

Heaven – What is it like and how do we get there?

Bible Reading - Romans 10: 5-16 NLT

“For Moses writes that the law’s way of making a person right with God requires obedience to all of its commands. But faith’s way of getting right with God says, “Don’t say in your heart, ‘Who will go up to heaven?’ (to bring Christ down to earth). And don’t say, ‘Who will go down to the place of the dead?’ (to bring Christ back to life again).” In fact, it says,

“The message is very close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart.”

And that message is the very message about faith that we preach: If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. As the Scriptures tell us, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced.” Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. For “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.”

But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is why the Scriptures say, “How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!”

But not everyone welcomes the Good News, for Isaiah the prophet said, “LORD, who has believed our message?” So faith comes from hearing; that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.”

SERMON

Last month I showed you from Scripture that the key reason us gentiles received the promise of eternal life, was because the Jews (or at least a large

majority of them) refused to accept that Jesus Christ (Jeshua) was their Messiah.

God sent His only son to His chosen people (the Jews), but as we heard last month from a number of different New Testament Scriptures, they rejected Him. In fact, they had Him crucified on a Cross; albeit that this was all part of God's great plan to bring the prospect of salvation to repentant Jews who would believe in Jesus Christ, and also to gentiles like us who would believe and trust in Him.

The possibility of salvation - living forever in Heaven with God and other believers – **was** and **is** a free gift from God for those who would believe.

But, you may ask what is Heaven like, and how can we be sure we are going there when we die?

Let me cover the second part of that question first...

My dear Mum (who died 16 years ago) always said to me when I was young and whenever the subject of death cropped up, that she was 'worried in case she hadn't done enough good things to make sure she was going to Heaven when she died'.

Mum was a regular churchgoer, and had a deep faith. But now that I have been a Bible believing Christian for over 25 years, and understand God's promises laid down in His Holy Scriptures, the kind of erroneous Church teaching that caused my Mum's fears, makes me very concerned, not to say angry.

And that is because the Bible makes it abundantly clear that whether or not you go to Heaven when you die, has got nothing to do with how many good things you do.

Please don't misunderstand me, it is important to God that we do as many good things as we can, but doing good works alone, will not qualify us for Heaven.

In fact, two thousand years ago this was one of the things that annoyed the Religious Leaders so much about Jesus. Whilst **they** spent most of their time showing people how 'good' they were, Jesus spent most of His time talking with, eating and drinking with what the religious leaders considered to be 'sinners'. The down and outs – lepers, prostitutes, corrupt tax collectors and

the like - all manner of people that the Priests, Pharisees and Scribes would go nowhere near because they despised them!

'Surely someone who claimed to be the Messiah wouldn't do that', they thought.

But the truth is, according to the Bible, Jesus came to seek and save the lost!

And the reason for this, was that 'God's free pass' (as it were) into Heaven, isn't for the proud, but for the humble. It isn't so much for the rich as for the poor. It isn't for do-gooders; but it is for believing do-gooders and also repentant 'do-badders'!

The truth is that Heaven is reserved only and exclusively for those - rich or poor, sinner or saint, proud or arrogant - who will repent of their wrongdoing (their sin), humble themselves, give up their right to themselves, sacrifice their life to God and believe and trust in Jesus alone for his or her salvation. As The Bible puts it, in Ephesians 2 verses 8 and 9:

*'God saved you by **his grace** when you believed. And **you** can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is **not** a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it'.*

One of the reasons it is wrong to focus on doing good, in order to get into Heaven, is that we can do lots of good things but **still be caught up in sin**. The religious leaders of Jesus' time were caught up in sin. Jesus told them to their faces they were hypocrites – they said one thing, but did the opposite – they didn't practise what they preached!

And the Bible tells us in both the old and New Testaments that sin leads to death. Spiritual death as well as, in some cases, physical death. In Romans 6, Paul tells us this in verses 12 to 16:

'Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires. Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God. Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.

Well then, since God's grace has set us free from the law, does that mean we can go on sinning? Of course not! Don't you realize that you become the

slave of whatever you choose to obey? You can be a slave to sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God, which leads to righteous living.'

And in verses 22 and 23:

"But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"

A few moments ago, I likened God's free gift of eternal life as being given a 'free pass' by God into Heaven.

One night, lying in bed, after I had been preparing this sermon, these thoughts came into my mind and I share them with you in an attempt to help us get our heads around the concept of salvation being a free gift from God.

If you have ever been on a train or an aeroplane you know that you can only take part in the journey if you have a ticket or a pass. If you are going on the London Underground, for example, you won't even get past the barrier if you don't have a ticket. If you do manage to get on the train without a ticket, then you travel with the fear of being caught out by the guard, or you will likely find you can't get out through the barrier at your destination.

Similarly, when taking a flight on an aircraft, even if you manage to get past the check-in desk and down to the gate without a ticket, you still won't get on the flight without your boarding pass.

In both cases, if you manage to fraudulently find a seat without a ticket, then you run the risk of being frogmarched off the train or aircraft by the guard, cabin crew or security personnel once you are found out.

In Matthew 22 Jesus gives us an example of someone to whom, in effect, this happened. Except the stakes were much higher; the parable shows what will happen to people who try to enter Heaven without meeting the entry requirements.

Jesus is telling His listeners what the Kingdom of Heaven will be like, and likens it unto a Wedding Feast. He says:

"But when the king came in to meet the guests, he noticed a man who wasn't wearing the proper clothes for a wedding. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how is it that you

are here without wedding clothes?’ But the man had no reply. Then the king said to his aides, ‘Bind his hands and feet and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

This man tried to enter Heaven without the correct entry requirements, was found out, and was thrown into the pit of Hell!

