

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### Revelation 4

### "Heaven"

We start today on a new summer series of *Ask The Pastor* sermons. The first - and shortest, but among the most challenging - question is "What is heaven like?" That's something we would all like to know more about, and we wish the Bible answered more of our questions! But there are three basic things the Bible does tell us.

#### 1) God's Home

The first thing to say is that heaven is above all *God's home*. He created it, it is the place where he rules, and everyone there obeys his will - "Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven," we pray every Sunday. Because everyone does his will, we know it is a place of harmony and goodness and joy. We say it is a "place," although of course we don't quite know what we mean by that: the ancient world pictured it as a "high" place, somewhere "beyond the skies." The very word "heaven" was ambiguous: it could refer to what we loosely call "the heavens" - the sky, the sun, moon and planets, the stars - or it could refer to the "place beyond all that" where God lives. The Bible uses both kinds of language.

We know heaven is God's home because from there he speaks - whether by sending his Word to his people, or by "heaven opening" and the voice of God being heard. We know it is God's home because it is full of worship, as well as obedience and

harmony. When someone like John in *Revelation* is given a vision of "the door of heaven open," he sees multitudes of beings - angels and others - praising God. So heaven is a place of glory - meaning the wonder of who God is, the brightness of his majesty, awe at his power, his wisdom, his goodness, his holiness. Heaven is sometimes described as his temple, so we are to understand that all earthly temples and tabernacles are pale reflections of the true temple of God in heaven. Heaven is also described as a city, reminding us that it is a community of peoples.

We know that Jesus came from there and returned there - he "came down from heaven" but he also ascended bodily into heaven after his Resurrection. That is a profound and often overlooked fact: the physical but transformed body that rose from death, still bearing the marks of his crucifixion, still able to walk and talk and eat, is now in heaven. So heaven is not, as we usually think, a purely "spiritual" place, but a place in which Jesus' risen body is now "at the right hand of the Father." That has huge implications for us, which we will come back to later.

Jesus is active in heaven - he stands as our "advocate with the Father," especially when we fall into sin, and he prays and "makes intercession" for us! Jesus and the Father together sent and still send the Holy Spirit to

be with us, to guide us, to teach us, and most importantly to lead us to faith. The Spirit is the member of the Triune God who brings us salvation – that is, the promise that we will one day be fully reconciled to God from our rebellious ways, that we will live with him and he with us, that we will be saved from “the wrath to come,” that we will participate in “the renewal of all things.” We can have a taste of salvation now, in being assured of the forgiveness of sins now, in experiencing God’s love and grace now, in being led and empowered for a more godly life now, in knowing his will now, in having now the hope of full future salvation to reassure us in our daily lives.

Heaven is the source of our life, which is a gift of God, and of “new life,” “spiritual life,” “abundant life,” “eternal life,” which is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Heaven is the source of truth, goodness, beauty, justice; and also will be the place of final judgment, the banishment of evil, and the “restoration of all things” under Jesus Christ as head.

## 2) *Where Believers Go*

Well, you may say, that’s all very wonderful, but explain again what that has to do with us, now, and especially with us when we die?

So the second big thing the Bible tells us about heaven is that it is the place where the people of God go when they die. In Christian language, people who have faith in Jesus Christ go to be “with him.” Heaven is “the better place” we often speak of. At death, believers are immediately in the presence of their Lord. They do not take their bodies with them; but something that is real and identifying – the Bible calls it soul or spirit – goes to heaven. “Today you will be with me in paradise,” said Jesus from the cross to the dying thief beside him – paradise being an alternative name for heaven, but carrying

with it a sense of the beauty of the place. Paradise is a name that goes far back in history to a root meaning “garden” or “park,” and might be used to describe “the Garden of Eden,” or the “new heaven and new earth” that are yet to come. Heaven/Paradise is the place where “the Tree of Life” grows.

But what, we want to know, would it be *like* to be “with Christ”? If it is “better,” how is it better? We wish we knew more, but here are some of the things the Bible says: it is a place of rest (being there is sometimes called being “asleep” but that probably means a state that we can be “awoken” from, not that we are “barely conscious”). Believers in heaven are depicted as fully aware, communicating, comforted. They are “clothed” in a new life, they are safe; they have been called into God’s presence and welcomed there.

