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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 in there 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 punched him the face and said, 'Hey! Why don't you leave that little lady alone? And while you're at it, you and your filthy friends clear out of here and get on your bikes and ride away.'

"Wow, that was pretty brave, when did that happen?"

"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.

Americans are fascinated with the idea of heaven, they just don't know what the Bible teaches about heaven and how to get there. According to a Pew Research Poll this year 74% of Americans believe in heaven, and 54% believe if they do enough good deeds they can earn entrance into heaven after they die. But only 39% of Americans believe in hell. The Apostle Paul certainly believed in heaven and hell, and in an amazing passage of scripture before us today, he makes a claim that he once experienced a vision of visiting of heaven.

2 Corinthians 12:1-7. "I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body, I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say. To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me."

Was Paul talking about himself? If he is, why does he refer to himself in the third person when he says, "I know a man in Christ who was caught up to the third heaven?" It was a common practice for Jewish rabbis to use the third person when talking about themselves. Jesus referred to Himself many times like this. For instance in Luke 19:10 He said, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." We know for sure Paul is talking about himself because he says, "to keep ME from becoming conceited because of these visions."

The next question we must answer is, "What is the third heaven?" You've probably heard of the "seventh heaven" but that phrase never appears in the Bible. Jewish Kabala says there are seven

levels of heaven and Islam also teaches there are seven levels of heaven. I've never seen it, but I've heard there is a television program called "7th Heaven." But the phrase "seventh heaven" never appears in the Bible. Instead the Bible teaches there are three heavens.

Both the Hebrew word for heaven, *shamayim* and the Greek word *ouranos* describe three different realms. The first heaven is the atmosphere around the earth. For instance, the Bible says, "The LORD will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands." (Deuteronomy 28:12) The first heaven is the atmosphere where the birds fly and where rain forms and falls. The second heaven is outer space. For instance, when God made His promise to Abraham He said, "'Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'" (Genesis 15:5)

The third heaven Paul mentions is the dwelling place of God (Paradise). This is the most common use of the word "heaven." For instance we read these words about Stephen when he was being stoned, "But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'" (Acts 7:55-56) Based upon Stephen's vision, paradise isn't located on some distant planet. It seems to be another dimension that is nearby, perhaps even superimposed on this visible world. Only certain people at certain times are allowed to see it.

This experience of visiting paradise had such a profound effect on Paul that it changed his life. Why do you think Paul was so passionate about preaching the good news of Jesus Christ? He knew there was a torturous hell to be avoided and a tremendous heaven to be gained. That's what kept him going in the face of tremendous opposition. That's why when he was in prison facing execution he could say, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain!" (Philippians 1:21) He had seen heaven and he was excited about going there!

The current problem is most of us don't seem to be as excited about going to heaven. I think one of the greatest tragedies of the modern church is that we have either ignored heaven or we have robbed heaven of its wondrous joy to the point that most Christians are apathetic about the idea of heaven. Why aren't people today more excited about heaven? I agree with John Eldridge who has written: "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)

Paul saw a vision of the third heaven and he was so excited about heaven he couldn't resist telling people about how they could go there when they died. I want to do the same thing in this message. I want to convince you heaven isn't going to be a boring church service. It's going to be the most fulfilling, most exciting existence possible. I want to give you seven fantastic reasons why heaven will be a blast!

(1) We'll LIVE in a wonderful new body!

The Bible teaches, "We know that when these bodies of ours are taken down like tents and folded away, they will be replaced by resurrection bodies in heaven—God-made, not handmade. Sometimes we can hardly wait to move—and so we cry out in frustration. Compared to what's coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an unfurnished shack, and we're tired of it! We've been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home, our resurrection bodies!" (2 Corinthians 5:1-4 *The Message*)

These earthly bodies we live in are only temporary. There are two words used in 1 Corinthians 15 to describe these earthly bodies: "perishable and mortal." That means that they grow old and eventually die, and then they decay. But Jesus will transform these temporary bodies into a body like His. The two words that describe our resurrection bodies are: "imperishable and immortal." When we live in our resurrection bodies, we'll never grow old or get sick. If you're still young and healthy, you may not get too excited about your resurrection body—but for those of us who are getting older and feeling the aches and pains a little more every day, the idea of an eternally young and healthy body makes us smile!

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)

(2) We'll RETAIN a physical existence!

The resurrected Jesus said, "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." (Luke 24:39) "We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2) Our resurrection body will be like that of Jesus. His resurrection body was physical. He invited the disciples to touch Him, and He ate in front of them to show them He wasn't a ghost.

The very best book I've read about heaven is entitled *Heaven*, by Randy Alcorn. I believe he has a better grasp of heaven than perhaps anyone else living in the 21st Century. In this book he answers questions like: Will there be pets in heaven? Will there be arts, entertainment, and sports in heaven? Will we work in heaven? He stresses throughout his book that our eternal dwelling place will be as real and as physical as the original Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve lived in paradise. They walked with God and talked with God in the cool of the evening. Randy Alcorn doesn't say heaven IS the Garden of Eden, he says it will be *much better* than the Garden of Eden! He believes that not only will we have our same five senses, but they will be super-enhanced senses. I'm color-blind so I can hardly wait to see color so rich that in comparison the brightest colors in this world seem dull and pale. Imagine hearing music that makes the music of earth sound like static? In comparing heaven to the Garden of Eden, Alcorn writes: "Eden was

not destroyed. What was destroyed was mankind's ability to live in Eden. It appears to have remained just as it was, a physical paradise removed to a realm we can't gain access to. We know from Revelation 2:7 that the tree of life is now in heaven. (To him who overcomes I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.) The presence of the tree of life in the present Heaven suggests that Heaven too has physical properties and is capable of containing physical objects." (*Heaven*, p. 56) So forget your idea that you're going to be a ghost floating around in the mist above the clouds. Heaven is going to be a real, physical experience for all eternity! If you wonder what that means, one of the physical aspects of heaven is that:

(3) We'll ENJOY heavenly food!

The Bible says, "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" (Revelation 19:9) Can you imagine tasting food that in comparison makes a gourmet meal on earth taste like mud? Randy Alcorn writes: "The resurrected Christ invited his disciples, 'Come and have breakfast.' He prepared them a meal and then ate bread and fish with them. He proved that resurrection bodies are capable of eating food, real food. Christ could have abstained from eating. The fact that he didn't is a powerful statement about the nature of his resurrection body, and by implication, ours, since Christ 'will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.'" (Philippians 3:21). (*Heaven*, p. 302)

The wonderful thing about eating in heaven is that nobody will overeat, and nobody will go hungry. We read in Revelation 22:2 that in heaven the tree of life will be growing on both sides of the river of life and it will bear its fruit every month. But this isn't speaking of a single tree—how can a single tree grow on both sides of a river? It's speaking of thousands and perhaps million of fruit trees. When I say "the pine tree" is indigenous to East Texas, I'm not talking about a single tree! We'll enjoy the fruit and food of heaven for all eternity!

Jesus said the Kingdom of heaven is like a man who held a great feast and invited people to come. Heaven isn't going to be a funeral; it's going to be a feast! Somewhere along the way, people got the idea hell would be party central and heaven will be boring, but just the opposite is true. Heaven is going to be a blast because that's where the feast is!

(4) We'll be FRIENDS with Bible heroes!

Jesus said, "Many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 8:11) The real fun of a meal is fellowshiping with others while you eat. I really can't stand to eat alone. The Chinese have a word for the loud noise that accompanies a good meal where friends and family members are talking, laughing, and there is a lot of background noise. Our English word "ambiance" doesn't quite capture it because to us, "ambiance" could speak of dimmed lights, candles, and soft music. For the Chinese, it's more of a party atmosphere. They don't consider a meal to be successful unless this party atmosphere is created. That's what heaven is going to be like!

I can't wait to meet David and hear him tell the full story about killing Goliath. I can't wait to meet Daniel and let him tell me what it was like to spend that night among the hungry lions. I

want Noah to tell me what it smelled like on the Ark. I want to ask Lazarus what it was like to be pulled back to earth after four days in heaven. I want to ask Paul what it was really like on the night God sent an earthquake that only shook the shackles off his hands and feet. These men and women of faith are my heroes, and I can hardly wait to sit down and fellowship with them and hear their full stories!

(5) We'll RECOGNIZE our loved ones!

There is overwhelming evidence that we'll know others in heaven, including our loved ones. When Jesus experienced His transfiguration, we read "And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus." (Mark 9:4). In other words, Elijah and Moses were there and they possessed individual identities. When we go to heaven, we don't just morph into some kind of clone of everyone else.

One of the biggest fallacies about heaven is many people believe when we die we get wings and become angels. The Bible never teaches that. Angels will always be angels and people will always be people. Jesus did say our existence would be somewhat "like the angels in heaven." Just as angels are eternal created beings, our new bodies will be eternal, but we will all maintain our identities.

But of course, we'll only recognize our friends and family who are in heaven. We must never forget that not everyone will be in heaven. Heaven will only be populated by those who put their trust and faith in Jesus Christ in heaven. People often wonder if they could enjoy heaven knowing a loved one was in hell. Randy Alcorn devotes a section to this. Basically, when I get to heaven I'll be so overwhelmed by a sense of God's amazing grace that brought a sinner like me to heaven that I'll never question God's perfect justice.

The best thing I can tell you about recognizing your loved ones in heaven is that I pray you will love them so much now that you'll do everything you can to make sure they meet you there.

(6) We'll REJOICE in the "no-mores"!

Heaven will be a blast not just because of who or what IS there, but also by who or what *won't* be there. I call these the "no-mores" of heaven. The Bible says, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain...the city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light...On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there...nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life." (Revelation 21: 4, 23, 25, 27)

In his book, *All the Doctrines of the Bible*, Herbert W. Lockyer writes: "Where is there a country without sin, crime, lawlessness, bloodshed, disease, death, sorrow and heartache? Heaven is a country in which there is the absence of all that is common to any land, for in God's country there are no barriers, no walls or curtains to divide; no race barrier; no soldiers because there are no wars; no policemen because there is no crime or sin; no undertakers because there are no graves; no physicians because germs, fevers, pestilence, and diseases are unknown; no thieves

because there is no darkness. Who would not yearn for this better and more desirable country in which there are no separations, no broken homes, no drunkards, no prisons, no hospitals, no beggars, no persons who are blind, deaf, dumb or destitute? What a country! Are you not homesick for Heaven?"

(7) We'll SEE Jesus face to face!

The Bible says, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am known." (1 Corinthians 13:12) When I was in college we used to sing a little chorus that went: "Heaven is a wonderful place; Filled with glory and grace; I wanna' see my Savior's face; Heaven is a wonderful place." I still feel the same way. Heaven is going to be a wonderful place because we'll see our Savior's face.

Randy Alcorn writes: "The most exhilarating experiences on Earth, such as white-water rafting, skydiving, or extreme sports, will seem tame compared to the thrill of seeing Jesus. Being with Him. Gazing at Him. Worshiping Him. Embracing Him. Eating with Him. Walking with Him. Laughing with Him. Imagine it!" (*Heaven*, p. 180)

Will I see you in heaven? You don't have to say, "I hope so." You can answer, "Yes, without a doubt." Theoretically there are three ways you can go to heaven. First, if you die before the age when you understand that you're a sinner in need of a Savior, you go to heaven. But if you can hear me and understand my words, chances are you've missed that option. The second way to go to heaven is to live a perfect life from the moment you're born until the second you die. Theoretically, if you never think an evil thought, speak an evil word, or commit an evil deed, you could meet God's perfect standard and be admitted to heaven. But if you've ever goofed up, then you don't qualify for that option. The *only* other way is to put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ. He said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

Are you excited about heaven? We've all heard the charge that some people are so heavenly-minded that they are of no earthly good. But I believe the opposite of that is actually true. Most people, including Christians, are so earthly-minded we are of no heavenly good.

CONCLUSION

In 1871 Fr. J. Boudreau wrote a short story entitled "The Happiness of Heaven." It's a story about a kindhearted king who is hunting in the forest when he discovers a blind, poor orphan boy living there. The king takes the blind orphan to his palace and adopts him as his own son. The king gives to his blind son the finest education and training money can buy. The blind son loves his father dearly and is grateful for everything he has done for him.

When the son turns twenty, a surgeon performs an experimental surgery on his eyes, and for the first time in his life he is able to see. This royal prince, who was once a starving orphan, realizes how he has been blessed with fine food, fragrant gardens, and lovely music. But when he gains his sight, he doesn't care to look at the wealth of his kingdom or the wonders of the palace. Instead he only wants to gaze upon the face of his father—the king who saved him, adopted him,

and loved him.

We'll do the same thing in heaven. We were all poor, blind, wretched orphans, and the King of Kings has adopted us into his family. When we arrive in heaven and our faith finally turns to sight, we aren't going to be looking for a pearly gate, or streets of gold, we'll only have eyes to look upon the One who has redeemed us! My favorite promise is found in Revelation 22:3-4, "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."

Like the song by Jimmie Davis 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!'" The greatest thing about heaven is that we shall see the Lord! So, I hope you'll get so excited about going to heaven, that you'll want to take everyone with you possibly can!

OUTLINE

(1) WE'LL LIVE IN A WONDERFUL NEW BODY!

"We know that when these bodies of ours are taken down like tents and folded away, they will be replaced by resurrection bodies in heaven—God-made, not handmade. Sometimes we can hardly wait to move—and so we cry out in frustration. Compared to what's coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an unfurnished shack, and we're tired of it! We've been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home, our resurrection bodies!" 2 Corinthians 5:1-4 *The Message*

(2) WE'LL RETAIN A PHYSICAL EXISTENCE!

The resurrected Jesus said, "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." *Luke 24:39*

"We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." *1 John 3:2*

(3) WE'LL ENJOY HEAVENLY FOOD!

The Bible says, "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" *Revelation 19:9*

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(5) WE'LL RECOGNIZE OUR LOVED ONES!

"And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus." *Mark 9:4*

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"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain...the city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light...On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there...nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life." *Revelation 21: 4, 23, 25, 27*

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