

## STUDIES IN ESCHATOLOGY No. 22

“Heaven, No. 3”

December 14, 2003

### Review

In our consideration of the Bible’s doctrine of heaven we have so far noted the Bible’s characteristically image-laden description of the heavenly world and life to which believers are heading. It is described to us in symbols and metaphors more than in explicit and literal ways. In this way it invites us to a kind of holy speculation about life in the better country. It likens that world to this in various ways and, last time, we spun out some of the ways that we might translate our experience of life here, both positive and negative, into a picture of life in the world of joy.

Tonight I want to turn to what the old writers used to call the “use” of the doctrine, that is, its practical application to life. If, as we said some weeks ago, the depiction of hell in the Bible is designed to make us serious, sympathetic, and full of the joy of salvation, then what is the biblical depiction of heaven supposed to make us? What effect should taking the Bible’s picture of the heavenly country to heart have upon our lives and living? That is our question for this evening. No doubt we could say many things in answer to that question, but I will mention tonight four of the most consequential applications of the fact and reality of eternal life for those whose trust is in Jesus Christ.

The reason we need to get a clear picture of heavenly life in our heads, as we sought to begin to do last Lord’s Day evening, is because the brighter, the more lustrous, the more convincing the prospect of heaven, the greater the impact of that prospect will be on our lives. Heaven should be a living hope in our lives every day. We should think about it often. It has interested me that in the Lord’s Prayer, for example, the model prayer Jesus taught his disciples, heaven is mentioned twice and hell not at all. Paul talks about how we have already been seated with Christ in the heavenly place when he wants us to know the greatness of our salvation. He speaks of our citizenship being in heaven when he calls us to forsake the worldly living of so many around us. He tells us in a great summary statement in Col. 3:1 that to live the Christian life is to set our minds on things above where Christ is, seated at the Right Hand of God. Heaven is supposed to be *a power* in the Christian life.

But how little I am and most of us, I think, would admit this about ourselves, how little we are like Samuel Rutherford, who once, and I think very honestly, described himself as “A man borne down and hungry, and waiting for the marriage supper of the Lamb.” One finds in Rutherford’s *Letters* many expressions of longing for heaven and the desire to be there.

“O heavens move fast! O time, run, run, and hasten the marriage day.”

In the first edition of Rutherford’s *Letters*, a collection of his letters that was edited posthumously by his friend Robert MacWard, there is added the subtitle: Joshua Redivivus – Joshua Alive Again. MacWard saw Samuel Rutherford as another Joshua. You see, Joshua was one of the spies who went ahead into the Promised Land and brought back a good report.

Rutherford's letters are full of good reports of the heavenly country and happy anticipations of the Promised Land. By faith Rutherford spied out the Promised Land for the rest of us.

Andrew Bonar concludes his excellent introductory essay in his edition of the *Letters* with this apostrophe:

“O for ten such men in Scotland to stand in the gap! – men who all day long find nothing but Christ to rest in, whose very sleep is a pursuing after Christ in dreams, and who intensely desire to ‘awake with His likeness.’”

You see Bonar thinks that it was Rutherford's heavenly-mindedness that contributed greatly to his spiritual power and the fruitfulness of his life. And surely that is right. Well how does the prospect of heaven sanctify our lives? What is the “use” of that doctrine?

*I. First, the prospect of heaven should make us happy, joyful people.*

Jesus said as much. “Rejoice – even when you are persecuted – rejoice and be very glad *for great is your reward in heaven.*” The reality of hell, we said, should increase our joy because by it we are made to appreciate what might have been and how great has been our rescue and how much we owe to the grace of God. Heaven, on the other hand, should increase our joy and make it virtually impregnable, because we have set before us the prospect of unmitigated joy forever and that prospect is not far off. We have a great reward before us, a reward great beyond the power of words to describe.

Tell me! If you knew that a month from now or a year from now you would inherit a great fortune, are not two things true? The first is that you would be thinking all through the time of waiting what you were going to do with all that money, how your life would change, what it would be like. The second is that there would be a lightness in your step. The prospect of what would soon be yours would bathe your life in light. How much more the eternal world of joy, the glory of God, the thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, and the church of the firstborn.

