

Sermon Title: Longing for Heaven – February 15, 2014 (Scripture is from the ESV)

Introduction

Good evening, everyone. It's always a joy for me to speak here at Joint Prayer Meeting.

Tonight I'm going to speak about something that I feel correlates to each believer's level of faith and level of obedience to God, and that is their revelation of heaven. I have discovered that many Christians have very little understanding about heaven and picture it as just a cloud city where everyone is gathered worshipping God day and night. For a lot of Christians this revelation of heaven isn't that enticing to them. Worshipping God can be powerful, but for hours and hours and years and years and all eternity... this actually doesn't sound that "heavenly" for many. And because of a weak revelation of heaven, many Christians nowadays are living for the now rather than for the future. Many Christians are dabbling in different sin, believing a lie that their current sin is going to satisfy them more than heaven ever will.

Many of you are aware of the marshmallow test where children's ability to delay their gratification was put to the test. Kids were put in a room with one marshmallow and told that if they wait for the teacher to return without eating the marshmallow, then they will receive another marshmallow. From those tests a clear correlation came forth that the kids who were able to wait and delay gratifying themselves ended up much more successful than the kids who couldn't wait and went ahead and just ate the one marshmallow. The sad thing is, many Christians are in a room with a marshmallow representing earthly gratification and have been told to wait, but have no idea what they are actually waiting for. For a lot of them they view heaven more like vegetables... good for you, but really not that appealing. And so the marshmallow of earthly gratification looks a lot better in comparison.

Tonight I want to share about heaven. I have long felt a desire for the church to get greater revelations of heaven so that the temptations of this world will weaken as the church becomes more excited and focused on heaven. Let me read Philippians 3:12-21 to you...

Philippians 3:12-21 – Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained. Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, **with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven**, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Let me read verses 19 and 20 to you again, this time in the NIV...

Philippians 3:19-20 (NIV) – Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. **Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await** a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you're taking notes, the title of today's sermon is, "**Longing for Heaven.**"

Peoples' Revelations of Heaven

I want to start this message with a stipulation: I am not going to preach from anyone's revelation of heaven other than what we have found from the Scripture. There are many books and videos about peoples' revelations of heaven. I personally know many people who have had dreams and visions of heaven. One of my favorite books is *Visions Beyond the Veil* about a Chinese orphanage where God's glory fell and all the kids got crazy revelations of God, of heaven, and of Hell, and were forever changed. Another book that has gotten famous in the past few years is "Heaven is for Real." That book has gotten so popular that they are making a Hollywood movie about it.

I have no problem with such dreams and visions and I have been encouraged by different friends and family members accounts of what they saw and experienced, **but I have a big concern that a lot of the church has limited their scope of heaven to these few "eyewitness" accounts.** That is a huge problem.

Think about this, if twenty of us were cast into different parts of the world today and were told to give our account, our accounts would be very limited to what we saw. For those cast into a field, you would say that the earth is a huge field with a couple of trees. For those cast into a city, you would say the earth is all concrete and cluttered. For those cast onto a beach, you would say earth is sandy. While you are each seeing a picture of the earth, your view is incredibly limited. What region, what country, what continent are you in? From your limited view you couldn't answer anything.

Also, people all see through different lenses. We could put five people of different economic, age, gender, religious, and ethnic backgrounds in the same place in the world and they would all likely describe the same exact place differently. To say that just one person's account is correct would be wrong. At the same time, a kid might incorporate his imagination into the account and someone of a poor, uneducated background might also describe things in ways that don't fully match up. Think about the prophets who saw the end times: tanks, missiles, bombs, men in fatigues, airplanes... none of those things existed during Biblical times. So how could these prophets accurately describe what they saw? It would have been impossible. This is the same for many people who see heaven. While I don't doubt what has been seen, it would be wrong to limit our scope to their accounts.

I believe sharing visions and dreams of heaven needs to be done carefully and only to people who can treasure what is shared while not forming their beliefs all around it. In the New Testament only three people are mentioned having visions of heaven. The first Christian to be killed for his faith, Steven, saw a brief vision of heaven just before he was killed. The Apostle John was brought up to heaven and given specific revelations from heaven to share, along with specific revelations NOT TO SHARE. In the book of Revelation, chapter 10, there appears to be a powerful revelation from "the seven thunders" that John excitedly began to write down, but then he was told by a voice in heaven to seal up that revelation and to not write it. Apparently that revelation was for John and John alone. The third person to have visions of heaven was the Apostle Paul. In 2Corinthians 12 he eludes to being taken up to heaven.

