

Sunday, July 11, 2021

Philippians 1:19-26 Luke 23:39-43 John 14:1-6 Revelation 21:1-4

“You will be with me in Paradise/Heaven”

It is great to be back with you today as we begin our summer series “At Your Request” whereby some of our church members have offered topics for our summer services. Today’s focus is on Paradise or Heaven: what it is and what Jesus meant when he spoke with the thief who was dying on the cross beside him.

Paradise was created on Earth by God to emulate or be like God’s dwelling above. Paradise was perfection made by God on earth. However, it was lost when sin entered by the desire of Adam and Eve to gain wisdom, ‘and become like God.’ Paradise as God had first planned it was lost and the people had to leave. But at the same time paradise was lost, God promised that we will one day dwell in God’s house forever. Where is God’s dwelling? In heaven. For centuries the idea of heaven has been argued and discussed because those living in this moment cannot fully understand God’s house while still living an earthly life. So we must define heaven in different ways. We might remember that at the time of creation God made a division/ a separation between heavens and the earth in what we would call the atmosphere of the world. There is also an understanding of outer space as witnessed by space travellers and exploring bodies- heavens above. But it is the eternal dwelling or abode our future home where God lives for all eternity that we are focused upon. It is where Jesus taught us that God lives “Our Father who art in heaven” and it is where we want to return to when God calls us home to begin our eternal life with him.

Yet heaven is a concept that is difficult to grasp for us who are grieving and mourning the death and separation of loved ones. This is because of an inner struggle of head and heart that calls us to seek God’s wisdom and love. This is reflected in Justin Moore’s country song “If Heaven wasn’t so far away”. Moore describes what he would do if he could go and visit heaven and then return again to Earth. Moore would pack up the kids, introduce them to their grandpa and “watch 'em laugh at the way he talks.” He would also find his cousin John who died in Vietnam. He would then show John a picture of his daughter who became a doctor and he'd be proud. Moore then goes on to say, he would then tell them that he'd be back in a couple of days. They would then drive away and as they go they would wave.” The key message is that losing them wouldn't be so hard to take, if heaven wasn't so far away. And this is the difficult part about heaven and earth—there is a separation when our loved ones die—but there is also what Jesus calls us to when we are grieving and mourning- we are to imagine his arms around the ones we love and knowing that they are at peace. They are also with Christ as they watch over us in what we say and do as they continue to live in our hearts. This is difficult but it is also a part of our human life. So what is important is to ask where is heaven for you and what is it that Jesus is calling us to do now and in the time that God has blessed us with on Earth?

Paul, writing to the church at Philippi from jail, expresses his faith in Jesus to encourage the young church to continue to live and serve Christ. As he writes this letter he seems torn about what is best for him. He does not know what will happen to him- whether he is set free, jailed for a long time or killed. By faith he believes that for him to live is Christ and to die is gain. He is having an inner struggle between head and heart because he knows that it would be better for him to be with Christ (in heaven). But in the circumstances of where he is in his ministry it is necessary to remain alive on earth. He would rather be in heaven than to be in jail with different kinds of pain and loss yet he believes that his Earthly ministry is not yet completed and so he will continue to live his earthly life. He is convinced that he still needs to share Jesus' message with others. But he has not given up on the Philippians and so he writes to them and wants them to know that they are standing firm in the spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel and that he is holding them in prayer with much hope.

It is difficult to understand as we continue to live on earth but what are we supposed to believe and do? For many people living on earth, heaven is a place far away and out of their grasp. One cannot go and visit for the day because only those whose earthly has ended are in God's presence. But for those who lived before us and taught us well, heaven is their eternal home and it is where we each should want to go. However, this desire should be in God's time because God is there and will call us when things are ready for our arrival.

Jesus spoke about heaven, God's house as he himself prepared to die. He knew that he would be betrayed by Judas and that Peter would deny him. He also taught his disciples not to be afraid of what was going to take place. Jesus wanted them to be prepared for what was going to happen to him and for themselves. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He told them this as he described the Father's house- with many dwelling places- places for each of them and for us. He also taught the disciples that he would go and prepare a place for them, and for us. This is Christ's promise of a heavenly home.

