

*We exist to make disciples who delight in God and make Him known
by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

Imagining Heaven

Selected Passages

Keywords: Heaven, Eternity, Imagination, Beatific Vision, Theosis

PowerPoint Presentation included: NONE

SermonAudio Blurb: How do we think about heaven? This is harder than many realize and the reason is that people have written and taught on heaven for over 2,000 years. Today the average Christian can access countless videos, documents and interviews that span an incredibly diverse range of beliefs and ideas. In this sermon we will see how groups and people over the centuries have tried to understand heaven. This involves going beyond what the bible actually teaches and into the world of imagination. This is not necessarily bad, but imagination must be always kept where it belongs.

I. Introduction.

- A. Today we begin in earnest to consider the biblical teaching on Heaven.
 - 1. We considered first the fearsome reality of hell. Now we can turn our attention to the final hope and joy for all who trust in Jesus, which is normally called Heaven.
 - 2. I challenged you to ask yourself why, perhaps, you do not look forward to heaven. Colossians 3 tells us to set our minds on the things above, NOT on the things that are on the earth.
 - 3. My suggestion for you to consider was how often do you find yourself thinking and moving toward heaven rather than expanding yourself and your pursuits to this world?
- B. But what happens when a person dies? One whose faith is resting in Jesus Christ alone?
 - 1. This is where things can be a bit vague for people. But the normal response is ‘heaven.’
 - 2. But that is only mostly correct. It is fine to say ‘heaven’ but it is key to understand that it is not the final state of things.
 - 3. There are steps or stages to what you might want to call the “final” heaven. If a Christian dies today, the soul goes to heaven to be with Jesus Christ, but the body remains in the grave.
 - a. When Christ returns at the end, all believers are caught up with Christ and the soul and body are reunited and changed to be like

*We exist to make disciples who delight in God and make Him known
by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

Him. Then we co-reign with Him in His 1,000 year rule on earth.
Many call this heaven on earth.

- b. At the end of that time, all of creation is recreated, sin and death are done away, and the New Heaven & Earth are made. This is the final heaven.
- C. So how do you see heaven in any of these three ways? It is harder than you realize once you actually try to do it.
1. What does it look or feel like to be alive and aware but without your body? How much of what the bible describes as heaven right now is literal?
 2. Revelation 4:1-8 serves as an illustration of this. “. . . *behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance. And around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads. And from the throne proceed flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God; and before the throne there was, as it were, a sea of glass like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. And the first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come."*
 3. To do this requires imagination because the bible does not give us a lot of information that is hard and fast. So this leaves us with room to imagine.
 4. So what I hope I can do in this series is help you with your imagination of heaven for if you have lost a loved one who was a believer, then he is in heaven now. If you are facing a terminal illness then heaven is very soon to be your reality.
 - a. When you lose a loved one who was a Christian, there is very real grief. But we are told in the bible to not grieve like the non-Christian, because they have no hope.
 - b. The grief is not to be for the person who died. The grief is to be because you are left without him or her. Your husband or wife,

*We exist to make disciples who delight in God and make Him known
by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

your daughter or father is not grieving in heaven. They are finally home and are at rest. They are waiting for the day that their body is raised and the fulness of heaven is brought into reality.

c. So for a Christian who suffers the loss of a believing loved one, it is a grief that vacillates between sorrow and thanksgiving, sorrow and joy.

5. Jesus talked about the seriousness of putting away sin as a believer. He said that it is better to enter eternity, or as He called it, "life," blind than to find yourself in hell.

D. My goal today is to introduce you to how people have imagined heaven to be over the centuries since the New Testament was written.

1. To do this requires us to spend time learning about how doctrines/formal teachings were developed and what were some of the outside influences behind them.

2. I will try to make this both something that stretches some of your minds but also make it accessible to each of you. But this is not a sermon where you should let your mind wander.

II. Imagining Heaven.

A. In the song called "Home" by CityAlight there is one verse that says it so well,

I do not know what I will see
When all my tears are wiped away
But I am sure that it will be
The world that I was saved to see
And He has said that I will know
A joy beyond my deepest hope
A Father's love, a Savior's peace
When I am truly home

B. So again, what comes to mind when you think of heaven?

1. I remember being invited to a meeting with John Piper along with several other pastors where he was discussing things he had learned recently.

2. Psalm 27:4 says, *One thing I have asked from Yahweh, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of Yahweh all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of Yahweh And to inquire in His temple.*"

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

We exist to make disciples who delight in God and make Him known by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

3. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:12, *"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known."*
 - a. Two points: First, whatever we see of heaven now is but a dim picture. So, whatever in that vision thrills us, make sure you remind yourself that the reality is going to blow it out of the water.
 - b. Second, in heaven, all the masks, filters, or hindrances are removed. We will know fully. But also note that currently, God knows us fully.
 - c. For the Christian, this is to be your hope and desire. Heaven is not merely some vague concept nor is it merely a place where we get a lot of great stuff or we get relief from sorrow or pain. Heaven, in every of its aspects, is where we see God.
- C. It is here that imagination comes into play.
 1. The bible gives us much information on heaven, but it also leaves much to remain mysterious. And this invites us to imagine. To think deeply and broadly on what "might be."
 2. I remember a man who spoke of an exercise he liked to do. He would find something that was particularly delightful (the specific was biting into an especially good apple) and then allowing his mind to run away in imagination that if this apple could be so delightful now, in this fallen, sinful age; then, how much more delightful is the fruit he will enjoy in the new earth?
 3. So, one of the ways I imagine heaven is by thinking about color. We have the visible spectrum, that manifests itself in what we call "colors" (Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet).
 4. This whole journey started when I learned about the mantis shrimp and the fact that they can see colors we are blind to.
 - a. They have 12-16 types of photoreceptors to the human's 3.
 - b. Here is just a simple shrimp living out his life and yet what he sees as everyday normal is exceedingly beyond what we can see.
 5. Now, put this whole thing into the idea of what heaven is like.

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

*We exist to make disciples who delight in God and make Him known
by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

- a. Right now we see dimly, just a few million shades of seven basic colors. But there is essentially an infinite amount of other colors that exist and were created by God.
 - b. And in the end, we will see as He sees. An explosion of color and shades and hues in perfection. And it will become our playground to grow and live and play under the care and kind gaze of our Creator. This is what imagination can help you see.
6. However, **our imagination must never become what we believe nor should we confuse it with truth.** Like everything, we need to make sure to submit everything under the authority of Scripture.
- D. Heaven is one of those things that we need to gain a good scriptural grounding so that we don't wander into foolish speculations.
1. Over the centuries various ideas and models have been put forth in an attempt to understand heaven.
 2. A key image was to see it as a paradise and that it is the recreation of the Garden of Eden.
 - a. John Milton is famous for this image, as he considered paradise lost through sin and how through Christ it is restored and will be brought back into its final state of glory in the end.
 - b. Interestingly, the early Church Fathers saw that idea of the paradise as fitting into what is known as the 1,000 year reign of Christ on the earth.
 - c. But this millennial kingdom was not the final place, but it was the beginning of the end of all things. At the end of this time, then God would recreate the New Heavens and Earth. Sin, Satan and death are cast away into Hell and the final stage of heaven comes into existence. So, in the early church the anticipation was that Christ would soon return.
 3. This began to change, not because scripture changed, but because Christ did not return as soon as hoped.
 - a. The influence of Plato's idea that the spiritual was good and the physical was imperfect was very strong in the minds of many church leaders in the 3-5th centuries.

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

*We exist to make disciples who delight in God and make Him known
by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

- b. This influence is still seen whenever you see a person downplay anything physical and lift up anything that is so-called "spiritual."
- c. So now the view of heaven began to shift from something real and physical, to something spiritual. This led to the medieval period of 5th -15th centuries where heaven was seen primarily as the **beatific vision**. This idea is that the person is raised to a spiritual body and is not given a direct vision of the person of God and this is the supreme joy of the believer. This was then seen in passages like:
 - (1) 1 Corinthians 13:12 — *"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."*
 - (2) 1 John 3:2 — *"We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."*
 - (3) Matthew 5:8 — *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."*
 - (4) And again we see imagination moving understanding in ways that the bible does not do.
- d. Meanwhile the Eastern Church (as opposed to the Western Church under Rome) began to split away over powerplays on both sides.
 - (1) There arose a doctrine called **theosis**, which is the idea that a key part of salvation is that the believer is transformed in such a way that they participate in the divine nature.
 - (2) So, in the Eastern Orthodox church heaven is where we are drawn into the full presence of God and are able to experience and enjoy His presence.
 - (3) 2 Peter 1:4 — *"For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust."*
 - (4) 1 John 3:2 — *"We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."*
- e. Again, note how imagination comes into play. They have passages that they see and read.

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

*We exist to make disciples who delight in God and make Him known
by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

4. Now, between the development of what became known today as the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox church and their views of heaven there came the development of what happens after you die.
 - a. For the RCC this resulted in the teaching of **purgatory**.
 - b. In the Eastern Orthodox church, this was rejected.
 - (1) But instead they see that at death the soul of the person is now with the Lord in rest. But this is not very clear. There is the idea that our prayers and giving on earth can ease the suffering of the wicked and help them grow toward God.
 - (2) Some parts of the Eastern Orthodox teach what is called "**Aerial toll-houses**" where the soul is escorted by a guardian angel through the space between earth and heaven.
 5. Again, note how imagination about what heaven must be like comes into play. You don't have biblical teaching on these things. But once theologians started thinking and imagining, it helped them go down certain paths that developed teachings that go well beyond the bible's teaching.
- E. Now we come to the 16th and 17th centuries where much of this sort of imagining was abandoned with a desire to hold to the authority of the Scripture above anything else.
1. But now there came the presence of the Copernican revolution and the growth of science that operated alongside philosophical ideas that still persisted from Plato and Aristotle. So heaven is still seen as spiritual rather than physical by many.
 2. Others, begin to decide that heaven is not an actual place but more a meta-physical idea that is only vaguely understood. The one thing for certain is that heaven is not some place "up there."
- F. Now, today, you will find a broad spectrum of ideas about heaven.
1. This ranges from a hyper-literal idea of gold streets to a place of eternal joy but not actually a physical place.
 2. Also there are many ways that heaven is perceived by individuals. Today, heaven becomes a place for you. You think about it from how it affects you as an individual and so there is a lot of talk about family reunions and what you will do in heaven.

M i s s i o D e i F e l l o w s h i p

*We exist to make disciples who delight in God and make Him known
by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

3. Whereas for many others, it is not really about you so much as it is about all the people of God entering into a state of joy as a whole and the details aren't important.

III. Conclusion.

- A. But it does matter.
- B. Imagination is part of thinking about heaven, but it can never replace biblical truth.
- C. The gospel is not just that Jesus died in our place to ransom us out of enslavement to sin. It is not just that Jesus rose on the 3rd day.
- D. It is that God will defeat our enemies in Jesus Christ. Sin, Satan and Death cannot stand or remain. And in the end, God will make all things new. And those who trust in Jesus Christ alone shall live and enjoy it for all eternity.

Benediction

**Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever.
Amen.**