

INTRODUCTION

This is the first message in a new series I've entitled "Heaven: An Insider's Guide." When you plan a trip to visit a new city or a new country, you want to have an insider, a local resident, give you information as you plan your trip. When it comes to Heaven, I'm not the insider—Jesus is. He resides in Heaven and He has given us ample information in His book for us to learn about His Home Country.

During this series we're going to learn what Jesus taught us about His homeland. Today we're talking about "Planning the Trip of a Lifetime." Next week we'll answer the question: "What happens when a person dies?" In two weeks, our subject will be: "Heaven's activity guide."

Then on Palm Sunday, New York Times best-selling author, Joel Rosenberg, will be here to speak. On Sunday morning he'll tell people how to get to Heaven. That evening, he'll be back and I'll interview him about world events in light of Biblical prophecy. Then on Easter, I'll conclude the series with a message, "Have You Confirmed Your Reservation in Heaven?"

During this series I'll be answering a lot of questions about Heaven. Some of the questions are "Do babies go to Heaven?" "Do I become an angel in Heaven?" "Are we married in Heaven?" "What kind of body will we have in Heaven?" "What will we be doing in Heaven?" If you have questions about Heaven you'd like for me to answer, feel free to email me your questions at david@mail.gabc.org.

Everyone talks about Heaven. The idea of Heaven permeates our popular culture. Led Zeppelin performed a song entitled, "Stairway to Heaven." Queen sang, "Heaven, heaven, heaven is for everyone." U2 sang about Heaven in the song, "Where the Streets Have no Name." And Belinda Carlisle sang, "They say in heaven, love comes first. We'll make heaven a place on earth."

In 1991 Eric Clapton wrote and recorded a Grammy winning song called, "Tears in Heaven." He wrote it with a broken heart after his five-year-old son, Conor, fell from a 53rd floor apartment in New York. In the song he asked the question, "Would you know my name; If I saw you in heaven? Would you feel the same; If I saw you in heaven? I must be strong and carry on; 'Cause I know I don't belong here in heaven."

Clapton retired this song in 2004 and no longer sings it. The official reason is that he has gotten closure and moved on. But those closest to Clapton say thoughts of his son are still too painful to express.

The Bible has a lot to say about Heaven. The word "Heaven" appears over 600 times in the Bible. The Hebrew word for Heaven is *shamayim* and the Greek word is *ouranios*.

In this message we're going to study Hebrews 11, which is often called "The Roll Call of Faith," because it contains the names and faithful deeds of many of the heroes in the Bible. But when you read this list, you discover they all had one thing in common besides faith. They were all looking forward to a better country—a heavenly country.

Hebrews 11:8-11: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. And by faith Abraham, even though he was past age— and Sarah herself was barren— was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise."

Hebrews 11:13-16: "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."

According to a recent Pew Research Poll, 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.

Among Christians there is a widespread ignorance about the details of Heaven. If you ask a Christian what Heaven will be like they'll give short answers like, "Beautiful" or "Wonderful" or "Paradise." Let's imagine you are planning an expensive two-week vacation to Costa Rica. The easiest thing to do is use a travel agent and let them plan the trip for you. But most of us want to do some of our own research online. So you go online to learn everything you can about Costa Rica. But when you Google Costa Rica there are only three words on the website. These words are, "Beautiful, Wonderful, Paradise." You wouldn't be satisfied. You'd want to know more about the place. You want to know the history, the climate, the language, the currency, the places to eat and the places to stay. Those are some of the details of Heaven we're going to be examining over the next few weeks. So as we're planning our trip of a lifetime to Heaven, let's notice four details about this destination of a lifetime.

1. The Builder of Heaven is God

Whenever you visit a new place you want to know a little bit about the history of it. The history of Heaven is connected with the history of God. And God lives above the timeline of history. He has always existed. The Bible says, "From everlasting to everlasting you are God." (Psalm 90:2)

The first verse in your Bible states there was a time, in the beginning, when God created the heavens (plural) and the earth (singular). A good starting place to learn about Heaven is to understand that the word "heaven" is used to describe three different places in the Bible. There's a popular expression, "the seventh heaven," but according to the Bible there aren't seven heavens, although the Koran teaches that.

