

After Life sermon series
Heaven – John 6:35-40
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“Guys, I think he’s stopped breathing.” I was kneeling by my dad’s bedside, stroking his arm, while my brother and sister and aunt stood around the bed. I watched as my dad’s breathing got shallower, matching my breathing with his, until at last his chest rose...and fell...and didn’t rise again.

Dad died two years ago this past Wednesday, and I think about that moment every day. There’s something so sacred and holy to be with a person when their earthly life ends. I’ve had that privilege on many occasions, and each time I say a prayer of thanksgiving for that person’s life and the life to come for them when they get to Heaven.

But here’s the thing...I don’t know for sure that’s going to happen. Not because the person was such a scallywag that their eternal elevator may go down instead of up. I don’t know for sure a person goes to Heaven because I don’t know about Heaven. Now, I know what I BELIEVE about Heaven, without a shadow of a doubt, but I can’t prove it the way I could prove that my dad’s body had stopped drawing breath. Heaven is one of those places where we are called to walk by faith, not by sight.

I wanted to preach this sermon series on the afterlife because it’s probably the thing I get the most questions about. What is heaven? Where is heaven? Who goes? Who doesn’t? What about the other place? How can I ensure I don’t go there? Will I see my grandpa when I get to Heaven? What about my dog? And is it really forever? I think it’s our human nature to wonder about what happens after our chest rises...and falls...and doesn’t rise again.

Before we can begin to understand the biblical idea of Heaven, we must agree to this disclaimer: we’re embarking on a dead-end journey. There’s simply no way we can understand what Heaven is truly like. Imagine trying to describe to an unborn baby, who has only known the inside of its mother’s womb, what life on the outside is like. How do you do it? Where do you start? That’s what it’s like for us to try and describe Heaven. Paul tells the Corinthians, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” It’s simply beyond our comprehension, so we start with humility.

What do we do when we can’t understand something? We try to put it in human terms to try and describe the indescribable, like when we give God hands and feet and a heart. It’s called anthropomorphization. That’s not a wrong thing to do, but we run the risk of trivializing that which we are trying to understand.

Heaven is a perfect example of this. I think there are three ways in which we have misrepresented the biblical understanding of Heaven, and which we must be willing to discard if we’re going to try and comprehend it. The first faulty description of Heaven is geographical. We talk about Heaven as a place up there somewhere, a physical destination where people with wings sit on clouds. This understanding was contested by Yuri Gagarin, the Russian cosmonaut and first man in space who said, “I flew into space, but I did not see God there.” Our increasingly sophisticated technology has helped us understand the scope of our universe in such a way that a Heaven “up there” doesn’t hold water anymore.

The Bible contributes to this misperception, for sure. In the creation story, God creates a dome over the earth and puts stars in it and calls it “the heavens” – lower case H – but that’s different than Heaven. In our first scripture reading from Denise, the resurrected Jesus floats up into the sky and disappears behind the clouds. And in the John reading, Jesus says God will “raise up” believers on the last day. So, while the Bible seems to have an arrow pointing up to Heaven, it’s more metaphorical than astronomical.

A second way we’ve misrepresented Heaven is that we think of it chronologically. We understand eternal life only from the dimension of time. It’s a question I hear a lot: “Eternity: what am I going to do with all that time?” This was captured by Gary Larson in one of his Far Side cartoons. It shows a guy with angel wings and a bored expression sitting on a cloud, thinking, “I wish I’d brought a magazine.”

That probably describes the predominant worldview of Heaven. Streets of gold, angels with wings and harps, people sitting on clouds, forever...and ever...and ever. Some people assume their eternal life will be filled with eternal boredom.

So, we try and fail to describe Heaven geographically and chronologically. The final way we’ve misrepresented Heaven is that we’ve come to understand it selfishly. We’ve come to think that Heaven exists purely for our own pleasure, a reward for being good here on Earth. Heaven is like the ultimate retirement village; it’s an eternal weekend in Palm Springs. When we get to Heaven, St. Peter stamps our hand and we’re turned loose in this all-inclusive divine amusement park where we can eat Krispy Kremes and Reese’s Cups all day and still maintain our svelte physique. Our mistake is thinking that Heaven is about us.

The writers of the Bible, while still human, had divine inspiration in describing the Bible, which may mean their representation has more truth to it than our modern ones. In the book of Revelation, John writes about getting taken up into Heaven, where he sees God on his throne, surrounded by four living creatures. John says, “Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.”

If Heaven is a place, then John says it is a place of worship. Revelation says that Heaven is basically an eternal worship service. Now, before you roll your eyes, remember this: in Heaven, everything that we know on earth to be imperfect will be perfected. On earth we can only know imperfect joy, imperfect health, even imperfect love. But in Heaven, everything will be perfect, and our worship will be perfect worship, which could mean that everyone sings on key, every sermon is riveting, and no one ever drops a communion tray...and it never snows! Whatever our heavenly worship is like, we do know this: we were created for God, and we fulfill our highest purpose when we are worshipping our Creator. In Heaven, we will do what we were created to do. As the last verse of “How Great Thou Art!” says, “When Christ shall come with shouts of acclamation and take me home, what joy shall fill my heart. Then I shall bow in humble adoration and there proclaim, my God, how great thou art!”

The Bible also addresses the issue of the chronology of Heaven. We can only think in terms of time, but we have to remember that God is timeless. In the very beginning of Genesis, when God creates light and separates the light from the darkness, God is in essence creating a way for humans to mark time – days and nights. But God existed before time was made. A friend once described it this way: We watch a movie

from beginning to end, but God can see the whole movie at once. Heaven isn't necessarily a place, or a length of time, but a way of being, a way of existing eternally in perfect relationship with God.

Finally, we are told that Heaven is not about our wants and needs. That doesn't mean that we won't enjoy it; after all, it is the closest we will ever get to God. But Heaven is about what God wants, and what God wants more than anything, is for us to be with God.

You know how you feel when you return from a long trip and walk in the door of your house? Those familiar sights, that favorite scent, those same clothes still piled on the stairway. As theologian Dorothy Gale once said in a movie, "There's no place like home." When we die, through our faith in Jesus Christ, we don't leave home; we go home, to be with our Creator. In John's gospel Jesus says, "In my Father's house are many mansions." That doesn't mean when we die we'll get a Victorian with a two-car garage and a nice deck on the back. Jesus isn't saying we'll get our dream house; he's saying we'll be home. That brings me a whole lot of comfort when I think about how much I miss my dad. He's not here, but he is home.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells us to "fix our eyes on what is unseen, because what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." In other words, we are called to live with the promise of Heaven always on our minds, and letting those promises guide how we live each day. Heaven is not something that starts after we die, but something we can experience right now as we seek to live out our faith each and every day. Do you want to know what Heaven is like? Follow Jesus' example of loving extravagantly, forgiving endlessly, extending grace abundantly, seeking justice fiercely, welcoming and including boundlessly, serving others relentlessly, seeing the image of God in each other constantly. Another famous theologian, Belinda Carlisle, once sang, "Ooh, baby, do you know what that's worth? Ooh, Heaven is a place on Earth. They say in Heaven, love comes first. We'll make Heaven a place on Earth." Or, as we pray each Sunday: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven." May we make that our mission every day we are on this earth, until we go home.