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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes

INTRODUCTION

Today, I'm going to be talking about Heaven. A man died and went to Heaven. St. Peter asked him, "Why should I let you into Heaven?" The guy said, "Well, I tried to help other people." "Can you give me an example?" "Sure. Once I was in a roadside diner and a group of Hell's Angels were bothering a little old lady. They had knives and guns and were scaring everyone in the place. So I stepped up the leader and spun him around and said, 'Hey! Why don't you pick on somebody your own size? Leave her alone. And while you're at it, you and your filthy friends clear out of here and get on your bikes and ride away.'"

St. Peter said, "Wow, that was pretty brave, when did that happen?" The man said, "About five minutes ago!"

There are a lot of jokes about Heaven but most of them are certainly not based on reality, and they can be misleading. For instance, there's nothing in the Bible that teaches St. Peter is going to meet people at the Pearly Gates and admit them into Heaven. Peter can't get you into Heaven—only Jesus can—and that's no joke.

Jesus had a lot to say about Heaven. In our passage today, Jesus reveals some information about Heaven to some people who didn't even believe in Heaven.

Matthew 22:23-33. "That same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. 'Teacher,' they said, 'Moses told us that if a man dies without having children, his brother must marry the widow and have children for him. Now there were seven brothers among us. The first one married and died, and since he had no children, he left his wife to his brother. The same thing happened to the second and third brother, right on down to the seventh. Finally, the woman died. Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven, since all of them were married to her?' Jesus replied, 'You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in Heaven. But about the resurrection of the dead—have you not read what God said to you, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?' He is not the God of the dead but of the living.' When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching."

The Sadducees were a small but influential group in Jerusalem. They were the aristocrats, the high priest was always a Sadducee. They were much more liberal than the Pharisees. The Sadducees didn't believe in angels, or demons, or miracles, or an afterlife; that's why they were sad-you-see.

Last August when I taught on the book of Ruth we examined the law of Levirate marriage found in Deuteronomy 25. If a married man died without a son, his next oldest brother received all his property—including his wife. The brother of the deceased was obligated to marry his sister-in-law and try to have children. If her husband's brother refused to marry her, she could spit in his face and take his sandals and he would be publicly shamed. So most brothers obliged by marrying their brother's widow. Then if the wife had a son by her new husband, the son would

carry on her dead husband's name and claim his property.

The Sadducees took the Levirate marriage law and extrapolated it to a worst-case scenario: seven brothers marrying the same woman and each of them dying. This is a fabricated example, but if it really happened can't you imagine husbands numbers five, six, and seven weren't too happy about marrying her? They would have probably been thinking, "What's wrong with her meatloaf?"

In our passage, after the Sadducee finished the ridiculous case study, I can imagine he smiled, and glanced at the other Sadducees before he delivered his preposterous question: "Now, then (giggle) at the Resurrection (laugh) whose wife will she be? The Sadducees didn't even believe there would be an afterlife!

Actually, if you've ever been married more than once, it's a valid question. If you've remarried due to death or divorce, you may be wondering which mate will be yours in Heaven. Relax. Jesus indicates that it doesn't matter in Heaven.

I love to talk about Heaven. We ought to get excited whenever we talk about Heaven. I like what the great English Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon told young preachers about speaking on Heaven. He said, "When you speak of Heaven let your face light up...When you speak of hell—well, then your everyday face will do."

Most Americans believe in Heaven, but frankly, you don't find much excitement about Heaven. I've often wondered why people aren't more excited about it. It could be because they don't understand what Heaven will be like. I agree with John Eldridge who wrote: "Nearly every Christian I have spoken with has some idea that eternity is an unending church service...We have settled on an image of the never-ending sing-along in the sky, one great hymn after another, forever and ever, amen. And our hearts sink. Singing forever and ever? That's it? That's the good news? And then we sigh and feel guilty that we aren't more 'spiritual.' We lose heart, and we turn once more to the present to find what life we can." (The Journey of Desire, p. 111) But Heaven won't be boring!

As we think about Heaven, I want to address seven Heaven questions, and it's my desire that you'll leave here more excited about Heaven than ever before and more committed to go there and to take as many people with you as possible.

1. Is Heaven for Real?

The short answer is ASOLUTELY, YES! The word "Heaven" appears over 600 times in the Bible. The words "hell" or "hades" only appear 22 times. When you write the word "Heaven" you should always capitalize it. Just like you capitalize the "T" in Tyler and the "D" in Dallas because they are real, proper nouns, you should always capitalize "Heaven."

There has been a renewed interest in Heaven because of a recent book entitled, *Heaven is for Real* by Todd Burpo. A few years ago, Todd's four-year old son, Colton, underwent emergency surgery, and had a near death experience. A few months after his surgery as his family drove past

the hospital, Colton said, "That's the place where I saw the angels." His parents began to question him, and Colton began to describe the details of Heaven in a simple childlike way. At first, his parents were skeptical, and then Colton began to reveal some impossible-to-know details. For instance, he informed them that he had met his sister in Heaven. Colton's mom had miscarried a daughter before Colton was born, but they had never told him. He described meeting his grandfather who died 30 years before Colton was born. In both cases Colton revealed details of them he had never been told. It's a fun book that communicates that Heaven is real; Jesus really loves little children; and that Jesus is going to return.

I enjoyed reading sections of the book, but it didn't make me believe in Heaven any more that I already did. Jesus left us plenty of information to convince us that Heaven is for real! He was the expert on Heaven because He claimed to have come from Heaven. Jesus said, "For I have come down from Heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me." (John 6:38)

Maybe you've never been to Florala, Alabama, but if you wanted to go there, I could tell you about the city. It's a small town on the Florida/Alabama border built around Lake Jackson, the largest natural in Alabama. It's a beautiful little town. It's close enough to Florida, that there are palm trees planted in the median of the main street of the city. I can tell you all that information because I'm from there. I came from Alabama. Do you doubt what I said about Florala? Probably not. Well, Jesus came from Heaven, so we should believe what He has to say about His home, Heaven. Heaven IS for real.

2. Will we know our loved ones in Heaven?

Again, the answer is ABSOLUTELEY, YES! There are many passages indicating we will maintain a distinct identity in Heaven. At the Transfiguration, Jesus recognized Moses and Elijah.

In response to the Sadducees foolish question Jesus referred to Moses' experience at the burning bush. (Exodus 3) God said, "I AM the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." His logic is irrefutable. Let me explain it in simple terms. My earthly dad, Orlo Dykes, died over 30 years ago. My father-in-law, J.R. is alive in Alabama. If a stranger who knew my dad meets me they will say, "I was (past tense) a friend of your dad." That would be the correct statement since my dad is dead. If someone who knows J.R. meets me, they will say, "I am (present tense) a friend of your father-in-law. It's all in the tense of the verbs. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob still are alive in Heaven and have their distinctive identities.

Contrary to popular folklore, when we die, we DO NOT become angels. Jesus said we become LIKE the angels. In Luke 20 Jesus said we would be like the angels in that we will never die. I've read every passage in the Bible about angels and there is no reference in the Bible to an angel birth or an angel funeral. Contrary to the Cupid myth, there is no reference in the Bible to baby angels—or senior citizen angels. Angels are spirits sent from God to serve His people. (Hebrews 1:14)

Here in Matthew 22 Jesus adds that we will be like the angels in that we won't marry or be given in marriage in Heaven. The exact language Jesus used is important. He said "at the resurrection people will neither marry (verb) or be given in marriage (verb)." In other words, there won't be

any new marriage ceremonies in Heaven. Current marriages won't be dissolved. So if you aren't married here, don't expect to go to Heaven and meet Mr. or Mrs. Right and ask them, "Will you marry me?"

So, you'll know your spouse (and your ex-spouses), family members, and friends in Heaven, but it won't really matter then as much as it does now. In Heaven, our relationship with the Living God will be so powerful our earthly relationships will seem to be insignificant in comparison. I like the way Eugene Petersen paraphrases Jesus' words:

I love that great song about Heaven written by Jimmie Davis. It says, "I thought as I entered that city, my friends all knew me well. They showed me the streets of Heaven; such scenes too numerous to tell; I saw Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Mark, Luke and Timothy. But I said, 'I want to see Jesus! He's the One who died for me!'" So, yes, we'll know each other in Heaven, but that will be overshadowed by the glory of knowing Jesus.

3. Can the people in Heaven see us now?

I think there is enough Biblical evidence to say, "Yes" to that question. In Luke 16 Jesus talked about a rich man who died and found himself in Hades. He was able to see Lazarus and Abraham in paradise and he was aware of his five brothers back on earth who needed to repent.

Also, in Hebrews 11, we are introduced to many faithful saints who have died and gone on to Heaven, and then we read, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." (Hebrews 12:1) The scene is a stadium, and we're the ones on the track. This "cloud of witnesses" is cheering us on.

I posted these seven Heaven questions on my Facebook page earlier in the week, and I got lots of great comments. But there were several who answered this particular question by saying something like, "I hope not." Or "Wouldn't their joy in Heaven be ruined if they saw all the sin and suffering down here in our lives?"

I don't think there is anything on earth that can dampen the joy of Heaven. Instead of weeping, these witnesses are cheering us on. They are encouraging us to run the race with patience and to finish the race as we sprint toward the prize.

Dr. Peter Kreeft is a respected Biblical professor at Boston College. He wrote an article in *Christianity Today* about "Heaven" and here is his take on the question, "Can the people in Heaven see us now?" He writes: "Is there any compelling reason why they shouldn't? Jesus can see us now and those in Heaven are like Him. Can Heaven be Heaven only by being quarantined and having the blinds drawn? It is reasonable to interpret the 'cloud of witnesses' in Hebrews 12:1 not only as witnesses to their faith during their own lifetimes, but as witnesses to us now."

4. What kind of bodies will we have in Heaven?

We'll have a transformed body. Different religions have different ideas about the afterlife. Platonism, Buddhism, Hindus, and other Gnostic faiths, which see the body as "evil", teach that

we will be pure spirits. Some Christians embrace this heresy and imagine we'll be spirits floating around on clouds.

Muslims and Mormons teach we will have physical bodies and even have marriages and produce children. Muslims teach that faithful men will be rewarded with a harem of 70 virgins. That reminds me of the joke I heard about a suicide bomber arriving in the afterlife. He was met by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and other men. The bomber said, "But where are my 70 virgins?" George Washington says, "Virgins was a misprint. It really says, '70 Virginians!'"

We won't be spirits, and we won't have physical bodies, instead we'll have transformed bodies which will be like the body of the Lord Jesus after the resurrection. The Bible says, "But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2)

Jesus had a real body after the resurrection. His body could be touched and He could eat. Yet it could go as He pleased, with neither walls nor distance as an obstacle. It was the same body He had before He died because His friends recognized Him. Yet it was different enough that they did not recognize Him at first sight.

A sub-question to this is what age will we be in Heaven? Medieval philosophers suggested we would all be 33 since that was the age of Christ, but most scholars doubt that. While I don't know the age we'll be in Heaven, I can assure you that nobody will be old.

There is one interesting part of little Colton Burpo's experience in the book *Heaven is For Real*. He reported to his parents that he met his grandfather who died 30 years before he was born. The family called him "Pop." After Colton spoke of meeting him, his dad, Todd, got an old picture of Pop out of the attic taken when Pop was 61, just before he died. Colton looked at the picture, and there was no recognition. Colton said, "Dad, nobody's old in Heaven. And nobody wears glasses." Todd started thinking and he called his mother and asked her to mail a picture of Pop when he was younger. She sent him one taken when Pop was in his thirties. When the picture came in the mail Todd showed it to Colton and asked him if he recognized him. Colton said, "Yep, that's him."

5. What will we do in Heaven?

The answer to this is simple. We'll do God's Will. In the model prayer Jesus taught us pray, "Thy will be done on earth AS IT IS in Heaven." In Heaven, we'll do whatever God wants!

For sure, Heaven won't be boring. There will be praise and worship. In Revelation 4-5 we are seen around the throne of the Lamb singing praises. Erwin Lutzer wrote: "If we want to prepare for our final destination, we should begin to worship God here on earth. Our arrival in Heaven will only be a continuation of what we have already begun. Praise is the language of Heaven and the language of the faithful on earth."

But we won't be singing praises for eternity as some people think. There will much more to do as we worship God and do His will. Worship involves so much more than praise; worship is

honoring and obeying God.

Bottom line, I think we'll spend eternity fulfilling the two basic directives God has given us to follow here on earth: Love God and love others. So get ready to spend an eternity loving God supremely and loving your brothers and sisters there.

6. What does Heaven look like?

Which Heaven are you talking about? In his excellent book entitled *Heaven*, Randy Alcorn correctly points out that there is a "present Heaven" and a "future Heaven." The present Heaven is where the departed saints are now. But after Jesus returns, Revelation 20 reveals that there will be a new Heaven and a new earth.

I think that all the things that God created perfectly will be there, that includes animals and nature. But it will be a new earth as God originally intended without the stain of sin.

What kind of perfect environment do you picture? If you love the beach, you might picture a perfect beachfront with no litter, undertow, sharks or crabs! No it's better than that. If you're a golfer, you might picture being able to play Augusta National and every drive splits the fairway and every putt rattles into the cup. No, it's better than that. If you love hiking you might picture a perfect mountain trail with no briars or snakes, and you don't get tired as you carry a 100-pound pack uphill. No, it's better than that. Imagine what you can, and it's better than that.

We spend a lot of time imagining what Heaven will be like, and then we think we can't comprehend how wonderful it will be. Actually, you don't have to use your imagination. The Bible says, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him [and that's where most people stop reading, so they think, I can't understand how wonderful Heaven will be. But just keep reading]—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit." (1 Corinthians 2:9-10)

7. How do I get to Heaven?

This is the most important question, and the answer is John 3:16. Say it with me. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

One of my Facebook friends answered this question by giving the driving directions to Cowboys stadium in Arlington. Of course, he was joking, but it made me think. It's actually easier to get into Heaven than it is to get into a Dallas Cowboys game. You can't get into a Cowboys game for less than about \$250, and the good seats go for thousands. And it doesn't cost anything to get into Heaven. It doesn't cost you anything, that is. It cost God plenty. It cost Him the life of His only Son.

I may not ever make it to Jerry's house in Arlington, and I'm fine with that, because I'm going to a place that in comparison will make that stadium look like a falling-down outhouse!

CONCLUSION

Heaven should thrill and excite us and it should be the desire of every person to spend eternity in Heaven. C.S. Lewis wrote: "Aim at Heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither." In other words, if you live this life with an eye on Heaven, then this life is rich beyond description. But if you live only for this life on earth, you lose.

My favorite thing about Heaven is what Jesus said about it on the last page of the Bible. In Revelation 21:5, "Behold I make all things new!" It's all going to be new and improved. A new and improved earth. A new and improved Heaven. And a new and improved you!

I think sometimes the more we suffer here, the more we long for Heaven. As a teenager, Joni Eareckson had a spinal cord injury that paralyzed her for life. But she hasn't let that slow her down. In spite of her handicap, she has ministered to millions of people through her books and artwork. As she considers the idea of her eternal resurrection body she writes: "I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed in righteousness—powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope this gives someone spinal cord injured like me? No other religion, no other philosophy promises new bodies, hearts, and minds. Only in the gospel of Christ do hurting people find such incredible hope." (*Heaven: Your Real Home*, p. 53)

Is Heaven real? You betcha. And I hope you'll surrender your life to Jesus so you'll spend eternity there, and then I hope you'll take as many people with you as you can!

OUTLINE

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4. What kind of bodies will we have in Heaven?
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7. How do I get to Heaven?