They are citizens with rightful places in heaven; they have a home (perhaps a “mansion”) prepared for them. There they receive rewards for what they have done in their earthly lives. They can have “treasure” there as a result of their earlier “spiritual investments.” They are part of a great multitude of people from every age and every language; and there is every reason to think (though this is not said) that they converse with one another, know one another, are reunited with those they have known and loved before. They are part of a community of the redeemed; but they are aware of what continues to happen to those who are still living this life: “there is joy in heaven over every sinner who repents.” In heaven, their own sins are now long past, because they are purified and perfected instantly by the powerful presence of God.

There are two more things about heaven that are clear in the Bible, but not often noticed or remembered in this world – indeed even Christians often lose track of them! One is

obvious: that heaven is hidden from our eyes. In our present state, heaven is hidden, and therefore easy to forget or to dismiss. To the skeptic, it is nonsense. Even to the believer, it can seem "too far away," too obscure to take seriously. Faith is, in part, relying on the truth of what we have been told but cannot "see" the evidence for. And right now "we live by faith, not by sight," and heaven can seem like an illusion - unless we make it a daily discipline of this life to immerse ourselves in the thought world of the Bible, where talk about "God's home" is found everywhere.

### 3) *Temporary Accommodations*

But the second unnoticed Biblical teaching about heaven is more shocking than its invisibility. It is the fact that heaven is only temporary accommodation. There is more beyond, and in the Biblical view of history and the world and life and God, what lies *beyond heaven* is the final destination!

The door to that is called "the general resurrection" which leads to the judgment and the "new heaven and new earth," the "restoration of all things." In the words of Bishop Wright, who has stirred a lot of controversy with a recent book on heaven called *Surprised By Hope*, what the Bible promises believers is not just "life after death" but "*Life After 'life after death'.*" Christians believe not in "the immortality of the soul" - that is a Greek idea - but in "the resurrection of the body."

Heaven is the place we await our resurrection bodies. Heaven is where we prepare for the day our souls and new bodies are reunited to fit us for the new heaven and new earth that God is preparing. He has not created "all things visible and invisible" in order to destroy them, but to redeem them through Jesus Christ and then restore them to what he intended. One day

Christ will return, "the dead will rise," all peoples from all times will be judged, and those who are pardoned and declared righteous will enter the eternal state of living with God in a remade world, when "the Holy City, the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God," and God makes his dwelling with the people he created, sustained and redeemed. Then his "righteous ones" will rule with him and for him, then "all nations" will bring tribute to him, then "the lion will lie down with the lamb," then "swords will be beaten into plowshares," then "he will wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

*That is the Christian hope.* That is what lies ahead in God's plans. That is what we believe, and why we believe, in the face of death and pain and frustration now. "Heaven when we die" is but a step on the way to the "resurrection bodies" that we are promised: bodies like Jesus' that are recognizably us, carry the marks of our history, but are transformed. "We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed." Then we will have "new names," then we will be "imperishable," then we will know joy in the glad service of our Lord and our God.

### 4) *What We Don't Know*

Finally, what don't we know? Much that we would like to! Will we be able to find our loved ones and be easily recognized? I think so. Will our pets, and all animals, be there? - yes, if "lions are going to lie down with lambs" in God's new world! What about angels, harps, clouds? We don't know.

We have to remember that a lot of what we think we know about heaven is based in art, poetry and literature, not in the Bible. We owe much - perhaps too much - to Dante, to Michelangelo, to Milton. We may have taken

the *Left Behind* series as “the gospel” when it is fiction! I have been much affected by C. S. Lewis’ book *The Great Divorce*, which describes why some very British “types” choose not to go to heaven if it will mean giving up their favorite complaints, pride, prejudice, lust, and theories about faith.

Remember too that the Bible, unlike Dante or Milton, has very little to say about the state of *unbelievers* after death. Only one of Jesus’ parables talks of their condition as conscious, suffering and separated from God. We are told that at the “general resurrection” *all* will rise to give account of themselves at the judgment. But we know far more about God’s promises to his people than his final plans for those who despise him.

May we be faithful and hopeful until we reach the heavenly city to dwell with God!

Let us pray...