In the Bible there are three heavens. First, Heaven is used to describe the atmosphere around the earth, what we call "the air." In Genesis 1:20 God said, "Let the birds fly above the earth across the vast expanse of the heavens." (ESV) Second, Heaven is used to describe what we would call outer space. In Genesis 1:17 God created the sun and the moon and it says, "God set them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth." (ESV)

The third use of Heaven, and the one we're going to be focusing on during this series, is the dwelling place of God. Daniel said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries." (Daniel 2:28)

You see the first Heaven by day. You see the second Heaven by night. And you see the third Heaven by faith.

In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul said he knew a man in Christ who had a vision of being caught up to the third Heaven. We believe this was Paul himself, but modesty prevented him from bragging about it. But in the same passage he called this third Heaven, "paradise." The word "paradise" which is taken from a Persian word meaning "beautiful garden" is used only two other times in the New Testament. Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43). And in the letter Jesus wrote to the church at Ephesus he says, "To him who overcomes I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." (Revelation 2:7)

Paradise, or this third Heaven, is a real place. There are many ways Heaven is described, but in every case, we're told that God built it. In 2 Corinthians 5:1 we read, "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands."

Many people think Heaven is going to be some kind of spooky ethereal place where we're going to be floating around on soft clouds eating Milky Way candy bars. But Heaven is a REAL place. During this series, I'm going to capitalize the word Heaven, just like I would capitalize the word "Tyler" or "Texas." It's a proper noun.

These are real buildings we're in now, they aren't just illusions. Consider the Lighthouse and the Conference Center. Those buildings had an architect, Steve Fitzpatrick and his team. They had a builder, Denson Construction Company. Hebrews 11 says God is the both the architect and the builder of this better country—it is a city with foundations.

Heaven shouldn't be confusing to us. God has given us some plain descriptions. I'm going to give you a word and I want you to picture it. Ready? City. Did anybody say, "Wow, I wonder what a city is?" I'll give you another word for you to imagine. Ready? Country. Now think of a better country. When I say, "Imagine a city." Do you have trouble? When I say, "Imagine a country." Can't you see that in your mind? Heaven is a real place and God built His own house, His own city, and His own country.

This book begins with a paradise—the Garden of Eden. It's the story of God and two people in paradise. And this book ends with God and a lot of people with Him in paradise.

2. The Currency of Heaven is Faith

When you visit a foreign country, you want to know what currency they use, and you need to exchange your currency for theirs. Three weeks ago I was in the Philippines and converted dollars to Filipino pesos. Last week in Israel, I exchanged dollars for shekels. The good news is many countries around the world love the U.S. dollar and you can use dollars in most stores. But there are many countries that only accept their national currency. In England, don't try using dollars; they only accept pounds. In Brazil, they won't take U.S. cash; you must pay using Brazilian reals.

In Heaven, there is only one accepted currency, and it is the currency of faith. The Bible says, "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." (Hebrews 11:6)

So if faith is the currency, what is it that we must exchange for Heaven's currency? We must exchange sight. The Bible says, "We live by faith, not by sight." (2 Corinthians 5:7) We have five physical senses, sight, hearing, feeling, smelling, touching. Of these, sight is the major sense. We must be willing to exchange living by our five senses to be able to use the currency of faith. Sight says, "Give me proof and I'll believe." Faith says, "I'll believe without any proof."

There was an agnostic college professor who was trying to convince his students God didn't exist. He said to the students, "Look out the classroom window. Do you see the buildings?" They all nodded. "Do you see the trees?" They nodded. "Do you see the grass?" They nodded. "Do you see the clouds?" Again they nodded in affirmation. Then he said, "Do you see God?" They shook their heads. He summarized. "Exactly. Buildings, trees, grass, and clouds exist. But God does not exist."

