

This past Thursday my oldest son, Christian, participated in an event thirteen years in the making: a commencement ceremony. His high school days officially came to an end and a new season of life had begun. It was a moment he had been longing for, the thought of it helped him persevere through a challenging senior year, and it influenced the way he lived and studied because he knew that would impact his future.

Each of us has a commencement ceremony in our future. In fact 250,000 people per day worldwide experience it. It is our death, the moment where this life ends, and the next life commences. Jesus talked to his disciples about it in John 14. He told them to not let their hearts be troubled because he was going to prepare a place for them and would come back and take them there so they could be together. **Jesus was talking about the next life. He was talking about Heaven.** And page after page of the New Testament and believer after believer for centuries after held fast to that promise no matter what life threw at them. **They lived this life anchored in eternity because they knew the best is yet to come.**

But for far too many Christians today, Heaven is an afterthought, a faraway reality that has little importance today. We know too little, know the wrong things - like we turn into angels, float on a cloud and play a harp, or that eternity is just one really long church service - or are so focused on making this life perfection that we miss out on living in light of the totality of our glorious salvation. This series aims to remedy that by answering fundamental questions about Heaven and do what Paul calls us to in Colossians, to set our minds on the things above so that we can live with hope in the midst of hopelessness, be spurred on to live our lives with a Kingdom purpose and live with longing and anticipation of an intimate eternal relationship with God. That we would live knowing the best is yet to come. This morning, by way of introduction, I want to answer why eternity matters today. How is this life blessed when we set our minds on the next?

Eternity produces perspective and perseverance today. When we focus on eternity, this life is put in its proper place.

[Revelation 21:4] ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

This verse contains one of the great promises of eternity. There will be no more tears, pain, mourning, death. That sounds pretty good to me. But this verse also tells us what we can expect before we get there. The "former things" are the things of this life. We live in a broken world and, as a consequence, we will experience pain, tears, mourning, death. **If this world is broken, it can't be perfect.** Do you see how freeing that is? Think of all the ways we idolize this life by trying to make it perfect: Our stuff, our lifestyles, our relationships, our image, trying to give our kids a magical childhood and turn them into pro athletes. We put the weight of ultimate fulfillment on things that simply can't bear it, and we wind up disappointed, angry, dissatisfied.

But if we recognize this life won't be perfect but the next will be, we can actually be more content today. Tim Keller, pastor and writer, was recently diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and there's a good chance it will kill him. In an interview, he said the reality of his death has caused him to hold fast to the eternal hope and satisfaction that awaits him and, as he's done that, it's

caused him to recognize that the things of this life can't fully satisfy him. As he's lowered his expectations, he's actually enjoyed them more. Every good and perfect gift comes from God, and there are a lot of good gifts in this life. But if we recognize they can't fully satisfy, we'll be more content and free when we don't ask them to.

Eternity also enables us to not fear death. We can be like Paul: To live is Christ and to die is gain! **If you are a follower of Jesus, you are living a story with a last chapter that's infinitely longer than all the others and infinitely better than all the others.** Yes, death is awful, and it is an enemy Jesus has conquered. But there's a reason Christians call funerals "Celebrations of life" and "Home Goings". It's because we know the believer who died is now doing better than all of us left here! Roman philosopher Seneca put it this way: "The day thou fearest as the last is the birthday of eternity."

Eternity also helps us persevere when things get tough.

[2 Corinthians 4:17-18] ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Scripture never shrugs at our suffering. It says we should expect it. But it also says something else. **SUFFERING WILL NOT LAST FOREVER!** God will redeem it, he will use it to refine our character and show himself to be gracious and faithful, and he will ultimately bring it to an end. When we focus on Heaven, our weighty eternity, we can look at suffering as light and momentary. And when we get there, we are reminded we can get through it. I imagine Heaven was much more real for believers this last year. I don't know how those without the hope of Heaven got through it. Suffering is real, but it has an end. The promise of Heaven is the encouragement to get us through.

Eternity reminds us we will all give an account someday. There are two judgments that await us. One determines our eternal destination. The other impacts how believers in Christ will experience eternity. The first is the Great White Throne judgment.

