

The Weight of Glory—Talks about Heaven
Life beyond the grave?
Ecclesiastes 12:1-8 January 8th 2023
Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers

Why this series?

I have two hymn books here, “Redemption Hymnal” which came out in 1951, about 1 in 20 of the hymns are about heaven. But “Praise! Hymnal”, which came out 50 years later in 2000 has less than 1 in 50 hymns about heaven! It would appear that 50 years ago Christians sang—and thought! - more about heaven than they do today, and this is the first reason we’re turning our thoughts and hearts towards heaven this term:

Heaven is a missing note in our churches. We don’t think, talk, or sing much about it anymore. I wonder why? Is it perhaps that life in the West has become so comfortable, that, well, heaven can wait? One of my Nigerian friends told me that since moving to the UK, 9 out of every 10 prayers he used to pray in Nigeria are now redundant! He doesn't need to pray about security, national stability, access to health care, and so on. Perhaps we do not think much about heaven in the West, because life has become so comfortable for us.

But in the New Testament, heaven is a major theme and the pre-eminent hope of God’s people: “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:18) “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” (Phil. 3:20-21)

Another reason for these sermons is that setting our hearts on heaven will make us better Christians here below. Those who say that being heavenly minded will make us of no earthly good, are mistaken. Nothing will make us more useful Christians in this world than to place the few days we are here in the light of the long eternity that lies ahead. (Ps. 90:12)

In the third place, setting our hearts on heaven will comfort us in all our sorrows here below. Like an exhausted coal miner whose thoughts of a fortnight's holiday at the beach lighten his back-breaking labours, so too, the prospect of heaven cheers us on our way, “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” (2 Corinthians 4:17) Weighed on the balance of time, says Paul, our earthly afflictions are both short and tiny when measured against the weight of glory to come. What is your greatest sorrow today? Place glory on the other scale!

Fourthly, setting our hearts on heaven will save us from earthly errors. Some of you will have heard about “health and wealth” teaching— the false idea that God wants Christians to be healthy and wealthy and successful in this world. Nowhere does the Bible teach this error, which, by the way, makes the Lord Jesus Christ the biggest failure in history, for he had no riches, he was despised and rejected by men and he suffered torture and death!

The error of health and wealth preaching is that it tries to drag what God has promised about heaven down to earth! God promises glory in heaven, not in this world: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world!” (John 16:33) Meditating on true heavenly health and without-end wealth will drive this heresy away.

Heavenly thoughts will also keep us from a more common English error, the error of putting hope in worldly things. Are you sometimes bitterly disappointed with people: friends, family—even brothers and sisters in Christ? Discouraged by your career path, depressed with your health, downhearted by the progress of your football team? At those low moments, perhaps the real problem is that we are investing too much hope in worldly things! How does CS Lewis put it?, if we turn the things of this world into dumb idols, they will “break the hearts of their worshippers.” Meditating on heaven will keep us from breaking our hearts on earthly idols.

And finally, a series of talks on heaven because, Heaven, not earth, is our true home! If you were living in a leaky, cold, draughty tent, while someone was building you a mansion, your thoughts would be on that future mansion not the miserable tarpaulin over your head!

How did Abraham put up with living in a tent, after leaving the fine grandeur of Ur of the Chaldeans, the New York City of his day, to live the rest of his life in a tent, never owning a place of his own? “Abraham was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” “They were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.” (Hebrews 11:10, 16)

Brothers and sisters, this world is not our home, we’re just a passing through! If the Holy Spirit is pleased to bless these sermons, all of us will think less about this present world and long more for the glorious world to come.

But our simple task this morning, is to remind ourselves that there is life beyond the grave; if you have doubts to persuade you; if you don’t believe to convince you. I am going to present you with 6 good reasons to believe in life beyond the grave, starting with three common-sense reasons before moving to three Christian reasons. Only God can give you the faith to believe.

Reason #1 : Most people in the world believe in life beyond the grave

Exactly 100 years ago in 1923, but on February 23rd, Howard Carter broke into the sealed burial chamber of the Egyptian king Tutankhamun, and what did he find there? Over 5000 objects had been stored alongside king Tuts mummified body? Chariots, food, chairs, you name it—why? Because the Egyptians believed he would need them in the world to come. Most people who have ever lived on this planet—not only in history past but most people alive **today**—believe in life beyond death—in the USA it’s over 70% of the population. That’s one reason to consider the possibility of life beyond the grave—you’re in the minority if you don’t believe.

Reason #2: Some scientists now believe in life beyond the grave

Reason 2, some scientists in the West are coming round to the idea of life beyond the grave, because there is a growing body of evidence that the mind keeps going when the body is nigh-on-dead; if the mind can work without the body, then why can't it keep going beyond death?

Bruce Greyson is just one of many such scientists. Like many doctors, Greyson used to believe that the mind is just the brain, so when the brain stops working, the mind ceases to exist. But one day he was called to an emergency. (He discovered, too late, when he arrived, that he had a big spaghetti stain on his striped tie—remember that detail.)

The patient had taken an overdose and was completely unconscious. Her flatmate was pacing the family lounge which was located at the end of the hallway, far away from the patient's emergency room. Dr Greyson had a long discussion with the patient's flatmate about the cause of the overdose, and went home.

The next morning he came back to the hospital, and relieved to find that the patient was making a good recovery, went over to chat to her. She said some incredible things to Greyson: Not only had she noticed the spaghetti stain on his striped tie, she had heard the conversation between him and her flatmate though they were in a different room a long distance apart — she went on to repeat all the questions the doctor had asked the flatmate and all the answers her friend had given without any mistakes.

That event set Dr Greyson (who is not a believer by the way) off on fifty year exploration of what are now called near-death experiences, where he came to the conclusion that the mind of a person (we would call it the soul) can continue to work even when the brain is nigh on dead. In the hundreds of “near-death experiences” he examined, it was common for people who had been dying or had been regarded as clinically dead, to later talk about remarkable out of body experiences:

- where their senses were heightened,
- time passed by in a very different way,
- or they encountered heavenly realms

Hundreds of scientific papers have now been written on this subject. Another doctor, Jeffery Long wrote, “After considering the strength of the evidence, I am absolutely convinced that an afterlife continues.” I don't know what you think about these reports, but they seem to show that your mind doesn't need your body to exist, which means that when your body dies, why couldn't your mind keep on living?

Reason #3: Why do we all possess desires that are never fulfilled?

Our third human reason for believing in heaven runs like this: I find a natural desire within me called thirst, which leads me to believe that there is something out there which might meet that need—drink. I find myself with a natural desire for friendship —which leads me to reason that there may be

someone out there who may be able to meet that need. To every need within, it is reasonable to think that there is a comparable something out there which could meet that need.

Well, do we not find within our hearts a longing for a perfect satisfaction where all the good desires of the human heart are met? Or to put this longing in another way, do we not find that this world's greatest joys do not completely satisfy our hearts? There is still something missing? The best gifts of this life, in the words of CW Lewis, "...are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited."

Why would you and I have the desire for heaven built into our hearts, if in fact there was no place called heaven?

Reason #4: The Old Testament teaches life beyond the grave

I include this reason, because some people say that only the NT teaches life beyond the death. It is true that the flower of eternal life bursts into full bloom in the New Testament, with the Gospel of Jesus Christ: "Christ Jesus, has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (2 Timothy 1:10) But the bud of eternal life to be found everywhere in the OT: "Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Psalm 23:6) "I know that my redeemer lives and that in the end he will stand upon the earth, And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (Job 19:25-27)

Reason #5: The New Testament teaches life beyond the grave

The first Christians and every true Christian and every true church and every reliable creed down the ages has believed that our lives continues beyond the grave, that death is *not* the end.

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, 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." (Matthew 6:19)

"For me to live is Christ, to die is gain... I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ which is better by far!" (Philippians 1)

"16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words." (1 Thessalonians 4)

“Praise be to the God an Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade,. Kept in heaven for you...” (1 Peter 1)

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning, or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21)

We believe in life beyond the grave because the apostles of Jesus Christ believed it, lived it and taught it.

Reason #6: Jesus rose from the dead!

But supremely, we believe in life beyond the grave, because Jesus Christ rose victoriously from the dead never to die again!

His body was certainly dead when it was placed in the cold tomb on Good Friday evening, but early on that first Sunday morning, the tomb was found empty because his dead body had been made alive; the same body but glorified with new powers.

For 40 whole days, many people saw him, on their own, in groups of a few to over 500, and all of them were totally convinced that the same Jesus who had suffered and died was now alive!

We believe in life beyond the grave, most of all, because Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, rose from the dead.

Conclusion and Challenge

Last year we lost three lovely saints from our church family, our sister Pat Wilson, our brother Joe Grew and just three Sundays ago, our sister Margaret Prosser. We miss them all, but we know they are in a far better place, and so we grieve with hope! “In my Father’s house are many rooms... I am going there to prepare a place for you.” (John 14)

What about you? One day you will die, and I will die. That’s not a morbid thought, it’s a fact of life, the only certain fact that lies in our future! Solomon urges everyone to remember their creator before the silver cord is severed or the golden bowl is broken. Let us all prepare for that day while there is time, and we do that by believing in Jesus Christ who says to all of us:

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:26)