

Heaven | Week 2

Fairview Missionary Church | Angola, IN

Scripture: Assorted

Speaker: Joel Greenwood

October 29, 2023

Last week, we started a series talking about heaven, and I said I was going to take a couple of weeks to talk about this, and that I was going to answer some more of your questions, the questions that you guys have asked me through the years. And I had a few of you contact me this last week through phone calls and emails and things like that and wanted me to address certain things. And so I do want to just take a moment and address some of those. I can't address all of them. But one of the questions had to do with hell.

Now, I know we're doing a series on heaven, but the two do kind of go together when we discuss these things. And so I want to give you a statement on hell. Just like I had begun my series last week, my message, I said that if you were to go to Trine University with a video camera and a microphone and ask the students, "How many of you believe in a place called heaven?" Over 80% would say yes. But did you know that if you were to ask the question of the average American, do you believe there is a place called hell?

The number goes drastically down to under 40%. So over 80% believe in heaven, under 40% believe in hell. So let me just read a statement to you that I have prepared so that I don't get off track so we can get back to talking about heaven. But I do think this is important, all right? Hell is also a real place. It has been created for Satan and the fallen angels. It was never intended for human beings.

People often will ask me the question, "How can a loving God send people to hell?" There's multiple ways that you can answer that question. The one that I like to lean on as I look at Scripture is that hell was never created for humans. It was created for Satan and for the fallen angels. Scripture is very clear, while at the same time, God is so loving and kind that he refuses to push himself upon us. He refuses to force himself upon us.

He gives us the choice of whether we want to be with him or not. And if we choose that we do not want to be with Jesus, the only other alternative is to be separated from Jesus. And the very definition of hell is to be separated from God, to be separated from him. The other thing that I want to make sure I address is that some people believe that earth here and now is a form of hell. To that, I can only answer.

I know people use that phrase just to say it's difficult. Life is hard, but there's actually people that believe this is hell. We're living in it right now. To that, I can only tell you we have no idea what this earth would look like if God were to pull his presence from it. We have no idea. This right now is not hell. Hell is the absence of God. So that's just my statements on hell. I think it's good to address that. But now let's talk about heaven for the rest of the day.

I told you last week that when I was growing up in church, heaven was not something that I was really looking forward to. I know it sounds horrible, but I wanted to spend an eternity in heaven because the alternative didn't sound great. But I remember watching cartoons and you had angels with their halos and the harps and everything else. And I thought, "That doesn't really look like fun. It might be enjoyable for a week, but for an eternity, that's going to get pretty old." At church, most lessons that I heard about heaven made it sound like a church service that just went on forever, and that didn't sound like fun to a 10-year-old boy.

How many 10-year-olds? Do we have any 10-year-olds in here? Some of you are older and you're like, "Yeah, that's me. Trust me." An eternal church service, that does not sound like fun, right? And so I remember growing up thinking about that. Now, one of the things that was also shared with me last week, and I know I

mentioned this, but now as I've gotten older, I can't wait for heaven. I can't wait to experience heaven. I'm okay to give up everything that is here as much as I love my family, and I love the blessings. I am willing to give it all up for heaven.

Someone called me last week and left a message, and I want to quote them. I'm not going to tell you who it is, but I will let you know I wholeheartedly agree with this. This person said, "As followers of Jesus Christ, we should long for heaven like someone who is in jail longs for freedom. We should long for heaven like someone who is hungry and thirsty longs for food and water. We should long for heaven like someone who just ran a marathon and longs for rest and recovery." And I agree with that statement.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we should long for heaven. I believe as a church, we need to do a better job of communicating what heaven is going to be like while still remaining true to the Word of God. I shared with you last week that I take only as truth what is written in Scripture about heaven. I know there's a lot of books out there, Christian books that are written about heaven. We have a lot of people that have had near-death experiences.

And although those things intrigue me and I like to read about them and listen to them, the only thing I take as fact is God's Word. And so as we answer these questions, that's where our answers come from. So last week, we talked about where is heaven? We talked about what heaven is like. Scripturally, we said that heaven is a real place, but we don't know where that place actually is. We also saw that heaven was described as a city whose streets are made of gold.

