

HEAVEN – Part One
“Halt! Who Goes There?”
Sermon – February 10, 2019

What happens after we die? Where do we go? Is there even a place to go after we die? If there is, is it a place where we simply sleep for a while before something or someone wakes us up? Is there an interim place where we atone for our sins, trying to make right what we did wrong in this life before we are released to another dimension? Or are we immediately ushered into an eternal existence with no ability to make right our wrongs?

Do we die simply to wake up after death in another body or another universe or another dimension? Do we die and then return as an ant or a butterfly or a horse until we master this earthly life enough to be rewarded with another higher type of life after death? When we die does all life as we know it cease to exist? If so, do we then become part of the universe; changed into one of the many molecules and atoms that hold our universe together?

Is death a door that ushers us into eternity or is it a door that locks out all life? Is there a heaven? Is there a Hell? If there is a Heaven is it as boring as most people seem to think it is? If there is a Hell is it as bad as some have made it out to be or is it just a party place where those who party now want to go to continue partying with their friends?

If there is life after death, are we disembodied spirits – a soul with no body - or will we have a body of some sort? If we have a body will we have an angel body? And if we are angels will we go on adventures like Clarence in the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life” to earn our wings? Or will we just sit on a cloud playing a harp for eternity? Does everybody go to Heaven or just some people? How about marriage? Are we still married in heaven or is death an instant divorce? Will we recognize loved ones after we die? Will they recognize us? Do people get sick in heaven? Are tears shed in heaven? Does grief even exist in the afterlife? Is there only one death or is there another death after our earthly death? When we die will we become gods of our own worlds or will we be servants of the one true God?

These are some of the many questions people ask when confronted with death. As the saying goes, “The only thing certain in life is death and taxes”. Death is a certainty for all of us. For some it may come after a prolonged illness; for some it may come instantly due to an accident or sudden heart failure. But however it may come, it will come to all of us. Death is a certainty of life. But what happens afterwards?

Over the past several decades there have been many people who have spoken or written about their own death and what they experienced after leaving their earthly body. We call these near death experiences because, though these people were clinically dead, they were only so for a short period of time. Most were lifeless only for several minutes or hours before their bodies began to once again show signs of life – their heart started beating and their lungs started to once again inhale and exhale air.

Two of the most well-known of these experiences happened to a pastor and to a small boy. Books were written and movies were made documenting their experiences. “90 Minutes In Heaven” is the title of one of them. The book (and subsequent movie by the same name), recreates the story of Pastor Don Piper who, in 1989, was involved in a horrible car accident. Crushed and trapped in his car after being hit head on by a semi-truck, he felt his life ebb away and his spirit leave his body. When the paramedics arrived they could find no sign of life in him.

Pastor Don says he felt the pain leave him as he left his body and was immediately transported into what he believes was heaven. There he experienced things he describes as amazing and beautiful, including meeting family members such as his great-grandmother and joining a Heavenly Choir that proceeded into the Gates of Heaven. While this was happening to Don another pastor happened by the accident and felt led to pray for him. As the praying pastor pleaded for Don's life Don felt himself leaving heaven and returning to his earthly body.

Still trapped in his mangled car after 90 minutes of being unresponsive, earthly sensations began to return to Don's body. He began to feel the severe pain of his traumatic injuries. Once the rescue workers realized he was alive they used the jaws-of-life to remove him from his vehicle and had him transported to the hospital. He spent many months under going multiple surgeries to repair the damage done to his body and has spoken about his experience before live audiences and on numerous television and radio programs.

In the book and subsequent movie entitled "Heaven is For Real" Todd Burpo tells the story of his three-year-old son Colton who, while undergoing emergency surgery for a ruptured appendix, had a near death experience. It was not until months after his surgery that Colton began to share the story of how he had left his body during surgery and went to heaven. He told his father he had seen him in a room by himself angry with God and that he also saw his mother praying for him and calling many others to pray. All this happened while he was undergoing surgery.

Colton then began to describe events and people that seemed impossible for him to have known about. He spoke of seeing an unborn sister miscarried by his mother and details of a great-grandfather who had died 30 years before Colton was even born. He also says He saw Jesus and angels singing. Colton's parents had never spoken of the miscarriage so he had no prior knowledge of his sister. And Colton was able to identify his great-grandfather whom he had never met on earth after his father showed him a picture taken when his great-grandfather was in his mid-thirties. (It seems, from Colton's experience, that we will all look much younger when we get to heaven. I don't know if this is true or not but I'm hoping it is.)

