

“Heaven: Can’t Wait!”

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Text: Revelation 4:1-11, 22:1-7, 1 Thessalonians 4: 13 - 18

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“Tears in Heaven” by Eric Clapton was the Grammy - winning song of the year of 1993. To many people it probably seemed like an odd choice, given that the lyrics are so atypical for “pop” music. Yet, on the other hand, the lyrics do reach out and touch something so fundamental to so many people, by asking questions and speculating on the nature of Heaven. The lyrics ask “What is it like in Heaven?”, “Will I see again a loved one who has died?”, “Will we know each other there?”. These questions were imposed on Clapton two years earlier, when his 4 year old son Connor accidentally fell from an apartment window to his death. In speaking from the core of his own grief a song was born that could touch the same core in many listeners. Film is another medium that has been used to speculate on the nature of Heaven with surprising frequency. Classic movies like, “It’s a Wonderful Life”, “Heaven Can Wait”, and “Ghost” are but a few of the perennially popular ones. If you want an entertaining current take on Heaven (and Hell), check out the TV comedy series “The Good Place”. The medium of film allows people to richly imagine and speculate on Heaven’s nature.

But it’s not just film makers who stoke the speculative fires about Heaven—even some self-declared serious Christian writers do as well. Take the recent Christian inspirational book entitled “A Travel Guide to Heaven”. The author declares Heaven is “Disney World, Hawaii, Paris, Rome and New York all rolled up into one”—the “ultimate playground, created purely for our enjoyment”....a place where you will be thinner, happier and smarter. “The ultimate playground created by God PURELY for OUR enjoyment”? Really? I think the author has it backwards. Listen to Revelation chapter 4 and the image of Heaven we find there. [Read vs 1-8]. Jewish thought (starting as far back as Genesis) and Christian thought has always described Heaven as the residence of God and a place overwhelmed with the worship of God.

The idea of Heaven we find in the Bible changes as you move from the beginning to the end. And the images of Heaven we are presented there are at times confusing and contradictory. Preachers, most commonly, talk of Heaven at funerals, and at those times we tend to paint a simplistic view of Heaven in order to convey hope and comfort rather than understanding. So today I am going to work on the understanding side.

Jewish thinking about Heaven for centuries was rooted in their scriptures (our Old Testament). To them Heaven was the residence of God. When a Jew died they went to the “Place of the Dead”—Sheol: a place of darkness where everyone went regardless of whether one was righteous or wicked. But while the dead were not in Heaven it did not mean that they were separated from God. For example, in Psalm 139 we read, “and if I make my bed in Sheol, behold: you are there.” But Jewish thinking about Heaven

began to evolve starting around 500 BC. With the Babylonian conquest came the introduction of different ideas. Later, the Jews were dominated by the Persians, then the Greeks, the Romans...and each of these peoples brought influences about how one could think about the afterlife.

And, this evolution of Jewish beliefs about the afterlife took place during the 400 year gap between when the Old Testament ends and the New Testament arrives. It was during this period an idea emerged that there were several Heavens. At first it was three and five, but later Rabbinic tradition held that there were seven heavens. Also in this time period several Rabbi's wrote accounts of their personal revelations they received about the nature of Heaven. So the Revelation of John (at the end of the New Testament) is not unique. And this also helps us understand a most peculiar story that the apostle Paul recounts in 2nd Corinthians: a story unique to the New Testament that seems to come right out of left field. [read 2 Corinthians 12: 2 – 4]. For Paul—who had been a Pharisee, a Rabbi—a story like this would not be unusual at all, because this kind of understanding was common among Jews in Jesus' day. In this story Paul said the man (likely himself) was also caught up into "Paradise." We've heard that word before, right? On the cross Jesus said to the criminal beside him "Today you will be with me in Paradise." In Jesus' day it was a common belief among Jews that in death the righteous did go to Paradise, which was located either in the third or the seventh Heaven in their sense of cosmology. Belief in Sheol had faded by that time. In death they also believed that the righteous Jews went to heavenly dwelling-places. And that sounds quite familiar to us too, doesn't it? Every Christian knows the words of Jesus at the Last Supper [read John 14:1-3]. So two things to note here. First, Jesus' teaching that there are heavenly dwelling places in "Paradise" was not news revealed by Jesus. It was re-affirmed. Second, in Paul's story of the man who saw Paradise, he asserted that there are things about Heaven that mortals are not supposed to know....yet. This is also a strange thing to say and I wonder why he wrote it. But I think, in the end, Paul was trying to convey that the nature of Heaven is a mystery and its intended to be a mystery for now. And that helps me, because as we look further into the New Testament teaching about Heaven, there are mysteries indeed!

One of the mysteries revolves around when we go to Heaven. As we noted, Jesus famously said to the criminal beside him on the cross "TODAY you will be with me in Paradise." But Paul describes a very different sense of timing. Every time we recite the Apostles' Creed we affirm our belief that Jesus will return at some unknown time at the end of this age. In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian church he suggested that it is at the time of Jesus' return that the dead are raised to join Jesus for eternity together. [read 1 Thessalonians 4: 13 – 18]. That's a very different sense of timing, isn't it? Certainly not "today you will be with me in Paradise." The thought that there may be a gap between the time we die here and the time we join God prompted a doctrine that is called "soul sleep." Basically, the soul sleep idea is that in death our essence goes into some form of stasis. It is like the pause button on us has been pushed until Jesus return. The reformer Martin Luther promoted this concept. The Reformer John Calvin

disagreed with it. Today the large majority of Christians believe that we go to God with our death. But not everyone does. In fact, the Biblical scholar I most respect—N. T. Wright—thinks the way Paul described it (and soul sleep) is the best way to understand when one goes to God. For me, I don't know which one is right, but I don't think it matters. If the idea of soul sleep is right, it will just seem to us that we have gone direct to God...And, besides, in the end it is about being with God in the life after this.

The Bible is pretty thin on details on what our experience will be like in Heaven. Perhaps because for now the notion of Heaven is intended to be mysterious. Perhaps it's because CBC doesn't have a foreign correspondent there. But still we get glimpses. The Book of Hebrews speaks of it as "a better country". In Jeremiah we read that it is a place filled with God (23.24). The Apostle Paul called it a place filled with inexpressible things (2 Cor. 12.4). One odd bit about Heaven we find in the New Testament concerns marriage. In Luke we read of an encounter Jesus had with some religious leaders who did not believe there was any resurrection from the dead. So they posed a hypothetical question to Jesus. They said, it is our Law that if a man dies, leaving the wife with no children, then the man's brother should marry the widow. And if he dies leaving no children the next brother should marry the widow. So the widow could have many husbands here but once she dies who will she be married to? We hear Jesus say in response, "Marriage is a major preoccupation here, but not there. Those who are included in the resurrection of the dead will no longer be concerned with marriage nor, of course, with death. They will have better things to think about, if you can believe it. All ecstasies and intimacies then will be with God" (Luke 20: 34 – 38). Now, some spouses may think this is good news! Others not. But I don't think the passage is saying—necessarily—that we will no longer engage with or care for our spouses. What the passage is definitely saying is that to be in the presence of God will be such an overwhelming experience that we will be pre-occupied with God. So this passage points back to the notion we looked at first: that Heaven is a place that is overwhelmed by the worship of God. But this raises a different common question: will we know each other? Will there be family reunions in Heaven? That's not clear. However, every time we say the Apostles' Creed we profess "I believe in the communion of saints." The communion of saints is the grand family of faith...and that family includes those who have gone before us and those who will follow us. When we say this we say we believe we are one family that is together for all time and eternity. Think back to Paul's description of Jesus return, which brings about a gathering of all people to him. So are there family reunions in Heaven? My personal hope is that there is. And indeed I look forward to it!

Another cherished notion about Heaven is that it is a place free from suffering. Let us hear from Revelation 7:15-17. [Read]. This is an anticipation and a hope that has run strongly through the people of faith and has given Christians a sense of peace and support to face their present moments of suffering.

I began by saying that the idea of Heaven we find in the Bible changes as you move from the beginning to the end. So it does again as we reach the very end of the New Testament, at the end of the Book of Revelation. Here we get the surprising news that Heaven is not our home for eternity. Most Jews in Jesus' day believed that the age they lived in was coming to an end and that there will be a great renewal of all things in an age to come. Jesus taught the same thing. The final revelation to John paints this anticipated future vividly. The end of the age will be inaugurated by Christ's return, then John recounts the vision he saw [read Revelation 21: 1-5, 22-26; 22:1-6]. The renewal of all things. It is like a repeat of Genesis, isn't it? A new world, God present with us in that world (we will see God's face), Jesus' promised living water flowing like a river through the land, the tree of life for the healing of the nations (suggesting the wonder of unity and peace)....

So our end is truly knowing God, being in God's presence, enjoying a renewed creation, and worshipping God as a consequence of it all. And this last vision ends with an assurance, "These words are trustworthy and true" (Rev. 22.6). So all those words...all those glimpses we've reflected on today....they are but small glimpses into what the future holds for us. The glimpses are intriguing, enticing, mysterious. But what Christ has done for us strengthens our hope that what we glimpse is true. So we live in hope, and I think in the expectation of being quite surprised when that time comes for us.