1Corinthians 12:4 – And he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

Paul's revelations were so great that he was given a thorn in his flesh to keep him from becoming boastful or arrogant. Paul knew not to share any of the revelations because he knew people might begin to think more of him than they should.

I believe there are some people like the Apostle John who have been given revelations of heaven that they are called to share with the greater body of Christ, but I also believe that there are far more people like the Apostle Paul who have been given revelations of heaven that they are meant to only share with key people or are meant to keep completely to themselves. I also believe that because we each see through our own lenses, sometime the revelations God gives people are really meant for them and them alone.

If you get a revelation of heaven, which I hope all of you will either tonight or at some point in your life, treasure it and journal about it. If you feel it is encouraging, share it with your spiritual father or a spiritual mentor of yours. I recommend only sharing it with others if your leader endorses it and if you are mature enough to not become proud from it.

Why Heaven is Such a Mystery (It's Meant to be Sought!)

With all that said, let's get into the message, "Longing for Heaven." I think one of the greatest passages to describe heaven is Matthew 13:44...

Matthew 13:44 – The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

This passage is a clear representation of God's love for us through Jesus Christ. God, in His joy, gave all that He had so that He might redeem us and have us as His own.

This passage also represents the elusiveness of heaven. Heaven is mentioned throughout the Bible, but the clear revelations of heaven from Scripture are quite limited. In fact, in preparation for this message I pulled out my 1,200 page Systematic Theology book that covers pretty much every topic about the Bible. Out of 1,200 pages can you guess how many pages were allotted to talk about heaven and eternity? Seven pages. Seven out of 1,200 pages.

Most of today's teaching among the Christian church is about the present: how to fight sin, how to live successfully, how to keep your joy, how to expand the kingdom, how to dream big, and so on. Almost all of mankind, including most Christians, are focused on just getting through the day. Some of the great visionaries were able to look ahead five years, ten years, or even twenty years. But for many Christians they will say, "I'm just trying to be faithful in the now, heaven will come when it comes." But the truth is, the greatest of people had heaven on their mind all the time.

Hebrews 11 is about those who lived by faith. The first people that are mentioned are Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Abraham's wife Sarah. These people made a sacrifice, walked with God, made a boat, and conceived a son. This is what Hebrews 11 speaks of them...

Hebrews 11:13-16 – These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a

heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Hebrews 11 describes such people of faith as “of whom the world was not worthy” (Hebrews 11:38).

God loves it when we long for Him. God exalts those who seek Him. I believe God didn't want to just lay everything out before us because He wanted to separate the true worshippers from those who are lukewarm. Romance is all about mystery. If there is no mystery, then there is no romance.

Tonight I want to reveal some things that will hopefully give you a boost in developing a longing for God like those great people of faith. **What needs to happen first is an increase in your revelation of how good God is.**

Israelites Mistake

A revelation of how good God is, is what the Israelites needed when they departed from Egypt for the Promised Land. They experienced a powerful deliverance from God and were promised that the land they were being taken to flowed with milk and honey. The problem was the Israelites didn't trust God that the Promised Land would be all that it was cracked up to be. In fact, they rebelled and said they wanted to return to Egypt and eat the food there... the food of slaves. The Israelites literally believed that prison food would be better than the food promised for them in the Promised Land. That seems ridiculous now, but it shows that they had very little revelation of the goodness and love of God.

I have heard a number of Christians share that they aren't looking forward to heaven because they don't want lose the relationships they have with loved ones here on earth. We know that in heaven there won't be any marriage, so for some married folk the thought of heaven is actually a little depressing to them because they know they won't be married anymore.

The truth is that the earth is like Egypt and that heaven is like the Promised Land. Here we do have love, but it's a poor image of love. 1Corinthians 13 says of love that now we see a poor reflection as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Romantic love, family love, any love here on earth is like slave food compared to the true love we will experience in heaven. Amen?

Before I go on, I need you all to renounce any cynical attitude toward heaven. Do not be cynical like the Israelites were regarding the Promised Land. God is good. If you need proof of that just remember the Cross. He gave His Son Jesus for us to rescue us from sin. He cares about us more than anything. No one loves us like God loves us. He works all things for our good (Romans 8:28). God is a good God. I can guarantee to you that heaven, in every single aspect, will be better than our current life here on earth.