Others have also written about their near death experiences and have had books written about it. "The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven" written in 2010 was very popular. It told the story of Alex Malarkey who was involved in a car accident in which his skull became completely detached from his spinal cord. He was in a coma for two months until he emerged from that as a quadriplegic. Alex then began telling his family and friends about travelling to heaven and meeting Jesus and Satan. But in 2015 Alex admitted he had fabricated the whole story. "I did not die. I did not go to heaven. I said I went to heaven because I thought it would get me attention." His story was fake.

What can we make of these and other similar stories of near death experiences? Obviously we can't believe all of them. Some are made up by people because they desire the attention. But are they all fake? Can we take what has been described by others as a visit to heaven as real? Will we be able to recognize relatives we have never met? Will we see aborted and miscarried babies in heaven? There really is no way to know if what Colton Burpo and Don Piper say is real and not imagined. We may trust their word and believe in their credibility but we will only know for certain if and when we too get to experience heaven. Then and only then can we verify what they have said.

There is one Book though that we can rely on to tell us the truth about life after death. It tells us whether there is a Heaven or a Hell, where each of us will go after we die, and what awaits us there. That

book is the Bible. It is in this book that God reveals His plan for all mankind after they die. It reveals the truth of what happens in Heaven and in Hell and how to avoid one and enjoy the other.

Over the next several weeks we will be looking at heaven. I will describe for you where heaven is currently located and where it will eventually be located. I will tell you who will be able to enter Heaven and who will be refused entry. I will tell you what will be happening in heaven and what will be happening in Hell, should you be so unfortunate to go there. But first I want to share with you what people who have been surveyed say about heaven and hell and who will go there.

According to these polls there is a full array of possibilities of what might happen after death. One poll found that 67% believed that the person's soul goes to heaven or hell, 13% believed the soul lives in some sort of spiritual realm, 6% believed that it's all over (no existence after death), and 5% believed that the soul is reincarnated. (Reincarnation is the concept that an aspect of a living being starts a new life in a different physical body or form after each biological death. It is the rebirth of a soul in a new body, be it human, animal, insect, or plant. What is surprising is that in a 2011 poll, 15% of Protestants and 24% of Catholics – those who adhere to the Christian faith - said they believed in reincarnation.)

Another poll found that 65% of Americans believed that people go to heaven, hell, or purgatory after death (I'll explain purgatory at a later date), 7% believed they go to another dimension, 6% believed they are reborn on earth, and 2% believed they became ghosts. 13% did not believe there is any afterlife and 7% didn't know. But what may be surprising to you is that atheists, agnostics and people who say their religion is "nothing in particular" also believe in the existence of heaven and hell. 37% of this group said they believed in heaven, while 27% believed in hell; so even a certain percentage of those who do not hold a biblical view or follow the Christian faith believe that both heaven and hell exist. It seems that even if we don't agree on how we get to one and avoid the other, we still believe in their existence.

I now need to address an issue which is all too prevalent in our society and that is the issue of good works. Roughly seven-in-ten (72%) of Americans surveyed say they believe in heaven; but they define Heaven as a place "where people who have led good lives are eternally rewarded." At the same time, 58% of U.S. adults also believe in Hell – which they define as a place "where people who have led bad lives and die without being sorry are eternally punished." According to this survey nearly three fourths of Americans believe the only entry requirement for heaven is whether you have lived a good life; and a little over half of Americans surveyed believe that people who have led bad lives and have not apologized for their behavior will go to hell.

How many people do you know that when asked if they believe they are a Christian or believe they are going to heaven respond in the affirmative? And when asked why they believe they are saved and going to heaven they respond with a litany of the good things which they have done. Like those surveyed they believe that good works is the only requirement for entry to heaven.

This world is full of bad people who do bad things who are not sorry for what they have done. When they are discovered we usually incarcerate them in our jails and prisons so they cannot perpetuate their evil on others. But we also know a lot of people who live what we would call "good lives". These people live among us. We may even think we are one of those good people. Through the centuries there have certainly been people who have done tremendous good; not just within their circle of friends but also for those in other places throughout the world. So I am not denying that there are people who do many good things. But what I want to caution everyone about is that good works does NOT get you entry into heaven.

If heaven is such an easy place to get into why all this fuss about Jesus? Why bother with conditional entry if there are no conditions, or the conditions are so few or so trivial, why make such a big deal about Jesus? If we are all going to heaven when we die what is all the fuss about? I'll tell you what the fuss is all about. Heaven is not such an easy place to get into. We may assume we are heaven worthy but we assume too much. No one is worthy of heaven and to think we are for whatever reason is to presume too much of God.

In His word God gives us a wake-up call. For He tells us that no one is righteous not even one, that no one does good, and that all our so-called "righteous deeds" are in reality just filthy rags.

ROMANS 3:10-12

"There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one."

ISAIAH 64:6

"For all of us have become like one who is unclean and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment."

I know I'm preaching to the choir here but there may be someone listening that does not know that what we may label as a "good" or "righteous" deed is not considered so good or righteous by God. He sees them like a filthy garment. God says that no one does good, not even one of us. So at the very least we and God have a difference of opinion of what constitutes a good deed and what does not. And since many people are basing their hope of heaven on their good deeds I believe it is vitally important to let them know they are placing all their hopes in the wrong basket. I don't want them to assume they are going somewhere when in fact they are not. Once they get to the place they are going it will be too late to change their mind and wish for the other place. Better to know now what the requirement for entry is for Heaven than to assume to know and find out otherwise.

So let me lay it out plainly and simply. The people who do good works travel on a very broad road. It is an easy road to follow and many people travel that road, but that road does not lead to heaven. It leads instead to destruction. If 72% of Americans believe their good works will get them to heaven then this is the road that nearly three-fourths of Americans are currently traveling on. They need to get off this road and onto the road less traveled. This road is much narrower and harder to travel on but it does not deceive the traveler because it leads straight to Heaven. Not many people find this road but those who do travel this road find that it leads to life; life now and life later. In Matthew 7 Jesus tells of these two roads and encourages us to follow the latter one.

MATTHEW 7:13-14

"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

Where is the narrow road located and how do we find the way to it? Jesus tells us.

John 14:16

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me"

Jesus is the only way to heaven. He is the road we must place our feet upon if we are indeed going to make it to Heaven. There is no other way to come to the Father who resides in Heaven other than

through Jesus. I did not make that up. I am quoting Jesus Himself. Peter reminds us in Acts 4:12 how salvation is attained. He says,

“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

And John reminds us of the words of Jesus who said,

JOHN 3:16-17

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

EPHESIANS 2:8-9

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

So how do you get on the right road? How do you ensure you are headed to Heaven after you die? It is actually quite simple. You must first acknowledge that all your good works are as filthy rags in the eyes of God and are not sufficient to gain entrance into Heaven. Then you must confess your belief in God’s Son and accept the free gift of God which can cleanse you from all your sins.

ROMANS 10:9-11

“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. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame’.”

1 JOHN 5:11-12

“And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life”

The Bible is the only reliable guide that can ensure us entrance to heaven. But our entrance will not be granted because of our good works. It will only be granted if we believe in the good work of Jesus. All of us will die. What happens to us after we die depends on us. Not on what we do but on what Someone else did for us.

HEBREWS 9:27

“It is appointed once for men to die once and after this comes judgment.”

As you can see by this Scripture there is no reincarnation. We only die once. And after that comes the judgment. For the one who travels the wide path to destruction and does not believe that Jesus is the way into Heaven there will be a judgment of condemnation and eternal punishment. But those who believe that salvation is found in no one other than Jesus will escape this condemnation.

ROMANS 8:1

“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

JOHN 5:24

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes in Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.”

You can know if you are headed to heaven or headed to hell. It does not have to be a guessing game. You do not have to wait until death to know where you will end up after you die. You can know now and have the assurance now that you will soon reside in heaven with the One who died for you. It may be hard for you to come to a point of confession of faith in Christ who died for your sins; but that confession is your guarantee of Heaven. It is part of the hardness of getting on the narrow road. But it needs to be done.

In his book entitled “Heaven” author Randy Alcorn tells the following story:

Years ago Ruthanna Metzger, a professional singer, was asked to sing at a wedding of a very wealthy man. According to the invitation, the reception would be held on the top two floors of Seattle’s Columbia Tower, the Northwest’s tallest skyscraper. She and her husband, Roy, were excited about attending.

At the reception, waiters in tuxedos offered luscious hors d’oeuvres and exotic beverages. The bride and groom approached a beautiful glass and brass staircase that led to the top floor. Someone ceremoniously cut a satin ribbon draped across the bottom of the stairs. They announced the wedding feast was about to begin. Bride and groom ascended the stairs, flowed by their guests.

At the top of the stairs, a maître d’ with a bound book greeted the guests outside the doors. “May I have your name, please?” “I am Ruthanna Metzger and this is my husband, Roy.” The maître d’ searched the M’s and said, “I’m not finding it. Would you spell it please?” Ruthanna spelled her name slowly. After searching the book, the maître d’ looked up and said, “I’m sorry, but your name isn’t here.”

“There must be some mistake,” Ruthanna replied. “I’m the singer, I sang for this wedding!” The gentleman answered, “It doesn’t matter who you are or what you did. Without your name in the book you cannot attend the banquet.” He motioned to a waiter and said, “Show these people to the service elevator, please.”

