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Bridgeway Church
Hebrews #32

Heaven on Earth. Literally!
Hebrews 11:8-16

Some of you probably think that I take a certain perverse pleasure in bursting your deeply cherished doctrinal bubbles or in slaying your sacred cows when it comes to certain long-held beliefs about the Bible. I don't. Well, o.k., so maybe I do, just a little bit. But my real pleasure comes from providing you with a clear explanation of the truth of God's Word, and if in the process of doing so I have to call into question some of the things you may have been incorrectly taught in the past, well, so be it.

In any case, I find myself in the position this morning where, in order to be faithful to the biblical text, I must challenge a common belief among many, if not most, Christians about *heaven*. Let me explain.

One of my favorite hymns growing up is titled, "When the Roll is Called up Yonder I'll be There." One verse reads as follows:

"On that bright and cloudless morning when the dead in Christ shall rise,
And the glory of His resurrection share;
When His chosen ones shall gather to their home beyond the skies,
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there" (James M. Black, 1893).

Or here's another example, as found in the hymn, "The Old Rugged Cross." I love it, but it ends on the same misguided theme as well:

"Then He'll call me some day, to my home far away,
Where His glory forever I'll share."

Both of these hymns and countless others are based on the idea that the final and eternal destiny of Christian men and women is a spiritual or immaterial world far beyond this present earth,

perhaps in some distant galaxy of the universe, where we will all live in a disembodied or non-physical condition. This other-worldly spiritual realm is what most Christians refer to as heaven.

This reminds me of something A. W. Tozer is alleged to have said: ***“Christians don’t tell lies; they just go to church and sing them.”*** Of course, we are diligent about the biblical accuracy of what we sing at Bridgeway. Not all churches, however, can say the same thing.

There is, of course, a small measure of truth in this concept of heaven. So let me take just a moment and talk about what happens when a Christian dies.

When a Christian man or woman dies physically, he or she enters immediately into the presence of Christ in heaven. In other words, if I were to drop dead of a heart attack in five minutes my physical body would fall lifeless to the ground and eventually decay in the ground after you kind people buried me. But my spirit or soul or what we might call the ***immaterial dimension of my identity*** would pass instantly into the presence of Jesus Christ. ***All Christians who thus die physically are very much alive spiritually with Jesus. They are mentally and emotionally conscious and filled with joy and delight as they worship the Lamb of God around the throne in heaven.***

This is what Paul meant in Philippians 1:21 when he said that “to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Or again in 2 Corinthians 5:8 Paul said that “to be away from the body” is to be “at home with the Lord.” And there are numerous other texts that teach us the same thing. So, yes, in one sense ***it is true that when you die physically you enter into a heavenly and altogether spiritual form of existence until such time as Christ returns to this earth to consummate his kingdom.*** Theologians call this ***the intermediate state*** because it comes *in between* our present life on this earth and our future life in eternity.

But when Christ does return all mankind will experience the resurrection and transformation and glorification of their bodies. Thus ***we will live in glorified physical bodies forever; literally, forever.*** The future that awaits all who believe in Jesus is not an immaterial, non-physical, purely spiritual existence in a distant world somewhere in the universe, but a redeemed life ***on this earth*** after it has been restored and glorified and all sin, corruption, and evil have been eradicated. We will not “wing our flight to worlds unknown” as the traditional hymn puts it but will ***spend our eternity on this earth, a renewed earth, a glorified earth, where God’s purposes for his creation will be ultimately fulfilled.***

Thus the popular image of a shapeless, amorphous Christian floating in some ethereal spiritual fog, perhaps flying from one cloud in the heavens to another, is due more to Greek dualist

philosophy than to the biblical text. The people of God will spend eternity in a body; albeit a glorified and resurrected body, but not for that reason any less physical or material in nature.

What I'm saying, then, is that the final destiny of redeemed mankind is in glorified, physical bodies on a glorified, physical earth. We will live forever on the New Earth portrayed in Revelation 21-22, not in some distant, other-worldly, and ethereal heaven.

So, I know what you are thinking. “Sam, are you telling us that we don’t go to heaven when we die?” Now, if you were listening carefully you know that I said no such thing. I said we go to a spiritual heaven in a disembodied condition known as the intermediate state until such time as Christ returns to this earth and we receive our glorified, physical bodies.

But ***God has always made it his purpose to redeem and glorify this earth as much as he will redeem and glorify your body.*** We will live on a redeemed and renewed earth forever. It is called in the Bible the New Earth. But ***this New Earth is Heaven!*** So it isn’t so much that we go to heaven as it is that heaven comes to us. Look at a couple of biblical texts that teach this:

“For behold, I create a new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind” (Isa. 65:17).

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5).

“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:19-23).

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:10-13).

“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:9-10).

“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. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God’” (Rev. 21:1-3).

