

Heaven

by Ryan Dean

I write these words assuming that they find you in the midst of a busy week, perhaps one you'd like to soon forget, filled with stress and maybe even heartache. I meet you here with words that are golden, words of hope and comfort, promises as sure as our God is faithful. They are promises concerning a real future that I hope will shape the way you interpret the reality of the present. They are promises spoken by the foundational stones of the faith we profess: the prophets and the apostles speaking filled with the Holy Spirit. So, lift your eyes with me as we peer into the windows of heaven. Let the view there gladden you and fill you with anticipation, for our best days are yet to come.

What is heaven? The world conjures up clouds, harps, and pearly gates at the mention of the word, but we know better from Scripture. Looking into heaven through the eyes of Scripture should humble us. Although God in his sovereignty chose not to give us details about what an average day will be like or at what age our bodies will be resurrected, He has given us enough information to keep our hearts longing. According to Scripture, heaven is the place where the glory of God is undimmed by the clouds of sin and death, where the creation knows its Creator fully and is fully freed to worship and love the One for whom it was created.

Heaven is a place of overwhelming glory. Understanding how the Ancient Hebrews understood the word “glory” has given it renewed meaning for me. In Hebrew, the word “glory” literally means “weighty” or “heavy.” Let me use a homeowner’s analogy to help you get the picture. Every fall, the trees in my yard shed their leaves and inevitably, many land on my roof. It’s a bit of a hassle, but not really a big deal. Give me an afternoon and my roof’s good as new. Leaves, you see, are relatively light objects. On the other hand, imagine that an ice storm comes in the winter and knocks that same tree onto the roof of my house. My house now has an unwanted sunroof. Unlike the leaves, whose clean-up only required a blower, to repair a fallen tree involves a ton of manpower, machine power, as well as a ton of money. Why? Because trees are heavy objects. They cannot be reckoned with lightly, the effect of one’s presence on your roof is life-altering. When the Bible calls our God a “God of glory” the same idea is communicated. As people who

know him, His reality should rest heavily upon us and effect everything about us. The truth of the matter is that most people in the world we currently live in feel nothing of the glory of our God. He is of little or no consequence to them. The Bible teaches us that heaven is the place where everyone will feel the glory of God like they would a tree on their house; where the full weight of God's importance and severity is unmistakably known and felt.

We see this in Isaiah's vision of the place. He says "*I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of His robe filled the temple*" (Is. 6:1). The angels that surrounded that throne covered their faces and their feet in humility before their Creator and sang the song that they must have know intuitively: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." The glory and holiness is so overwhelming that all Isaiah can think about is the glaring shame of his sinfulness: "*Woe is me, for I am lost. I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.*" Thankfully for Isaiah (for who knows how long before he might have dropped dead) the angel touches his mouth with a coal from the altar, symbolizing that his sins had been atoned for. I don't know about you, but this vision of heaven doesn't really strike me as restful or joyful or wonderful (many of the ideas that we rightfully attach to the concept of heaven). Isaiah's vision raises a point we must understand if we are to understand heaven at all: heaven, for sinful man, is a terrible (and not a wonderful) reality. Heaven is a reality to be feared as equally as hell for anyone who appears there hoping that his own good works will pacify God.

Thankfully, Isaiah 6 is not the only vision of heaven Scripture gives us. The book of Revelation also gives us some important glimpses into this place of glory. None are more exciting to me than John's vision in chapter 7 in which he sees "*a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands and crying with a loud voice 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!'*" (7:9-10). You may not have thought of this in a while, but you are a featured character in the book of Revelation. There, do you see the one in the white robe with the palm branch? That's you! But, it's not just you, it's every believer who has ever lived from every culture that has ever been, a group as numerous as

the stars of heaven that night God made a covenant promise to Abraham (Gen. 15). This is the goal of human history achieved. No longer is heaven a place of “woes” like it was for Isaiah, for this future group (surely including Isaiah) is a place where

...they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Rev. 7: 15-17

This is the heaven with which our longings are familiar. This is the heaven that has been a consolation to us in the midst of death and heartbreak. Not the place of fear and terror that Isaiah encountered, but a place where we fearlessly enjoy the companionship of God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit, and our glorified brothers and sisters in Christ. Here is the place where tears will be no more.

So, the question begs itself, how are we to understand the difference between Isaiah and John’s vision of heaven? The text in discussion answers this question for us. After introducing this great multitude, verse 9 tells us that they were “*clothed with white robes.*” Verse 14 gives us more information about these white robes and what they symbolize when it states that “*(the multitudes) have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*” Unlike Isaiah who (although redeemed) appeared before God while still in his sinful flesh, this members of this future group appear before the throne of God glorified, having put off their mortality and with it their old sinful nature. And what, we might ask, is the basis of their boldness amidst the terrible glory of heaven? Is it that they are clothed in their own good works? On the contrary, there, before the holiness of their Creator, they are clothed in a righteousness not their own: the righteousness of their Head and Groom. It is His blood that makes heaven a place of wonderful glory. Apart from the robes washed in blood that He has given to His children, heaven would simply be for them hell. The author of Hebrews describes this distinction using the analogies of Mount Sinai (the place where Moses received the Law where the terrible glory of God was fully disclosed to man) and Mount Zion (the true, heavenly place of God’s dwelling, where the glory of God is experienced in a wonderful and life-giving way). “*You,*” the author tells us

“have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in joyful gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Hebrews 12:22-24).

Does this scene sound familiar? It should, because it’s the same vision as that described by John in Revelation. Unlike John’s vision, which is set in the future, this vision reveals that this glorious scene is also a present reality. Amazingly, the author uses the perfect tense verb “you have come” revealing the fact that in a spiritual way, we live our lives here with that heavenly scene as our backdrop.

How often do we live our lives without any thought for this glorious future that both awaits us and has come to meet us here and now? How often do we fail to remember that “our light and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17)? Do you believe that these things are true? If so, let them motivate you in your worship. Let John’s vision of Revelation 7 be on your mind we gather together for corporate worship, for here, in our own humble way, we rehearse for the Day when we will join our voices with a “multitude that no one could number.” Remember, our best days are yet to come.