad looked at each other and followed him. Perhaps they expected to find Ben on his knees in prayer. They didn't. Instead, they found him folding his Star Wars pajamas into his Sesame Street suitcase. They said, "Ben, what are you doing?" He answered, "Packing." "Why?" Mom and Dad asked. "To go to heaven," he said. They then understood why their child hesitated to give his life to Christ. Little

Ben thought that in so doing, he would have to leave his family and take up residence, literally, then and there with Christ in heaven. That might bring a smile to our faces. But there's more than a kernel of truth in Ben's misunderstanding. We should all possess the faith of little Ben. We should have our hearts so fixed on Christ's appearance and we should be looking forward to Heaven so intently that all the attachments of our earthly life pale in comparison. The Bible says we are "aliens and strangers on earth ... longing for a better country—a heavenly one." Are you looking forward to Heaven?