Sometimes the Christian hope of heaven has been scorned as pie in the sky by and by – as if it actually interfered with a useful life in this world – to which our Dr. Harris replied, well, it is better than no pie at all! But, the fact of the matter is that the prospect of heaven – as Christ has made that prospect sure and certain – utterly changes human life in this world and for the better. It is impossible that it would not. There must be something wrong with a person whose life is soon to be morally and psychologically *perfect* and, at the same time drunk with joy, who is not now happy in the deepest, richest sense of that word. I don't mean to say that you will not have your sorrows in this world. Any holy man or woman, any feeling and sympathetic man or woman will and must. But underneath, below, as a foundation there must be this solid joy. *And the joy of the Lord is our strength.* Joy enables us, frees us, motivates *to do things!*

Your own heart bears its witness every day that you were made for deep and unconquerable love, for wholesome and happy relationships with other hearts and minds, for joy, for worship, for the most satisfying of work, and for the pleasure of the enjoyment of God's good gifts. All of this

together is what the Bible calls “the life that is worthy to be called life.” It is the want of these things or the struggle to obtain them that darkens our life in this world. But to know that they shall all be yours and yours forever, that your life will be made up and completed and fulfilled in every part, to know that this fullness of life awaits you in due time, *is to have such things already in a measure*. Such a prospect surely must leave us with a sense of well-being. Or such knowledge will if we keep it fresh, active, and lively in our hearts.

Nehemiah says that the joy *of the Lord* is our strength. There are many things that produce this joy: the Lord’s love and our knowledge of him chief among them. But all of that, even that, would be for naught if there were no heaven beckoning, no future in which all the promise of God’s love will find its fulfillment in our lives. C.S. Lewis said that “joy is the serious business of heaven.” Well, yes, but that joy is something that heaven spreads upon our way even while we are in this world.

*II. Second, the prospect of heaven should make us a patient people.*

When I am talking to broken hearted people, when I am trying to comfort them in their woe – and life has much woe and hearts are often broken – if they are surely Christian people, I remind them that they are suffering the trials and afflictions that God promised his children. “Through many tribulations we must inherit the kingdom of God,” Paul said. I remind them that what makes a trial, what makes a set of circumstances an affliction, is not simply the difficulty or the sorrow itself, but still more, much more, the fact that one does not know how the matter or when the matter will be resolved. No matter your sorrow, no matter the bitterness of your woe, if you knew that next Tuesday everything would be put right and you would be completely happy and satisfied again, well, it wouldn’t be a trial. Your pain might continue at some level, but it would be enveloped in the warm light of a sun rising in your heart.

There is not a trial, a disappointment, a heartbreak, a wearying and discouraging struggle that heaven does not put in a completely different perspective, if only the prospect is brought to mind and applied to the circumstances of life. In a wonderful poem by Henry Lyte, the genius hymn writer of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, are found these lines that I have often sent to people suffering the woes of life.

‘Tis good that our props should from ‘neath us be fled,  
If we drop into arms everlasting instead...  
My trials may deepen, my comforts may flee;  
I’m rich amid ruin with heaven and Thee!

I’m rich amid ruin, *with heaven* and Thee. Can anyone dispute the logic of that argument? Does anyone fail to see its persuasive power. Name me the trouble, name me the heartbreak that would not dissolve like the morning mist if you could but for a moment see, up in the sky, the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven.

You young people. You naturally wonder and worry about finding a husband or a wife. Will there be a worthy man for me or a worthy woman? Will I have a marriage that is wonderfully happy for the deathless love between me and my spouse? But what if God gave you a vision one

night and told you that by such and such a date you would be the most happily married man or woman on the face of the earth? What if God came to you and said that very thing? Why the worry would disappear and you would be thinking every day, as you made the most of the time that remained before you met your intended, about the happiness that was soon to come upon you. Well, so it is with heaven, looming above every trial, every worry, every longing of our lives. It is a prospect so wonderful that it has the power literally to overwhelm our trials, our doubts, and our sorrows, *if only it is kept as a living prospect in our minds and hearts.*

This is the lesson at the end of Psalm 73, when that man who had been so distressed by his doubts and his flagging faith, had been recovered to a sound spiritual mind. His circumstances hasn't changed, only his state of mind.

“When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, *and afterward you will take me into glory.*” [73:21-24]

I can take this world, he is telling us, because God who loves me is with me in it; and I can bear this world because I will be with God in glory soon enough. Heaven will have the same power in your life to mitigate and soften your troubles and strengthen you to endure your trials if only it is a prospect as real in your heart as it was in his.

### *III. Third, the prospect of heaven should make us a zealous people.*

There is one thing about heaven that must be said and faced by every serious Christian. It is not so difficult to live there. It is not the same challenge, the same test to live there as it is here. It will not require so much of us to live in heaven. It will not be the struggle, the fight that a godly life is here. That is what makes it heaven! Our hearts will be pure, all our acquaintances and friends will love us and help us as we will love and help them. We will live every day beholding the glory of God. Perfect life will come naturally to us then.

It is not so in this world. Here is where the test is applied. Here and only here must we face down great obstacles in the power of the Spirit. Here and only here must we surmount our sins and serve the Lord by faith and not by sight. This is a much more difficult thing. And our opportunity to do that difficult thing is strictly temporary. It is soon to pass away. This is the meaning of those texts – they sound so alien to us – about their being nothing to do, no work to perform in the grave. That is what Jesus meant when he told us that the night is coming when no man can work.

