

Until We Meet Again

Daniel 7:1-18

November 4, 2007

Rev. Chris Cadenhead

Her husband's sudden death on Christmas Day left her in a state of shock. We did our best to stand by her as, over the next few weeks, she struggled just to resume the basic functions of daily life.

One day a few weeks later, almost as unexpectedly as his death, she burst into my office, tears once more streaming down her face. "I need some answers," she said with a tone of anger. "I need to know what has happened to my husband." She tossed onto my desk a religious pamphlet that she had picked up in some waiting room or another and said, "I need to know if what this says is true!"

I quickly skimmed through the small document. Published by some obscure end-times prophecy group of which I had never heard, it claimed to describe what happens to us when we die. They had linked a few Scripture verses together and concluded that when you die nothing happens until Jesus returns. According to them, between now and then you basically just lie there suspended in some state of temporary nothingness. But when Jesus comes back everyone is raised from the dead to face judgment. At that point, the faithful will gain admission into heaven and the unbelievers are sentenced to hell.

It wasn't the heaven and hell part that had my friend upset. That's about as biblically sound as you can get. What concerned her was the timing of it all. "Do you mean to tell me that my husband is just lying there in the cold hard ground!" she demanded to know.

I assured her that her beloved husband was with the Lord even as we spoke. I tried to explain to her how the God who created time is not bound by time. He exists outside of time, and so for God there was no delay between her husband's death and the return of Christ, for the sovereign God sees all of eternity as but a present moment. Of course, I realized even as I was saying these things that what I was saying was hard enough for me to comprehend, let alone try to explain to someone else, but never the less I believed then and still believe now that her husband and all other departed saints are already now caught up in the mystery of God's heavenly life.

My feeble efforts to explain this to her and to you only show how difficult it is to speak about life after death. The Bible gives us glimpses of heaven, but it stops short of explaining

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anything in precise detail. Even Paul, the great theologian who could go on for paragraphs discussing the most complex spiritual topics – even Paul had to concede that when it comes to understanding what shall become of us “now we see through a glass darkly.” Even he, when speaking of the life to come as to say, “Behold, I tell you a mystery.”

A mystery – that is what we are dealing with when we talk about heaven. A mystery is something for which there is no rational explanation, something that does not fit into any category of experience we know. To call heaven a mystery doesn't mean that we simply haven't found the right explanation yet. It means that so long as we remain on this side of eternity, such an explanation will always elude us. A little over a century ago most forms of illness were a mystery, because nothing we knew about biology at the time could account for them. But then we discovered germs, those microscopic organisms that get into our systems and attack healthy cells, and the mystery began to unravel.

That is not how it is with heaven. It doesn't matter how many Scripture verses we analyze or how much Greek and Hebrew we parse, the precise details of the life of believers after death will remain cloaked in mystery, much to the chagrin of the publishers of that little pamphlet who thought they had finally figured it out. It is something we will not understand with any perfection until we experience it ourselves.

But that does not mean that we are left with nothing to say. Just as God is a mystery and yet has chosen to reveal enough of himself to us that we can have an accurate and reliable picture of who He is, so it is with the heaven he has created for us. God tells us enough about what awaits us in our heavenly home to give us a reliable glimpse of what it is we are waiting for. What can we say about heaven with any certainty?

The first thing we must say with certainty is that heaven is a certainty, or else we are all wasting our time here. I have said several times now that heaven is a mystery. But don't confuse mystery with doubt. To say that we cannot understand something is not to say that it isn't real. Modern man arrogantly thinks that the only things that are real are the things he can comprehend and put to his use, but the Bible points us to a reality that is bigger than us. And from start to finish, the Bible tells us that existence is going somewhere - that the life we

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presently experience in all its incompleteness and brokenness is not all we were created for. As Paul writes, “if for this life only we have hope, we are to be pitied more than all men.”

