

When Heaven Comes to Earth

Intro. For the past three Sundays we've been talking about Heaven. We've considered the challenge of **Col. 3:1, 2** which says, **Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.** I think most of us would agree that Heaven doesn't occupy much space in our daily thought processes, but hopefully more this August. Yet in the last decade some have been awakened to the fact that Heaven has fallen off the church's radar. In response, they've researched and written some helpful volumes. But this neglect is unfortunate and damaging since Heaven is our true home and the Lord has so much to say about it. God's intention is that our lives be incentivized and hope-filled as we anticipate life in this place Christ is preparing for us. But without a clear idea of what God has revealed, we're like a runner without a finish line. We're like Florence Chadwick, that long distance swimmer, who in sheer exhaustion quit swimming just ½ mile from her goal. At a news conference she told reporters, *"All I could see was the fog...I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it."* So during these final weeks of summer, I've been asking God to help us see, not what men imagine Heaven to be, but what God has revealed about it.

Last time we emphasized that Heaven is REAL. I urged you to remember this every time you touched something solid. Did you do that? Because Heaven is REAL, we have a *perspective* on the things of life the unbeliever can't have. As Paul said to the Philippian believers, **our citizenship** is there. (**Phil. 3:20**) Then too, the certainty of a REAL Heaven helps us persevere in life's trials and temptations because as **Rom. 8:18** declares, **our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.** And thirdly, because Heaven is REAL Christians have a basis for ordering our priorities. Remember, Jesus taught us to **store up for ourselves treasures in heaven and not on earth...**(**Matt. 6:19, 20**) If Heaven is real, eternal investments make total sense!

To bring Heaven a little closer and to make it more REAL to us, I want us to think about Heaven in relation to the Divine Purpose / A Divine Principle / and the Divine Program. With these in mind, I think we'll be in a better position to think right about the life after this life. Let's first consider...

1. Heaven in Relation to the Divine Purpose – As we found last time, me-centered humanity tends to view the world revolving around us. Secularists imagine Heaven in those terms...a pleasure palace...a smorgasbord...a place of release from all our hang-ups. In other words, Heaven is Utopia and the Sweet Isle of Nowhere where everything is geared for the betterment and enjoyment of the human race. While those ideas contain some shreds of truth...the basic premise is wrong. The idea that Heaven is all about us, misses the essential purpose behind everything God creates and does. **Col. 1:16** corrects this notion when it says, **by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.** It's a good starting point to remember that Heaven is essentially God's place. It's the dwelling place He created for Himself long before we came along. The Heavenly city is His headquarters and the unique place designed to put His glory on full display. Yet here's the thing...from the beginning of time, God planned to share this unspeakably glorious place with angels and redeemed people like you and me. His redemption plan makes it possible for fallen sinful humanity to live with Him forever.

There's a magnificent 70 acre estate in Akron, OH called Stan Hywett Hall and Gardens. It's nicknamed "the house that rubber built" because it was built by the Seiberling family who founded that little mom and pop operation called, Goodyear Tire and Rubber. The house was finished in 1915 as a monument to their overwhelming success. The long, sprawling Manor House has 64,500 square feet of floor space which includes six floors at various points of the layout. The floor plan includes a large music room / an indoor swimming pool / a formal dining room that seats up to 40 / 5 guest bedrooms with adjoining full bathrooms and walk-in closets, and 8 live-in servants' bedrooms.

It's not quite as spacious as the Biltmore which has 178,926 square feet of floor space, but it's certainly no bungalow or starter home! Jesus said, **In my Father's House are many rooms.** Houses like the Biltmore and Stan Hywett are spacious and spectacular, but they can't even begin to compare to the **Father's House** in Heaven! And listen...if you have trusted Jesus, you have a room assignment there. Your nameplate is no doubt affixed to the door already.

Yet here's the unique thing about Stan Hywett Hall...the Seiberlings had a vision beyond building a house for their own enjoyment. Inscribed in stone above the front door are these words, "Non nobis solum", which means "Not for us alone". When the house was still on the drawing board, the Seiberlings planned to share their estate with generations after them. In keeping with this vision, they donated Stan Hywett to a non-profit organization formed for the preservation of the estate. It's now an historic museum and country estate open seasonally to the public. If you're ever down Akron way, I recommend you pay a visit. I promise...you won't be disappointed.