So one hindrance to peoples' revelation of heaven is that they are unable to see God as a truly good God who cares. Another hindrance to peoples' view of heaven is that their scope of the size of God is actually small. Because of most peoples' view of God has been based off of cartoons or illustrations of God sitting on a throne, God doesn't look that big to them. He is big, but not enormous. Also most paintings of heaven don't look that grand either: God on a throne with a bunch of people bowing before Him. Because a lot of people don't think of God as truly enormous, it's hard for them to see heaven as that big or that great.

Greater Revelation of God as a Loving Creator

Let's clear this up right now. God is the God of the universe. Amen? He created the heavens and the earth. The truth is, God is master creator who has no limit.

Let's look at the solar system for a moment.

PICTURE

There are nine planets and one star in our solar system. Most peoples' view of creation is limited to the earth and maybe to the sun and to the planet Mars. There is very little thought beyond these things. The truth is that just as most people focus on the present and not on the future, so do most people focus just on the earth and not on all of creation.

Our solar system is not the end. Our solar system has one star, the sun, that the nine planets rotate around. Our solar system is part of a galaxy, or a system of stars, that we call the Milky Way.

PICTURE

The Milky Way has how many stars? Approximately 200 to 400 BILLION stars. This picture is of the Milky Way with the approximate location of the sun and our solar system in it. To go from one end of the Milky Way to the other at the speed of light would take approximately 100,000 years. In other words, it would take about all of eternity to explore all of the Milky Way.

But the universe isn't limited to the Milky Way. There are a number of galaxies out there with many being a lot bigger than the galaxy we live in. Here is a chart of just some of the galaxies...

PICTURE

The chart might be difficult to see, but the Milky Way is the dot in the middle of this chart. You can see how small it is in comparison with the other galaxies here.

Do you know how many galaxies are in the universe? Take a guess. Let's see how big you think the universe is.

Most recently, a German super computer put the number at 500 billion galaxies in the universe, and the number has continued to grow. That means there could be more galaxies in the universe than there are stars in the Milky Way. That means that every person living today all across the world could have as many as 70 galaxies EACH.

This is pretty much impossible to comprehend. If it takes 100,000 years traveling at the speed of light to go from just one end of the Milky Way to the other, then you are talking millions and millions of years to go from one end of 70 galaxies to the other while traveling at the speed of light and not exploring anything in them.

God is a lot bigger than you think. His ability to create is much greater than we will ever know. Whether you are looking at the massive size of the universe or you are looking at the

crazy intricacies in a human body cell, you will see just how ridiculously amazing God is as a Creator.

Size of Heaven

If God can create SO MUCH for us in this universe, then imagine how great part 2 of His creation will be!

Isaiah 65:17 – For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.

How many of you have heard of the new earth?

Revelation 21:1-2 – Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Here we see the city that God had prepared in advance for those who live by faith. I don't want our vision of heaven to be limited to just this city, because God has clearly also made a new earth and a new heaven for us. But let's look at the city first.

In Revelation 21:14-16 the apostle John is tasked with measuring the city. That's a wild task. He finds that the city is approximately 1,380 miles in length, in width, and in height. That means this city is either a pyramid or a cube. In square footage, this city is about the size of the moon. Perhaps the moon doesn't sound that big to you, but remember this is a city we are talking about. Let's think about this for a moment...

Let's say there have been 100 billion people who lived in the history of mankind, and let's say that 20% were saved so there would be 20 billion people having a place in this city. That would mean that each person would have 75 acres of surface area in this city, or about 57 soccer fields. That's a lot of land! Now what if the city isn't just a surface, but has levels all within it? If you were to look from the sky at this building we are in you would see a limited surface area, but the truth is that under the surface area of this building is six stories of different rooms. In the heavenly city we won't have a sun or a moon to give us light, instead God's presence will be all the light we will need, whether we are indoors or outdoors. If this is the case, then the amount of land in this city would be almost immeasurable.

So while this is a city because God loves having His people together, it obviously isn't going to be a crowded mess. And what about our homes in heaven?

Our Homes

Let me read John 14:2 to you...

John 14:2 (ESV) – In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you.

The ESV and the NIV have the worst translations of this verse. The word "Rooms" makes it sound like a college dormitory. Rooms makes heaven sound cluttered. The word "room" translated literally in the Greek actually means "dwelling places" or "homes to dwell in." The King James and the New King James translates in a way that is more telling of heaven...