The Metzgers followed the waiter past beautifully decorated tables laden with shrimp, whole smoked salmon, and magnificent carved ice sculptures. Adjacent to the banquet area, an orchestra was preparing to perform, the musicians all dressed in dazzling white tuxedos. The waiter led Ruthanna and Roy to the service elevator, ushered them in, and pushed “G” for the parking garage.

After locating their car and driving several miles in silence, Roy reached over and put his hand on Ruthanna’s arm. “Sweetheart, what happened?” Ruthanna replied, “When the invitation arrived I was busy. I never bothered to RSVP. Besides, I was the singer. Surely I could go to the reception without returning the RSVP!”

Ruthanna started to weep – not only because she had missed the most lavish banquet she’d ever been invited to, but also because she suddenly had a small taste of what it will be like someday for people as they stand before Christ and are denied entrance to Heaven because their names are not written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.

Randy ends the story of Ruthanna and Roy Metzger by saying this: “Throughout the ages, countless people have been too busy to respond to Christ’s invitation to His wedding banquet (in Heaven). Many assume the good they’ve done – perhaps attending church, being baptized, singing

in the choir, or helping in a soup kitchen – will be enough to gain entry into Heaven. But people who do not respond to Christ’s invitation to forgive their sins are people whose names are not written in the Lamb’s Book of Life. To be denied entrance to Heaven’s wedding banquet will not just mean going down the service elevator to the garage. It will mean being cast outside into Hell, forever.” (Randy Alcorn, © 2004 by Eternal Prospective Ministries. All rights reserved; Taken from “It’s Not In the book” by Ruthana C. Metzgar, © 1998 by Ruthana C. Metzgar. Used by permission.)

The invitation to attend the wedding feast of the Lamb which is held in the halls of Heaven has been going out into the world for centuries. If you have not accepted God’s invitation to join the banquet by confessing your sins and accepting Christ as Your Lord and Savior, I urge you to do so today. Tomorrow is not guaranteed to any of us. Death will come like a thief in the night for all of us some day; perhaps someday soon. Better to make sure of your eternal destiny today than wait and find out too late that you made the wrong choice, or failed to make the right choice.

There is only one way to Heaven and we have spoken about that today. Over the course of the next several weeks we will talk about heaven itself – what it will be like and where it is currently and will eventually be located. We’ll even speak a little about Hell and what it will be like for those who do not believe in Jesus. We’ll talk about the types of bodies we will have after death, the rapture, the resurrection of the dead, the millennial kingdom, and the new heavens and the new earth. It will be exciting to see what awaits those of us who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and have confessed Him as our Savior. If you’ve ever wondered what Heaven will be like, you won’t want to miss this continuing series of sermons on Heaven.

1 JOHN 5:13

“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

None of us should merely assume that we are a Christian and are going to Heaven. All of us must make the conscious decision to accept Christ’s sacrificial death on our behalf. When we choose to accept Christ and surrender control of our life to Him, only then we can be certain that our name is written in the Lamb’s book of life. So today I want to close by praying for those who may have been convicted today of their uncertainty of heaven. I want all who hear my voice today to know for certain they are saved and will inherit eternal life. If you are uncertain of your eternal destiny pray along with me today silently in your heart.

“Lord, I am uncertain if I am going to heaven. I thought if I did enough good in my life that it would be enough for you to welcome me into Heaven. But today I found out otherwise. Lord, I ask you to open my mind to the truth of your word. Convince my heart that You are the only Way to Heaven. Give me the assurance that You will welcome me into Your home. I believe You are the Way to Heaven, the Truth about how to get into Heaven, and the Life that awaits me in Heaven. Cleanse me from my sin and write my name in the Lamb’s book of Life so that I may be welcomed into eternity with You and attend the wedding feast of the Lamb. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.”

If you have prayed this prayer with me and made this confession of faith for the first time today I would like to welcome you into the kingdom of God. I have a little booklet that can help you get started in your journey of faith. If you would like to receive it I simply come up to me after church and I will be happy to give it to you. In the meantime let’s reiterate what we have just said though the singing of this next song, “Only One God of Grace”.

ONLY ONE GOD OF GRACE

Once I was dead in my sin I was helpless and then in my stead
One bled and died and rose fulfilling His promise to those He would save by grace
Now I praise the one, only one God of grace

One God of grace; one faith in one gospel, only one way
One blood that saves; the blood of the One who died and lives to give us grace
There's only one God, only one God of grace

There's one Father in heaven and one perfect Son
Who was willing to pay the one cost
To save one lost world and create one new man
Through the mercy of one lonely cross

One Lord of life; one comforting Spirit, one name lifted high
One love, one hope; one people who long to see one Jesus face to face
There's only one God; only one God of grace

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