After Jesus was arrested, tried and sentenced to be crucified, he was nailed to a cross with two others, one on either side of him. One mocked him and the other asked whether he feared God since they were under the same sentence Jesus. Then the same man asked Jesus to remember him upon his arrival in heaven that is, when he came into his kingdom. This criminal condemned to death asked for Jesus to remember him. Jesus' response, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

Paradise—Jesus knew what paradise was. He knew heaven as he had come from there and was now preparing to return to the Father as he had told his disciples he would. He knew the sins of the world, and carried them. He also knew God's glory and here he was dying on a cross, promising the thief by his side his place in paradise. Heaven is the ultimate dwelling place of the just. Jesus knew heaven and earth. God had created paradise on earth and yet it was lost. But there is still hope because= paradise / heaven exists and there will one day be a new

heaven and a new earth for the matters of God's creation will change and something new will emerge. But what will heaven be like?

The Taj Mahal was built by Shah Jahan who had been married to Mumtaz Mahal his beautiful wife for 14 years. After she died in childbirth, he commissioned this extravagant building as a loving tribute to her. It took many years for its completion as it was built from 1632-1653 and is the place where her body was entombed. Years later upon his death, the Shah was laid here as well. This building is a mausoleum which has thousands of visitors each year and is recognized as a UNESCO heritage site. Many people marvel at its structure, design, craftsmanship and architecture because it is brilliant and magnificent. For some people, this beautiful building, gives a glimpse of what heavenly structures might be like. There are precious jewels, special rock and marble, meaningful inscriptions in different languages and a quiet inner sanctuary where peace is experienced. This building is a mausoleum a place to remember the dead who were loved. One can only imagine what heaven will be like filled with people whom we have loved and are now experiencing their eternal life in God's presence. But when we think of heaven we must remember that according to John of Patmos, in heaven, there is no more death, no pain, no sorrow or tears, it is the presence and glory of God which calls us to want to go there not the place where God lives alone. This is what John envisioned in Revelation 21.

It is through John's vision that we learn more about God's new heaven. There is no suffering, crying, pain or death. It is a safe, eternal and secure place. The walls are stable and unshakeable and are upon 12 foundations which are immovable. It is a place filled with light and it is where all who believe will serve and see God. We also learn that the tree of life existing in God's paradise will be forever nurtured by the river of life first mentioned in Genesis. This river flows and brings forth fruit for the healing of nations. And this river flows by the throne of God offering us peace and joy. It is the place where all will be nurtured and fed and it is where God's people and angels will unite in singing praises to God forever.

How do we understand what heaven will be like? A doctor visiting a dying patient was asked this question. Just then they heard the sound of something on the closed door of the patient's bedroom. "Do you hear that?" "It's my dog. I left him downstairs, but he got impatient and came up here looking for me. He doesn't know what's in this room but he knows his master is here. I believe that's how it is with heaven. We don't know what it's like, but we know that Jesus will be there. And really, nothing else matters."

Beyond the closed door of death, we know that heaven will be a place of radiant splendour. It will be a place of reunion as we meet again those we have loved and from whom we have been parted. But above all, we will be with Jesus who awaits us. And it is the place according to the Westminster Catechism will be fulfilled—for this is where people will glorify God and enjoy His presence forever.

Heaven is God's dwelling where those who believe in Christ Jesus as Saviour are called to come home in faith. Everyone is invited to share in God's eternal glory, but each must confess their sins and seek God's forgiveness. The gates of heaven are open wide, but we must be prepared to enter in God's time so that when God calls to us we will be ready to follow. Jesus told the thief by his side that he would be in paradise with him. All are invited, but we must confess our sins and seek God's forgiveness. Nothing will separate us from God but we must believe and know that Christ calls us to him. God is preparing something new for us all. Let us believe and faithfully live our earthly life as Christ taught – with hope and in love. Let us also be prepared for the day when we too will be called home to our eternal rest in God's heaven. This is our faith. In life in death, in life beyond death—God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.

PRAYER

God we thank you for heaven's our promised home with you. Show us and reveal your love to us as we seek to learn and understand about heaven. We also ask that you would embrace us as we feel the separation from our loved ones and yet we know that your grace lifts us up so that we might be renewed with hope for another day. Hear now the prayers of our hearts. Amen.