This world is your only opportunity to send ahead to heaven, to make permanent and eternal, the credit and honor of your Christian life, your love for God and your gratitude for his grace. All this is best, in some ways is only, expressed by a life of zealous service of the Lord offered by faith in a world of difficulties. Heaven will not give you this greatest of all opportunities again. We know it is the great opportunity and great importance of life because its outcome is fixed forever in the next world. What you do here, in this world, you do forever. Your actions here are, morally considered, permanent and eternal. It is not so with your life in heaven. These facts

should make us all determined to live consequential Christian lives while we are given to live in this world. We should be determined to practice our faith before faith disappears and is replaced with sight. It is really true that we have only one life to live, at least to live in this world by faith. Why should we then not care to live it fully and fruitfully while heaven awaits so that when we are there we will have the satisfaction of having done well when it mattered. The Lord as much as urges these motivations upon us when he reminds us that what we do in this world will come to judgment and that our reward in the next world will be fixed according to the faithfulness we showed him while we were here.

In my Latin classes we read the story of Horatius, a brave young Roman soldier, who, with two companions, saved the day for Rome by defending alone a bridge across the Tiber until it could be destroyed and then swam back to safety himself. Lord Macaulay, the great English historian, put this famous Roman legend into verse.

Then outspake brave Horatius,  
 The Captain of the gate:  
 "To every man upon this earth  
 Death cometh soon or late.  
 And how can man die better  
 Than facing fearful odds,  
 For the ashes of his Fathers,  
 And the temples of his gods?"

Well there is something very like that spirit in the teaching about the Christian life that we are given in the Bible. We hear of the great cloud of witnesses before whom we live our lives in this world, we hear of the great battle, the fight that we are bravely to wage in our Savior's name, we hear of the glories and honors that are bestowed upon those warriors who perform exploits and by whose courage and strength the kingdom of God is defended and its enemies defeated.

And what is it that looms above this entire view of life, this view of life as something deserving great sacrifice and summoning up from us great effort? It is heaven. A future to die for, to fight for, a place where all that is achieved in this world, all that is done in faithfulness to God will have its everlasting reward. We have been made *to do something important with our lives*. Heaven is the invitation to let nothing dissuade us or distract us from making maximum sacrifices and the noblest efforts in taking up the cause of our Lord Jesus Christ when that cause must still be fought for and when blood must still be spilt for our Savior's sake.

You must think of what that means for you, where the battle must be fought by you and what sacrifices and what obedience will be your particular weapons. Is it faithfulness in a marriage, or generosity with your money, or purity with your mind and body, or the bridling of your tongue, or the greater boldness of your witness, or the life of prayer, or the other-centeredness of your life? Whatever it is, heaven is hastening on. The day is coming to its end. I tell you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, you will want to have made the most of the life God gives you to live by faith. The very most. A bright view of heaven kept in the front of the mind will prevent this saddest of all squandering and wasting of human life.

As one wise man has written recently,

“Making a career out of nothing – wandering through malls, killing time, making small talk, watching television programs until we know their characters better than our own children – robs the community of our gifts and energies and shapes life into a yawn at the God and Savior of the world. The person who will not bestir himself, the person who hands himself over to nothing in effect says to God: you have made nothing of interest and redeemed no one of consequence, including me.” [Plantinga, *Not the Way its Supposed to Be*, 188]

Well no one thinks *that* or anything like that who keeps heaven clearly in view and, as a result, keeps a sharp eye out on the absolute singularity, the eternal uniqueness and consequence of this life in this world, this life of faith that lasts for a few years and is never again...but which counts for ever.

IV. *Fourth, and finally, the prospect of heaven should make us unafraid, confident, willing, even expectant in the hour of death.*

Over and again in the Bible Christians are called upon to face death without fear, even without regret – apart from the regrets of love – and the argument is that death immediately takes us to Paradise! It is an unassailable argument *if only it is really believed.*

George Sayer, a student and later a friend of C.S. Lewis and the author of what is perhaps the best biography of Lewis, read the *Narnia Stories* to his little daughter. After they were done she told her father, “I don’t want to go on living in this world. I want to live in Narnia with Aslan.” “Darling, one day you will,” her father replied. [Jack, 193] Well, out of the mouths of babes sometimes comes logic that is crystal clear. Why would someone want to go on living here if one could live there?

Christina Rossetti has a lovely poem entitled “Uphill.” In the poem which is about the Christian view of the end of life and of death, she sees death as an inn on the journey to heaven. She is talking about what theologians call the “intermediate state,” not yet heaven in its fullness – such as it will be at the Resurrection and in the new heavens and the new earth – but still heaven. Still even that heaven, the place of the souls who have died in Christ, even without their bodies, is still called Paradise in the Bible, and Paul still calls that place and that life “better by far” than the life of this world because there we are with the Lord. The poem is a series of questions and answers.

Does the road wind uphill all the way?  
 Yes, to the very end.  
 Will the day’s journey take the whole long day?  
 From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting place?  
 A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.  
 May not the darkness hide it from my face?

You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?

Those who have gone before.

Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?

They will not keep you waiting at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?

Of labour you shall find the sum.

Will there be beds for me and all who seek?

Yea, beds for all who come.

That is a beautiful image – heaven as an inn at the end of a long, difficult journey. I like another one better, however. Andrew Bonar likens the heaven to which Christians ascend at death to arriving at a great house for a banquet, a banquet you feel greatly privileged to have been invited to and have been looking forward to for a long time. You are dressed in your best and so is everyone else. But the banquet is not quite ready to be served, so you spend your time in the great hall, outside the dining room, though from time to time you look in upon that gorgeous dining room, brightly lit and bustling with preparations. Your host, the person you love and admire more than anyone else, mingles among you treating you as his best friend, greeting you and making you feel so wonderfully welcome, and you find yourself talking with the most interesting people, enjoying the finest hors d’oeuvres and drinks you have ever tasted, and waiting for the remaining guests to arrive.

The person who thinks this way and *really believes* in God’s promise of heaven both at death and then in perfect fulfillment at the end of time, cannot face the end without confidence and without anticipation and without a deep, fundamental peace and joy. He or she is going home, going where he has always wanted to be, going where she has so many times wished she already were.

I told many of you of the last moments of my sister, Bronwyn’s, life. She had been failing and everyone knew she was about to die of the cancer that had afflicted her for the last two years of her life. A few minutes from the end she began struggling to breathe. Her lungs were filling up with fluid as happens at that hour. She cried out a number of times “Help me; Help me; Help me;” and one could hear the fluid coming up in her lungs and see the color leave her face; though just before that her face had been hot and sweaty. Those who were there say that was a horrible moment. Then her husband and her daughter helped her sit up straighter in bed to help her breathe – the gurgling dissipated somewhat. Her daughter said, “you wanted to help her somehow clear her throat.” I have thought that this drowning that is so characteristic of cancer deaths is, for a Christian, just like the immortal scene in *Pilgrim’s Progress* when Christian goes into the river and begins to drown and then is lifted up by Hopeful. Bronwyn’s head was turned toward Linnea, her daughter, and Linnea said to her, “This is your very own Pilgrim’s Progress – your crossing the river – You get to do it first.” Then she told her that “You’re going to see, Samantha and Papa.” [Samantha was her stillborn daughter and Papa was our father who had died some six years before.] Bronwyn seemed to be trying to speak. Then Bronwyn said, in a clear voice, loud enough for anyone in the room to hear – though before for the last few days one had to have one’s ear at her mouth to hear anything she might try to say – “Everybody’s here.

Jesus is here. Samantha is here. Paul, Mark, Joshua.” Linnea said, “Joshy is next to you.” She shook that off, as if to say she didn’t mean her son Joshua. And Linnea said, and John Donne. And she responded with eyes wide open, “And Donne.” She kept saying “Hallelujah” and “Everybody’s here.” The sense of some in the room was that she was not speaking to those in the room but to those she had named who were before her eye. This period of her speaking lasted only a few minutes; the inflection in her voice, everything was different. She hadn’t been able to make herself understood all day. One woman who was at the bedside said, “She looked like a child.” Later someone added “and full of wonder” like a child who had just walked into a toy store. She also kept saying, “I need to hurry.”

The remarkable thing, the shocking thing to everyone was that she had wind to talk like that. She wasn’t even breathing that hard. A window of a few minutes, nothing more.

As they laid her back on the bed, she did not return to the struggle to breathe, but took shorter gasps further apart until the breathing stopped completely. This was a process of only a few minutes. After she died some fluid came out of her mouth, indicating how completely her system had been flooded and how remarkable that she had been able to give full voice to speaking about what she was seeing.

Now I don’t claim to be able to interpret all of that for you in any way you are obliged to accept. But there is nothing in that wonderful experience at the end of my sister’s life that is not first and foremost in the Bible, the Word of God. Nobody will fear to step into the river who sees that wonderful crowd beckoning on the other side with Jesus himself in the midst of them. We all wish that we could see the other side when we must step out of this world. But, you see, *we can!* Faith can see it, can see heaven itself, can see the cloud of witnesses, can see the Lord Jesus with outstretched arms.

Heaven is our future if we are in Christ, but it is also very much *for* our present. Heavenly-mindedness will do wonders for our earthly life. It will if we take heaven to heart and believe it, actively believe it, day by day.