

Series: *Heaven: Security. Beauty. Glory.*

Message Title: *The Community of Heaven*

Date: Sunday, July 16, 2017

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Speaker: David H. McKinley

Location: Warren Baptist Church, Augusta, GA

Introduction

Last week, I introduced a short series on a really big subject—*Heaven: Security. Beauty. Glory.*

In review, I began by asking and answering a few foundational questions from the Bible on the subject of Heaven. See John 14:1-3, 6.

>What is Heaven? It is a *place*—like Augusta, Atlanta, Dallas-Ft. Worth, Miami and London. If we strip heaven of something less than or other than a place, we strip the words of Jesus of their meaning.

>Where is Heaven? Heaven is UP!

>How do you get to Heaven? Jesus is the “all-access pass” to Heaven. There is no heaven without Jesus. A teacher was speaking to a group of 5th graders (all know it’s hard to be smarter, right?). She explained

the gospel—by grace (gift), through faith (trust), trusting in Christ, not good works—and then asked a series of questions to verify their understanding of the gospel. “If I go to church and never miss and give every time the offering plate is passed and pray for everybody in the church every day, can I go to heaven?” NO! “If I really work hard to be good—no lies, don’t lose temper or patience, etc., ...really good... can I go to heaven?” NO! “If I sold all I have and moved to spend my life serving/sharing with others, would this get me into heaven?” NO! “Then how can I get to heaven?” One boy (new to the class) answered, “You have to be dead!”

If Jesus does not return immediately to take us to be with Him, then we all have to die to go to Heaven.

Who goes to Heaven? What will we know there? A common question is this: “Will there be pets in heaven?” Do all dogs go to heaven? I have theological problems with this—not whether there could be dogs in heaven, but the issue of “all dogs”.

Many among us have lost loved ones in recent weeks and months. I personally lost my dad, and I have officiated eight funeral services in the past 14 weeks (18-95 years old), and made many visits in hospitals and homes of families along the way. It has been a tough season on my heart and the hearts of many.

In these weeks, I have looked into tear stained eyes and tried to find answers to many complicated questions about life, loss, fairness, goodness, sorrow and hope. I don't have answers that gnaw at hearts regarding disease, accidents, timing and loss, but I know this: we share a confident and abiding hope.

"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For

the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words”
(1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 ESV).

“If you are a faithful Christian and not alarmed, I think you are failing to read the signs of the times.”

The word, sleep, is not about snoozing, but about a state of being for the body. Note the reason for this discussion, “...that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.”

The Bible (Christian faith) is not anti-grief. We all struggle to have the right things to say in moments of pain. It’s never easy, but never think because we are Christians we do not grieve. We grieve! We weep and mourn loss because of love. If love is real, grief is sure. Yet having said this, the love that sustains in our grief is the love of God in our Lord Jesus

Christ, and this love is greater than all this world can send our way.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35, 37-39 ESV).

Our security in God’s love is greater than any security system you can try to add to your life on earth.

But in 1 Thessalonians 4, we learn something about the afterlife and about *The Community of Heaven*.



Who is in Heaven?

“For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thessalonians 4:14 ESV).

Here lies the foundation of what we believe about Heaven—“since we believe”. What we know of those who go to heaven is what we know of the One who gives access to heaven:

“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Corinthians 15:1-5 ESV).

...“if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be

saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved (Romans 10:9-10 ESV).

“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4-7 ESV).

Those who have responded to God’s gracious work of salvation in Jesus Christ (members of God’s family) are ushered into heaven when they die.

So to answer our question “Who?” ...

- **Heaven is the habitation of angels.**

“For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep (1 Thessalonians 4:14 ESV).

The subject of angels could be a series in itself. But today, I simply want you to see that the Lord is served and supported by heavenly messengers and warriors called "Angels". They are present in Genesis and dominate the landscape of Revelation. They are seen throughout as serving God's purpose in this world and in the lives of His chosen ones.

- **Heaven is the home of the redeemed of all the ages.**

- > **Moses and Elijah**

- "And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Him" (Matthew 17:3 ESV).

- > **Poor Man and Abraham**

- "The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame'... He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets,

neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead'" (Luke 16:22-24, 31 ESV).

"I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 8:11 ESV).

–fellowship of love and separation of darkness.

>Martyrs and Believers

"And falling to his knees he [Stephen] cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:60 ESV)

"For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that

what is mortal will be swallowed up by life... we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:1-4, 8 NASB).

There were "sacred cries" common to saints of all ages—yearning for release/reclaimed

>Those who have fallen asleep.

