

STUDIES IN ESCHATOLOGY No. 20

Heaven, No. 1

November 30, 2003

We have finished our series on the Bible's doctrine of hell as a subsection of this larger evening series on the Bible's doctrine of the future. We come to our last subject, namely, heaven. In the nature of the case our problem with heaven is not the same as the problem posed with the doctrine of hell, though actually it is nearly the same. In the case of hell the problem is that of unbelief. People either deny that such a place or condition exists at all, or, what is much more common, they do not take the prospect of it seriously. In the case of heaven, almost everyone is a believer, but, once again, hardly anyone takes heaven seriously. They believe it, they may even in the back of their minds expect it for themselves and their loved ones – they surely speak as if they did at funerals – but it bears little or no relation to their lives in this world, as the reality of hell, which most still confess, bears little or no relation to their lives in this world.

Surely that is the main reason why heaven has virtually disappeared from Christian preaching and, strangely, except in almost absurdly superficial ways even from preaching at funerals. I remember attending the funeral of an unbeliever a few years ago, a man who was, by the estimation of every Christian who knew him, a man who had not lived a Christian life. He had been an avid tennis player and there were a number of jokes about his playing tennis now in heaven. When a biblical subject is trivialized to that extent, you realize that it has lost its power over the thinking of people. No one apparently worried that they might be making light of something too serious to turn into a joke about tennis, no one worried that entrance into heaven was a subject of such gravity that joking about it would be taken by some as tantamount to blasphemy, and no one seemed at all concerned that the assumption that apparently everyone went to heaven would be taken as utter tripe by the serious section of the congregation at the funeral. That is the fate of heaven in our day, without a doubt. It has been marginalized to the point of irrelevance. The liberals don't preach it because they hardly believe in it in any form that could be described meaningfully to others and the evangelicals don't preach it because they fear that people won't find it interesting or that it will be positively offensive for the suggestion, which evangelical gospel preaching cannot entirely avoid, that some might not go there. The question in our day is not whether heaven exists – virtually everyone says that he thinks it does – but what difference does it make and why should we think about it when we have so much to concern ourselves with in this world.

Clearly in the Bible, however, heaven is the end and the goal to which everything points. It was that we might go to heaven that Christ came into the world, suffered and died. To take us to heaven he will come again. To live with him and the Father and the Holy Spirit in unbroken communion in heaven is the great object of our salvation. "I go to prepare a place for you," our Savior said as he left the world, "so that where I am you may be also." Heaven is no afterthought in the Bible. Without it the entire biblical system of the meaning of life crumbles. As many texts teach, if there is no heaven we are of all mortals most to be pitied. It is no longer worth bearing the Lord's crosses every day.

It was Woody Allen who said "The trick is to start at the ending when you write a play. Get a good strong ending and then write backwards." Well, no matter it was Woody Allen who said it,

there is an important point there. Without a fixed ending to the human drama, the search for significance and meaning in life is hopeless. And so it is in the Bible. God had an ending in view when he made the world and each of us. He says so everywhere in the Bible. And the ending he had in view for his people was life together with him in heaven; a life that would last forever. Like it or not the Christian religion crumbles without heaven. It is the reason for everything. So it deserves our careful study and reflection.

We are going to say a similar thing about heaven as we said about hell, viz. that our world, our lives are full of the anticipations of it. Its reality is everywhere and always being communicated to us in this world. We will take up that fact next time. Tonight I want to begin with some general perspective.

What is striking about the Bible's presentation of the world to come is that in the case of both heaven and hell it is not the literal and detailed picture we might have expected. We have already noticed in the Bible's description of hell how image-laden that description is, how non-literal the Bible's account of hell is. Now, we pointed out that the Bible's presentation of hell is no less powerful for all that; its images and symbols are clear in their meaning and intention. We are certainly not left in any doubt as to whether hell is a place to avoid at any cost. But, we are not given any specific information about what people do in hell, how they spend their time. I cited, if you remember, the great Reformed theologian of the 17th century, Francis Turretin, sometimes called the Protestant Aquinas, who wrote, "What the punishment really is, or in what does the essence of the pains of hell consist, is not easy to define." [Locus XX, Qu. 7, par. 4] There is, for example, an argument in Christian theology about the state of mind of people in hell: whether they remain fiercely unrepentant and determined in their rebellion against God, whether in W.G. T. Shedd's words, "the wicked will intensifies itself perpetually" and so there is in hell no regret for one's rebellion against God, no acceptance that God's judgement is just [cited in Henri Blocher, "Everlasting Punishment and the Problem of Evil," in Nigel N. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, 296], or, contrarily, whether the triumph of Jesus Christ, such as Paul describes in Phil. 2, when he says that the day will come when every knee will bow and every tongue confess him "Lord," means that in hell they will feel remorse, a remorse that is full of self-knowledge and self-condemnation. Hell in that case would be a conscious remorse fixed and unchangeable, an acceptance that one has brought this upon himself and now cannot change his fate, for it is just. In that way those in hell also would give glory to God. Edward Young, the poet, has the lines:

For what, my small philosopher, is hell?
'tis nothing but full knowledge of the truth...

My simple point is that even a question as fundamental as this one – whether hell is a place of ever deepening rebellion or of the proper acknowledgement that one is being punished for one's sins – cannot certainly be answered by appeal to any clear statement of the Bible.

And what is true of hell is also true of heaven. There is a clear depiction of heaven in the Bible as a place of wonderful life, of joy and fulfillment. But it is, again, an image-laden description and we are left largely to imagine precisely what life will be like in the world to come. What we

will do, how we will live, how we will relate to God and to others, these and many questions are left unanswered.

Peter Kreeft, formerly a professor of philosophy at Calvin College, now professor of philosophy at Boston College, has an interesting book on heaven entitled *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Heaven*. One of the chapters of that book is entitled, “Fourteen Questions about Heaven.” The answers that Kreeft gives to these questions do not always persuade me, but the questions themselves are an interesting demonstration of how little the Bible addresses the specific questions that rise in our minds.

1. Do people in heaven see us now? Kreeft appeals to Hebrews 12:1 where it is said that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and to the fact that, according to the Bible, our lives *are* observed by angels and concludes that people in heaven do see us now. He might have included some other biblical data to make a stronger case. But, in fact, none of that data is an actual statement that people now in heaven witness what we do.
2. Will we feel sorrow in heaven for those in hell? An important question. It is hard for me to believe that there will be no sorrow in heaven, even though the Bible says that God will wipe away every tear from the eye. For we will certainly remember our own sins and grieve the suffering we caused the Lord Jesus. If we are pure in heart, we will certainly grieve for the pain and suffering the Lord endured for us. The old Scot Presbyterian spoke of “an eternity of sweet weeping” on account of our sins. God is sorrowful for certain things, the Bible says, and heaven is the place where his glory dwells. But, what does that mean for us to say that in the world of joy there will be a pure sorrow? It is very hard to know. I cannot think that we will be isolated from, immune to the great tragedy of life, because love itself is bound up with the tragic. It is the greatest love that loves in the face of loss and of betrayal and we will know *that* love in heaven, surely, for it was the character of God’s love for us. But what does that mean? I am sure I cannot begin to say.
3. Will we possess or own things in heaven? Kreeft says that we will own everything and nothing, but offers no text. He says that there is no private property in heaven, but, again, offers no biblical demonstration.
4. Will we wear clothes in heaven? Adam and Eve did not before the Fall. Kreeft has some very interesting reflection on this question, but, again, nothing from the Bible itself.
5. Are there animals in heaven? Well, Christ comes from there astride a war horse in Revelation 19, a chariot comes to collect the prophet Elijah, but what can we say for sure about eternal life from those two instances? C.S. Lewis thought that there would be animals and even that family pets would be saved “in” their masters, as part of their extended family. [*The Problem of Pain*, 128-131] But, anyone with a familiarity with the Bible knows how speculative all of this really is.

The persistence of such questions in our minds, and many others like them – chief among them “what will we do?” and “how will we relate to those we have known and loved in this world?” – is the demonstration of how little the Bible actually says about the life of heaven.

What description it does provide us comes in the form of grand and beautiful images drawn from life in this world. The final state of the righteous is described variously as “eternal life” [Matt. 25:46], “glory” [2 Cor. 4:17], “rest” [Heb. 4:9], and then as a set of moral states and activities:

knowledge [1 Cor. 13:8-10], holiness [Rev. 21:27], service [Rev. 22:3], worship [Rev. 19:1], authoritative judging or commanding of men and angels [Lk 19:17,19; Matt. 25:21,23; 1 Cor. 6:2; we shall reign over the earth, Rev. 22:5], communion with other people [Heb. 12:23] and communion with God [Rev. 21:3].

It is also called “Paradise,” three times in the New Testament, the word used for the Garden of Eden by the translators of the OT into Greek two hundred years before Christ. The word “Paradise” is probably Persian in origin and meant originally a lush garden or park. The word is used in the NT for both the heaven where the dead in Christ are now – remember the Lord telling the thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise,” [Lk 23:43] – and for the heaven of eternal life [Rev. 2:7]. It evokes, especially when the Tree of Life is said to be there [Rev. 2:7], the image of a perfect world, lush, fruitful, perfectly suited for happiness.

It is the generality of this description that has led some to wonder why the Lord did not tell us more and make more explicit the future that awaits his people.

Samuel Rutherford, in a letter to one of his favorites correspondents, Lady Kenmure, wrote,

“If you knew what he was preparing for you, you would be too glad. He will not...give you a full draught till you come up to the well-head and drink, yea, drink abundantly, of the pure river of the water of life, that proceedeth out from the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev. xxii. 1). Madam, tire not, weary not; ...when you are got up thither, and have cast your eyes to view the golden city, and the fair and never-withering Tree of Life, that beareth twelve manner of fruits every month, you shall then say, ‘Four and twenty hours’ abode in this place is worth threescore and ten years’ sorrow upon earth.’” [Letter XIX, p. 68]

So, for Rutherford, the descriptions of heaven we are given in the Bible are as general as they are to keep us from forgetting all about what must be done in this world. There is surely something to be said for this. Christians who have enjoyed moments of spiritual ecstasy – that is joy in Christ and in the knowledge of him – have found that they are virtually overwhelmed by this wonderful distraction. Perhaps it would be very difficult to live in this world a fruitful life if one were always thinking about the life to come. I’m not sure, however, that this is so. I think it just as likely that the man or woman who was enraptured about heaven would be the most useful of all men and women on earth. I know a fellow who had such a moment of ecstasy when he was a young man and, when under that wonderful spell of divine love, the first thing that occurred to him was *to do something* for the Lord. He took up his Bible and went out to find people to invite them to church! He did it at dinnertime, the worst possible time, but he didn’t care. He was under a sweet compulsion to serve the Savior of his life whose love had been poured out into his heart at that moment. So, I don’t know whether Rutherford is right as to why we are not told more about heaven. Nevertheless, it is one explanation of the Bible’s general way of speaking about heaven.

Another, very different explanation, is suggested by John Henry Newman. In one of his sermons, the evangelical turned Roman Catholic Cardinal argues that heaven is not for everyone; it is an acquired taste, and hard to acquire while our taste buds still resemble a crocodile’s back.

An unholy person would be restless and unhappy in heaven. [This summary of Newman's *Sermons and Discourses*, p. 24 in Plantinga's *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 37n.] According to Newman's suggestion we might argue that even Christians, sinful people that we remain, are ill-prepared to understand and to appreciate the life of heaven and that an explicit description might very well confuse and even disappoint us rather than whet our appetite for such a life. It is very interesting, isn't it, that the caricatures of heaven that are so common in our culture – sitting on clouds and playing harps – are, frankly, utterly uninteresting and boring. The sinner has a hard time thinking that heaven would be nearly as fun as earth, because he cannot imagine what would be fun in a place where God was everything and holiness of heart was the greatest pleasure.

Somerset Maugham expressed the unbelieving mind when he said that "Perfection is apt to be dull." Well, there is a great deal of unbelief still in us Christians, which may explain why Christian people are not generally as eager to get to heaven as we might expect them to be. We are not entirely sure what will make it so wonderful a place to be. And perhaps we cannot know that until we are fit to be there.

Well, however tempted we may be to prefer this life to the life of the world to come, any believer studying the images used to describe heaven and the biblical statements about it knows that it is a place much to be preferred to this world and this life. Paul says straight out that, for a Christian, to die is better by far than to go on living because of the great gain it is for believers to be where the Lord is. We'll elaborate why it is great gain to go to heaven next time.

But, it is the lack of a literal description of heavenly life that has led through the ages to so much speculation. If all we have are images and symbols, then we are, as it were, invited to spin out the meaning of them into a more literal account of heavenly life. Some of these speculations, I think, are clearly of little value and more likely to be wrong than right.

For example, one speculation is that there are levels of heaven. Some Jews in the days of Christ spoke of there being seven such levels. That idea was taken up later by some Christian heretical sects and, interestingly, also by Mohammed in the Koran. It has been thought by some that Paul gives some support for the idea of these levels in heaven (as Dante's circles of hell) when he speaks of himself being taken up to the third heaven in 2 Cor. 12:2. It is more likely, however, that what Paul means there is simply heaven as we understand the term. In speaking of the third heaven Paul refers by implication to the first heaven which is the sky, the second heaven which is outer space, the place of the sun, moon, and stars, and the third the heaven which is where God's glory dwells and where the saints will go to live forever.

Another interesting speculation about heaven is that everyone there will be around 30 years of age! A Scot preacher, commented on this.

"Augustine and other fathers were surely right in their idea that our bearing the image of Christ includes the likeness of apparent age, and that childhood will be brought up, and old age brought back to the likeness of the mature and perfect yet youthful manhood in which Jesus died and rose again. For however beautiful the hoary head is on earth, it is the ripe fruit of decay, and infancy with all its loveliness would cease to be attractive if it

did not grow both in wisdom and in stature...” [Alexander Moody Stuart, in *Memoir*, 197-198]

Now that may be more likely. After all, we have all wondered what would become of the babies who died and went to heaven and the old people. But, still, we are only speculating.

But, then, that is all we can do. And some speculations must come much closer to the mark. Here is Archbishop Whately on what friendship will be like in heaven.

“I am convinced that the extension and perfection of friendship will constitute a great part of the future happiness of the blest. Many have lived in various and distant ages and countries, who have been in their characters – in the agreement of their tastes, and suitableness of dispositions, perfectly adapted for friendship with each other, but who of course could never *meet* in this world. Many a one selects, when he is reading history...some one or two favorites characters with whom he feels that a personal acquaintance would have been peculiarly delightful to him. Why should not such a desire be realized in a future state? A wish to see and personally know, for example, the apostle Paul, or John is the most likely to arise in the noblest and purest mind. I should be sorry to think such a wish absurd and presumptuous, or unlikely ever to be gratified. The highest enjoyment of the blest will be the personal knowledge of their great and beloved Master. Yet I cannot but think that some part of their happiness will consist in an intimate knowledge of the greatest of his followers also; and of those of them in particular, whose peculiar qualities are, to each, the most peculiarly attractive.” [Cited in Wilbur Smith, *The Biblical Doctrine of Heaven*, 194-195]

In Philip Melanchthon’s great funeral address for Martin Luther, he turned to this same thought.

We remember the great delight with which [Luther] recounted the course, the counsels, the perils and escapes of the prophets, and the learning with which he discoursed on all the ages of the Church, thereby showing that he was inflamed by no ordinary passion for these wonderful men. Now he embraces them and rejoices to hear them speak and to speak to them in turn. Now they hail him gladly as a companion, and thank God with him for having gathered and preserved the Church.” [*Ibid*, 195]

Surely *that* is right even though the Bible never actually describes the fellowship of the saints in heaven. I do not think that such speculating is a bad thing. I think the Bible’s way of speaking about heaven is a virtual invitation to speculate about the life of heaven. We must be careful not to give too much weight to these speculations, but we must in some way take to heart the information that we are given in the Word of God.

Much of present day thinking about the afterlife is utterly superficial and is unaware of or uncaring of contradictions. For example, according to a recent survey, among evangelical Christians, people who claim to be born again and who believe that they will go to heaven because of their faith in Jesus Christ, 10% also believe in reincarnation, 29% believe it is possible to communicate with the dead, and 50% believe that people can also earn their way to heaven by good works. Even among the atheists contradictions like these are rife. 50% of those

who called themselves atheists said that every person has a soul, that heaven and hell exist, and that there is life after death. Go figure. What seems to be happening is that in our day people actually expect that God will change his nature and his moral principles for their individual benefit and conform them to their tastes, whatever they may be. The objectivity, the reality of heaven is slipping away and in its place remains a vague idea of a happier future with which folk keep at bay the darkness of life and the inevitability of death. What is clear, in any case, is that there is very little serious thinking about heaven or hell and that people are content to think whatever they please.

Not for us, brothers and sisters. The Bible has a doctrine of heaven. It tells us many things about what life will be like there, even if it does so in very general and symbol-laden ways. That does not mean we cannot know; it only means that we can know only so much about heaven until we are there. So we begin by admitting that the Bible does not give us a literal description of the life of the Redeemed in heaven. It leaves us wondering about many things. But it does not leave us without a glorious prospect or without a way of putting flesh and blood into our picture of ourselves in heaven. We will take up that prospect next time.