Here is where we are forced to confront all this “Jesus was just a good teacher” nonsense. In our pluralistic world we are told that we cannot claim any uniqueness for Christ - that Jesus was just a good religious man who taught what good people have always taught. But if you actually listened to our gospel lesson this morning, you have to conclude that this idea is utterly ridiculous. If Jesus is just trying to be a good teacher – if he is not actually pointing us to the kingdom of heaven – then the things he taught are foolish. Blessed are the poor? Blessed are the hungry? Blessed are those who weep? Such things are only intelligible if heaven is real. If Jesus was just a good teacher concerned with giving us some insights into how to get along a little better in this life, then these are about the dumbest things he could say. If this life as we know is all there is, then C.S. Lewis is right: you have to conclude that Jesus is either a lunatic or a liar.

But this life is not all there is. For those who put their hope in Christ, there is a life beyond this one; a life that looks exactly like God intended it to be when he first created us. And while it might seem a little silly for grown, intelligent people to spend a perfectly good fall morning talking about something as other-worldly as heaven, the simple fact is that everything Jesus did was for the purpose of getting us ready for that other world.

Don’t worry. Despite what our critics might say, talking about heaven is not a way distracting ourselves from the difficulties and the responsibilities of this life. Our’s is not an escapist’s faith. If you are looking for a quick and easy way to get out of the realities of the present moment, then you’d better look elsewhere. Because while Jesus was busy pointing us to the life to come, his feet were firmly planted in this life, and he calls those who chose to follow him to treat this life as though it matters. Jesus wants us to understand that if we take our preparation for heaven seriously, then we will end up making this world a little more heavenly in the process. Why do we feed the poor? Why do we send shoeboxes filled with Christmas presents to neglected children around the world? Why do we work for justice? Why do we

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honor our commitments and tell the truth and take up our cross? It's because we know there is another world coming, and our calling is bear witness to that world in this world.

Which leads us to at least one other thing we can say with absolute certainty about heaven. Whatever heaven is like, it will be a perfection of all that is right and good about the life we have known here. One of the most frequently asked questions about heaven is whether or not we will recognize each other. To this the Bible gives a clear answer: yes. Paul uses the analogy of the seed and the grown plant that grows out it. A seed and a grown plant look very different from each other, and yet the two are intrinsically linked together – they are two different expressions of the same physical reality. He says that is how it will be with us. Our resurrection bodies will be more than a heavenly duplicate of our earthly bodies, but the two will be linked together as one reality. Which means that whoever we are now – whatever it is that makes us us down at core of our being – we will continue to be in heaven. We absolutely will know each other.

Which means that the fellowship we enjoy here and now is eternal. I think one of the reasons the Bible stresses so highly that people in church love each other is because we are going to have to put up with each other for a very, very long time. You see, when God gave us to each other and gave us the rich fellowship we share with each other, he wasn't teasing us with something that he will only take away at the moment of death. No, he was giving us something that he desires to go on for all eternity. And by sending Jesus into the world to defeat death and destroy sin, God has made that possible.

Heaven will be a perfection and a completion of all that is right and good about the life we know now. The love, the beauty, the joy, the goodness, the richness of relationship – for those who live and die in Christ these things will go on for ever and ever.

What will heaven look like? Nobody knows. The best that even the Bible can do is give us analogies and images, like pearly gates and gold streets. These are not, I believe, literal descriptions. They are far more than that: they are pointers to a reality that is bigger and more beautiful than anything our minds have ever dared to imagine, a reality that awaits those who claim it by faith.

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This morning as we share the Lord's Supper we do so in remembrance of him whose death and resurrection opened the gates of the kingdom of heaven. We also do it as a foretaste of that day when we will join together with all the saints of God at his heavenly banquet to feast forever on his riches.

In preparation for that meal, I invite you to listen prayerfully as I read the names of all the saints from this fellowship who in the last year have gone to take their place in the heavenly banquet hall: