

Christ Presbyterian Church
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2 Corinthians 4:16-18
Reflections: Living in Light of Eternity

We're in the middle of a sermon series on what God has been teaching us. I'm going to talk a little bit about heaven. But before I do, let's pray together, shall we?

Lord God, we thank You that You are the light, and You pull back darkness. We thank You that our hope is in You. We ask now that Your Spirit would minister to us. We pray, God, that whatever is of You would penetrate our hearts and souls, and that whatever I might say that is not of you would be like chaff in the wind. We pray that in Your holy and strong Name. Amen.

How many people here wonder or have wondered what will happen to us after we die? Anybody here ever think along those lines? About what heaven might be like? There have been studies done that have found that across cultures and time, people universally are fascinated with life after death, and we know that from pyramids and all different religions. Something is in us that wonders if there isn't something more than this life. Ecclesiastes 3 in the Old Testament says this.

¹¹ He (meaning God) has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

Listen to that. "He has also set eternity in the human heart." Now you and I have never lived in a perfect world, yet somehow we can imagine what it might look like if everything was perfect. We have never had a perfect relationship and yet even though we have never lived into that, we can imagine what a perfect relationship might look like. It is as if there is this latent memory of paradise lost that we all carry around in us. We yearn, even when things feel like they just can't get any better, for something more. C. S. Lewis says that yearning is like "a remote music we are born remembering," and we all have that.

Unfortunately, though, I think our images of what heaven and the afterlife are like are often shaped by cartoons. Or maybe Hallmark cards. Or even some of our hymns. What we kind of conjure up in our heads are angels with halos strumming on harps of gold. We are all sitting around in these beautiful white robes on fluffy clouds forever and ever and ever. You know Gary Larson who did The Far Side? He drew a lot of cartoons on heaven and hell. One of my favorites on heaven is this man in a white robe sitting on a fluffy cloud with a bored expression on his face, and the caption is "Shoulda brought a magazine." Unfortunately, we kind of think "Oh, no, is it going to be eternal boredom?" Or we know we are going to be in the presence of God, but when we think of worship, we think of singing, and we're kind of like "Oh, no. I like church, but really? Forever?"

You kind of wonder where in the world some of these funny ideas come from. Part of it stems from Medieval times, the Dark Ages. Most people didn't read. At that time it was believed that only the clergy should have Bibles and read the Bible, and they should interpret it for the congregation. It is safe to say that the vast majority of people never had a Bible in their hands to read if they even knew how to read it. So how did they communicate the Biblical stories to folks? Well, they had paintings and stained glass windows, and often around a church and up on the ceiling, they would paint the Biblical story, the saints and so forth.

Well, if you have ever looked at some of the paintings of heaven and hell from Medieval times and even the Renaissance, they are scary. We wouldn't even put them up on the screen here for you to look at. They are really, really scary. I think that often our images of what heaven and hell are like are from this Medieval imagination, fueled by Dante but not necessarily grounded in Biblical text. No wonder we are a little ambivalent about heaven. If somebody offered you the opportunity to go to heaven in the next two minutes, my guess is a lot of people would say, "You know what? I want to go to heaven. It is definitely better than the alternative but not yet. I have this bucket list of things I want to do, things I want to see, places I want to go. I want to achieve certain things, and so heaven can definitely, definitely wait." Compounded to that is, not only do we oftentimes have a Hallmark card-view of heaven, we don't really teach or preach a lot about heaven in church. Have you noticed that? We refer to it but, honestly, even in seminary, I went through seminary and we talked about end times, all these different theories of how everything is going to happen. We talked a lot about salvation and how that happens, but we did not talk a lot about heaven. We did not talk a lot about the afterlife.

So what am I learning lately? I am learning a lot about heaven, and so this sermon is about heaven. But before we get into it, I want to do two disclaimers. First of all, some of this might sound a little different from what you have always assumed was true. It may even be a little disquieting. And second, none of us this side of heaven can know what heaven will be like. All we know is, it is going to be unimaginable and so different from anything we could conceive. I love this verse in 1st Corinthians 2:9. It says,

⁹ ..."No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him."