Fortunately, the Bible tells us how to get a ticket to Heaven; and the first good thing is that there is nothing to pay. Nothing for you and me to pay, that is!

A price we could never pay, has already been paid by Jesus Christ. That price involved His death on the Cross in our place. So, in my example about needing a ticket to enter Heaven, Jesus has bought the ticket for you, and it’s available – you need only ask for it. But we can only receive it provided we believe, and have faith in the first place that the price has been paid for that ticket. We need to tell the person who has paid for the ticket (Jesus Christ) that we want His Holy Spirit to come into our life to change us from the human default condition of sin, and sanctify us (make us more like Him), so that we won’t want to sin anymore.

When we do get it wrong, which will happen from time to time, we must then confess to Him our sin, and make a resolve, with His help, to turn away from repeating that and all other sins we engage with from time to time.

The Bible tells us that many people will be calling at the ‘barrier’ or ‘checking-in desk’ of Heaven only to be told that the ticket of ‘good works’ they have brought with them does not qualify them for entry

Do not be mistaken, you cannot buy the ticket to eternal life by your own good deeds. The only ticket recognised at The Pearly Gates is one with Jesus’ blood on it!

So, please do not be like my dear Mum who was wrongly led by people in the church who should have known better, to believe that she had to do lots of good things to go to Heaven.

On the contrary; the essentials are - belief, faith, confession, repentance and obedience. As we heard in the Reading today:

‘If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved.’

So having been clear about the entry qualification, do we know what Heaven will be like?

Well in Revelation chapters 21 and 22 we read these words that tell us something about it:

‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, “Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”

And the one sitting on the throne said, “Look, I am making everything new!” And he also said, “It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children.

“But cowards, unbelievers, the corrupt, murderers, the immoral, those who practice witchcraft, idol worshipers, and all liars—their fate is in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

Then one of the seven angels who held the seven bowls containing the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come with me! I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”

So he took me in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God and sparkled like a precious stone—like jasper as clear as crystal. The city wall was broad and high, with twelve gates guarded by twelve angels. And the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were written on the gates. There were three gates on each side—east, north, south, and west. The wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The angel who talked to me held in his hand a gold measuring stick to measure the city, its gates, and its wall. When he measured it, he found it

was a square, as wide as it was long. In fact, its length and width and height were each 1,400 miles. Then he measured the walls and found them to be 216 feet thick.

The wall was made of jasper, and the city was pure gold, as clear as glass. The wall of the city was built on foundation stones inlaid with twelve precious stones: the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst.

The twelve gates were made of pearls—each gate from a single pearl! And the main street was pure gold, as clear as glass.

I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light. The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the world will enter the city in all their glory. Its gates will never be closed at the end of day because there is no night there. And all the nations will bring their glory and honor into the city. Nothing evil will be allowed to enter, nor anyone who practices shameful idolatry and dishonesty—but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.

Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations.

No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him. And they will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads. And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever.

Then the angel said to me, “Everything you have heard and seen is trustworthy and true. The Lord God, who inspires his prophets has sent his angel to tell his servants what will happen soon.

I think this is such a wonderful and reassuring Scripture. God's followers - those who love Jesus Christ and worship Him alone will spend forever in the eternal city – the New Jerusalem.

Heaven is such an amazing place that Paul told us in 1 Corinthians 2 v 9:

“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.”

So, in summary, Heaven is going to be an unimaginably beautiful and amazing place, the Bible clearly tells us how to obtain the free ticket for entry:

Belief, faith, confession, repentance and obedience.

But our gratitude for the free God-given ticket, and our response to God and His Son Jesus Christ who died in our place on the Cross, compels us to do as many good things for others as we possibly can, every day that we are able. And these good works are our service to God, once we have become Christ's followers.

Before I close, we need to be reminded that the Bible clearly states that there are only two places we will go to when we die – either Heaven or Hell.

And most churches have stopped preaching the truth about Hell, in case it frightens people away.

But for those churches, and their congregations, it's time to wake up!

Jesus says time and again in the Gospels, that Hell is real – it isn't nice, and it's not a place any one of us would want to go to.

Jesus warns us in Matthew 7 verse 13:

“You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way.”

In fact, Jesus tells us later in Matthew 24 and elsewhere, that Hell is a place where ***‘there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’***. In Revelation chapter 20 and verse 15 Hell is referred to as the ***‘lake of fire’*** and it clearly says:

‘Anyone whose name was not found recorded in the Book of Life was thrown into the lake of fire’.

Heavy stuff, I grant you, but **we do not** need to be afraid...

If you believe and trust in Jesus Christ for your salvation, if you confess your sins to Him and allow His Holy Spirit to 'sanctify' you (that is slowly and surely make you more and more like Jesus) then you have nothing to fear.

Provided you put your faith in Jesus Christ for your salvation, then your name IS written in the book of Life and you will go to meet Father God and His Son in your special home He has already reserved for you.

This is what Jesus told His followers in John chapter 14:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father’s home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am”

Last month I asked you some questions, some were rhetorical.

Two questions I asked you were these:

Do you believe in Jesus?

Do you accept Him as your Saviour?

I said, if not, I would love to pray with you after the service. A simple but life-changing prayer, that will change your life and your destiny for ever. Eternal life is a gift from Almighty God. Our part is to receive and accept it. We cannot earn it simply by doing good things. I decided to make this offer to you again today, in case last month you weren't sure. If you would like prayer, for anything that's troubling you, please just speak privately to Michele or me afterwards.

I also said if you **do** believe in Jesus and accept Him as your Saviour and obey His Word, then as we have just heard, the Bible says, your name is written in the Book of Life and your destiny is to spend forever in Heaven, where there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things will be gone forever!

AMEN!

Copyright © Chris Neal February 2019