The gates are made of a single pearl, and the walls are made of costly jewels. And we had to initially answer the question, should this be taken literally or not? Is heaven literally a city where the streets are made of gold? The gates are made of a single pearl, and the walls are made of jewels. Now, I am not sure to the answer. I can't give you the answer, but I did tell you if it is to be taken literal, that's pretty cool. I'm okay with that, right? I'm okay if that's what heaven looks like.

But if it is meant to just be imagery, if it's meant to give us an example, then I am sure that heaven is better than I could ever imagine. And I told you that that's the side that I kind of fall on because I want to believe heaven is greater than I could ever imagine. And I can picture a street with a city whose streets are gold and those things. But I think it's going to be even better than that. But the truth remains. We don't have to worry about being bored in heaven or missing anything that we experience here on earth.

We do not have to worry about being bored. Today, we're going to answer some more questions. First question, we're going to answer who is in heaven right now. Then we're going to discuss the question that most people ask me when they lose a loved one or a family member. Will we know each other in heaven? And then finally, what will we do in heaven? Those are the three questions we're going to address today, looking at it from a scriptural standpoint. And after that, I want to show you a six-minute video. So we're going to have a little longer video than what we normally show.

It is from the Guides at the Bible Project. And if you do the YouVersion Bible study every day, this video was on there on Monday after I preached on heaven on Sunday. It's a little weird when things like that happen. It's a little eerie for me. But so I want to show you that video as we discuss the possibility that the kingdom of heaven has already begun here and now, and we can experience it. So let me pray and then we'll jump into that first question. Heavenly Father would come before you.

I thank you for your word which reveals truth to us. I thank you for the children that are here today. I thank you for their excitement. I thank you for their faith. Again, your word says that we are to have the faith of a child so we can learn from them. Thank you for the blessing. Be with us today. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen. So who is in heaven right now? Scripture tells us that God the Father is in heaven.

Scripture repeatedly says that heaven is his dwelling place. It's his throne. It's his house. Heaven is the location of God's presence. Scripture also tells us that the Lord Jesus is in heaven, and he has been in heaven since he ascended there. Acts chapter 1 verse 9, we read, "After Jesus said this, He's standing before His disciples, He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently into the sky as he was going when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. Men of Galilee, they said, "Why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." Jesus' presence is in heaven.

Jesus, the Son, ascended to heaven, and He will come back in the same way the disciples saw him go, which is why many people believe that when Jesus returns for His second coming, that He is going to descend on the Mount of Olives because that's where He ascended into heaven in Jerusalem. And so that's why people believe that from Acts chapter 1 verses 9 through 11. So God is in heaven. The Lord Jesus is in heaven. The angels are also in heaven. We read about angels being in heaven throughout the scriptures.

Heaven is their home, and so that is their location. We also know that all the saints of God who died on this earth are in heaven. Now, this is not just for the here and now, but going all the way back into the Old Testament. Heaven includes every Old Testament saint who by faith trusted in God's Word and looked forward to the coming Messiah. One of the questions that people will often ask, it's a great question.

What happened to all of those people that died before Jesus came, before He was able to die for our sins and be raised back to life? The answer to that question is found in the Old Testament that these saints, these believers, were putting their hope in the coming Messiah. They knew that they needed somebody that would carry their sins so that they could be made right before God. Heaven also includes every true believer who has put their trust in Jesus Christ as Lord post his resurrection.

The Bible also teaches that the moment we die, we go directly to be in His presence. To be separated from the body means to be in His presence. The Apostle Paul talks about this in a few of his letters. 2 Corinthians chapter 5, verse 7, and 8. Paul says, "For we live by faith, not by sight. We are confident," I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

He's saying, "If I'm away from the body, I am going to be in the presence of the Lord." In his letter to the Philippians, he says, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. 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. I am torn between the two. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.

Paul had this understanding, "If I am separated from this earthly body, I will be present with the Lord." So who is in heaven, God, the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, those that have gone before us, and they are with Him now. Second question, will we know each other in heaven? I don't remember who said this, but I wrote down the quote, and the quote is this, "We may be sure that we will not know less in heaven than we know here." You and I will not know less in heaven than what we know here.

1 Corinthians 13:12 says it this way, "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror. Then we shall see face-to-face. Now I only know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." It is believed that when we get to heaven, we will know each other just as God knows us. Sin will be taken away.

