

**SERIES: Life After Death Wk. 2**

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**Message Title: Is Heaven on Earth? Pt. 1**

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Both in the church and out of the church, we've been trying to make the case people think about Heaven, but I would also say both in the church and out of the church, there's a tremendous amount of confusion about Heaven. There's a couple of things that I want to clarify.

Number one is a lot of people have said, this is all new, and I understand it may be new to you, but it's really important to understand it's not new. These are things that Biblical scholars have believed for hundreds of years. The goal of the preacher is never to come up with something new. After 2000 years of scholarship, I would suggest to you, if I come up with something new, you can take it to the bank - it's in error! I may say it differently, may apply it differently because of the culture in which we live, but it's not new. There may be disagreement on some of the details, but these are things that have been widely understood as part of Biblical theology for hundreds and hundreds of years.

It's important to clarify when I'm talking about saints that have died and go into the intermediate heaven, I'm not saying that they in some way are a mediator between you and God. I think there's only one mediator between you and God and that's Christ Jesus. And I'm also not suggesting that you pray to those saints that have gone on, that they have some effect on God in some special way. I would reject all of that. I'm simply saying that I think the evidence is clear that when you die and go to this intermediate heaven, that certainly you would continue to value the things that God values and there's no question that Jesus in the Heavens today, His attention is on His church. He is the head of the church. He is building His church; He's building His kingdom.

You read through Revelation. There is no question. The focus of the attention is on this cosmic battle that is taking place on Earth, and as long that battle is engaged, it makes no sense that when you die you go to Heaven in the presence of Jesus and disconnect from everything that's on the heart of Jesus. It would be just the opposite. You would be more engaged with what's on the heart of Jesus, what's the focus of the Heavens? And you would still know that you have loved ones on the Earth. If God values family and relationships on Earth, that isn't a value that goes away in Heaven. You know it's a value that God has. It's how he's made us. So if I died tomorrow, I don't stand in the presence of Jesus and not know my name and not know that I have three daughters and not know that I have a wife and not know that there's a battle still raging on Earth.

I would be very aware of that and if I share those concerns with Jesus, that is prayer in Heaven, and I think there's every reason to believe that certainly is the case. I think we get ourselves into trouble when we fail to designate between the intermediate heaven and the New Heaven and the New Earth. We like to say the moment we die, there are no more tears. There are no more pain, no more sorrow, but where does the Bible say that? It says in Revelation 21, talking about the New Heaven and the New Earth: As long as the battle is raging on Earth, we're not going to have

some blissful experience completely disconnected from everything that's on the heart of God, rather the opposite. I think we'll be engaged until the victory is won and then the New Heaven and the New Earth sets in. When we talk about knowing what's going on on Earth, obviously there's differences of opinion on the degree to which you're aware.

I think almost all scholars agree that you're aware. It's just kind of the level of that awareness, but I'm not by any means suggesting you take on god-like attributes, when you get to Heaven, and you suddenly become omniscient and know everything about everybody, but you would be aware, just like I'm aware today, I'm aware of what's going on in India. I'm aware of the church in China. I'm aware of my daughters and their struggles and their ups and downs. I'm aware of Patti. It doesn't mean I see every single detail of every moment of every day, but I'm aware. I'm aware and I care, and I pray, and I think it would be that same level of awareness in the presence of God. I would still be aware of this reality. I would bring those concerns into the presence of Jesus and that's prayer in Heaven.

Again, the challenge is making sure we separate the idea of the intermediate heaven which is now, from the eternal New Heaven and New Earth that we're going to talk about this morning. So what NT Wright calls life after life after death. Sixty seconds after I die is life after death. The New Heaven and the New Earth is what comes after that and that's what we want to talk about. What I want to do is try to lay a Biblical foundation of what the concept of the New Heaven and the New Earth is about. If I refer to Heaven today, that's what I'm referring to and then next week we'll talk more about the details and probably more the questions that people have.

If you have a Bible turn with us to First Corinthians Chapter 15. We began making the case for the literal physical, bodily Resurrection of Jesus. Understanding that is critical to our belief that there is life after death, and not just life after death, but a literal physical, bodily resurrection of the saints. In my opinion, First Corinthians 15 is very clear. We will not be a disembodied spirit in Heaven, but rather the whole point of the literal, physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus is He's the *first fruit*. He's the pledge. He's the promise that one day we shall be like Him. It's very important as we begin to define our theology of Heaven, that we start in the right place. The tendency is starting to think about Heaven and streets of gold and all of that. And then as a side thought, we say, and maybe we will, or we won't have a body. That's exactly backwards. What is very clearly taught is there is a Resurrection. We clearly will have a body. That's where the theology of Heaven starts. And if that's true, then we begin to build our theology of Heaven around that. As one writer said, the idea of a physical, literal body in Heaven is not one of many options, like options on a car, like a sun roof or a CD player; it's rather the very engine of the car. It's what drives the theology of Heaven.

