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WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HEAVEN
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Today we move into a three-week series on heaven. We are using Randy Alcorn's book on heaven (Image of Book) as a guide and Randy has some very interesting thoughts on heaven that I think will be new to some of you. Our Adult Education will be following the sermon series on Heaven as well.

I would also like to invite you to email/text me your questions on heaven. (**Pastor Kim - xxx-xxx-xxxx on screen!**
Text her with questions about heaven! She has never been there but will try her best)

So many of our loved ones here at WVPC have gone to be with the Lord in past years, and as you think about them, and miss them, I am sure many of you have questions.

The Bible gives us *enough* information on heaven, but not reams of information, so doing this series is a bit like piecing together a jigsaw puzzle of Biblical excerpts and putting it together to form a picture that we can understand.

It seems like everyone wants to know about heaven and everyone wants to go there. Nearly 80% of all Americans believe there is a place called heaven. I find that statistic encouraging because it tells me that even in this post Christian era there is something deep inside the human heart that cries out, "There's got to be something more – there's got to be a better place."

Heaven Is Not The Default Setting For All of Humanity

We must acknowledge that it is through Jesus Christ, and only through Jesus Christ that heavens gates are opened... every person must receive Christ into their heart to enter heaven...however

I will say right now that I don't have the kind of lenses on my eyes to see someone's heart. I don't have the kind of lenses to determine if someone is saying all the right words ... but their heart is in the wrong place...

God's the only one who has that lenses to see the human heart– and God is way more merciful than I am. God is also the judge of all humanity and I am not...

So...

We need to rest in the mystery of not knowing sometimes if someone received Jesus into their heart maybe at the very last minute...before they died. We just don't know...let God be the judge in these cases...and let's trust him with it...

So I leave the “getting into heaven part” to God, and I stake it all on his mercy...I just want to say that up front

1. Heaven is an Awesome Truth

One thing we can know for certain is this – **Heaven will be wonderful! Beyond our wildest imaginings!**

Unfortunately, Hollywood has created false images in our mind about what Heaven is like.

Clouds, fuzzy foggy landscapes, people sitting down plucking ancient looking harps in white togas, staring piously into space.

Jesus bouncing off of cumulous clouds.

Angels with big sugary wings looking on with sentimental smiles.

Who wants that? Someone I know once looked at a picture like that, turned to me and said, "I'd rather be in hell!" Images conjured up by Hollywood don't look like too much fun do they?
That...for ALL ETERNITY?

Part of the problem with these Hollywood images is that they make heaven seem *less real than earth*. Sort of dreamy... Foggy, ethereal, misty, up there somewhere.

In actuality, Heaven, will be MORE real than this earth. **It is this earth that CS Lewis calls the SHADOWLANDS meaning that what we live here is the less "real" place.** A shadow of what is to come.

For instance if you see a shadow of someone's profile, let's say a silhouette, you can sort of make the person out from that image, but much of it is unclear. (***show a silhouette if possible – then the true face of the person – if possible***)

The idea is that everything we love and experience in this life will be intensified, or colored in, so to speak, in God's realm – in heaven.

Now I was working on this message for you in my office on Thursday and Jordan Eldridge...walked in and said – What are you doing? And I said Working on my heaven talk – and right off the bat he quoted to me the scripture...

Let's read it...

**What no eye has seen,
what no ear has heard,
and what no human mind has conceived —
are the things God has prepared for those who love him**

1 Corinthians 2:9

I love the old story of the rich man who, on his death bed, negotiated with God to allow him to bring his earthly treasures with him when he came to heaven.

God's reaction was that this was a most unusual request, but since this man had been exceptionally faithful, permission was granted to bring along just one suitcase.

The time arrived, the man presented himself at the pearly gates, suitcase in hand— BOTH hands, actually, since he had stuffed it with as many bars of gold bullion as would fit.

St. Peter said, "Sorry, you know the rules—you can't take it with you." But the man protested, "God said I could ... one suitcase." St. Peter checked, found out that this one would be an exception, prepared to let the man enter, then said,

"OK, but I will have to examine the contents before you pass." He took the suitcase, opened it, saw the gold bars and asked quizzically, "You brought PAVEMENT?"

Really? We walk all over this stuff....

Our sense of goodness, beauty and value pale in comparison to what God has prepared for his children

In the best selling book “**Proof of Heaven**” written by a renowned neurologist (significant) who had a very powerful NDE – Near Death Experience – **Eben Alexander** has trouble describing the place where he went when he died – heaven - because he said it was like trying to explain something here – in this world - using only half the alphabet.