John 14:2 (NKJV) – In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.

No matter the size of these dwelling places, I can guarantee they will be wonderful. If a human mind can come up with castles and mansions, it’s hard to imagine what God can come up with.

Size of New Heaven and Earth

Now I just shared with you the size of the heavenly city, but what I cannot tell you is the size of the new heavens and the new earth. I already mentioned the ridiculous size of our current universe. With God Part 2 is always so much better. The New Testament of God coming down and living within us is so much greater than the Old Testament. Scripture itself says that the glory of the latter house will be greater than the former (Haggai 2:9). God always saves the best for last. So imagine how big the new heavens will be? And imagine how amazing the new earth will be? It is debated whether God plans to renew our current earth or completely make a new one, but regardless it will be amazing.

Let’s put the size of the new heavens in perspective by looking at some verses about angels in the book of Revelation...

Revelation 10:1-3 – Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring. When he called out, the seven thunders sounded.

This angel was huge. In preparing this sermon I was shocked by how little art has been made of angels and of events in the book of Revelation. This was the one picture I could find...

PICTURE

This picture does little justice, but you can at least see that this angel is bigger than the mountains and hills behind it. How else could the Apostle John see this angel if it wasn’t huge? So let this image shift your paradigm a little. Not every angel is our size or a little bigger. Some angels are massive.

My favorite Scripture about an angel is Revelation 17:19...

Revelation 17:19 – Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, “Come, gather for the great supper of God.”

We don’t know from which perspective John is seeing this angel as he writes. If John was looking up from earth to see this angel, then the angel would probably need to be the size of a small moon to be seen in the sun. But if John was watching from heaven, then this angel is probably had to be the size of a planet in order to be seen in the sun. Some angels are huge! God is the God of the universe. His creation is not limited to making everything human sized.

Even on earth we see this. Humans are a proud species. We think of ourselves as pretty big. But have you ever stood next to a redwood tree? Look at this picture...

PICTURE

That guy looks like an ant next to the tree! Look how small he is! If God can create trees that big, then why couldn't angels be even bigger? Of course heaven must be huge!

Here is another illustration...

PICTURE

That is the size of a man compared to an argentinosaurs. At full length an argentinosaurs is 120 feet long. That's a 12 story building in length. This dinosaur is the longest to have been found so far. Remember, dinosaurs and all the animals right now are from our present earth. Who knows what types of creatures will be in the new earth and the new heaven and who knows what size and enormity they will be? Some people loved the movie Avatar because of the mystical creatures in it. The irony is that some human came up with Avatar. Can you imagine what God can come up with? He is the one who has inspired us and given us wisdom, so whatever we have come up with, it originally came from His design. I guarantee you God has some new, original work to reveal in the next life. Otherwise it wouldn't be described of as new!

John saw some wacky things: a demonic horde that looked like massive locusts with human heads, four living creatures that were each pretty bizarre, and a huge dragon representing Satan. John's view of heaven was mostly the old the heaven during our current age and the end times. He got to see the new heaven in the last two chapters of Revelation, but was only able to record a little including trees with fruit the produce healing and the river of life moving through the city.

If God could make cute puppies and kittens for us to be blessed by here on earth, imagine what could be awaiting us in heaven? Multiple visions of heaven from Scripture have witnesses seeing horses, so it's clear that there are animals in heaven. But God is also making things new. Humans love to dream up stuff, but remember it is God who inspires us...

PICTURE HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON

That's a picture from the movie How to Train Your Dragon. Who wouldn't want their own pet dragon? **Remember we worship the God who promises us that we will soar on wings like eagles** (Isaiah 40:31, NIV). I want to hold God to that verse. I want to fly!

We worship the same God who enabled the prophet Elijah to outrun chariots and who teleported Philip from one region to another and also teleported Jesus and the disciples from the middle of the sea to the dock. Those things happened because the Spirit of God was on them. Elijah himself was taken up to heaven in a chariot. Think about that, Elijah flew up to heaven in a whirlwind! Roller coaster rides have nothing on that!

And what about Jesus' resurrected body? He was able to go through walls. He was able to teleport. He was with them one moment and then disappeared. Then Jesus ascended up to heaven.

Can you imagine what it will be like to be in our resurrected bodies? First off there will be no more pain or shame or jealousy or envy or pettiness. Racism, bias, comparison, insecurity, all

those things will be completely gone. We will always feel fully accepted and fully loved. We will also no longer be limited by our earthly bodies. I doubt that while John was in the heavenly city that he had to walk from one end to the other to measure it. Heaven will be fun! It will be amazing. Even parties and celebrations originated from heaven. One multiple occasions Jesus speaks of the great feast, the great party of the coming Kingdom of God. Heaven is not going to be boring. It's going to be wonderful.

What is Truly Elusive

I began this message by sharing how elusive heaven is. It is like a treasure in a lost field or like a lost pearl. It is meant to be sought. And the greatest treasure heaven has to offer is God Himself.

Different passages in Scripture speak about a rank in heaven. According to our obedience here on earth we will receive different treasures in heaven. Those who were martyred for God will be very close to Him. Those that overcome in the last days will be taught songs that only they know and will receive garments that only they can wear.

God is such a good God that He gives us what we desire. For those that desire sin and life apart from God, God gives them what they want... a life of sin and an eternity apart from God in Hell. For those that desire Him, He reveals Himself to them. He is clear in Matthew 7:7 – Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you (NIV).

Everyone will be happy in heaven. No one will be disappointed. But Scripture is clear that certain people will be closer to God than others. The disciples all wanted to be seated next to Jesus in the coming Kingdom, and Jesus never refuted the thought of some being closer than others. We will get what we want, and those who want God the most will get the greatest treasure of all, to be close with Him.

Matthew 6:20-21 – But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Who were the people who rejoiced over Jesus the most while He was on earth? They were the blind, the lame, the poor, and the rejected. They loved Jesus' presence. In His presence they found fullness of joy. Their joy wasn't in the praise of man, it wasn't in earthly riches, or anything else of this world. Their joy was in Jesus' presence.

For those who know their true condition, who understand their true need for a savior like those we read about in the Gospel accounts, they will be the ones who treasure heaven and God's presence the most.

Matthew 5:3 – Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:10 – Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Sometimes it takes a revelation of just how desperate we are without God before we can truly appreciate heaven.

A friend of mine met with some people who do ministry with North Korean defectors on the border of China. During the meeting my friend kept noticing the quiet, smiling Korean man seated at the end of the table. Peace exuded from this man. When my friend asked about the man's background he was told that the man was a Christian North Korean defector. He had lost his wife and his kids in the prison camps of North Korea. They were apparently believers when they passed away. Now this man lives to go into North Korea and share the Gospel with people and help them defect out of the country. His job is one of the riskiest in the world, especially because of his faith. And yet this man possessed far more peace and inner joy than anyone my friend had ever met. It was clear to my friend that this man was living for heaven, and not for earth. His joy, just like Abraham, Noah, Enoch, and Abel, was in the thought of being with God. He had once been fallen and desperate in North Korea, but now possesses a love unlike any other. He knows of the greatest promise in heaven...

Revelation 21:4 – 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.

It's the poor, the victims of injustice, the blind, the lame, and the oppressed who will appreciate heaven the most. It's those who truly know their fallen condition and the goodness of God that will long for heaven the most.

Our generation needs a revelation of heaven. They need revelation of God's love in the now and in God's promises of true peace and joy in the life to come. But so many are blinded by greed, by earthly pleasures and comforts, and by sin. Matthew 5:8 says "Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God" (NIV). For most of South Korea, America, and other developed nations there needs to be a strong, sharp conviction both of our sin and God's redemptive power, and also of God's goodness that awaits us in heaven. But for North Korea and for countries that are far more desperate, just a drip of the pure water of the Gospel is enough to turn their hearts fully to God. More than the glorious and fun things that await them in heaven, they are longing for true peace and for true love.

Matthew 10:8 says, "Freely you have received, freely give" (NIV). My prayer is for the church to get a revelation of heaven so sweet, that when they speak of it to others their longing for heaven will be contagious. My prayer is that when we enter North Korea, our message of hope, of God's love, God's goodness, and God's power, will be so pure and so strong because we have meditated on it and we know it deeply within our own hearts. Our earthly pain in our lifetime has no comparison to the joy we will experience for eternity.

Invite the praise team up

In light of this message, let's reflect... let's ask God to reveal heaven to us... let's ask God for the grace to know our true condition, to be poor in spirit, so that we can truly appreciate Him... let's ask for God to show us just how big and great He is... repent and renounce any small views of God or any views that God doesn't really want to satisfy you

Every time we feel pain, we can be comforted in knowing heaven is coming.