[Revelation 20:11-12, 15] "11 And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds...15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

All will stand before our perfect, holy, righteous, and just God on the merit of our deeds or the merit of the deeds of Jesus. Our deeds, no matter how good, fall short of God's perfect standards and, if we go to God with that, we will be condemned. But Jesus did live up to God's standards. He is righteous and gives us his righteousness to stand before God.

We'll talk more about this in the series but something we all need to understand up front is that Heaven is for believers. **Good people don't get into Heaven. Forgiven people do.** All of us have fallen short and are in need of forgiveness. God offers that freely through Jesus, who lived the life we couldn't and died the death we deserve. We receive that gift through faith in Christ, by believing he did that for you, and letting his life count for yours. If you have never made that decision, do that today and begin living this life with the certain hope of the next.

The second is the judgment seat of Christ.

[2 Corinthians 5:9-10] ⁹ So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

There is coming a day when all we have done and not done, good and bad, will be evaluated by God. It's not about salvation - that's a free gift - it's about rewards. Our good deeds, faithful and obedient deeds, will be rewarded, and our evil deeds will be burned up and lead to loss. That means what we do today reverberates throughout eternity. What we do in this life greatly impacts the next. Go back to my son. He's worked hard, gotten good grades and, much to his father's delight, been rewarded with a good number of scholarships for the next life, which is college.

Our primary motivation to do good, to live faithfully, is to please God. But Scripture is clear that he will graciously reward us in eternity for the way we live today. You know what that means? **Use up your life!!!** Pour it all out for the sake of Christ! What are you saving it for? I had this fancy cheese in my fridge that I kept putting off eating. I was saving it for later. And the day I went to finally eat it, it had gone bad. Use up your life for Christ; every last drop, every last dollar, every last day! You have nothing to lose because everything you pour out you get back and infinitely more!

There was a novel written in 1902 called *Brewster's Millions*. It's been made into a movie a bunch of times, the last starring Richard Pryor. But the premise is an eccentric grandfather dies and leaves an inheritance to his grandson. He gives him \$1million but says if he can spend it all in a year, he'll get \$25million. That's what God is offering us. He has given you this eternally valuable life and he wants you to spend it on eternal things. And the more you spend, the more you get back in eternity. Do not save it. Let the tank read "empty" on your commencement day.

Eternity creates joy and longing today. As I often ask you, what's your joy meter reading these days? Want it to increase? There's a guaranteed way.

[1 Peter 1:3-9] ³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus

Christ. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Here's the promise for believers: Because Jesus is alive, you have been made alive and have a hope that is alive, and that hope is an inheritance being guarded by God in Heaven for you. Your salvation is past, present, and future, and when we set our minds on what's to come, joy is the result. Joy is the echo of hope. It's the "yeah, but" in the midst of suffering, that while things may be painful now, there is a perfect eternity just waiting for us. No matter what is going on in our lives, Heaven awaits, and when we think about it, our heart responds joyfully and longingly.

Just think about something you have scheduled in the future that you are really looking forward to. There's a longing to get there and there's joy when you think about what it's going to be like. Martha and I have a few days scheduled to get away at the end of the month and I am thinking about it all the time. And when I do, there's a longing, even an ache to get there, but there's also joy as I think about what it's going to be like. That's what happens when we think about Heaven. Martha is so excited to get to Heaven that I sometimes take it personally! Martha is also full of the joy of the Lord. **If you want more joy in your life today, think about what life will be like with Jesus tomorrow.**

And as you do, your joy will be contagious, and your ministry will flourish.

"If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you will get neither." -C. S. Lewis

When you are bursting with joy over your salvation you won't be able to keep it to yourself. If you are lethargic in your relationship with God and lethargic in living out your faith and purpose, start with the end in mind. When you set your mind and heart on eternal things, it changes you.

I want to close this morning by letting you hear from one of our own. Richard Ford is a long-time Fellowship member, a friend, and one of the most hopeful people I know. He talks of Heaven often and talks to others about the God of Heaven often. My prayer is that his heart for Heaven would encourage you this morning and inspire you to be more Heavenly-minded going forward.

If you are a Jesus follower, your eternity will be glorious. You don't have to wait until eternity, though, to bask in its glow. **Let's set our minds on the things above over the next eight weeks and let the truth of Heaven change our lives today.**