He was feeling pretty smug, but a Christian girl in his class said, "Excuse me sir, may I ask the class some questions?" He said, "Sure." She said, "Look at the professor. Do you see his hair?" They nodded. "Do you see his face?" They nodded. "Do you see his shirt?" Again they nodded. She said, "Do you see his brain?" They shook their heads. She said, "Using the same logic, then, we know our professor's brain doesn't exist!"

All these saints in the Old Testament died without seeing Heaven, but they died believing they would see Heaven. They saw Heaven with eyes of faith, and died with the full assurance they would enter the city God had prepared for them.

You may be the kind of person looking for proof of Heaven. You'll never find empirical evidence of Heaven in this world. If you're waiting to see God to believe in Him, then when you see God it will be too late to believe. But the Christian faith isn't irrational, it is supra rational. The theologian Elton Trueblood wrote: "Faith is not belief without proof. It is trust without reservation." You must exchange your sight for faith if you want to visit Heaven.

3. The Way to Heaven is Jesus

If you're going to visit a new destination, you'll want to know how to get there. Is there airline service? Can you take a train or ship? Do you have to drive? If you're driving, you want to have a map or a GPS to guide you. You're not going to leave for your journey until you know the way to go.

Have you heard the jokes about St. Peter being at the gates of Heaven? Here's one. 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 grabbed him by his leather jacket. I yelled, 'Hey! Why don't you leave that little lady alone? And while you're at it, you and your filthy friends should get on your bikes and leave right now!'"

St. Peter said, "Wow, that was pretty brave, when did that happen?" The man said, "About two 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.

In John 14 Jesus talked about going back to His Father's house to prepare a place for us. That's Heaven. Phillip was confused and asked Jesus, "How can we know the way?" Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

There are approximately ten thousand religions in the world, and each one has a different idea of how to make it into the afterlife. We live in a pluralistic society that preaches tolerance toward anyone except those they consider to be intolerant. It isn't politically correct to say Jesus is the only way to Heaven.

What most people believe is there are many avenues to get to Heaven. It's like a twenty-lane superhighway. We're driving in the Christian lane, and others are driving in the Judaism lane. There's some in the Islam lane, and others in the Buddhist lane. But we're all going to arrive at the same destination: Heaven. Sounds good, right? Here's what Jesus said about that, "Broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." (Matthew 7:13-14)

Some people say it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere. Well you can sincerely believe you'll get to Oklahoma City by taking I-20 West, but you'll never get there on that road. You've got to take I-35 North. I know that sounds narrow minded, but it's the truth.

I make no apology when I say Jesus isn't one of the ways to Heaven. He isn't just a good way to Heaven. He is not relatively a better way to Heaven. He is not even the best way to Heaven. He is the ONLY way to Heaven.

You may be thinking, "Come on, pastor. Do you really think Jesus is different than the other religious teachers?" Did anybody else come back from the dead? Christianity is not following the teachings of Christ; it is having a personal relationship with Jesus. It is knowing Him. You can be a Muslim without knowing Mohammed: It's impossible to know him, he's dead and buried in Medina. You can be a Buddhist without knowing Buddha, in fact, he's dead. He was cremated. Some of his remains are in Sri Lanka. But I was at an empty tomb again last week in Jerusalem, and I've got good news: He ain't in dere!

4. The Cost of Heaven is Paid

Now before you take a vacation, you want to know how much it's going to cost. Are you going to stay in five-star hotels or camp out in a tent?

The view of most people on this planet is that if you go to Heaven, you must earn your way there. Islam is the second largest religion in the world, and it teaches that Allah may reward you with paradise IF you obey the five pillars of Islam and perform more good deeds than bad. The Koran teaches that Allah has a set of heavenly scales and if your good deeds outweigh the bad, you will be rewarded with paradise.

In 2005, Barbara Walters interviewed different people around the world asking about their belief in Heaven or the afterlife. She interviewed a seventeen-year old Palestinian terrorist who was a prisoner in a maximum-security prison in Israel. He had attempted to detonate a bomb strapped to his body on a busy street, but the bomb was a dud. Walters summarized his belief: "He believes his reward will be to enter paradise, where he will enjoy sex on silken couches with young virgins, amid rivers of milk and honey. Muslims believe that paradise is a place of lavishly comfortable homes with beautiful gardens and servants to serve them. Food and wine will be plentiful, and both men and women will enjoy hedonistic pleasures. As strange as it may seem, what drove this young man to attempt to commit his heinous act was his idea of Heaven and his longing to go there."

In 1964 Frank Wilson and the Cavaliers sang, "Where, oh where can my baby be? The Lord took her away from me. She's gone to Heaven so I've got to be good. So I can see my baby when I leave this world." Nice sound, but you don't get to Heaven by doing good or being good. It is a gift from God.

But if you're going to spend eternity in Heaven, you've got to realize that price has already been paid. It is FREE to you, but it cost Jesus His life. The Bible says, "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect." (1 Peter 1:18-19)

We have a couple in our church that has a special ministry. I'm not going to name them because I don't want them to lose their heavenly reward. But every year they provide funds for me to take a pastor and his wife to Israel. They let me choose the couple. Last summer I was in Florida at a conference and I sat with a young pastor and his wife at a banquet. We'd never met. In our conversation they mentioned that they'd like to go to Israel sometime. I began to pray about it,

and after the conference was over I called him and asked him if he and his wife wanted to go to Israel with me. His first question was, "How much will it cost?" I told him it was completely free. At first he had a hard time accepting the offer because it seemed too good to be true. He wondered, "What's the catch?" There was no catch. And he even offered to pay part of the price. I finally convinced him that the trip was free and all he had to do was say, "Yes." He did and they had a great time.

Many hard-working Americans stumble over the fact that salvation is free. They want to work for it and earn it just like they do with their jobs. But Jesus has paid the full price; and all you have to do is to say, "Yes" in faith to Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Everyone has his or her own idea about what Heaven is going to be like. Golfers like me want to imagine it is filled with the most beautiful golf courses in the Universe, there's no slow play, and never a wait on the first tee and the ball always flies straight. Fishermen imagine a lake where every cast brings in a trophy fish. Surfers imagine a place where the waves are massive and the curl is perfect, and you never wipe out. Beach-lovers imagine a deserted white beach with gentle waves and breezes and no sharks, crabs, or sunburn.

Novelist Ernest Hemingway lived a tough and torturous life and eventually ended his own life. He had these thoughts about Heaven: In 1925 he wrote a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald in which he wrote, "To me Heaven would be a big bull ring with me holding two barrera seats and a trout stream outside that no one else was allowed to fish in and two lovely houses in the town; one where I would have my wife and children and be monogamous and love them truly and well and the other where I would have my nine beautiful mistresses on nine different floors."

Let me paraphrase one of the profound things Randy Alcorn wrote in his excellent book *Heaven*. "If Heaven is anything you can imagine, then it is nothing." If your idea of Heaven is just an extension of your greatest fantasies, you miss out on the real Heaven, which is FAR BETTER than anything you could ever hope or imagine.

Almost everyone goes through life with a partial sense of dissatisfaction. We're looking for the "it." And we're not even sure what the "it" is. People attempt all kinds of thrills and experiences to see if that's "it." It's not "it." The Bible says in Ecclesiastes 3:11 that God has placed eternity in our hearts. Because of this, we will never be satisfied in a temporary world. The "it" is Heaven. That's why C.S. Lewis wrote: "If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world."

Most of us have watched the "Wizard of Oz" where Dorothy clicked the heels of her ruby slippers together three times and said, "There's no place like home. There's no place like home." We've adopted that phrase into our American mentality. We go on trips and vacations, but we're always longing to get home. Even if home isn't as nice as that resort, and there are problems and challenges. We walk in and say, "There's no place like home."

If you're a follower of Jesus Christ, I want to remind you that you aren't home – yet. An unknown author has written: "Think of stepping on shore and finding it Heaven; Of taking hold of a hand and finding it God's; Of breathing new air and finding it celestial air; Of feeling invigorated and finding it immortality! Of passing from storm and stress to a perfect calm; Of waking and finding it HOME!" (Unknown author)

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes