

IS YOUR ANTICIPATION *BIG ENOUGH*?

ISAIAH 65:17-25

Well, another Christmas is over. The shopping is done at least for a little while. The decorations have been taken down and stored away for another year or soon will be. The cookies have been mostly eaten. The gatherings and parties with family and friends are over. The carols have been sung; the candles have been extinguished; and the gifts have been unwrapped and put away. What we have anticipated for a month or so – after all, Christmas is a season of anticipation - is over for another year. The season of Advent is over, too. We've observed that Advent - a 20 plus day period of time preceding Christmas Day Christians all over the world have observed for hundreds of years - is a time of spiritual anticipation. It's a time to long for God and what only He can do in this world. It's a time to get prepared spiritually for the coming of God into this world. We've looked at several prophecies from the Old Testament book of Isaiah to help us answer questions like, "Just *who* are you anticipating?" and "Just *what* are you anticipating?" when it comes to Jesus. After all, Isaiah lived some 700 years before Jesus was born, so all Isaiah could ever do was anticipate who the Messiah would be and what the Messiah would do.

When it comes to God and the things of God, do you have any sense of anticipation? When it comes to God, do you look forward to anything? Do you long for anything, hope for anything, or expect anything that you haven't already received? I suspect that many of us are a bit deficient when it comes to spiritual anticipation. Perhaps that's because far too many of us we have a little God, a small God – a God that rarely, if ever, blows our minds with the sheer immensity of who He is, what He has done, and what He has yet to do. If that's true of you, you should spend some time in the Bible, generally, and with the prophet, Isaiah, specifically. What you will find there is a very big anticipation in a very big God. In the last two chapters of Isaiah – chapters 65 and 66 – the prophet not only brings his prophecy to a climax but also his Holy Spirit-inspired vision of the future. The final question in our Advent series of messages is this one: "Is your anticipation *big enough*?" An honest answer would require a simple "no" from everyone in this room. For that very reason and many others, we need to read and study Isaiah - and the rest of the Bible - because by doing so, our anticipation will just have to get bigger. By way of example, let's read together the following passage from Isaiah. Now, help me answer two questions I'd like to ask you and myself.

ARE YOU ANTICIPATING THE RESTORATION OF ALL THINGS?

It's obvious that Isaiah is describing something that is going to happen in the future, because nothing like what he envisions has happened yet. If you believe the Bible is true and that all biblical prophecy will be fulfilled, the questions you want to ask are, "When is this going to happen? When is this going to take place?" Now, you should know that some Bible scholars will tell you that this probably refers to a time in the future called the Millennium. What's that? The

word “millennium” literally means 1,000. Some Christians believe that after the Second Coming of Jesus, He will reign over the Earth for a literal period of 1,000 years. Others say that the 1,000 years doesn’t have to be taken literally but simply refers to a very long period of time. This Millennium is after the Second Coming but before we enter eternity when God creates the new Heaven and the new Earth. They believe Isaiah is pointing here to that specific time in the future.

But other Christians – some who believe in a literal Millennium and others who don’t – argue that Isaiah is providing us a picture here of eternity not the Millennium. Even though that interpretation has its problems, too, those who hold this view think the clincher is right there in v. 17: “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth...” (Is 65:17 NIV) For what it’s worth, that’s how I interpret Isaiah’s prophecy – that what the Holy Spirit was showing him refers not so much to the Millennium but rather to our eternal condition when God creates the new Heaven and the new Earth. The climax of God’s plan is not the Second Coming of Jesus. It’s not even the Millennium. It’s the creation of a new Heaven and a new Earth by God Himself.

There are other important references in the Bible to a new Heaven and a New Earth. In Revelation, John writes, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared.... 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) The Bible teaches that there will be a kind of temporary destruction and reconstruction of the present Earth followed by the creation of a new Heaven and new Earth. It says, “But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and the very elements themselves will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be found to deserve judgment.... But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God’s righteousness.” (2 Pt 3:10,12 NLT) The ultimate and final destination of every follower of Jesus is the new Heaven and the new Earth.

The Bible teaches that our future and eternal home will combine Heaven and Earth. An incredible merger is ahead of us! Right now, Heaven is God’s home. and Earth is our home. But one day in the future, God will make Earth into Heaven and Heaven into Earth. You will be in Heaven as you continue to live on the Earth. Pastor and author, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, put it succinctly, “... what we call heaven is life in this perfect world as God intended humanity to live it.” Peter, the disciple of Jesus, says in the New Testament book of Acts, “He (Jesus) must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.” (Ac 3:21 NIV) Well, Isaiah was one of those “holy prophets”! God has never given up on His original plan for human beings to dwell on Earth with Him. The Bible teaches 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.

The traditional view of Heaven is that because of our sin a poor, weak God had to abandon His original plan, destroy this world at some point as a failed experiment and then take disembodied creatures to live with Him to a boring, otherworldly environment where we float around on clouds and sing hymns and choruses forever. But God will not surrender this Earth to the trash heap. Earth is not disposable. Furthermore, God has never given up on His original plan for human beings to dwell on Earth with Him. The climax of God's plan is the creation of the New Heaven and the New Earth. That's why He sent Jesus into the world. That's why Jesus died and rose again. 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, "[T]he 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." Is that what you're anticipating? Is your anticipation big enough? Is your anticipation big enough to encompass the restoration of all things?

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 that 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 or tomorrow, the Holy Spirit will keep on comforting you, energizing you and encouraging you along your journey. Now, a second question ...

ARE YOU ANTICIPATING AN ENDLESSLY WONDERFUL LIFE?

That's the wonderful reality depicted here in the rest of this passage. First of all, it will be a joyful life, won't it? "... 'The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.'" (Is 65:17-19 NIV) Isaiah describes a place and a life where joy will be perpetually experienced. Both inward and outward joy will be the condition of everyday life. Maybe you remember the line in the movie, *A League of Their Own*, when Tom Hanks – the manager of the women's baseball

team – says to one of the ladies who’s broken down into tears, “There’s no crying in baseball!” Well, I don’t know about baseball, but I can tell you on the basis of God’s Word that there’s no crying in Heaven! Joy everywhere all the time!

Perhaps one reason that you’ll experience eternal joy is because – as Isaiah says here – we won’t remember the former things. Now, some people believe that means we will not remember anything about our lives here on Earth. I don’t agree with that opinion. After all, the Bible uses language that might imply that God literally forgets our sin. It says, “... ‘And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins.’” (Jer 31:34 NLT) How could God be omniscient – know everything there is to know – and literally forget our sins? Instead, I believe that simply means that God chooses not to bring up your past sins or hold them against you. In Heaven, your past sins and sorrows won’t preoccupy God or you. Instead, you’ll be capable of remembering how God has loved you and shown you His grace but, at the same time, not choose to recall or dwell on anything that would diminish Heaven’s joy. Is that what you’re anticipating? Is your anticipation big enough? Actually, Isaiah implies that you should rejoice and be glad *right now* because of what God is going to do in the future. “But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create,....” (Is 65:18 NIV) Are you anticipating a joyful life?

Secondly, are you anticipating an endless life? God says through Isaiah, “Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.... For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people....” (Is 65:20, 22 NIV) To a Jew in Isaiah’s day, a tree was a symbol of permanence and longevity. Now, to be fair, what is suggested here is an unusually long life rather than eternal life. That’s why some people believe this refers to the Millennium instead. But, I suggest that Isaiah is not trying to be theologically precise here but rather conveying truth in powerful, poetic metaphors. And in other places in Scripture, where we read about the new Heaven and the new Earth, eternal life is clearly mentioned. “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared.... I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, ‘Look, God’s home is now among his people! ... He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.’” (Rev 21:1-4 NLT) What will it be like to live forever? It boggles the mind. But are you anticipating it? Is your anticipation big enough?

Thirdly, are you anticipating a meaningful life? Do you hear that in these words? “They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat.... my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them.” (Is 65:21-23 NIV) Isaiah was envisioning a situation that happened regularly in his day and time. You

built a house or planted a crop and then the army of some neighboring country came in and kicked you out of your home and off your land. Children often didn't survive into adulthood. Isaiah is saying that our future home will never be a place of frustration. There will be no disappointed hopes or failure of any kind.

Frankly, this and other Scriptures refute the myth that Heaven is going to be this place of endless rest and relaxation where you just do nothing all day long. You were created to serve and work for God. That won't come to an end in Heaven; it will be fulfilled. After all, in the Bible's description of future Heaven, we read, "No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him." (Rev 22:3 NIV) Working is part and parcel of bearing God's image. In Heaven, your service and work for God will always be joyful and fulfilling. The curse of sin is what has made work tedious and frustrating, but God is going to restore the original design for work in Heaven. There will be no failure in your work, no disappointment in how it turns out and no falling short of your expectations. Serving God in Heaven will be a reward. There's no retirement in Heaven, because serving God will bring only great joy and immense satisfaction. Instead of an endless vacation or sitting around idle, God will offer you endless opportunities to be productive for Him. Are you anticipating a meaningful life? Is your anticipation big enough?

Fourth and finally, are you anticipating a God-filled life? Isaiah touches on that reality there in v. 24, "Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear." (Is 65:24 NIV) That suggests a whole new level of prayer that suggests a whole new level of relationship. God will answer your prayers before you even ask Him. And every prayer will be answered because, at all times, you will want exactly what God wants to give. You will enjoy unbroken fellowship with God. That was the original intent way back there in the Garden of Eden. That was and is God's ultimate plan for human beings. That's why Jesus was born and came into this world. That's why Jesus died and rose again. This promise and plan of God will be fulfilled when we literally live with God in the new Heaven and the new Earth. The Bible says, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.... 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)

Salvation, getting saved, redemption, being born again, conversion – whatever word you prefer - all point to the same spiritual reality: restoration of an unbroken relationship with God. On this Earth, that relationship was broken by our sin, but then restored in the person of Jesus. But you know as well as I do, that perfect fellowship with God this side of Heaven is hindered, obstructed, stunted and partial because we still carry around within us that sinful nature – that bent towards resisting God. In Heaven every barrier between God and His children is going to be gone and is going to stay gone for all eternity. All the limitations that sin and spiritual darkness cause you to struggle with now will be gone then. Your greatest joy is going to be unhindered fellowship with God Himself. Wherever

you go in Heaven, you will be in the immediate, actual presence of God's full glory. You will enjoy the complete manifestation of God's presence forever and ever and ever. We will experience the ultimate fulfillment of what Jesus Himself promised, "... 'I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.'" (John 10:10 MSG) I don't think Jesus had just this life in mind, do you? I don't understand the kind of life I'm going to have in God's great future, but I accept it by faith because Jesus promised it. Are you anticipating a God-filled life? Is your anticipation big enough?

His Italian mother named him after the gospel writer, Mark. When he was only seventeen, he took an epic journey lasting a quarter of a century, taking him across the steppes of Russia, the rugged mountains of Afghanistan, the wastelands of Persia, and over the top of the world through the Himalayas. He was the first European to enter China. Through an amazing set of circumstances, he became a favorite of the most powerful ruler on planet earth, the Kublai Khan. Mark saw cities that made European capitals look like roadside villages. The Khan's palace dwarfed the largest castles and cathedrals in Europe. It was so massive that its banquet room alone could seat 6,000 diners at one time, each eating on a plate of pure gold. Mark saw the world's first paper money and marveled at the explosive power of gunpowder. It would be 500 years later before Europe would manufacture as much steel as China was producing in the year 1267. He was the first Italian to taste a Chinese culinary invention, pasta.

After serving Kublai Khan for 17 years, Mark began his journey home to Venice, loaded down with gold, silk, and spices. When he arrived home, people dismissed his stories of a place called China as a myth. His family priest rebuked him for spinning lies. On his deathbed, his family, friends, and priest begged him to give up his lies about this place called China. But setting his jaw and gasping for breath, Mark spoke his final words, "I have not even told you half of what I saw." History has proven the truthfulness behind the book he wrote about his adventures—*The Travels of Marco Polo*.

1300 years before Marco Polo wrote about China, another man, the Apostle John, went on an amazing journey to a place we call Heaven in a vision. And 700 years before John, the prophet Isaiah, saw a similar vision. At times we shake our heads in disbelief at these biblical witnesses to the glory of Heaven. But they would say to us, "I have not even told you half of what I saw. Heaven is more joyful, more glorious, and more beautiful than you could ever imagine." May their God-inspired testimonies and descriptions move us to long for God's gift to us in Jesus—the glory of heaven.

As we close out yet another year tomorrow and welcome in a new one, what are you anticipating? Not just for 2013, but way beyond just next year. Are you anticipating the restoration of all things? Are you anticipating an endlessly wonderful life in the presence of God forever? You should be. Isaiah and the others have not told us half of what they saw.