

them, and I in them (*John 17: 24-6*).

3 HEAVEN IS HOME

Recalling Christ's promise, we should note that He was going 'to prepare a *place*' for us (see *John 14: 2*). By 'place', is Jesus speaking literally or metaphorically? Over against a traditional idea that heaven is an immaterial state in which we all float about with angelic grace playing ethereal music on mystical harps, we must consider 'place' in literal, material terms.

Only at present is the state of the departed faithful one of purely spiritual bliss. Yet this is not the end of the story. True, the moment believers die, they are ushered into the immediate presence of God (see *Luke 23: 43; 2 Corinthians 5: 6-8; Philippians 1: 21-3*). Yes, should we die before the return of Christ, our saved souls will enjoy an out-of-body existence (see also *Hebrews 12: 23; Revelation 20: 4*). But God's redemptive purpose includes the redemption of both the spiritual and physical spheres of reality (see *Romans 8: 18-23*). God's glorious plan includes a complete renovation of this fallen world. There is to be 'a new heaven and a new earth' (see *2 Peter 3: 13*). This is the significance of Christ's literal, physical, bodily resurrection. Our dead bodies will be restored to us as His was (see *Philippians 3: 20-1*).

By reminding us of our heavenly citizenship, Paul is telling us that the newly-restored order will be our eternal home! The family of God will be holy and happy together in the glory everlasting when Christ returns to 'make all things new' (*Revelation 21: 5*). In his hymn 'Jerusalem the golden', Bernard of Cluny (12th century) gives us a glimpse of the glory that awaits us:

The Prince is ever in them;/ The daylight is serene;
The pastures of the blessed/Are decked in glorious
sheen.

To appreciate the full splendour and wonder of it
all, we must wait and see!

Dr Alan C. Clifford

NORWICH REFORMED CHURCH

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WHO'S FOR HEAVEN?

Introduction

Heaven is the crowning glory of the Christian Faith and the climax of the Bible's message. Without it the Gospel is no gospel, a message concerned only with the here and now. Yet our Saviour's promise could not be clearer: 'In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you' (*John 14: 1-2*).

Now these wonderful words are misapplied by some and neglected by others. Many think that everyone goes to heaven - except really nasty people like Adolf Hitler. For those whose only contact with Christianity is at baptisms, weddings and funerals, they imagine they will end up in heaven despite a non-existent relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Others neglect heaven for various reasons. If they're healthy and wealthy, and life is pleasant, that's heaven enough for them! A holiday at some exotic location is all the heaven they want. But even professing Christians can neglect heaven. Believers in the 'health, wealth and prosperity gospel' can be seduced into an outlook not that different from Christless materialists.

Others of us can be tempted into an over-emphasis on applying the Gospel to life's day to day issues. Concerned to be 'relevant', we are afraid of the accusation of a 'pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die' mentality. However, we should not be robbed of any aspect of the Christian Faith. If our Lord 'went about doing good' (see *Acts 10: 38*) with the message of salvation and heaven frequently on His lips (see *Matthew 6: 19-21*), we should do likewise. In short, if we rightly insist

that the Christian life is a journey or pilgrimage, we ought to know where we are going (see *Hebrews 11: 13-16*). If becoming a Christian is setting out on the journey, we should know something about our destination!

1 HEAVEN IS HOLY

It is important to begin here. If heaven is the realm of God's eternal presence, it cannot be less holy than He is. 'You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness', wrote the prophet (*Habakkuk 1: 13*). Thus John declared: 'Blessed are those who do his commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practises a lie' (*Revelation 22: 14-15*).

This intimidating picture immediately shatters popular misconceptions about heaven. For instance, did the Islamic terrorists of 9/11 wake up in paradise as they expected to from the Qur'an's teaching (see *Sura 4: 55-7, 124*)? If so, they must be the first cases of unrepentant killers to be welcomed there. Indeed, these men were murderers not martyrs! Were they forgiven? How could they be? Yes, according to the Christian Gospel, penitent murderers besides those guilty of sexual and other wickedness may be saved (see *Psalms 51: 14; Luke 23: 19, 42-3; 1 Corinthians 6: 9-11*). Such is the miracle of God's mercy! However, it is impossible to be a penitent murderer while pursuing the deed of murder. No, Mohamed Atta and his fellow murderers died utterly deceived. According to the texts cited above, they had a rude awakening on the 'other side'!

Of course, as these and other verses indicate, those Islamic terrorists will not be alone. They will be shoulder to shoulder with murdering, ma-

terialistic and immoral Americans, 'Brits' and others as well as their non-violent fellow Muslims. Indeed, terrorism is not 'the only evil in the world' as implied by too many politicians. Terrorists do not have a monopoly on evil. Pleasure-seeking, sin-loving, Bible-scoffing, Christ-blaspheming westerners are just as likely candidates for hell as the Muslim murderers of September 11, 2001. And why? Because if they die without repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, the only Saviour of the world, there is no hope!

For those who take the true message of Christianity seriously, there is simply no other conclusion (see the Bible's warning against the folly and idolatry of materialism in *Luke 12: 13-21* and *Colossians 3: 5-6*). In short, only those saved by Christ are fit for heaven. Only those who are pardoned and purified are admitted. We must possess forgiveness of our sins and 'holiness, without which no one will see the Lord' (*Hebrews 12: 14*).

2 HEAVEN IS HAPPY

If the holiness of heaven renders it unattractive to non-Christians, they probably consider the happiness of heaven quite incomprehensible. Yet King David - who exchanged the pleasures of sin for those of salvation - wrote: 'You will show me the path of life; in your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore' (*Psalms 16: 11*). This statement should be enough to counter the idea that the eternal joys of heaven might even be boring in comparison with the best we can enjoy in this life! Whatever false impression glum Christians might create, true believers have experienced *both* the bitterness of sin's deceitful delights *and* the joys of forgiveness through a personal knowledge of Christ. Knowing the 'joy of the Lord' (*Nehemiah 8: 10*), they know for sure that true happiness is the fruit of holiness. As we say, 'it is something better felt than telt'!

The psalms and hymns of the Christian Church bear eloquent testimony to this. There is nothing like the joy of Jesus 'whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory' (*1 Peter 1: 8*). John Calvin highlights the heavenly dimension of this joy: 'It is an incomparable benefit not only that our consciences are at peace before God, but that we confidently rejoice in the hope of eternal life...Those who are not carried up above the heavens by this joy, so that they are content with Christ alone and despise the world, boast in vain that they have faith.' Indeed, the joy of salvation and the joy of heaven share the same source. Heaven is 'a world of love' said Jonathan Edwards. It is also a world of joy. In this life, even believers know joy mixed with sorrow. In heaven we will know joy without sorrow.

Again, the Bible could not be more explicit. The sight of God in Christ will be the centre-piece of heavenly joy: 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away' (*Revelation 21: 3-4*).

Furthermore, if the joy of God's people will be to see God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), God will have joy in seeing His people. If heaven for Christians would not be heaven without Jesus, likewise - for Jesus - heaven would not be so without us! Thus the Lord Jesus prayed: 'Father, I desire that they also whom you gave me may be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory which you have given me; for you loved me before the foundation of the world. ... And I have declared to them your name, and will declare it, that the love with which you loved me may be in