The generosity and vision of the Seiberlings is just a minute reflection of the eternal plan and purpose of God. Their purpose in building this estate was to create a showcase of their success and to share it with others. If we were to distill all the Bible says about God's eternal purpose in a summary statement, it might go something like this...*God's eternal purpose is to be glorified...to be universally recognized and praised for who He is and all that He has done.* (repeat)

To that end, **Psa. 19** says, **The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.** God created the vast magnificent universe to cause us to look up and think, "*Holy cow... How vast and magnificent must our Creator be?*" In the same way, we know that every sinner saved by faith in Christ is a new creation. **II Cor. 5:17** - **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation...** **Eph. 2:10** says, believers are **God's workmanship.** So, like the creations of a gifted artist, each believing sinner is an exhibit showcasing the mercy, love and grace of God. One day the whole universe will know our story and it will bring endless glory to God, our Savior. **Eph. 1:11, 12** say, **In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.** Make a note of that. God's ultimate purpose for saving us / including us in His family / and taking us into His eternal home, is so that we **might be for the praise of His glory.** This same eternal purpose is stated in **I Pet. 2:9** - **But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.**

Something far greater than our Oscar or Emmy Awards is happening in the universe. The world doesn't revolve around humanity and that's a good thing. It revolves around God and His purposes. God is working out His plan to be glorified for who He is and all that He has done. At the heart of this eternal purpose is Jesus. The sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary's cross is the greatest display of divine love and grace the universe will ever witness. Even the angels are watching and mystified by it all.

Psa. 24:3-5 - **Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?** Let me answer that...Apart from the moral cleansing and forgiveness of God's salvation...nobody I know! Yet God in Christ cleanses and forgives sin. He does this in keeping with His eternal purpose to share His House and His glory with sinners like us. I mean face it...aside from His grace, we have neither qualifications nor justification to be there. In fact, our sin has given God every reason to deny us entry. But He saved us by His grace and made us fit to enter His kingdom. Like King David who took in Mephibosheth, the crippled grandson of Saul, his enemy...we will be welcomed in the Father's house and seated at His table forever. This is what makes grace so amazing! As declared in **Eph. 2:7**, He saved us **in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.** So that's Heaven in relation to the divine purpose.

It's rooted in an eternal purpose far more significant than our comfort and pleasure. It's rooted in God's will and His good pleasure. In the glimpse of Heavenly worship found in **Rev. 5:9** we hear this song of praise to Jesus...**And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation."** Notice, Jesus purchased or redeemed people **for God**...for God's pleasure and God's purposes. And here's the amazing thing...God's good pleasure is to give us the desires of our hearts...to bless us...to satisfy our longings. Just like an earthly father who loves to give good gifts to His children, we'll forever glorify God for His goodness.

2. Heaven in relation to Divine Principle – Did you know that God is employed in the ReMax business? I'm not talking about real estate so let me explain. So much of what God does begins with the prefix R-E. Think about it...He's the active agent in redemption / renewal / regeneration or rebirth / reconciliation / resurrection / restoration / re-gathering / and revival. Each of these biblical reverbs anticipate *return to an original condition that was ruined or lost*. And when God does these things He does them to the Max, which means, they're done completely, not partially. In *redemption* God paid the full price to buy back what once belonged to Him by virtue of creation...namely you and me. In *renewal* God remakes something so that it's better than the original. In *regeneration* or *rebirth* God breathes spiritual life into lives once spiritually dead. In *reconciliation* God brings together things that are separated. In *resurrection*, God restores physical life into someone no longer alive. In *revival*, God *restores* freshness and vitality to a life where staleness and apathy have taken over.

Now this principle is vitally important to our thoughts about Heaven. You see, God isn't going to completely obliterate and eliminate the work of His hands and start over again. He won't scrap this fallen world altogether...though He could. That isn't His way. I mean, God didn't do that when He saved you, did He? **II Cor. 5:17** says, **Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!** I'd be willing to bet the farm that you looked pretty much the same the day after you were saved as you did the day before. Am I right about that? Yet something very real happened to make you new when you trusted Jesus...a miracle of grace occurred. An inward change happened that over time expresses itself outwardly.

Titus 3:5 declares this inward work of grace. It says, **He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.** Notice two of these re-verbs...**re-birth** and **re-newal**. Jesus said, **rebirth** is what every human being needs...even religious people like Nicodemus. In no uncertain terms He said, **"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."** This happens to each sinner who believes God's Word and trusts Christ to save them.

The second re-verb that appears in **Titus 3:5** is **re-newal...renewal by the Holy Spirit**. At the moment of salvation, the Spirit of God enters the believing sinner and takes up permanent residence. He begins to effect change from the inside out. This is an important distinction between the old covenant of law and the new covenant of grace. Through Ezekiel the Lord said, **I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God. – Ezek. 11:19, 20**

And consider the Flood in Noah's day. When God sent the Flood because the earth had become corrupted by violence and wickedness, He didn't annihilate the earth or the human race. He wiped the earth's surface clean by the floodwaters while preserving Noah and his family. Life after the flood was literally, life resurrected, restored, refreshed and renewed.

We see the same principle in effect with respect to God's dealings with Israel because they turned their backs on Him. In **Jer. 57:15-18** God speaks to His wayward people...

For this is what the high and lofty One says--He who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry, for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me-- the breath of man that I have created. I was enraged by his sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his willful ways. I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him... Once again, in justice God has promised to punish Israel but in mercy He promises to never completely annihilate the nation. He promises to **revive** and **restore** those who return to Him in humility and brokenness. The same is true for every sinner who humbles themselves.

Now this principle is important to our understanding of Heaven. In **Isa. 65:17** the Lord said, "**Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.** Peter echoed this promise with further detail when he wrote, **But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare...That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.** Then in **Rev. 21:1** John wrote, **Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.**

When we read these verses, it's tempting to think God will annihilate His creation and replace it. Phrases like **disappear with a roar / destroyed by fire / laid bare / destruction / the elements melt / and passed away**, all seem to indicate total annihilation. In one fiery atomic cataclysm, it would seem that God promises to vaporize the present heavens and earth and create new ones. Maybe you heard and believed it would happen that way.

But what about God's re-verbs? These words emphasize the fact that God always sees things in the light of what He intended them to be. He always seeks to re-store things to their original design and condition. Redemption and restoration brings Him greater glory than if He wiped His hands of us, destroyed us all and created a new race. It displays not just His justice, but His amazing grace. It opens God's heart to a watching universe. God's reclamation plan in saving us is declared so beautifully in the old hymn entitled, Hallelujah, What a Savior. Remember those lines? "*Man of sorrows, what a name, for the Son of God who came. Ruined sinners to reclaim, Hallelujah, What a Savior! Reclaim...*there's another re-verb. I tell you, these re-verbs found all through the Bible.

Stephen J. Lawson writes, "*Whatever sin has touched and polluted, God will redeem and cleanse. If redemption does not go as far as the curse of sin, then God has failed (and Satan has won). Whatever the extent of the consequences of sin, so must the extent of redemption be.*"

Espousing this same view, Albert Wolters wrote, "*God hangs on to his fallen creation and salvages it. He refuses to abandon the work of His hands – in fact, He sacrifices His own Son to save His original project. Humankind, which has botched its original mandate and the whole creation along with it, is given another chance in Christ; we are reinstated as God's managers on earth. The original good creation is to be restored.*"

Jesus said this principle would be in play when He returns. **Matt. 19:28 - Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.** The verb translated **renewal** is paligenesia which combines two Greek words to signify, "*new genesis*" or "*coming back from death to life.*" Jesus could have said, "*at the destruction of all things*" or "*at the abandonment of all things,*" but He didn't. He said, "**at the renewal of all things.**"

As a kid I enjoyed assembling plastic models. But when I first started, I was in too much of a hurry to get the model done. Lacking the patience needed to complete one step at a time, I'd start gluing parts to other parts where the glue hadn't yet dried and they'd come apart. I'd glue painted parts while the paint was still sticky. I remember one such model my grandfather gave me for Christmas. It was a tiger's head about the size of a volleyball. I tried to assemble the whole thing in one afternoon. But lacking any inner support, the head caved in before I was finished. With sticky fingers, I tried to reassemble it. After several attempts, I gave up and tossed the sticky mess back into the box it came in. The day ended in frustration and failure! I had no further plans for that tiger's head.

But a few mornings later, I awoke to a surprise. There on my dresser was the tiger head completely assembled and ready for paint. My father realized what had happened and spent a couple of evenings re-assembling it. I was impressed! What I couldn't do, my father did for me.

Isn't that like salvation and the renewal of all things? We couldn't correct our brokenness or fix our fallen world, so our Heavenly Father redeems us and promises to put things back together. We could only dream about Heaven on earth, but through the work of Christ, God will make it happen. This is what Peter alluded to in **Acts 3:21** when he said, **He (Jesus) must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.** The emphasis on what God plans to do is always expressed by one of those re-verbs. It's God's way. It's the method that brings the most recognition and praise to the magnificence of His grace and power.

But make no mistake. As God did at the time of the flood, He will destroy and remove every unredeemable thing on the surface of planet earth. What He did by water in Noah's time, He'll do by fire the next time. He will purify the earth of all that is offensive to Him. The junk yards we call cities will be melted down. The earth will be **laid bare** like a fresh canvas. John Piper argues that "*what will pass away is the present condition of the heavens and earth*", not the created entities themselves. We might compare what God plans to do to a caterpillar that dies. The caterpillar **passes away**, its outward form is destroyed...but from the chrysalis emerges a beautiful butterfly. Jesus said the same is true of a kernel of wheat or corn. He said, "**I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.**" - **Jn. 12:24** The lifeless looking seed is destroyed, but from within comes something new and very much alive. That seems to be the meaning of the terms that describe the destruction of the present heavens and earth.