So in reality, we will know each other better because we will see each other without the hindrance of sin. This is one of the verses that I like to point to when people ask me this question, "Will we recognize each other? Will we know each other?" And I say, "Yes, I believe we will because I don't think we will know less than what we know now." The other section of Scripture that I also like to point people to is the story of the transfiguration. This is when Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on the mountain, and he is transfigured before them.

It says that he was glowing like the sun, and his hair was white, and he is transfigured into this different presence. And while he is there, Peter, James, and John also recognized Moses and Elijah. And I look at that section of scripture and say, "Okay, Moses and Elijah existed hundreds of years before Peter, James, and John. They had never met Moses and Elijah. They didn't know what they looked like unless there was like a Polaroid picture or something, right?"

I don't think that they had name tags on. I don't think that Jesus introduced them. They recognized them. How was that so? Well, I believe it's because we can recognize people later. Scripture also gives no indication of a memory wipe causing us to not recognize friends and family. When you look even in the Old Testament, some of our fathers of our faith, Abraham, expected to be gathered to his people to recognize his people.

Jacob and David believed and expected that they were going to be reunited with their loved ones. This isn't recorded in Scripture for us, so it only makes sense that we will be able to recognize one another. Now, I know I said this last week, but I will say it again. Even though I believe we will recognize one another, we won't care nearly as much as we think we do now once we see Jesus. Once we see Jesus, everything else is going to fade away.

I know that that's hard to imagine now. But once we see our Savior face-to-face, whether or not we recognize our loved ones probably isn't going to matter. I know that's difficult to say, but that's what I think Scripture teaches. All right. Here we go. Last one. What will we do in heaven? I can tell you that heaven won't be boring, and it will be more fun and enjoyable than the best thing you have ever done here.

Sometimes people will ask me, "Joel, describe your favorite day. If you could choose your day, what is your perfect day?" And so I'll go through and describe the things that would be involved in my perfect day. But as I think about heaven and I try to comprehend eternity, that perfect day might be fun for the day or the week. But even after a year, I think that perfect day would get boring. If I did the same thing 365 days in a row, it would get boring, and yet heaven will not be boring.

So it has to be greater than anything I could ever imagine doing here. I will repeat myself again, the best part of heaven. What will heaven be like? The best part of heaven will be seeing Jesus face to face. I'm not sure if you have seen this image or not that has been circulating around the internet. Many of you are familiar with the shroud of Turin. It is this cloth that is believed to be the grave clothes of Jesus, what they wrapped his body in when they placed him in the tomb, and they found those claws laying there after he was resurrected.

And on that cloth, many people believe there is an image of Jesus' face that was put into that image. Now, I don't know if it's true. I'm always just skeptical by nature. But they took this cloth and they ran it through AI to complete what was on that cloth. And this is what they came up with for the face of Jesus. Now, again, I'm not sure whether I believe this or not, but I can tell you when I first saw that image, I just stared at it and it brought goosebumps to my arms. Just thinking possibly.

And again, I don't know if I believe it or not. Please don't spread this. This is definitely it. I don't know, okay? But when I looked at this, I thought, "Is it possible that I'm looking at the face of my Savior?" Can you imagine? I don't think we can what it's going to be like when you look into the eyes of the person who sacrificed his life for your eternity, who loves you more than you can ever imagine.

What is heaven going to be like? It's going to be beyond what we can understand. I think heaven is going to be the most amazing worship you've ever experienced. It's going to be so amazing that even when you think about the best worship experience you've ever had on this planet, you went to a worship night and you got goosebumps and you felt all tingly and you felt God's presence.

I believe that that experience is going to pale in comparison to the praise that is offered while we are surrounding the throne of heaven. It is truly indescribable. "We will worship," Scripture says, "with a great multitude from every nation and tribe and language and complete unity." Revelation says, "John, as he's

having his vision, says, "After this, I looked. And there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne and before the lamb.

They were all wearing white robes, and they were holding palm branches in their hands, and they cried out in a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb." I don't know about you, but I'm just looking forward to being able to sing on key. That's what I'm looking forward to. To be able to sing in a way that is received by my father that sounds good to him, even though I believe my singing sounds good to him, but also sounds good to me.

When we are in heaven, we will worship without distraction. We will serve without exhaustion. We will fellowship without fear. We will learn without fatigue and we will rest without boredom. It will be far greater than anything we have ever experienced here, so much so that everything we've experienced here will feel like rubbish, will feel like trash.

Now let's get to something that will possibly open our eyes a little further to the idea of heaven. I mentioned last week in our sermon that both John the Baptist and Jesus, when they were starting their ministry, when they began their public ministry, both began with the same phrase. And that phrase was, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near." What does that mean? Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near.

It is close to all of us. Let's watch this video. There's a lot to take in. So I'm just going to promise you, you're probably going to want to go back and watch this multiple times. You can watch it at home. Just search the Bible project. Again, you might go on a rabbit trail because there's some really amazing videos there. I love the guys that do these, the Bible Project. And this is about the kingdom of heaven. So in the Bible, the ideas of heaven and earth are ways of talking about God's space and our space.

So I understand our space really well. We live here, there's trees, rivers, mountains, but my understanding of God's space gets a little fuzzy. And what we do get in the Bible are images trying to help us grasp God's space, which is basically inconceivable to us. So these are two very different types of spaces. Yes, they're different in their nature, but here's what's really interesting is that in the Bible, these are not always separate spaces. So think of heaven and earth as like different dimensions that can overlap in the same exact space.

So we talk a lot about going to heaven after we die, but this idea of heaven and earth overlapping, we don't talk a lot about that. Which is kind of crazy because the union of heaven and earth is what the story of the Bible is all about. How they were once fully united and then driven apart and about how God is bringing them back together once again. So let's go back to the beginning where heaven and earth they're completely overlapping. Yeah, this is what the Bible's description of the Garden of Eden is all about.

It's a place where God and humanity dwelt together perfectly no separation. And humans then partner with God in building a flourishing, beautiful world and so on. But as humans, we wanted to do things a different way. We wanted God out and we wanted to create a world apart from Him. Yeah, so we have these two spaces now. And the Bible actually uses lots of different kinds of words and phrases to refer to these two spaces to make a clear distinction.

So you've said that these spaces can overlap though. So explain how that works. Yeah, this is where we have to start talking about temples because in the biblical world, you experience God's presence by going to a temple. That's where heaven and earth overlap. Now, there are two types of temples described in the Bible. One is a tabernacle, basically a tent that was built by Moses, and the other was this massive building made by Solomon.

And these temples were decorated with fruit trees and flowers and images of angels and all kinds of gold and jewels and so on. And these are designed to make you feel like you're going back to the garden. And at the center of the temple was a place called the Holy of Holies, which was like the hotspot of God's presence. Now we can go and be with God again. But not so fast, because the temple also creates a problem. So God's space

is full of His presence and goodness and justice and beauty, but human space is full of sin and injustice and the ugliness that results.

So how do these spaces overlap if they're so different and they're in conflict with each other? This was resolved through animal sacrifice. Yeah, that's kind of weird. What do animal sacrifices have to do with this? Yeah. The idea is this. Animal sacrifices, somehow they absorb the sin when the animal dies in your place. And it creates a clean space, so to speak, where you are now free to enter into the temple and be in God's presence.

Okay, so if I'm an Israelite and I live in Jerusalem, I might be able to be in God's presence. But you said the story of the Bible was all of heaven and earth reuniting. Right. So we have to keep going in the story where we come to Jesus in the New Testament. And in the Gospel of John, we hear this claim that God became human in Jesus and made his dwelling among us. Now, this word dwelling is really curious. Literally, it means he set up a tabernacle among us.

And so what John is claiming right here is that Jesus is a temple. He is now the place where heaven and earth overlap. What's interesting about Jesus is that he isn't staying in this safe, clean space. He's running around hanging out with sinners. He's healing people of their sicknesses and forgiving people of their sins. He's basically creating little pockets of heaven where people can be in God's presence, but he's doing it out there in the middle of the world of sin and death. And he keeps telling everyone that the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

And he even told his followers to pray regularly that God's kingdom come and that his will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven. But a lot of people are threatened by Jesus and they kill him, which seems to spoil this whole plan to reunite heaven and earth. But we have to go back to a scene earlier on in Jesus' story where John the Baptist saw Jesus and said, "Behold, this is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." So Jesus isn't just talked about as being a temple, He's also talked about as being the temple sacrifice.

Yeah. So the cross is now the place where Jesus absorbs sin to create a clean space that is not limited like animal sacrifices. Jesus' sacrifice has the power to keep spreading and spreading and reuniting more and more of heaven and earth. And this is all really great, but it leaves one big question in my mind, which is what happens when I die? Don't I just fly over to God's space to be with Jesus?

Yeah, so a few times in the New Testament, we learn that Christians will be with Jesus in heaven after they die, but that is not the focus of the Bible story. The focus is on how heaven and earth are being reunited through Jesus and will be completely brought together one day when he returns. So in the book of Revelation, we get this beautiful image of the Garden of Eden, now in the form of a city, coming to end the age of sin and death by redeeming all of human history in a renewed creation.

And God's space and human space completely overlap once again. Now, that is a lot to wrap your mind around, right? We could probably spend six weeks, 10 weeks just talking about that video, but I have always believed the best example and understanding we have about heaven comes from Genesis and the description of the Garden of Eden.

I don't think it's a coincidence again that the temple, when it was built in all of the speculation or all of the details that were given to them and to how it had to be designed, included images from the Garden of Eden, along with their understanding of what heaven was going to be like. Have you ever thought about the idea that we are making little pockets of heaven, God's presence in the world right now? Have you ever thought about that?

It's an interesting concept, and it really does shape my worldview in the sense that I know when I look at a map of our world, I see a bunch of different countries that are divided by geographical lines. But when I look at that same map from a spiritual perspective, I see little dots of God's kingdom everywhere, everywhere in

the world in which we live, which is why I often will tell you I am first a resident of God's kingdom before I'm anything else.

Because I believe that our responsibility as the church is to bring God's kingdom into the world. And we take that with us as we take God's presence with us. So let's wrap things up with some truths. Number one, God is going to live with humanity and make all things new. Scripture is very clear that he is going to make all things new. Second, currently, earth is cut off from the full life of heaven.

We haven't fully combined yet, which is why our prayer is, "God, bring the kingdom of heaven here on earth as it is in heaven." But the new creation is breaking in. It is starting to come in. Number three, heaven will not simply be a step back into the old garden. It will be a new Jerusalem, a new place, a whole new thing. That is the best thing we can look back to, but it's completely new. Number four, death will be replaced with life. Death was a part of the fall.

Death was a part of sin. Death will be replaced with true life. Number five, there is not one place in the Bible that mentions us going into heaven. I don't know if you caught that in the video, but you can look all through Scripture. Nowhere do we see this idea of us going into heaven. It's the idea of heaven coming here. Think about that. We could spend a lot of time on that as well. Number six, it seems that heaven will be physical in nature, but maybe not how we understand it.

Again, I look at the Bible and I see when Jesus came back when he was resurrected. And we have there recorded for us in Acts that he meets his followers in the upper room. And somehow he immediately shows up in the room. He walks through the wall. Now, I don't know about you guys, but I can't do that yet, right? So there's some weirdness to it, but at the same time, Jesus has a meal with them. And when he eats the food, it doesn't just fall out of his body like a ghost or something. So there's a physical nature to it, but it's different than we can understand.

So I don't know that I can give any more information about it. And number seven, one day, you will be resurrected and reborn just as Jesus is. We will become a new creation, made new. Thinking about heaven, there's a lot more questions than we have answers for. And as we look at Scripture, I believe that God has given us what we need, not what we want.

And that even though Scripture might be vague about this idea of heaven in some ways, the kingdom of heaven, it's fun to do a study about it. It's fun to research it. Even though we don't have all of the answers that we want about it, Scripture is very clear about how we attain it, that you must confess Jesus Christ as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. You must repent, turn from your old way of life, recognize your need for a Savior, and you can spend an eternity with Him.

And so my prayer is that as God is speaking to us, that if we've already made that proclamation with our mouth, Jesus is our Lord, He's our Savior, He's our everything, we have repented and turned to Him. It can be a time of celebration. But if there are people here that have not made that proclamation, you're watching online, listening on the radio, please know that God loves you. He loves you more than you could ever imagine. He desires to have a relationship with you. And Scripture couldn't be more clear.

You simply need to confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead, and you will be saved. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, as always, the altar is open for those that want to come and praise, those that maybe want to come because they're still wrestling with this. This is a no judgment zone for that. Father, maybe there's people that just need prayer. Something's going on in their life right now.

It might have nothing to do with this topic of heaven and salvation and things like that, but they just want prayer. Father, there will be people upfront that are willing to pray. Just ask that you would speak to our hearts, that you would draw us close to you. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