What these and other texts are teaching us is that ***when Christ returns to consummate his kingdom and launch eternity he will bring heaven to earth***. This earth will be redeemed. All evil will be eradicated. The curse will be lifted from creation. There will be no tornados, earthquakes, hail storms, tsunamis, or nuclear waste dumps. There will be no weeds or thorns that infest the ground. We will live forever and ever in the presence of Christ on this glorified and restored earth, the new earth. This is truly heaven on earth. Literally!

And no book of the Bible makes this clearer than does the book of Hebrews. We find it in multiple places. Look with me at several important texts, one of which is the passage we are studying today:

“[Abraham] was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10).

“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” (Heb. 11:13-16).

“For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:14).

The Eternal Fulfillment of the OT Land Promise

At the close of that period we call the Old Testament or Old Covenant we are left with an as yet unfulfilled prophetic hope of God's earthly rule over his people according to the promise given to the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is clear to me that the promised inheritance was neither forfeited by the people of God nor fulfilled. So what options are left? There seem to be two.

Some believe that the land was only figurative or symbolic in purpose. That is to say, it was a prophetic foreshadowing of heavenly or spiritual blessings which are either being fulfilled now by the Church or will be fulfilled in the age to come. The earthly Canaan, therefore, was never designed to be literally possessed as an eternal inheritance, but was to serve as a model of a future blessing, heavenly and spiritual in nature. I understand the reasoning behind this view, but I think it is wrong.

Indeed, I would argue that ***the OT land promise will yet be fulfilled, literally and on the earth.*** But the question is "When"? I believe that a glorious earthly consummation of the kingdom rule of Christ is yet to occur in fulfillment of the OT promises. But again, when? Many believe it will occur in what is known as the millennium, a period of 1,000 years that follows the Second Coming of Christ.

My belief is that the OT prophetic promise of God's rule over his people in the land will be fulfilled in what the Bible refers to as the New Earth. According to this view, the OT promise of the Messiah's reign among God's people in the land of Canaan will be literally fulfilled. It will be fulfilled, however, not on the present, unredeemed earth, and not merely in Canaan, but on the New Earth described in Revelation 21-22.

The relationship between this present earth and the New Earth is one of both continuity and discontinuity, even as there is between our present, corruptible bodies and our future, incorruptible and glorified bodies. We will be in eternity the same, though transformed, people that we are now. Yet, the heaven and earth to come are also said to be "new" (*kainos*), a word which typically indicates newness of quality, not time.

Let me begin with a question: How do we explain that when Abraham finally arrived in the land of promise he only *sojourned* there, as *a stranger and exile*, “as in a foreign land” (Heb. 11:9, 13)? In other words, how could Abraham have received the land of Canaan as an inheritance when it was a country in which he led no settled existence and to which he made no claim of ownership? We need not speculate an answer, for the text provides its own in v. 10, “*for* he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”

What is this city? It is that city which God has prepared for them (v. 16), mentioned again in Hebrews 12:22 as ***the “city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.”*** See also Hebrews 13:14, where we read that “here [that is, on this present earth] we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” This surely refers to the heavenly Jerusalem of Hebrews 12:22, the city which has foundations (v. 10).

But here is the crucial key. In Revelation 21:1-2, especially v. 2 we read that ***John “saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God”*** onto the new earth (cf. 21:9-11). The reason, then, why Abraham was a sojourner and exile in Canaan was because he viewed that earthly land to be a type of the heavenly and more substantial land or country. The land of Canaan thus pointed beyond itself, but not to some non-physical, non-earthly spiritual domain out there in the clouds. It pointed, instead, to the New Earth!

The point is that the patriarchs did not seek in the physical land of Canaan their everlasting possession. The focal point of the OT land promise was on *land*, to be sure, but on ***the heavenly land (or “country”, Heb. 11:16) of the new earth with its central feature, the New Jerusalem.*** Abraham, the one to whom the land of Canaan was originally promised, is said to receive the fulfillment of that promise, not in geographic Canaan, but in the heavenly Jerusalem. ***Abraham and his seed (that’s us) are heirs, not merely of Canaan, but of the entire world!*** Indeed, according to Hebrews 11:9-10, it was Abraham's expectation of permanent and perfect blessing in the heavenly city that enabled him to submit patiently to the inconvenience and disappointments during his pilgrimage in Canaan.

Look again closely at Hebrews 11:13-16. The patriarchs themselves “acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth” (v. 13). They died without receiving the promise, having only seen it from afar. Their hope was not focused on any this-earthly-inheritance, but, as v. 16 indicates, on ***“a better country, that is, a heavenly one.”*** The Abrahamic land promise, as well as prophecies such as Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; 32:15; 35:2,7,10; 11:9, which speak of a restoration of the cosmos, are to be fulfilled on the new earth in the new creation.