So we come back to First Corinthians Chapter 15 where Paul made his case for the resurrection of Jesus, made his case for life after death and made his case that Jesus' literal, physical, bodily resurrection is the first fruit. It's the promise, it's the pledge that we too will be physically, bodily raised from the dead one day.

I want to pick it up then in verse 40,

***“ There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it***

*is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So also it is written, "The first MAN, Adam, BECAME A LIVING SOUL." The last Adam [referring to Jesus, there] became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly."* (NASB, 1 Cor.15:40-49)

Now what Paul is talking about there is there is a heavenly body and there's an earthly body, a high emphasis on the concept of body. There is a perishable body. There is an imperishable body. There is a corruptible body. There's an incorruptible body. There is a natural body. There is a spiritual body. Now this is where we start to get into trouble. Some of the translations say there is a physical body and there is a spiritual body. That's a very poor translation. The emphasis is not on the physical. The emphasis is on the natural.

Those Greek words, natural and spiritual, are adjectives, and with the Greek construction, they would emphasize not what the body's made of, but that which energizes the body. So, in other words, the point that's being made, is right now we have a natural body energized by the natural energy of this life, the breath of God. But this is a body that's perishable. This is the body that breaks down. This is the body that is corruptible. This is a body that is groaning. But there will come a heavenly body that is energized by the very Spirit of God. The very Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is the Spirit that will energize the heavenly body that will be imperishable, incorruptible, a body that is fit for eternal existence in this New Heaven and this New Earth. Therefore, the emphasis is on right now it's one, but it will be changed to the other.

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If you would turn back to Romans Chapter Eight, I just want to show you the consistency of thought and wording to make our case. Romans Eight is this fabulous chapter that's really in many ways kind of the crescendo of the salvation by grace through faith message.

We get into Chapter Eight and I want to pick it up in Verse 10; Paul says:

*"If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."* (Romans 8:10-11)

What he's saying there is if you've trusted Jesus as your Savior, the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, dwells within. You've become spiritually alive, but your spiritual life is still housed in a dead, decaying, perishable body. So, for now it groans, but there is the promise that one day the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead and energized his resurrected body will do the same to your mortal body. Again, the emphasis is on a body that will be changed and energized by the Spirit of God.

But there's more to it than that. Skip down to verse 18,

*"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits*

*eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.” (Vs. 18-25)*

You have a lot of the same wording that we currently are spiritually alive, but spiritually alive within a body that is groaning. It's an earthly body. It's earthy, it's decaying, it's perishable. We feel the aches and pains of that, but we live with the promise that one day the Spirit of God, will change us into a heavenly body. So, we eagerly anticipate that freedom, that redemption, that promise that is yet to come. But he says it's more than that. That isn't just the anticipation of the saints. That's the anticipation of all creation. All creation eagerly anticipates the day of redemption where God will reconcile and redeem all creation back to Himself. The language here personifies creation in a way that a creation then eagerly anticipates that day, because not only will the saints be changed, but all creation will be redeemed, will be reconciled back to God Himself.

It's very important in our minds to go back to Genesis one and two and remember that when God originally created, God said, *this is good. I like this*. That's what God always intended. Now, thousands of years later, God isn't going to say, *you know, I changed my mind. Thinking back to Genesis one and two, I really decided I didn't like that and I'm going to do something very different*. We're just going to be kind of some mysterious spirits that kind of float around the universe. The Bible teaches not that the Earth is going to be annihilated, not that God's going to scrap it all and start over. It teaches just the opposite, that God is going to redeem all creation; that in Genesis one and two God said, *this is good. I like this*. The New Heaven and the New Earth will be more similar than dissimilar, much more like Genesis two than what you see in the movies because that's what God has always wanted.

This idea that someday God's just going to annihilate the earth and wipe it out and burn it up and start over is in some ways saying at the end of the day, in some way, Satan wins. He got things so messed up that God just had to scrap it and start over, but that's not good theology. That's not what the Bible says. The Bible says that God's going to redeem it. We are told that God will reconcile all things unto Himself, that God will redeem things, both in Heaven and Earth, back. That will be the ultimate expression of His victory!

When we get it in our minds that this Earth is so bad, that God's just going to scrap it and that's the end of it, we move into an escapism theology, where we're thinking, you know, what's the use? This world's gone to hell and there's nothing we can do about it, and I got my ticket to Heaven and I just can't wait to go, and we get in this escapism thing. I'm outta' here. And because of that, we don't care about the environment. Because of that, we disconnect from things that matter on this Earth. All we're waiting for is our chance to get out of here. That is much more gnostic in its theology than it is Christian. The reality is the anticipation of the saints in the New Testament was not so much, *I'm out of here*. It was much more, *He's coming back*. He's coming back and he's going to redeem everything back unto Himself, and that's the ultimate victory and that's what they eagerly anticipated.

