

This morning, we are continuing through our Advent series, looking at the second coming of Jesus. Last week we looked at the final judgment. Today, we will look at the new heavens and new earth.

There is a lot of confusion about heaven. For example, take a children's book by that noted theologian Maria Shriver, called "What's Heaven?":

*Heaven "is somewhere you believe in... It's a beautiful place where you can sit on soft clouds and talk to other people who are there. At night you can sit next to the stars, which are the brightest of anywhere in the universe... If you're good throughout your life, then you get to go to heaven... When your life is finished here on earth, God sends angels down to take you up to Heaven to be with him..."*

Even though this is written for children and pretty simplistic, you can hear some popular conceptions of heaven – it's up there, there's something magical and otherworldly about it, it's where God is, and it's where you go when you die if you're good.

I think if you asked the average Christian what happens when you die, they would say "you live in heaven with God forever." If you ask the average evangelical Christian what happens when you die, they would tell you something like this: "well, there are basically two options: **heaven and hell. God created us to have a relationship with him, but we sinned, and now we're separated from God. Those who come to faith in Christ Jesus will live for God with eternity in heaven, and those who do not will experience eternal torment in Hell. Heaven is up there, a disembodied existence in the presence of God. The body dies, the earth is no more, but our souls are up there forever with God, worshiping Him and enjoying his presence, being reunited with our loved ones, and living in mansions with streets of gold.**"

But is this really what the Bible teaches about heaven? Let me try to unpack what the Bible has to say about heaven and the new heavens and new earth. I will do this keeping in mind 1 Cor 13:9-13:

***1 Corinthians 13:9-13 - For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. <sup>12</sup> Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am***

*fully known.* <sup>13</sup> And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

I am sure when we are finally with the Lord, we'll all have a big laugh at my attempts in this sermon to put the new heavens and new earth into words.

So what is heaven? Let me share two things. We get our first clue from the Lord's prayer:

**Matthew 6:9-13** - *"This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, <sup>10</sup> your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us today our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."*

From this prayer, we learn that heaven is where God dwells, and where His will is done. It is not simply a future destiny but the other, hidden dimension of our ordinary life. Humans do not see it, except on rare occasions (Stephen in Acts 7:55, Elisha in 2 Kings 6, John in Revelation 4-5).

Secondly, heaven is a temporary place of rest and tranquility for believers on the way to the eventual resurrection of the body. **John 14:1-3** - *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. <sup>2</sup> In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. <sup>3</sup> 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"*

There are many dwelling places – the Greek word is “mone” – a temporary lodging on a journey that will take you somewhere else in the long run (not KJV “mansions”). Think as well of the thief on the cross in Luke 23:43 - today you will be with me in paradise. Paradise is the blissful garden of rest and tranquility, where the dead are refreshed as they await the dawn of the new day, the renewal of all things.

Do the dead “watch over us”? Maybe. They are probably aware of what is going on (Rev 6 – the martyrs, Moses & Elijah in Luke 9:31). Or think of Heb 12:1 – “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” However, we don't pray to them, since we have Christ and the Spirit.

But the Bible does not end with us in heaven. It ends this way:

**Revelation 21:1-3** - *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. <sup>2</sup> I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.*

It ends with God dwelling with resurrected believers. Heaven comes down to earth, and the dwelling of God is with men. A renewed earth that has been joined with heaven.

*Anthony Hoekema – “The new Jerusalem does not remain in a heaven far off in space, but it comes down to the renewed earth; there the redeemed will spend eternity in resurrection bodies. So heaven and earth, now separated, will then be merged: the new earth will also be heaven, since God will dwell there with his people. Glorified believers in other words, will continue to be in heaven while they are inhabiting the new earth.*

The end is the new heavens and new earth Three features:

1) **God will live with us**

God comes down to make His dwelling with us. If you've been paying attention to the Bible, God coming down to earth to dwell with us should not be a surprise. Remember that throughout the Bible we see God mercifully coming down to His people.

It begins with God dwelling with Adam and Eve, walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

It continues in the time of Moses with the Tabernacle, God dwelling among his people.

It moves on to the Temple under Solomon, again God's presence in their midst.