We don't have words, or symbols, to even begin to communicate the joy and the beauty of what God has in store for us in Christ.

And being just a Christmas and Easter Christian he now goes to church all the time because he says that the “stained glass windows in church remind him of the colors of heaven – how do you describe these windows – its kind of an example – there aren't really words that capture their beauty especially during some seasons at around 3 or 4 in the afternoon when the sun shines through him....and he said the low organ tones remind him of the vibrating pulse of rhythm and music that was always resonating in the heavenly realms.

Randy Alcorn tells us that trying to describe the beauty of heaven, the goodness of that place that is not of this world, is like trying to explain color to someone who is blind. We don't have the conceptual framework to grasp it. Its just too good. Beyond our wildest dreams...good.

But there are some things we can grasp from the Biblical promises of heaven. First of all we know from the Bible that...

Heaven is an actual place and our true home

The Bible is very clear that there is a heaven, and that it is an actual place as much as New York City and San Francisco are places.

Listen to the words of Jesus on the night before he was crucified:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. 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. 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 (John 14:1-3

Twice in three verses Jesus calls heaven a place!

This place called heaven is just as real as any place you would call home. **It's a real place filled with real people, which is why the Bible sometimes compares heaven to a mansion with many rooms (John 14:1-3) and sometimes to an enormous city teeming with people (Revelation 21-22).**

The Bible also tells us that heaven is the dwelling place of God. His throne is there, the angels are there, and Jesus Christ is in heaven. **Philippians 3:20 says very plainly that "our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ."**

The word translated “citizenship” has an interesting background. It literally means a commonwealth, or a homeland. In the Greek it was used to describe a colony of foreigners who are residents in a foreign city, while their citizenship and allegiance is elsewhere.

So here, Paul tells us that as Christians, we are foreigners here, living in a strange land, a land that is not our ultimate home.

By telling us that our citizenship is not here, but in heaven, Scripture is reminding us of where our allegiance truly lies – of where we truly belong and where we come from.

How would it change your view of life if God gave you diplomatic papers, making you an official ambassador from Heaven?

How would it affect how you lived if you knew that those around you were looking to you to see what heaven was all about?

What God’s kingdom was like?

Some missionaries to Spain described it this way. *When we first arrived in Spain we went through culture shock. Everything was strange. The language, the food, the signs on the road, the smells and the way people acted – everything was strange to us. From there we moved to wanting to learn the language and the culture. We attended the university, we studied everyday and step by step we began to learn more and more of our host culture and language.*

At this point there comes a temptation in the life of every missionary. The temptation is to try and become a native. I saw many missionaries change their dress, change their mannerisms, change everything trying to become native. But the truth of the matter is that regardless of how much you know about a foreign culture, or how well you speak the language you will never be a native of that place.

There are many here in Cupertino who live here feeling like strangers in a strange land. So much is different!

And underneath it all, despite our best abilities to acclimate to whatever culture we find ourselves in, we all know where our homeland is, and there is something about going home to where our roots are that resonates deeply within us – many here living in Cupertino tell me they long for their homeland – Cupertino is a foreign land.

In the same way, for all of us who know the Lord, this earth is a foreign land – because our homeland is not earth – it is in heaven. We are ambassadors, or citizens of a far better place than earth –

As one writer put it, **“When we have a longing within us that cannot be satisfied in this world it means we were created for something far better.”**

Now, this doesn't mean that we are so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good.

Rather its because we have had a glimpse of heaven through knowing the Lord that we can make earthly good happen – as ambassadors of heaven.

Because we know the Lord, we can sow the seeds of heaven here. That's why the Lord's prayer has those words, **"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN."**

Heaven is Closer Than We Think

The Bible hints that heaven is not as far away as we might think, and there is no delay between the time that we die, and the time we are united with Christ.

It's very clear that the early Christians understood that they would pass immediately from this life into the presence of Christ in heaven.

Jesus tells the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise."

Paul tells us that we are **"surrounded by a cloud of witnesses"** who have gone before us and are watching us, cheering us on! But we are surrounded by them...Heaven is not that far away at all...

Hebrews 12:22-24 tells us something amazing about what the gospel has done for us:

But you have come near to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come near to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come near to God, the judge of all people, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant...,

Under the old covenant no one could come near God except under very strict conditions. HERE... **Three times the writer of Hebrews uses a Greek word that means "to come**

near” or “to approach closely”. In Christ we have been brought near to heavenly realities. Think of what he is saying:

We’re not that far from heaven.

We’re not that far from the angels.

We’re not that far from our loved ones in heaven.

We’re not that far from God.

We’re not that far from Jesus himself.

Heaven is a real place, it’s where Jesus is right now, and it’s not far away from us.

Will We Recognize Each Other In Heaven?

This is one of the most frequently asked questions about heaven.

William Pettingill, theologian, says, **“We may be sure that we shall not know less in heaven than we know here.”**

He quotes **1 Corinthians 13:12**, **“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.”**

How does God know us? Answer: **God knows us completely, intimately, thoroughly, inside and out, with nothing hidden but everything seen as it really is (Psalm 139:1-4, Hebrews 4:12).**

When we get to heaven we’ll know each other as God knows us because all the imperfections of this life will be removed.

In this life separation from God causes us to cover ourselves-not just physically but emotionally and spiritually. But when sin is finally lifted from us, then we can be

ourselves with no shame, no pain, no embarrassment, and no covering up.

Dr. Pettingill concludes that **In heaven we will know every person in heaven and all of them will be friends and loved ones to us.**

In his very helpful book on heaven, W.A. Criswell makes the additional point that **individual personality survives into eternity.** I'll be the same person then that I am now-only with all the imperfections and limitations of sin finally removed.

This is a wonderful thought-that **...the essence of who we are will remain throughout eternity-yet vastly improved by God's grace.**

Heaven Will One Day Be On Earth

This is the part of Randy's book that really holds out the truth of Scripture that one day God will restore the earth to its intended glory. Right now heaven is where our spirits go to be with God, and our bodies are left to decay here.

But again and again scripture states that there will be a day when God will return the earth to its former glory and that Heaven will indeed come to earth and all things will be restored as they were meant to be before the curse of sin separated us from God.

Somehow in some way we don't understand, when the time is right, God will restore all death to life again- and our spirit will be re-united with our body in a new way.

We are going to talk more about this next week, because this is a huge topic, and many Christians have never really grasped the scriptural foundation of the fact that one day, heaven will be here on earth – everything will be restored the way God intended it to be in the beginning – and the prayer “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” will be completely fulfilled.

We get a glimpse of this truth in the following scripture

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. Romans 8:22-25

We are going to unpack this next time, but if you have a chance to read Alcorn – especially the first three chapters, this really gets explained very well.

I would like to close with a story about my Aunt Peggy.

My Great Aunt Peggy was a different sort of woman – from her family members many of whom were missionaries, pastors, or worked in churches and led respectable lives.

I remember her as a child, with blue eye shadow, leopard tops, and long tapered nails. She usually smelled of strong perfume

She had had a rough life growing up in a very poor Italian family – my grandmother was her sister, and things didn't always go her way in adulthood. She went through several divorces and did some things that made her feel ostracized from the local church she attended. She wasn't always very nice to her kids.

I remember family members talking about her in low tones and worrying. And yet my great Aunt Peggy had a sense about God's reality that she would share with me from time to time. She would tell me of how when she was 11 months old she fell off of the balcony of their tenement apartment – they lived on the sixth floor, and below them was a cement walkway.

My grandmother confirmed this story, because she was the oldest of the six children that occupied that flat, and she was supposed to be watching Peggy that day. She had forgotten to close the door to the balcony and Peggy...or PEA as she was called then...had crawled out and fallen through the slats in the railings. Rushing to the balcony my grandmother looked over expecting to see the worst and instead saw that her sister – Peggy – had fallen into a laundry basket that a neighbor had inadvertently put down there. And Peggy was fine.

“God must have had a plan for me” Aunt Peggy would always tell me. But she would tell me with sad eyes, and often a sigh as if she was saying that she had no idea why God had spared her life.

On her deathbed as family gathered in her room, we all knew the time had come. Peggy had been very sick and hadn't spoken or woken up for several days. But just before

she died her eyes opened, and they were full of light – they sparkled as she looked at those gathered around her bed.

“Do you hear that music?” she asked. “It’s the most gorgeous music I have ever heard!”

We didn’t hear anything, but we acted like we did. Sure! That’s great.

Then suddenly she sat up, and reached out in front of her.

“There is a plan,” she declared. “And it is good. And Oh... oh...oh...look...look...look...it is so beautiful!”

She died right then reaching out for that place we’ve been talking about...that place called heaven...that is the inheritance of the children of God.

Let’s read that scripture together to close...

**What no eye has seen,
what no ear has heard,
and what no human mind has conceived —
are the things God has prepared for those who love him
— Let us pray.**