Yet my point is this...When we apply this principle to the new Heaven and Earth it helps us understand what Heaven will be like. Too often we've thought of Heaven as something "other" than the scenes we so admire on earth. We tend to think of Heaven as a place enshrouded in clouds or a gem studded city. In all honesty, I've never been very excited or incentivized by images like these. But what excites me is the fact that Heaven will be the best of earth returned to perfect conditions like they were in the Garden of Eden. Remember, God looked at all He made before the fall and said it was "**very good.**" Imagine earth restored and free from the curse...now that's an exciting prospect! Imagine these old bodies of ours redeemed / regenerated / resurrected / renewed / and revived...now that's something worth shouting about!

3. Heaven in relation to the divine Program - When we attend a play or a concert we're often given a program that presents the order of service...the sequence of things planned. That's what God has provided through the prophetic Scriptures. He's given us the order of events that will unfold in relation to the life after this life. As we finish I want to briefly put Heaven in a chronological framework.

On solid biblical grounds we believe the next major event on God's timetable is the resurrection of the dead in Christ and the rapture or sudden removal of the Church. We base that belief on Christ's promise in **Jn. 14:1-3** and the subsequent revelation given to Paul in **I Cor. 15** and **I Thess. 4:13-18**.

Other passages explain that the souls of Christians who die immediately enter the Lord's presence but their bodies go into the grave. The soul...that is, the real life of a person, is forever conscious either with the Lord in the case of a believer, or separated from Him. We see this illustrated in **Lk. 16** in the case of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar and declared in **II Cor. 5** and **Phil. 1**.

Having taught a SS lesson from this passage, I heard of a teacher who asked her young students which man they'd rather be, the rich man or the beggar. One boy raised his hand and said, *"Before I die I'd like to be the rich man. But after I die I'd like to be the beggar."* Every class has a kid like this!

So the next event is resurrection and the rapture. The verses that accompany the description of these events offer these encouragements...**Don't let your hearts be troubled / And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words. – I Jn. 14:1 / I Thess. 4:17b, 18.** Today Jesus is in Heaven where He is seated at the Father's right hand. From Heaven He will descend and to rapture us. Church Age believers will be with Him from that moment on and forever. Where? In Heaven in the Father's House...in the place Jesus is preparing for us right now.

For the next 7 years, the Tribulation will take place on earth. By means of horrific judgments, God will prepare the earth and its inhabitants for His Son's return...the event called the Second Coming. The Tribulation will end with the Great Battle of Armageddon when Christ destroys all who refuse Him and resist His Kingdom. When He returns, the NT says we will return with Him. (**Col. 3:3**) At that time Jesus will establish His actual kingdom on earth...a kingdom that will last for 1,000 years. His kingdom will be populated by believing Jewish and Gentile survivors of the Tribulation and resurrected believers from the OT era. During this 1,000 year period, Satan will be bound. Nobody will be able to say, "the devil made me do it." Conditions on earth will be greatly improved but the curse will not be entirely lifted. Though different ideas are suggested to explain this, it would seem that our permanent home will be in the Heavenly city which may be like a satellite city that hovers over the earth. From the Heavenly city, Christ will rule over the earth and we will rule with Him. This suggests that glorified bodies may allow us to have access to both realms.

At the end of the 1,000 years Satan will be released. He will lead a rebellion against Christ that will be put down almost before it begins. This will be followed by the resurrection of those who rejected God and the Great White Throne Judgment where unbelievers are judged and condemned to Hell. **Then** writes John, **I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. – Rev. 21:1, 2.** It's at this time that the Father's House and our Heavenly home will descend to the new earth...an earth that is completely renewed and set free from sin's curse. Now we've seen and experienced some wonderful things down here...but...we haven't seen anything yet!

But here's the big point. Once believers enter the REAL place that Christ has prepared for us...that place will be our home forever. The dwelling place of God and our true home is presently located in the third heaven. It will remain there for at least 1,007 years. But listen...God's ultimate plan is to bring the Heavenly city to an earth that has been completely renewed and restored. **Rev. 21:3** says, **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.** In this awesome promise, each of God's re-verbs will be on display in all their magnificent glory. God's ultimate purpose to be recognized and praised will come to pass as God will be all and in all of His awesome creation. We're to set our hearts and minds on this awesome promise here and now!

In **Rev. 21:5** we hear the Lord express His eternal plan. **He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."** I believe God gives us permission to let our minds imagine what this newness entails.

We'll hang some detail on this framework next time. But for now...God's eternal purpose is for His grace to be glorified / God's principle involves reverbs / and God's program specifies the imminent (or at any moment) return of Jesus for His Church followed by His plan to bring heaven to a new earth. Are ready and eager for this?