

**“The Hope of Heaven”**  
VBS Sunday  
Dr. Peter B. Barnes  
June 28, 2015  
(Rev. 21:1-4 and Jn. 14:1-6)

**Introduction.**

As you’ve already seen and heard, this past week we celebrated Vacation Bible School. Throughout the week the children had a mountain top experience with the theme of Mount Everest and conquering challenges with the mighty power of God. Each day we had a specific Bible point we emphasized to the children, and each one was tied to the power of God. The kids learned how God has the power to provide for us, comfort us, heal us, and forgive us.

There is one more Bible point the curriculum includes whenever a church has an additional fifth day of VBS, and the point is this: *God has the power to love us forever and give us eternal life.* This morning I want to talk about the hope of heaven as we conclude our week of VBS at our church.

I think many people have misconceptions about heaven. Hindus speak of the bliss of Nirvana. Radical Muslim men dream of a harem of women in heaven. (I’m not sure why that’s so appealing. I have enough trouble trying to keep one woman happy in my marriage!) Buddhists conceive of heaven as getting past all our earthly passions. But none of these perspectives has anything to do with the truth about eternal life and what the Bible teaches about heaven.

Even Christians have misconceptions about heaven. I heard one man say that his idea of heaven was getting to play a different golf course every day for eternity. In my early Christian life I remember thinking that perhaps in heaven I’ll have a full head of hair, or that I will be able dunk a basketball! We tend to envision heaven as life on earth as I wished it were. Still other people have negative misconceptions and think heaven is only going to be one, long, boring worship service where the dominant instrument that is played is a harp. Or they conceive of heaven as a place where we all grow wings and just sit around on clouds.

What does the Bible have to say about all this? What is heaven really going to be like? Let’s take a closer look.

**I. The Description of Heaven.**

*“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (21:1,2).*

The apostle John had a revelation of heaven when he was exiled on the island of Patmos toward the end of the 1st century AD. After a panorama of the drama of history flashed before his eyes, after he had seen the clash of good and evil over the sweep of time, and after he was shown the suffering of the church, John was then given an assurance that history would conclude with God winning the victory and that the Lord would at that time create a new heaven and a new earth.

In the New Testament there are three primary images which describe heaven and give us insight as to what it might entail. The first image appears in this passage. It’s the figure of a

**city.** In Revelation 21, we read a beautiful description of the streets, walls and gates of that great city, which is referred to as the New Jerusalem.

In the ancient world a city meant *security* because it had walls which protected the people. It was safe to be in the walls of a fortified city, and there you could free from attack. The city also meant *beauty* and *grandeur*, and here we read of streets of gold, gates of pearl, and many precious stones. In other words, the most valuable metals and precious stones of our world are so plentiful in the heavenly city that they are used as pavement and common building materials. Most of all, the city meant *community*. And in the city that is heaven we're told that we'll have fellowship with God and with all those who have gone before us in the faith, those people who walked with the Lord in their day and time and are now with Him in heaven.

The second image of heaven we're given in the Scripture is one which Jesus used in describing it. He used the word "**paradise**." You'll recall that Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "*I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise*" (Lk. 23:43). Paradise is a Persian word which means "an enclosed park" which had springs and grass and trees. In addition, paradise was an image in the ancient world that signified beauty, quiet, and rest. Jesus said that is what heaven will be like.

The third image of heaven in the New Testament was also given by our Lord. It's the metaphor of a heavenly **home**. In the other passage that was read this morning Jesus said, "*In My Father's house are many rooms.... I am going there to prepare a place for you*" (Jn. 14:2,3). Going to heaven won't be like entering some strange place. It will be more like going home. Have you ever been away from home for a long period of time and missed your family a great deal? Boy, wasn't it great to get home and hug everyone in the family? Jesus said that's what heaven will be like.

So we see that in its description of heaven, the Bible uses these metaphors of the security of the city, the beauty of paradise, and the comfort and community of home to give us an idea of what it will be like. But these are only metaphors intended to give us a hint rather than paint a clear picture. The truth is heaven is going to be grander and greater than anything you and I can ever imagine. So all our efforts to put into words and describe how wonderful heaven is going to be will always fall short and be incomplete. These images and metaphors try to enlarge our vision and raise our expectation.

However, there is one thing I know for sure about heaven. Jesus will be there, and because of that it will be a place of great joy!

## **II. The Joy of Heaven.**

More than anything else, the Bible says heaven will be a place of joy. C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Joy is the serious business of heaven." I like that!

There will be **the joy of restoration**. Our passage in Revelation 21 promises that the old order of things will pass away, and God will make a new heaven and a new earth. What you and I lost in the Fall with the sin of our first parents will be completely restored, and the problems that plague humanity to this day will be forgiven and forgotten forever.

There will also be **the joy of reunion**. We'll be reunited with Christ as well as with our loved ones who have died and gone on to be with the Lord. The greatest family reunion on earth will pale in comparison to the Great Reunion of heaven. And the embrace will last for all eternity.

Then there is the **joy of celebration**. The Bible tells of a Great Wedding Feast that will take place when Christ, the bridegroom, claims His bride, the Church. In John 14, we read where

Jesus says, *"I am going to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am"* (Jn. 14:2,3).

In his book *The Journey of Desire*, John Eldridge<sup>1</sup> says that in the culture of Jesus' day, these were the very words a young man would say to his fiancée. Once the suitor secured the hand of his bride, he would return to his father's house and build the additional room that would be their bridal suite. Couples moved into the home of the groom's parents. It was "preparing a place for her." When all was ready, he would come for his bride and take her to be with him. This is the picture Christ paints of His return. When Jesus returns as the bridegroom, He will take the Church, His bride, to heaven that we might be with Him for eternity. And the celebration will never end.

There is also **the joy of reward**. Several biblical writers, and even Christ Himself, mention this. It appears that you and I will be rewarded in heaven in some measure for the faithfulness we demonstrate in living for Christ here on earth. We aren't certain what form this reward will take, but it will be wonderful. Whatever sacrifices you and I have made for Jesus in this life will be more than compensated.

Finally, there is **the joy of the Lord** Himself. As Revelation 21 promises, every tear we have ever shed, every pain we have ever known, every failure that has ever broken our hearts will be wiped away and forgotten forever. Peace will reign, and we'll live with God in happiness for eternity. The best part about heaven is that God will be there with us.

### **III. The Promise of Heaven.**

Most of us like fairy tales. As a child I always lit up whenever a story started off, "Once upon a time..." It's because I knew that it would be a story of adventure and glory, of struggle and victory, of darkness and light. I also knew that it would always end with the words, "and they lived happily ever after."

Why is it that we like fairy tales so much? Why do we like stories with happy endings? I think it's because the Bible is right when it says, *"God has set eternity in the human heart"* (Pr. 3:11). There is within every one of us a longing for something wonderful and beautiful and glorious that will never end. I think that's the promise of heaven.

Whether it's a romance, or a wonderful evening, or the feeling after a satisfying victory, or the tenderness of a Hallmark moment with a child, we all want the experience to last forever. We don't want it to end. So it shouldn't come as any surprise that God, having put that desire in our hearts, wants to meet that very aspiration. There is such a thing as everlasting life, and the Bible says that God has the power to love us forever. And we who follow Jesus will inherit the destiny which fairy tales envisage in fantasy. We will, in fact, live happily ever after because of God's endless mercy and grace.

That's the promise of heaven, and it can help give us perspective here on earth. When we train the eyes of our hearts to focus on heaven, it helps us to see and to process everything that happens to us on earth in the light of eternity. We're able to take the long view, and we realize that many of the things we get so worked up about in this life are really small potatoes in the grand scheme of things.

So the next time you have a problem, or you experience a setback, or you're stuck in traffic and your patience is wearing thin, ask yourself, "In the light of eternity, how much does this really matter? If the promise of heaven is mine because of Jesus, how does that affect how I feel about this situation right now?"

The most important question I have for you this morning is this: “Have you claimed the promise heaven for yourself? Do you have confidence that when you die you’re going to heaven?” The apostle John wrote in the fifth chapter of his first letter, “*These things are written so that... you may know you have eternal life*” (1 Jn.5:13). You can know if you’re going to heaven. It’s possible to have confidence about your future life in eternity. The Bible says so.

It’s a matter of putting your trust in Christ alone for your salvation and receiving the free gift of eternal life by faith because of the death of Jesus on the cross for your sins. You can know you’re going to heaven because of what God has done for you in Christ. If you haven’t made the decision to receive this gift from God and give your life to Christ before now, I hope you will do it today before you leave this sanctuary. Your eternal destiny hangs in the balance.

Several years ago, leaders in the city of Charlotte invited their favorite son, Billy Graham, to a luncheon in his honor. Billy initially hesitated to accept the invitation because he struggles with Parkinson's disease. But the Charlotte leaders said, "We don't expect a major address. Just come and let us honor you." So he agreed.

After wonderful things were said about him, Dr. Graham stepped to the podium, looked at the crowd, and he said, "I'm reminded today of Albert Einstein, the great physicist who was honored by *Time* magazine as the Man of the last Century. Einstein was once traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of each passenger. When he came to Einstein, the great scientist reached into his vest pocket. But he couldn't find his ticket, so he reached in his other pocket. It wasn't there either. So he looked in his briefcase, but still he couldn't find it.

The conductor said, “Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it.” Einstein nodded appreciatively.

The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, “Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry. I know who you are. No problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one.” Einstein looked at the conductor and said, “Young man, I too know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going!”

Billy Graham continued, "Do you see the suit I'm wearing? It's a brand new suit. My wife, my children, and my grandchildren are telling me I've gotten a little slovenly in my old age. I used to be a bit more fastidious. So I went out and bought a new suit for this luncheon and for one more occasion. Do you know what that other occasion is? This is the suit in which I'll be buried. But when you hear I'm dead, I don't want you to immediately remember the suit I'm wearing. Instead I want you to remember this: I not only know who I am, I also know where I'm going – to heaven. Do you, my friend?"

### **Conclusion.**

God has the power to love us forever, and the promise of heaven is to everyone who believes. I've only scratched the surface of these important truths, and there are some excellent books on the subject that are available now. I would recommend you consider checking out the following: *Heaven*, by Randy Alcorn; *Everlasting Life*, by David Swanson, and *For All the Saints*, by N.T. Wright.

As we close, it seems appropriate that we should conclude this sermon in a VBS sort of way by singing a song together. It’s a song I want to teach you, if you don’t know it already, and

we're going to sing it together. There is a part for the men, and a different part for the women. It goes like this:

Heaven is a wonderful place,  
Filled with glory and grace.  
I'm gonna see my Savior's face;  
Heaven is a wonderful place...I'm gonna go there.

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<sup>1</sup> Eldridge, p. 133.