So even in the best of the best scenarios that you can think of, we can't even conceive of what God has in store for us, but I think what we can do, what I hope to do here is to clear up some misguided notions that we have just inherited from wherever. It might be a shock to you, but the Bible says very, very little about where you are going to go after you die. Very little. In fact, if you start reading through the Gospels, and you usually start in the Gospel of Matthew, you know, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, you see Jesus coming onto the scene, and He starts preaching the Gospel, right? The good news which is all about the Kingdom of Heaven. So you and I tend to go, "Oh, the Kingdom of Heaven, well, that's where you go after you die." But actually, if you look at the other Gospels, Jesus comes on the scene and He is preaching about the Kingdom of God. What has happened in Matthew, when Jesus talks about the Kingdom of Heaven, we just kind of transpose into the other Gospels and think He is still talking about where we go after we die.

But listen to this. Some of you may know this and it is still true today. If you have read something written by a rabbi, you will see that they often don't use the whole word for God, G-o-d. They will

use G-d. Have you ever seen that? That is because they feel the Name of God is so sacred we should not utter it. That was definitely the way it was in Hebrew times. You did not say Yahweh's Name. You never took His Name in vain. It was too holy. Because a person's name contained their person, you would use a euphemism. With the Kingdom of Heaven, heaven was often used as a euphemism for God. People knew Jesus was talking about the Kingdom of God, but He said "the Kingdom of Heaven," or at least that is how Matthew wrote it, and so we automatically jump to, "Oh, He is talking about the clouds, the by and by up in the sky after we die," but that is not necessarily what Jesus was talking about.

I would challenge you to read through the Gospels and see what He says. He comes proclaiming the good news that the Kingdom of God is here. The Kingdom of God is near. He said the Kingdom of God is within you, and that was the good news. Then He went and started demonstrating what the Kingdom of God was, and He did it by raising people from the dead, by feeding the hungry, by healing the sick and giving sight to the blind. Basically what He did was, He restored creation to the way God originally intended it. Jesus demonstrated the Kingdom of God, and He said it was here. It is sort of like when Jesus arrived, the Kingdom of God came crashing into our earth from the future. Well, what is the Kingdom of God? I know that is kind of another one of those, so what is that exactly? Again, in the Lord's Prayer,

¹⁰Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

The Kingdom of God is wherever God's intention is being carried out, wherever His will is being done. If you think about our earth, we have many kingdoms. Not all of them are God's Kingdom. God's Kingdom is the sphere of wherever God is actually reigning as King and His work is being carried out so we see glimpses of the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. The Kingdom of Heaven is *not*, it is *not*, escaping from earth and saying, "Well, good riddance to that. Earth can go to hell in a handbasket." It is not flying away, by and by up in the sky. It is not ransomed souls in a disembodied, ethereal place. Rather, and I will talk about that a little more, rather it is something that is tangible, that we can know today.

This whole idea of our soul is a Platonic notion. We often think of our soul as being the real part of me; my body is disposable, the *real* part of me is my soul, It comes from Greek philosophy. Basically, the Greeks had a dualistic view of the world where anything material was evil and very temporary. Anything spiritual was very good and immortal. I can tell you, that is not the Biblical world view. That is a very Greek world view, but it is a view that we have. It is sort of engrained in us. The word for *soul* in the Hebrew or the Aramaic actually means your whole person. It is like your personality, but it doesn't distinguish this little, kind of spiritual thing inside of you.

Now what is the image of heaven that the Bible gives us? If you read Revelation and get to the end, chapters 21 and 22, what you see is a new creation, a new earth. Earth is what we are standing on but from heaven, from up in the air, a new Jerusalem comes down where we see people with bodies from every nation, every tribe, of every tongue, and they are coming up to Zion to worship God, who is again with us. This new earth is not like the earth we know in that there is no corruption. Revelation 21: 4 says,

⁴ 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

I want you to just think about the Bible for a minute. We have Genesis in the beginning, right? In Genesis you see Adam walking with God in the garden in the cool of the day. He is right in God's presence. There is a Tree of Life, and there is a river, but then there is the fall when things fall apart. Throughout the Bible we see God working to redeem, to renew, His creation, and then at the very end, we have a new creation, a new earth, with a River of Life and a Tree of Life. The curse is lifted. God's creation is as He intended it without the curse. We are redeemed. God is restoring, renewing, and redeeming our relationship, creation, to what He first intended it to be.

What is heaven going to be like? It is going to be a lot like earth. It is going to be a lot like us lying out in the middle of the desert looking at the vastness of the star-studded sky. It is going to be a lot like us snorkeling on the Great Barrier Reef or gazing at snow-capped mountains. It is going to be like us sitting by a fire or looking at the Autumn leaves in New England, all without famines, without women in the heart of Africa walking for days with their four children and bearing three of them on the way to find food and losing them. It is going to be without earthquakes and tsunamis. It is going to be without the wars that wreak devastation upon us, without death, without the curse of disease. Don't ask me how this is going to happen, but it will be God's creation as He originally intended it. I love this picture of the new creation we hear a lot about in Advent in Isaiah 2. It says,

⁴ ...They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.

So what are we going to do on this new earth? The pruning hooks kind of gives me the idea that there might be some cultivation going on. I know that we are going to be in God's presence. The Bible says we will worship God forever, so I am sure that there will be some singing, maybe even some bluegrass, I don't know. But there will be singing. We have these images of a banquet, and I believe we are going to be eating with Him. I believe when we are hanging out with God and Jesus, we are going to be laughing. Jesus loved to laugh. We are going to be creating things. You are going to be doing what you love to do because you have been designed to do it. We will be creating things, designing things, exploring, discovering, and we will continue to grow in this new creation, but we will not have sin. One pastor says, "I think we are going to be walking around with Jesus with our eyes wide open, just continually saying, 'Wow!'" It is going to be amazing!

The Bible says we will reign with God so I believe we will have responsibilities, which is another thing I think we need to think more about. We will work at cultivating beauty, goodness, and the earth. All right, that's cool, like "That's nice, pastor. Nice sermon, but what does this have to do with me now today?" Well, actually, great philosophers from Hegel to Plato have always said, "What you think about death and the life beyond is actually very key to seriously thinking about anything else in life." I think that touches on not only what we think about the afterlife, but what I believe is good Gospel, and I'd like to talk a little bit about that.

First, just so you know, I absolutely believe that Christ's redeeming work on the cross is central to everything, and that we should be about calling people to repentance, trusting in Christ and His work and receiving Christ and His life into our own lives. But if our Gospel is only about managing our sins like, we do this so we don't have any more sins and kind of get our ticket stamped so we can know we are going to heaven, kind of like getting a pass, a get-out-of-jail

free card, I think we are missing out on the essence of the Gospel. Believe me, I know people who have prayed a prayer to accept Jesus into their life, and they have asked for forgiveness, maybe at Young Life Camp when they were a kid or in Sunday School. They don't have a doubt that they are going to heaven, but they absolutely have nothing in them of the Kingdom life. They just live their life whichever way. I believe they are really missing out. Spiritual formation and building God's Kingdom and that view, they are all just like, "Why even do it? It's all just extra credit."

But if salvation is more than souls going to heaven, if it is more than that, then our priority on just preaching to people so that their souls might be saved for the future gets a little bit turned around. Suddenly all the things like campaigning against injustice, feeding the poor, caring for creation gets elevated. If the Gospel is, as Jesus said, about the Kingdom of God and if God's plan for salvation involves more than our souls but also includes relationships and creation, then here is the cool thing. We can live into that eternal future and that Kingdom right now. Do you know that you are eternal? If you have the Son of God, you have the life, and that life is eternal. You have it right now. You don't have to wait to die. You will have it in more fullness, but you have it right now, so right now we can be about building God's Kingdom, living into eternity that lasts by planting gardens, by teaching school, by building hospitals, digging wells, feeding the hungry, writing poetry, campaigning for justice, praying, preaching the good news, singing, loving your neighbor as yourself. It will all last into God's future. It is all part of His Kingdom.

Have you ever heard people say, "Oh, you are so heavenly minded, you are no earthly good"? Have you ever heard that? Okay, listen to this quote. C. S. Lewis wrote this in *Mere Christianity*.

Hope means a continual looking forward to the eternal. It does not mean we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in; aim at the earth and you will get neither.

I think that is because people who love something more than the world, who love the next world more than this one, actually have more love to give. It frees us from grasping at all the crumbs of this earth or what we can gain for ourselves here. Because this earth is God's creation, we fight against the death that mars it. We fight against pain and poverty and racism and injustice because we know our work will last. We know we will reign with God in the next world, so we are serious about whom we are becoming and how we are being shaped for heaven.

I know that this sounds kind of "Wow! That is interesting but I want to know where my husband is right now. I want to know where the child that I lost to cancer last year is right now. That is all way in the future when we get a new earth, but what about right now?" There are two different views on this. I am going to read a Scripture here for you from Luke 23. It says:

⁴² Then (this is the thief who was on the cross next to Jesus) he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus is dying. He is leaving this earth, and the thief says, "Remember me when you come into Your Kingdom."

⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Some Christian theologians have said, "Well, with God a day is like a thousand years." There is that reference in the Bible. Basically because we believe in a physical, bodily resurrection, they say, people are just sleeping in the shadow lands right now. They are just resting and eventually, no matter how they died, they might have been cremated or buried at sea, whatever, eventually, Christ will come and resurrect them. You may have even seen gravestones where it says, "Rest in peace,"

But there is another view that takes seriously "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" and talks about how paradise may be outside of our space time continuum. It may be in another dimension. Do you know that mathematicians have identified ten dimensions? We have three! And so it may be coexistent with us today. But the truth of the matter is, regardless, of the view, we have eternal life. 1st John 5:11 says,

¹¹ And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² Whoever has the Son has life....

Romans 8 says,

³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So, my personal opinion? Actually, it has been my experience that our loved ones who have passed from us are in God's presence right now. We don't know much about it, but I believe we can be comforted, knowing that death has not separated them from God. One of the amazing privileges of being a pastor is that you get to walk with people as they die. It sounds like woe, but it is holy ground when you are walking with someone as they pass from this life into the next. I have seen things that you can't believe. People have seen angels in their room. One woman who was elderly recognized her mom who had died when she was eight years old. People who are dying begin to see things. After the service last hour, I had all these people who had attended people who had died come up to me and tell me some of them came back for a while. They came back and explained what they had been seeing and doing. It is always beyond anything we can ever think or imagine.

I'd like to close with a story about such a happening that was written by Amy Carmichael. Some of you may know of her. She was a missionary to India in the Thirties. In one of her books called *Gold Cord*, she wrote about a little girl named (Proofer: sounds like Lula). She was a little Brahman girl about five years old who had great promise, but she got a very serious illness. They sent for the missionary doctor, but he wasn't able to arrive in time. Amy writes,

It was in that chilly hour between night and morning. A lantern burned dimly in the room where Lula lay. There was nothing in that darkened room to give account for what we saw. The child was in pain, struggling for breath, turning to us for what we could not give. I left her with (Proofer: sounds like Mabel Wade and Panamau) and going aside to another room, I cried out to the Father to take her quickly. I was not more than a minute away but when I returned, she was radiant. Her lovely face was lighted up with amazement and happiness. She was looking up and clapping her hands as delighted children do. When she saw me, she stretched out her arms and swung them around my

neck as though saying, "Goodbye." She was in a hurry to be gone. Then she turned to the other two and did the same thing in the same eager way, and finally holding out her arms to someone whom we could not see, she crossed her hands. Had I been the only one who had seen this thing, I might have doubted, but all three of us saw it. There was no trace of pain in her face. She was never to face pain again. We saw nothing in that dear child's face but unimaginable delight.

So, friends, my challenge to you is to bring the Kingdom into this earth and to build God's Kingdom, restoring, redeeming, and renewing, but know that if you have the Son, you have the life, and He will never, ever let you go. Let's pray.

Lord God, I'm actually pretty excited about a brand new, redeemed earth where I can walk with You and enjoy creation and relationships with other people just as You intended it. Thank You for that vision and, God, thank You that You have promised never to leave us and that You will walk with us always and that right now we have eternal life, and we will live it forever with You. In the strong Name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.