

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: Exposition of Romans

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THE JUDGMENT OF GOD: A MOST INCONVENIENT TRUTH (PART VIII)

We are *SAVED from* God's judgment and eternal separation (Hell) *unto* eternal life with Christ (Heaven). "... and they lived happily ever after." The Apostles' Creed concludes with the affirmation: "I believe in ... the life everlasting." The Christian doctrine of eternal life does indeed underscore the promise of God that the redeemed will, by God's mercy and grace in Christ Jesus, *live* happily ever after.¹ The cover story for the March 1997 issue of *Time* was "Does Heaven Exist?" The article's polling data reveals that over 80% of the American public believes in the concept of "heaven" (life after death in some pleasant place). And yet, in a curious fashion, as the article goes on to report, from one end of the spectrum to the other, churches have grown increasingly silent about the subject. It seems that the majority of people claiming to be Christian (even among professing evangelicals) are too preoccupied with the things of this world to be distracted by thoughts of heaven. The oddity about this situation is that, on the one hand, people are willing to affirm their belief in a religious concept like heaven while, on the other hand, we have been so impacted by the developments of our modern age that people find it increasingly difficult to reconcile their beliefs with our enlightened, scientific age. Highly respected people like the late Carl Sagan dismiss religion with a wave of the hand. The noted mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said, "As for Christian theology, can you imagine anything more appallingly idiotic than the Christian idea of heaven?" The verdict of H. J. Paton, one time Professor of Philosophy at Oxford, sums up the matter this way: "The gradual spread of the scientific outlook--and we are all affected by it--has tended not so much to refute religious belief, but rather to make it fade and wither."² The lyrics of the popular 60's band "Blood, Sweat and Tears" worded it this way, "I swear there ain't no heaven and I pray there ain't no hell." What a gamble! As Christians we are admonished by the Apostle Paul to set our hearts and minds on things above (where Christ is), not on earthly things (Colossians 3:1, 2). The biblical doctrine of heaven should have a telling effect on how we live.

I. HEAVEN: THE HABITATION OF GOD

1 Kings 8:30 declares that heaven is God's dwelling place. It is where God has His throne (1 Kings 22:19; Isaiah 6:1; Job 1:6; Psalm 82:1; Daniel 7:9). This language is not meant to imply that God is not omnipresent or that He is somehow confined in one particular place (1 Kings 8:27). The language used here in Scripture is figurative and anthropomorphic.³ Note how the Gospels in particular speak of God the Father as being in heaven. In the Lord's Prayer, beginning with the words "Our Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:9), Jesus speaks of "My Father in heaven" a number of times (Matthew 7:21; 10:32, 33; 12:50; 16:17; 18:10, 19) and uses the expression "your Father in heaven" as well (Matthew 5:16, 45; 6:1; 7:11; 18:14).

II. HEAVEN: ITS INHABITANTS

The Bible makes repeated references to "the angels in heaven" (Matthew 22:30; 24:36; Mark 12:25; 13:32). These beings seem to be innumerable (Hebrews 12:22). The OT speaks of "the hosts of the LORD" (1 Samuel 17:45; Daniel 4:35; Joel 3:11).⁴ They are described in Revelation 19:14 as following the glorified Christ into the battle of Armageddon. In addition to angels,

there are “saints” in heaven (Revelation 5:8; 11:17,18; 19:1-4)--as it is used elsewhere in the NT, the term “saints” refers to redeemed sinners (2 Corinthians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Revelation 13:7,19; 19:8; 22:21).

III. HEAVEN: HOW TO GET THERE

In Revelation 21:27 we read these sober words: “But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars--their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.” Later in this same chapter we read: “Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life,” (v. 27). According to the Time article I referred to in the introduction, over half of those polled believed that their good works are grounds for getting them to heaven. In a poll conducted by the Barna Group, an amazing 77% of those who identified themselves as Christians believed that human beings are basically good and that *good* people go to heaven regardless of their religious beliefs.⁵ The Bible emphatically declares otherwise. Only those (read the text) whose names are recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life gain entry into heaven (Revelation 20:15; 21:27).

III. HEAVEN: ITS GLORY

Everything in heaven is holy and the glory of heaven is inexpressible. It is a place of perfection. Long ago the Dutch Puritan Wilhelmus à Brakel wrote: “No darkness will stupefy the mind and no sinfulness will pollute the soul. Souls will no longer be deserted, and there will no longer be any battle against the flesh, the world, and the devil. All sorrow, grief, heartache, anxiety and fear will have been eliminated. There will be no poverty, opposition, oppression, pain, hunger, or anything else that would grieve soul and body.”⁶ The saints in heaven will know joy like never before. All the saints from Adam on will know the joy of fellowship--and they will continually know the joy of worship (Revelation 7:15) and will experience joy in its fullness (Psalm 16:11; Matthew 25:21). They will see the glory of Christ (John 17:24) and they will delight to serve Him throughout eternity (Revelation 7:13-17).

CONCLUSION: Listen to these texts of Scripture: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:2, 3). “So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with Him” (2 Peter 3:14). Christopher Love, one of the great Puritan preachers, in a series of sermons on heaven’s glory, concluded one of them by urging his listeners to “learn hence not to give these members of your bodies to be instruments of God’s dishonor in being instruments to sin to the provocation of His holiness. O beloved, you shall see God with these very eyes you have now in your heads. You who are the elect of God shall sing hallelujahs in heaven with this very tongue with which you converse among men. You shall lift up those hands in the praises of your God, with which you now act upon earth among men. Do not now use them as panderers to lust. Do not now use them, in the Apostle’s phrase, ‘as weapons of unrighteousness’ to war against heaven. Do not use your eyes to be windows to lust, and your tongue to be tipped with frothy discourse, your hands to deceive, and your feet swift to shed blood. O do not use the members of your bodies, that are to be glorified with Jesus Christ, in such sinful practices as these are.”⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ The phrase “eternal life” is used forty-three times in the NT, with twenty-three occurring in the Gospel of John and 1 John. “Its literal translation is ‘the life of the age,’ that is, of the age to come. Jews thought not so much in terms of two worlds, the earthly and the heavenly, as in terms of two ages: the present, imperfect one, and the future one, here or elsewhere, in which all would be according to God’s will. Jesus taught that the *quality* of life expected in that future age could be realized through Him here and now.

That is why the translation 'eternal life' is better than 'everlasting life'. It is, of course, everlasting, but it is its nature, rather than its duration, that Jesus emphasizes." H. Moulton, The Challenge of the Concordance: Some New Testament Words Studied in Depth (Bagster, 1977), p. 45. B. F. Westcott likewise takes note of this and warns that we must "guard against all conclusions which rest upon the notions of succession and duration. . . . It is not an endless duration of being in time, but being of which time is not a measure. We have indeed no powers to grasp the idea except through forms and images of sense. These must be used; but we must not transfer them as realities to another order." The Epistles of St. John (rpt. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 215.

- 2 As cited by Wilbur M. Smith, The Biblical Doctrine of Heaven (Moody, 1968), p. 21.
- 3 Anthropomorphisms are poetic symbols or, more particularly, metaphors for divine attributes which would otherwise be indescribable. The Bible uses speech like this in order to communicate to us God's nature and ways. We should never press this kind of speech literally (something that Mormonism, for example, does constantly; e.g., God has a body like a man). "It is wrong to ascribe space or whereness to God. Space is a mode of existence pertaining to finite beings; immensity pertains to God, to him alone; not to any creature, not even to the human nature of Christ. Immensity implies first of all that God is transcendent above all space and whereness." H. Bavinck, The Doctrine of God, (Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 161.
- 4 The Hebrew word for "hosts," שָׁחַבִּים, has a military connotation (see 1 Samuel 17:45). It refers to rendering service. The hosts of God are identified as His ministers that do His will (Psalm 103:21, compare with Hebrews 1:7, 14).
- 5 G. Barna, What Americans Believe (Regal, 1991), pp. 27-35.
- 6 W. à Brakel, The Christian's Reasonable Service IV (Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), p. 364.
- 7 The Works of Christopher Love (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), p. 511.