

WHAT HEAVEN IS LIKE
REVELATION 21:1-5

APRIL 6, 1986

A little boy and his father were walking one day. The boy looked up at the electric lines and asked, "Dad, how does the electricity get into the wires?" "Son," replied the father, "I'm sorry, but I'm not sure." "Well, then, how does the electricity travel through the wires?" "I don't know that either." Continuing, the son asked, "How does the electricity get into a light bulb and make it work?" The father didn't know that either. Finally the son said, "Dad, I hope you don't mind me asking all these questions." "Of course not," said the father, "If you don't ask questions, how else are you going to learn?"

Asking questions about heaven receives the same kind of reply---"I don't know." We know more about hell than about heaven. Last week I discussed hell and I know about hell from my own personal experience. Hell is a powerful, tempting reality that is dangerously close. We walk a fine line. Narrow is the gate, said Jesus, and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. Because of the constant struggle we have with the forces of evil, we are more knowledgeable about hell than we are about heaven.

Hell is our personal and corporate struggle; heaven is hope, and hope is future oriented. Humanity exists on hope, and hope for most has been expressed in terms of hoping for that which they do not have. To those who live their lives in poverty, heaven is where there is precious jewels, silver, a city of golden streets, a new Jerusalem, as expressed in the book of Revelation. Have you noticed in Revelation that the image of heaven is that of a city, and not green pastures and still waters?

The early American slaves were not so lavish in their hope of heaven. To them in their poverty, heaven is where they will have shoes. They sang, "I got a shoe, you got a shoe, all God's chillun got shoes. When I get to heaven, gonna put on my shoes, and walk all over God's heaven. Also, to the slaves in their misery, degradation, and humiliation, heaven is where they will be free. "Free at last," they sang.

To the hungry, heaven is a banquet with plenty to eat for everyone. In fact, as I understand Jesus, the last shall be first, and at the banquet in heaven, I expect to see the children of Ethiopia and Bangladesh sitting at the head tables, feasting, rejoicing; and you and I sharing the leftovers.

In the book of Revelation, heaven is where God is freely and openly worshipped. Revelation was written primarily to comfort the Christians who were being persecuted and martyred for their faith. Especially Emperor Nero delighted in persecuting the Christians who were called atheists because they would not worship the gods and the emperor. Tradition tells us that Nero would have Christians tied to stakes throughout his garden, and then burned so he could stroll through his garden by the light of burning Christians. As a result, Christians gathered in secret, usually in the catacombs beneath the city of Rome.

To persecuted Christians, heaven is where God is openly worshipped. Nothing delighted them more, or captured their imagination more, than praising God, singing hymns, and praying with other Christians. We take the worship of God for granted; but to them, it was a privilege, an honor, a dream to worship God, to celebrate God's presence in their midst. Revelation is filled with liturgies and hallelujahs!

There are many persecuted Christians yet today. Across this globe, Christians in many nations gather in secret, fight for the rights of people, take tremendous risks for their faith, stand up to oppressive and evil governments. For them, heaven is where God is freely worshipped and obeyed, where all people are treated equally, favorably and compassionately.

Heaven is where we hang our hope. At the rear of the sanctuary in the magnificent Stanford Chapel an inscription reads, "There is no narrowing so deadly as the narrowing of man's horizon of spiritual things. No worse evil could befall him in his course on earth than to lose sight of heaven." To keep heaven in sight is to get our minds off the routine, the ordinary, the evil, and the materialism which exerts such a strong impact on us and our society.

Hope gives us courage when we feel discouraged. Hope sustains us when we feel hopeless. Hope keeps us looking forward, not backward. Ken Callahan, church consultant and author of Twelve Keys to an Effective Church, says, "Hope is stronger than memory." Memory looks backward, but hope has a stronger pull and points us to the future. During the terrible bombardments of Great Britain by the Nazis during World War II, Winston Churchill constantly reminded his countrymen that they had to draw upon the future to make it through the present. Hope in heaven, hope in the kingdom of God, hope in God's eventual triumph over the forces of evil, gives us the courage, stamina, and faith to endure the present.

Even more so, hope in the future gives meaning and direction to the present. What we believe about the kingdom of God, what we believe is God's will for humankind and the planet, is what gives content to our values, tasks, and daily living. For example, because we believe God wills that all his people live in peace with each other, we can dedicate ourselves to peacemaking. The vision---the hope---is that nations will beat their swords into plow shares, their spears into pruning hooks, lay down their nuclear weapons, discard their trust in violence as a means of solving differences, and live in peace with one another. We can pursue peace in confidence because our hope is grounded in heaven.

Heaven is hope, but is there more? Can we know more about heaven? Can we experience than hope? In one respect, heaven is largely a matter of conjecture, for who has been there and returned to tell about it? Many incidents have been reported of persons who were supposedly dead, but then were brought back to life. Some of them tell of a long tunnel they went through and found a bright light at the end. Some report they were met by a figure surrounded by light; some said the figure was Jesus; some said the figure was a loved one. The consensus of these reports as I have read them is that they agree that death and what followed was a peaceful, comfortable, even beautiful experience. They agree that death is not to be feared. But, what

is it like on the other side? What is heaven like?

The only person of repute who went through the experience of death and returned to this earth is Jesus. Jesus told us that heaven is like a house with many rooms. He has gone ahead to prepare a place for each of us and will receive each of us into eternity. Heaven is where you belong; there is already a room reserved for you. Furthermore, we are told that heaven, like hell, is a present reality as well as a future reality. John tells us that they who have the Son have life; not will have life, but have life. Our present life in Christ which is called salvation, is a foretaste of heaven, an appetizer. Jesus said, (John 5:24) "Whoever listens to my words, and believes in the one who sent me, has eternal life; without being brought to judgement they have passed from death to life." We experience the reality of heaven when God breaks through into our lives. Heaven is where God is. I mentioned earlier in the sermon that I know about hell from personal experience; I also know about heaven from personal experience. When I feel close to God, warmed by his love, cleansed by forgiveness, receive courage to make a difficult decision, find strength to bear pain, and soar in the power of the Holy Spirit, that is a foretaste of glory divine.

The journey to heaven in this life, and that journey is a process of growth. I believe we are placed on this earth to learn, to grow, and to become more like what God intends each of us to be. We don't all start in the same place in this earthly growth process, but we are all challenged to make our own journey to heaven, to the ideal. Eugene O'Neil in his Broadway play, The Great God Brown, writes, "This is the secret for today; man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue."

Some religions and traditions believe that when we don't get it right the first time, we come back to this earth and live another life. I'm not sure about that belief, but I do believe that we are here to grow, that life is a process, and that death is not the end of the process. Paul was emphatic that nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Death is an event, not an end, in that process.

But, what is crucial in this process, is to ask yourself: what kind of life are you sending on ahead? What kind of house are you building in heaven? What kind of furnishings are you sending ahead for your room? Mary was only 13, the eldest of seven children living in tenement quarters, when her mother died. Her mother told her, "I must leave you and you must be mother now to the children. Be patient with father; you know he is kind when he is not drinking, and keep the children together." Mary bravely undertook her new role; but two years later she, too, lay dying of the same disease that took her mother. Mary told a deaconess, "I have been patient with father and I have kept the children together, but I am afraid to die. I have not gone to church because I have had no clothes and I have been too tired at night to say my prayers. Now, what can I say to Jesus when I see him?" The wise deaconess took Mary's small, rough and calloused hands, and said, "Don't say anything to Jesus, Mary, just show him your hands."

I'm afraid that a person who is centered on things--jewelry, money, stereos, boats, etc.--will find that those things do not survive death. What will such people do in heaven without their material things? With only the spiritual, will heaven become a hell for them?

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What happens to a person who has never learned to worship, never learned to pray, never had a personal, rich experience of fellowship with Christ. When heaven is unrestrained praise and worship of God, what will such people do? They will feel like strangers. Will heaven become a hell for them?

What about people who believe in violence, power, fighting, and war? What will they do in heaven when they find there is no violence there, but only peace? Will heaven become a hell for them?

What is heaven like? Heaven is the ideal. Heaven is hope; but even more, heaven is the experiencing of God in your life. The experience of heaven begins in this life as a journey, a process of growth, and narrow is the gate, hard is the way that leads to heaven.