I hope that brings some clarity to what the Bible says about our eternal destiny. And I especially hope that you aren’t disappointed. I’m sure that if your eternal happiness depends on you being

able to explore the galaxies above, God will make that happen for you. But ***God's purpose from the beginning of creation has always been that he would dwell forever with his redeemed, glorified people on a redeemed and glorified New Earth.***

Five Fundamentals of Faith

Before we leave this passage, I want to identify several elements of faith as it pertains to how we live our Christian lives. [I was greatly helped here by comments from a sermon preached by John Piper, "The Faith of Noah, Abraham, and Sarah," June 22, 1997.]

First, it's important to remember that although we are saved by faith alone in Christ, we must continue in that same faith all the way to the end of life. It is that on-going, enduring faith in God and his promises that is being described in Hebrews 11. The whole of our Christian existence, from the time of our being born again by the Spirit until the time that we are transformed and glorified and given our resurrection bodies is a walk and talk of faith.

We see this in Hebrews 10:39 where the faith that first saves is a faith that must be preserved and maintained in our hearts. This is why the apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 1:5 that by God's power we "are being guarded ***through faith*** for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

The second thing to remember is that our faith is always grounded in and focused on some promise of God to us. Faith, as I explained last week, is warranted confidence and justified trust in God to do what he has promised to do. We see this in the example of Noah back in v. 7. He believed God that "events as yet unseen" would eventually come to pass. That event, of course, was the flood.

Likewise, Abraham journeyed to the land of "promise" (v. 9). He and his sons were "heirs" of "the same promise" (v. 9). As we'll see next week, Sarah is singled out because when God "promised" a child to her she trusted him to be faithful.

So what are some of the promises God has made to us that call for a response of faith?

"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

"And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19).

“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32)

“He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (Isa. 40:29-31).

“Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isa. 41:10).

The third thing to remember is that in the experience of faith there is always a measure of perplexity. Noah had to have been perplexed by the promised warning of a flood that would kill all living mankind, aside from his family. Abraham was certainly perplexed because we are told in v. 8 that “he went out, *not knowing* where he was going.” It would have been easy and even understandable if Noah had said to God, “Yeah, I’ll believe it when I see it.” Sarah could easily have thought only of her dead womb, but instead, in the midst of her understandable perplexity, she trusted God to be “faithful” to his word. Seemingly insurmountable circumstances and risks notwithstanding, faith looks beyond the merely human element to the God who makes a promise. And so must we.

Fourth, once you believe you have to act on it. The “faith” described in Hebrews 11 is not some barren or static state of mind, some cold and lifeless idea in your brain. *Faith works.* Noah believed God’s warning and then built an ark. Abraham believed God’s promise and packed his bags. Sarah believed God’s word and “got the diapers and the crib ready” (Piper), or so it would appear. The point is that with all these people of whom we read in Hebrews 11, the sort of “faith” that pleases God invariably changes not only what goes on inside your head and heart, it changes the way you live. It gives direction to what you do.

Fifth, a life of faith makes God proud of you! Why do I say this? Look at v. 16. This is a remarkable statement. That God should say to any of us, “*I’m not ashamed to be your God*” is breathtaking! Perhaps we should rephrase this more positively and read it as if God were saying, “I’m actually quite pleased and proud to be your God!” That makes it even more remarkable.

On what basis did God say this to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Sarah? You may recall that from the burning bush, as described in Exodus 3:6, God said to Moses: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” So he’s obviously not ashamed to

be linked or identified with such men. So, on what basis might he say it to you and me? The answer is right there in v. 16.

Notice that God “has prepared for them [and for us] a city” (v. 16b). This is the New Jerusalem that will come down upon the New Earth. This is a reference to our eternal home.

And what was their response to this marvelous promise of a New and Glorified City that would be established on the New and Glorified Earth? They “*desired*” it!

The word “*therefore*” in the middle of v. 16 points back to the first half of the verse. In other words, it is *because* these OT patriarchs “desired” a better country that God is not ashamed of them. It isn’t because they donated huge sums of money to a building project. It isn’t because their names regularly appeared in the local newspaper. It isn’t because they were pastors or members of a mega-church.

God is pleased with and proud of them, and will be so of you and me too, because they “desired” what God had promised. They “desired” the New Jerusalem (that’s the “city”) on the New Earth (that’s the “better” and “heavenly” country). In other words, their hearts were set not on the things of this life but on the promised glories and beauties of the next life, our eternal life. They desired God over anything this world could offer. They preferred him to everything else. Desiring God honors God. It shines a light on his worth and value. It declares that he is our ultimate and most precious treasure.

Can you say this of yourself? What is the focus of your desires? Before you answer, perhaps you should ask yourself the question, “Does my life reflect the priority of my desires? Could anyone see from the choices I make and how I conduct myself and how I use my time and money that I desire God and his eternal city and all its blessings above everything else?” If your desires are like theirs, God will be just as pleased with and proud of you as he was of them.

Thus, God will be pleased with you and proud of you to the extent that your “desire” calls attention to his superior worth and value. When your treasure is God and what God has done for you in promising a city and country infinitely superior to anything we might experience now, in this life, he is not ashamed to be called your God!