

## Misconceptions about Heaven – Sermon 4/29/12

Series on Heaven using as a resource Randy Alcorn's book Heaven

In beginning this series a couple weeks ago Dr. Poplin began by answering an often asked question about heaven. Rather than do that today I will be answering a few of those often asked questions in the message this morning. I will answer them by looking at some common misunderstandings or misconceptions about heaven. I will also attempt to correct Rob Kelly's theology...just kidding! Last week Rob Kelly did an excellent job on the issue of hell... If you were not here you need to listen to it via web...

Let me remind you of what Dr. Poplin said and Rob reiterated – we have never met anyone who was so heavenly minded that they were no earthly good. In fact the opposite tends to be true. The more clear our understanding of heaven, the more passion we have to be used of God while here in this life

Last week Rob showed very clearly that understanding heaven and hell is not so much about doctrine as understanding destiny – that we all go somewhere when we die

He talked about the distinction between the words used by the authors of the Bible and that hell is similar in one aspect to heaven as we know it today. There is an intermediate hell and an eternal hell. In other words, there is a temporary destiny and an eternal destiny for every human being.

Rob also reminded us that a clear understanding of hell, just as Dr Poplin stated about heaven, is essential in our understanding of God

Talking about heaven and working at understanding it correctly is very appropriate for me right now as I have been a part of 11 funerals since this past Dec and have led 7 of them. Most recently I faced the death of my own sister and my wife's aunt for whom we had been primarily responsible.

Therefore, the question of: "What happens when a loved one dies?" or "Where do people go when they die?" is very central for me right now

Here is the first thing we must understand and is one of the major misunderstandings. When we die, as believers in Christ we do not go to heaven where we will live forever. That place comes later. Alcorn, in his book, states it this way, "If we fail to grasp this truth, we will fail to understand the biblical doctrine of heaven" and I might add fail to understand some of the greatest richness and beauty of what awaits us in heaven

We must understand that the final heaven – our eternal home...is a joining between a recreated earth and recreated heaven. This morning I want to answer the question: "Where do we go when we die in this age?" I want to look at the fact that there is an temporary heaven and that it is important that we know this. It is important that we

understand correctly. This temporary heaven is where believers go while awaiting this final consummation. It is simply a stopping off place

What this temporary heaven is like will be the focus of other sermons in this series.

But that it is a real place is what we look at today. It was important to the apostle Paul that his readers knew about what happened to believers when they died – ITh 4:13

*Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope.*

As with the distinction between a temporary Sheol/Hades and a permanent hell, we see the same thing with heaven. There is a distinction between the current, temporary heaven and the eternal heaven. As Dr Poplin mentioned a couple weeks ago, Alcorn calls this temporary heaven the intermediate heaven. It is the place all believers go to await the resurrection of the dead as Rev 20 calls it. Whether this resurrection of all believers happens before the millennial reign of Jesus or after is beyond the scope of today's message. Suffice it to say there is one final resurrection of the dead. Our resurrection from the dead does not take place in a one-at-a-time manner as we die.

As I said earlier, by intermediate, we mean temporary. Certainly want all of you to hear this: Though temporary, it is better by far than living here! Paul says it this way in Phil 1

*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.<sup>22</sup> If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!<sup>23</sup> I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;*

Jesus also spoke about the intermediate heaven, calling it Paradise to the thief on the cross... In response to the thief's request that Jesus remember him...

Lk 23:45 *Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

Paradeisos, a Greek word which comes from the Persian word Pairidaeza – means a walled or enclosed garden. Word used to describe the beautiful Persians gardens. This is the word used by the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to the garden of Eden. And it has similarities to Eden. In Rev 2:7 we see that the tree of life is in this paradise: *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*

Paradise as a word is used only three times in NT but refers to a physical place – not a place populated with discombobulated spirits but with human beings with some kind of physical body – that can see, hear, talk and think. Last week Rob mentioned the parable of the rich man and Lazarus to show the reality of suffering in an intermediate hell. I would say the same parable shows that in either the intermediate heaven or intermediate hell there are physical bodies that talk, listen and feel... (Lk 19:23-25)

So – Where do we go when we die? We go to paradise, to the intermediate heaven where Jesus is, where all those who have died before us as believers go, and where we will rest until the resurrection of the dead takes place at the end of all things. It is a place of rest and beauty, a physical place with physical beings

Given that the intermediate heaven is a real place, we can look at a few of the misconceptions or misunderstandings we have as we think about heaven, both the intermediate and the eternal. In talking about some of these, it is not that these misunderstandings are evil or horribly wrong. It is that, quite possibly, some misconceptions or misunderstandings we have about heaven will actually diminish our view of heaven rather than helping us understand the richness and beauty of the place of our destiny.

We need to be aware that sometimes our language can cause us to have some misunderstandings about the nature and other aspects of heaven. Sometimes language is just not adequate enough to describe something like this.

For example, we often think of heaven as Up there. We are going to mansions in the sky. We sing about the roll that is called up yonder or I'll fly away. But stop for a minute and think about it: If heaven is up there for us – then where is it for the people of Perth, Australia – a little over 7900 miles directly below us?

For one thing, when we talk about where heaven is right now we need to know we are talking about the intermediate heaven, for the eternal heaven is not up there somewhere. It will be here on this very earth after God recreates and restores this earth to its original state

But what about the current heaven? You see it is not a matter of levels to get to heaven. First the earth then the clouds, then the stars and space and then heaven... The writers of scripture are simply using the language they have available to paint a picture or symbol. It is what John does in much of the book of Revelation as he is seeing things almost beyond the ability of human language. He pictures a red dragon big enough to knock a 1/3 of all the stars out of the heavens...

We often do the same thing with language without even realizing it. When was the last time you heard someone say this: At 6:30 tomorrow morning the earth will have rotated on its axis in such a fashion that we will begin to see the light of the sun. No. We say the sun will rise at 7am tomorrow. What will people think, a couple hundred years from now when they read we think heaven is cool... Language is just inadequate sometimes

You see, Christ has not merely ascended up to heaven in the language of space, but he has transcended the limitations of space. After he rose, he appeared to many, ate meals with them, yet could walk through walls and disappear in a moment. Look at John 20:19-20.

*On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.*

He had transcended space and this physical world as we experience it

So - rather than a matter of levels, the intermediate heaven is entirely other. It is limitless and unlocalized in the sense that we could see it. Some of the early church leaders taught that it was present here on this earth in the original garden of Eden but beyond human perceptions.

A couple more misunderstandings or misconception about what happens when we die: One idea is that when we die, we become angels, wings and all. This is an idea that has its roots in ancient art forms and is presented through more modern media such as the classic Christmas movie "It's a Wonderful Life", though sometimes we have to wait a bit for our wings... Modern movies have sometimes portrayed the same change. We hear people say that when a child dies he or she becomes God's little angel...

Paul puts this misunderstanding to rest in these verses from I Cor 6:2-3

*Or do you not know that the Lord's people will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!*

Paul clearly makes a major distinction between angels and human beings

He states it further in the longest passage in the Bible on what kind of bodies we have when we die – I Cor 15. In this chapter he asks a question and then supplies the answer.

Look at vr 35, 42-43: *Some of you have asked, "How will the dead be raised to life? What kind of bodies will they have?" <sup>2</sup> That's how it will be when our bodies are raised to life. These bodies will die, but the bodies that are raised will live forever. <sup>43</sup> These ugly and weak bodies will become beautiful and strong. (CEV)*

Now – whether Paul is talking about our temporary bodies we receive for the intermediate heaven or our eternal bodies does not really matter. What matters is that they are raised as perfect representations of what they were originally created to be – human bodies, not angels.

The author of Hebrews makes the same distinction in the very first chapter (1:14)  
*Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?*  
Who is it that inherits salvation?

So no, when we die we do not become angels. We become more fully human!

Another misconception is: “When I get to heaven I won’t have to work another day in my life” This thought can be presented as a question: Will we work in heaven?

Yes we will work – but it will be work that brings passion and delight! God is in heaven and is at work to this very day – look at John 5:17 *In his defense Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.”*

Look back at the Garden of Eden – a prototype for heaven, both the intermediate and eternal. God created the man and woman and placed them in this perfect environment...God walked with them...weather was perfect...What did he say?

But you know what happened. The fall came, man and woman fell into sin and along with that all aspects of creation fell as well. So now, as part of the curse, God told the man that he would work the land with sweat dealing with thorns and thistles...

Some of you right now are in jobs that bring you little passion. Many are in jobs you like but continually hold your breath wondering when the next axe will fall...

Even those who love their jobs have aspects they could do without. In heaven, our work will be as fully redeemed as the earth itself. We will work with passion and enjoyment like we have never experienced on this side. If you love to work in the garden here, it is quite plausible that you will do so in heaven to a much richer degree.

Remember – our concept of work today is framed through the lenses of a fallen world. It was never intended to be so. It is hard for many to appreciate that work is a God given, created aspect of being a human being and we will fully function in that role in heaven.

One final misunderstanding that ties back to something Rob said last week. He referred to an idea that some have called postmortem repentance. This is the idea that after death each person will be given a further chance to make a decision to follow Christ. In fact some would go so far as to say that everyone who did not do so on this side, when given the chance after death will do so. This is called Christian universalism

An idea that is different but runs parallel to this concept of postmortem repentance is the idea of purgatory – a place people go after death to be cleansed further of their sin in order to enter a perfect heaven... In this view, our destinies are set at the time of our deaths – either eternal heaven or eternal hell. However, those who are saved for the eternal heaven must undergo some cleansing after death, some purgative process by which all final evil is wiped out through further suffering before entering heaven. This is the function of the intermediate heaven in this doctrine. And in one denominations view of purgatory, people here on earth can play a part in shortening the stay one must experience in Purgatory.

As you might imagine, we believe that this idea of purgatory has no biblical basis and in some ways runs counter to what Paul tells us in Eph 2:8-9

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast*

If we could literally pray someone out of purgatory we would certainly have something to boast about in terms of saving someone.

Also as we already saw – the intermediate heaven is going to be “better by far” than this world. Somehow an intermediate heaven that is for the purpose of purging final sin through further suffering just does not sound real attractive to me!

We believe that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin and that at the time of our deaths, sin is finally vanquished – for as Paul tells us: “...*Death has been swallowed up in victory. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (I Cor 15:54-57)*

That is the final call: for the believer, death is swallowed up in victory. Death no longer has a hold on us.

And for the believer death can be seen as a gift from God. A gift from our loving father that allows us to leave this fallen world and live as he created us to live!