"For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep" (1 Thessalonians 4:14 ESV).

Can you imagine seeing, sharing and walking with Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Elijah, David, Peter, Paul and Mary (not the group)? And it is the home of the redeemed because above all, our Redeemer is there.

Will we know our loved ones in heaven? Saying goodbye here and missing those we love are part of death's curse. But this separation brought by death will be removed in the grace and glory of heaven. Charles Spurgeon referred to heaven as being "dreary to inhabit should we be both unknowing and unknown."

God made us relational beings. There will be no less fellowship in heaven than on earth and no less knowledge or awareness in heaven than on earth. We will have fellowship with God and will be “with” those in heaven.

“Life beyond cannot mean impoverishment, but the enhancement and enrichment of life as we have know it here at its best.” —W.G. Scroggie

“We have not lost our dear ones who have departed from this life, but have merely sent them ahead of us, so we also shall depart and shall come to that life where they will be more than ever dear as they will be better known to us, and where we shall love them without fear of parting... all of us who enjoy God are also enjoying each other in Him.”
—Augustine

“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth” (Job 19:25 ESV).

Jesus is our blessed Redeemer and He is in Heaven. Heaven is the place of union with Christ and reunion with redeemed loved ones present and distant.

- **Heaven is filled with people from every tribe, tongue and nation.**

The thing that seems to be our greatest tripping point here will be part of God's glorious grace in heaven.

And they sang a new song, saying,

"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" (Revelation 5:9-10 ESV).

Segregation will not be part of the picture of heaven; it will be a very multi-ethnic place marked by joy and peace. This is why I love seeing people of all backgrounds and cultures gathering in worship here. We never deny difference and diversity, but we ever celebrate an amazing grace that calls us together in our common salvation.

"Nothing of ultimate worth from the long history of the nations will be omitted from

the heavenly community. Everything which authentically reflects the God of truth, all that is of abiding worth from within the national stories and the cultural inheritance of the world's peoples, will find its place in the New Jerusalem." —Bruce Milne

Heaven will be great and grand in size, scope and number. You are in the reach of sovereign mercy and saving grace. People are not saved by a *different* gospel. Do "all roads lead to heaven"? NO! The Bible is absolutely clear—there is no heaven without Jesus.

- **Heaven is the "safe place" of children.**

I am jumping into what could seem like a "brier patch" with no good way out! But I am speaking to some, many who have known the bitter and devastating loss of children—profoundly heartbreaking and perhaps the greatest grief a parent/grandparent is called to bear. For Christian parents, there is the sure knowledge that our sovereign and merciful God is in control, but there is also a pressing question: Is our baby in heaven?"

I don't want to try to answer a deeply personal, painful and emotional question

with philosophical/intellectual rhetoric. I try to discern the hurt and history when people ask questions of me.

1. When it comes to such crucial matters, we must guard against mere sentimentalism. Just because we want to believe something does not make it true. Sincerity is not reality. If you are driving to Florida but see road signs to Virginia, you are probably going the wrong way.

2. We gain security from doctrinal truth and clarity—sovereignty and saving grace of God.

“Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in Your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (Psalm 139:16 ESV).

God’s election is our security. Does God save all? No. But He has chosen to save some and in His redeeming grace, children are secure.

3. Jesus provides a telling view of God’s heart for humanity regarding children.

“Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to Me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.’”

—Matthew 19:14 ESV

4. God’s work in history provides a hint of what might be a struggle or mystery.

“Not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers... And as for your little ones, who you said would become a prey, and your children, who today have no knowledge of good or evil, they shall go in there. And to them I will give it, and they shall possess it” (Deuteronomy 1:35, 39 ESV).

5. David’s testimony in the grief of loss of a child.

“But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me” (2 Samuel 12:23 ESV).

“Pastor, why?” We cannot see clearly now, but that does not diminish the reality of God’s presence or promise.

Book recommendation: *Safe in the Arms of God: Truth From Heaven About the Death of a Child* by John MacArthur

• **Heaven is where we will see and be with Jesus.**

“Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words”
(1 Thessalonians 4:17-18 ESV).

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the central figure and the consoling feature of Heaven. Jesus is there. “There is no heaven without Jesus!” Note how comforting it will be not only that we will be with the Lord, but also we will be *together* with the Lord! Encouragement is so vital—hope is so important!

I can only pray I am helping you in these days to see the shore through the fog of darkness, disappointment and darkness that dominates this present world. I pray that you might see and know the nearness of the shore of heaven!