And then, of course, there was Jesus, Emmanuel – God with us, the Word become Flesh.

And then the giving of the Holy Spirit, God with us, God dwelling in the midst of His people.

So this ending should not surprise you – God is always coming down for us, to dwell with us, to mercifully come to us. Heaven is not about us earning our way up to him but God graciously coming down to us.

**Matthew 6:9-13** - *"This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, <sup>10</sup> your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. <sup>11</sup> Give us today our daily bread. <sup>12</sup> Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. <sup>13</sup> And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."*

Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. One day Jesus' prayer will be answered.

**Revelation 11:15-17** - *The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever." <sup>16</sup> And the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, <sup>17</sup> saying: "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign."*

But in order to live with us, He must first judge and purify the world:

2) **Evil will be destroyed**

God will judge and purify the earth, destroying evil forever. This is what we talked about in last week's sermon.

**2 Peter 3:10** - *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.*

**Revelation 21:4-5** - *He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." <sup>5</sup> He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

### 3) Everything will be perfected

He will judge the earth and destroy all that is evil and perfect everything that is left. There are a lot of “re” words in relationship to the second coming:

#### **Revelation of the sons of God & redemption of our bodies - Romans 8:19-23 -**

*The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. <sup>20</sup> For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be **liberated from its bondage to decay** and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. <sup>23</sup> Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.*

**Reconciliation of all things** – (speaking of Jesus) **Colossians 1:19-20** - *For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

**Restoration - Acts 3:19-21** - *Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, <sup>20</sup> and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you-- even Jesus. <sup>21</sup> He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.*

**Renewal - Matthew 19:27-28** - *Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" <sup>28</sup> Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*

The word for renewal is *Paligenesia*, which speaks of a new genesis, of coming back from death to life. Some day, **all that is not of God will be judged and destroyed**, and the Earth will be renewed, restored to the way it was meant to be.

**All that is not of God – including suffering and death – will be judged and destroyed, and all that is of him will be liberated and restored**

Redemption is liberating what has become enslaved from what is distorting it. It's not just things getting better or scrapping it.

And we will also be judged, purified, and perfected.

*1 John 3:2-3 - 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. <sup>3</sup> Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.*

Three implications of the new heavens and new earth:

- 1) God's plan is bigger than saving individual souls; it is the salvation and renewal of the whole cosmos

Often the Christian message is reduced to a contract with God, a personal relationship, but the Bible teaches us that it is not really about us. It's like salvation was not just about Israel but the world through Israel. It's not just individuals but the world through individuals. **You are saved to be a part of God's saving work.** Bring others in, work for justice, pointing to the way it will be one day. We live as a foretaste of the new heavens and new earth – community, justice, healing suffering, peace, righteousness, beauty. **This is what happens to individuals when God reigns, AND when His people are stewarding creation – no one goes hungry, creation is cared for, there is no economic imbalance, the blind see, the deaf hear, and the lame leap for joy.**

- 2) On that day, we will have all we have been longing for

Perfect community, perfect occupation, perfect relationship, perfect love, perfect balance between work and rest. You need to come to terms on some level that what you are looking for will not be found in this world. One day I will suffer no more. One day I will be His bride. One day I will have perfect community. One day I will be doing perfectly that which I was created to do. One day I will have the perfect balance between rest and work. **Don't keep thinking the grass is greener elsewhere.**

- 3) Everything you do for the Lord in this life matters eternally

Store up treasure in heaven. All that we do in faith, hope, and love in the present, in obedience to our ascended Lord and in the power of his Spirit, will be enhanced and transformed at his appearing. Working for clean water is working for the age

to come, doing something that will last. Honest business, redemptive art, honorable law, sustainable living, medicine, education, making a home, tending a garden. They're all sacred tasks to be done in partnership with God now, because they will all go on in the age to come.

**1 Corinthians 15:58** - *Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

There seems to be a sense in which what we do in this world for the Lord will last because of the resurrection, because of the new heavens and new earth. All that is of Him will be transformed, liberated from what has enslaved it.

*Bruce Milne – “Every kingdom work, whether publicly performed or privately endeavoured, partakes of the kingdom’s imperishable character. Every honest intention, every stumbling word of witness, every resistance of temptation, every motion of worship, every struggle towards obedience, every mumbled prayer, everything, literally, which flows out of our faith-relationship with the Ever-Living One, will find its place in the ever-living heavenly order which will dawn at his coming.”*

**1 Corinthians 3:10-15** - *By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, <sup>13</sup> his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. <sup>14</sup> If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. <sup>15</sup> If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one **escaping through** the flames.*

A day of judgment is coming that will test everyone’s building – how one has built, and that will determine the reward. The fire tests the materials. Fire is associated with purifying or testing.

Along those lines, look at another really interesting passage in Revelation 21:

**Revelation 21:22-26** - *I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. <sup>23</sup> The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. <sup>24</sup>*

*The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. <sup>25</sup> On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. <sup>26</sup> The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.*

The glory and honor of each nation, the things that are good and beautiful and God-honoring, will survive, and the kings will bring their splendor into the New Jerusalem. There is some continuity between this world and the next. Even though the well-known refrain goes “you can’t take it with you,” it seems that in a very real way, you CAN take with you everything that has been done with Christ as the foundation. Everything that is of value will be resurrected in the new heavens and the new earth.

*Bruce Milne – “Nothing of ultimate worth from the long history of the nations will be omitted from the heavenly community. Everything which authentically reflects the God of truth, all that is of abiding worth from within the national stories and the cultural inheritance of the world’s peoples, will find its place in the New Jerusalem.”*

The best illustration of this truth is J.R.R. Tolkien’s short story *Leaf by Niggle*. Tolkien came to an impasse while working on his masterpiece *The Lord of the Rings*. He began to despair of ever completing the work of his life. And in the midst of that despair he wrote this story.

The story starts by introducing a little man called Niggle who had a long journey to make. The journey, as we will find out, is a metaphor for death. He was a painter, but wasn’t successful. Partly because he was too ambitious for his skill – he’d spend forever on a single leaf, trying to catch its shape, sheen and dewdrops glistening, but at the same time he wanted to paint a whole tree, birds, forest, and mountains. But he couldn’t finish it. There were always interruptions – he had to care for other people, like his neighbor Parish, who had a bad leg and was always asking him to help with things. And sometimes he was just idle. But even when he was doing other things, he was thinking about his painting and what he hoped to accomplish.

The Inspector comes, because there was a flood, and they need canvas and wood to make houses, so he takes his canvas, and at that time the driver arrives to take him on his journey. He cries that his painting is not finished. A corner of his painting is eventually hung in a corner of a museum, with the painting called *Leaf by Niggle*, for a few years until the museum burns down and the painting is forgotten. But

Niggle boards a train for the journey, and gets off the train in another country. And on the journey, this happens:

*Niggle pushed open the gate, jumped on the bicycle, and went bowling downhill in the spring sunshine. Before long he found that the path on which he had started had disappeared, and the bicycle was rolling along over a marvelous turf. It was green and close; and yet he could see every blade distinctly. He seemed to remember having seen or dreamed of that sweep of grass somewhere or other. The curves of the land were familiar somehow. Yes: the ground was becoming level, as it should, and now, of course, it was beginning to rise again. A great green shadow came between him and the sun. Niggle looked up, and fell off his bicycle.*

*Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished. If you could say that of a Tree that was alive, its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide.*

*“It’s a gift!” he said. He was referring to his art, and also to the result; but he was using the word quite literally.*

*He went on looking at the Tree. All the leaves he had ever labored at were there, as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them; and there were others that had only budded in his mind, and many that might have budded, if only he had had time.*

He goes on to see the birds, the Forest, the Mountains.

Tolkien was eventually able to finish *The Lord of the Rings*. If this is true, if there is some continuity between this life and the next, that, as Paul says, our labor in the Lord is not in vain, that the many things we never finish that were done for the Lord will follow us into the next life – there is something beautiful and right about that.

That is what is in store for you. Not sitting on clouds enjoying the stars, but a resurrected, immortal body on a renewed heaven and earth, living with God and ruling over this world as you were meant to from the very beginning. And all that you have ever done in the name of Christ will survive with you. And so I say with confidence, because of Christ’s resurrection:

*Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*