There are passages, such as second Peter Chapter three, that use terms like, this Earth will be *burned*, this earth will be *destroyed*. Some of the translations say the Earth will be *burned up*, which is a very unfortunate translation. That's not what the word means. It will be *purged*. It will be *burned*. It will be *judged*. The sin stuff will be burned away and God's going to redeem it back. Second Peter Chapter Three says the Earth will be destroyed, but a few verses before that it says, *just as God destroyed the world during the time of Noah*. Now we know God didn't annihilate the world, the Earth, at the time of Noah, so we've got a definition of our term. It doesn't mean annihilation. It means that God is going to clean house and He's going to redeem back what He always intended. If the Earth is eventually going to be annihilated, then what is the creation eagerly anticipating in Romans Chapter Eight? Is the creation eagerly anticipating annihilation? Does that make sense to anybody? It says very clearly in the text, eagerly anticipating being set free to join in the redemption of the saints, and creation too will be brought back to what God always intended. It's God's statement of victory.

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Cara: So Bryan, if I'm just focused on getting out of here and going to Heaven, I could wind up wasting my life away and really missing out on some amazing moments that God has in store for me.

Bryan: Yeah, there's big problems, Cara, with viewing our Salvation as merely a ticket to Heaven and we're just kind of killing time until we cash the ticket in. If you read Second Thessalonians, that does seem to be the problem and Paul's telling them to basically, get back to work. But if you think of it in terms of a mission to give people a glimpse of Genesis one and two of the world as God intended it to be, as our testimony of this new life in Christ. So you start to think about, well, what will be the values in the New Heaven, the New Earth, and what might those look like, at least in pockets, little glimpses, little places of flourishing, you know, Old Testament Shalom? Really that's what we're about. We have a lot of work to do and you start running through all of the things that don't seem like they would be appropriate in the New Heaven, the New Earth; then let's get busy now.

Arnie: So Bryan, ultimately, what would you say God's restoration is all about? Why doesn't He just simply start over?

Bryan: Yeah, I think it's about God's ultimate statement that He wins. It's about God glorifying Himself. He wins completely, fully all the way to the end of the story. So you think about what God did with us. Therefore in Christ, we are a new creation. *Old things are passed away. All things have become new*. It's like our story is a picture of the greater story and God will restore all creation back to himself and it will be the ultimate declaration that, *I win*.

Cara: So what are we going to be doing in the New Heaven and Earth?

Bryan: Yeah, that's a great question. It has a lot to do with forming your theology of Heaven that's appealing and not boring, as a lot of people honestly view it. So, I think we create glimpses now and we experience little moments that are like teasers of what's to come. So the best way to think of it, because it's different for everybody - what are those moments you experience that just seem almost magical and it's like a little glimpse of Heaven?

Bryan: I had a moment with one of my girls where, she was probably four or five, we were Christmas shopping. It was one of those days where everything went right. It was just absolutely

magical. You know, father, daughter outing and we had about an hour and a half to drive back home. So she sits in the front seat and packages are piled on her. She won't let any of them go. So she's just buried. You can just see her arms and it was snowing and Christmas music was playing. And I remember saying to God, why can't these moments last? Because I knew I only had it for a moment and it would be gone. And those are like these little teasers of the world to come is going to be more magical, more wondrous than you can imagine. So that's a helpful way to think about it because, those are the glimpses of the New Heaven, the new Earth.

Bryan: I think then you go back to Genesis one through three and you get everything from these beautiful moments with God strolling through the Garden. There's work, there's relationships, there's beauty, there's food, you know, there's pleasure. It's kind of going back to the world as God intended it to be, is going to be what it ultimately will be in the New Heaven and the New Earth. Music, laughter, creativity, it's all that.

Arnie: So Bryan, do you think nonbelievers can experience this Heaven on Earth moments too? I know when I was on my boat up in Alaska, we were in this area that wasn't even charted and it was the most beautiful place I've ever seen in my life. And even though I wasn't a Christ-follower, I honestly felt the presence of God. And maybe that was like the beginning of, what Jesus said is right. I mean, do you think nonbelievers can get a glimpse or is it just believers?

Bryan: Oh, I think absolutely. I think - Romans one - God's made Himself known through creation. Psalm 19- I think there's certain things about God we only learn through what's been made. So as people made in the image of God, unbelievers certainly experience those moments. And I think it often is a bit of an *Aha* moment; that possibly there's something more to this life.