

## “Where Is Heaven?”—Philippians 3:20-21

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Where Is Heaven?”, is Philippians 3:20-21 → *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

My sister told me about a conversation with her three year old daughter while on a walk one day. My niece pointed out a dead rabbit lying in the gutter. Sensing her daughter’s sadness, she tried to comfort her by telling her that the bunny went to bunny heaven. A little further down the road my niece asked her mother, “Mommy, is bunny heaven in the street?” Needless to say, my sister felt ill prepared to enter into a theological discussion about heaven with her three year old. Fortunately she took the “age appropriate” direction and said something like, “Heaven is where Jesus lives.” That was a sufficient answer for her daughter. I wonder if my sister thought: “Thank You, Lord, for the faith of a child!”

The question which I’ve usually heard people ask is “Do you believe there is a heaven?” This may not be a common question until a death or

impending death which “hits close to home” occurs. It is at such times that many questions dealing with death, the “afterlife,” God and so forth arise in people’s minds causing them to ask others in an effort to find some answers. It is at these times when the “reality” of heaven becomes very important as you hear people speak about “a better place” where their loved one is engaging in favorite activities with friends and/or family members who have already died. “Where is heaven?” also becomes an important question for many people at such times.

When the apostle Paul wrote his letter *to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons* (i.e. the Church in Philippi) (cf. Philippians 1:1), he was in prison for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Recognizing that death was a reality for him, with decisions concerning his life being made outside of his prison cell, he said in Philippians 1:22-23 → *If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. **My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.*** Knowing it was not his choice to determine his time of death, he simply placed his life in God’s hands saying: *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.* (cf. Philippians 1:21)

Notice how he described heaven as simply departing this world to **be with Christ**. While Scripture refers to heaven as up, including the sky above us where the birds fly (cf. Genesis 2:19), what we call “outer space”

(cf. Matthew 24:29) and the “highest heaven” (cf. 1 Kings 8:27; Psalm 148:4), it is spoken of as something believers in Christ receive immediately upon death. Remember Jesus’ words to the repentant thief on the cross: *Truly, I say to you, **today** you will **be with Me** in paradise.* *Paradise* is a word which harkens back to the perfection in Yahweh’s presence which Adam and Eve experienced in the Garden of Eden. However, the thief’s body would be taken down from the cross and buried. How could Jesus say he would be with Him in paradise **today**?

The intention of Scripture is to describe and define living in a relationship with God through faith in His Messiah, Jesus. The death of Jesus is the death upon which Scripture places high importance because His death was the perfect sacrifice making atonement for your sins. As you repent of your sins and trust in His atoning death you have the privilege of living eternally **with Jesus in heaven** instead of living eternally separated from His presence in hell. Ecclesiastes 12:7 describes death as the body (i.e. *the dust*) returning *to the earth . . . and the spirit* returning *to God Who gave it*. It is this separation of the spirit from the body upon which Jesus made the promise to the thief on the cross of experiencing eternal bliss and joy in His presence immediately upon his death.

Thus, it is not so much where heaven is as much as Who is there, that is, Jesus. The day before His death on the cross Jesus told His

disciples that He was going to His *Father's house* (i.e. heaven) to *prepare a place for them* and gave them this promise: *If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to Myself, that where I am you may be also* (cf. John 14:3) The focus of heaven is all about relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior **now** and **then**.

In our text, Paul had just spoken about those who live *as enemies of the cross of Christ* (i.e. unbelievers who attack Jesus and His followers), whose *god is their belly* (i.e. live to indulge earthly desires), who *glory in their shame* (i.e. find no shame in sin but rather flaunt it) and have *minds set on earthly things* (i.e. are concerned only about their earthly life with no consideration for their eternal life) (cf. Philippians 3:18-19). Verse 20 of our text begins with the word *but* . . . In contrast to such idolatrous living we Christians define our relationships in the midst of *earthly things* much differently. He says: *But our citizenship is in heaven*.

If you've ever felt like you don't belong in the midst of this world's ideals . . . if you've ever felt like a stranger around others with the way they live, talk, behave and so forth . . . if you've ever felt very uncomfortable with the ways of this world . . . consider why this is so. The Holy Spirit given you in your baptism is giving you a discerning heart to recognize that such ideals, living, speaking and behaving in sin goes against your *citizenship in heaven*—your relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

It is important to remember that such a situation does not push you into a “death wish” of wanting to end your uncomfortableness with this sinful world. The Holy Spirit will never lead a Christian in this direction. Rather, He will always lead you to Christ *Who . . . ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things* (cf. Ephesians 4:10). Thus, verses 20-21 of our text says that *from heaven we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself.*

We look to Jesus to bring about the fulfilment of His promise to come again and take us to be with Him forever with new physical glorified bodies. Thus, heaven is being with Jesus now spiritually and on the Last Day physically with the restoration of paradise in the *new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells* (cf. 2 Peter 3:10-13). This heaven is what awaits those to trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

But what about so many who do not believe in the atoning work of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins? What about those who claim to believe and then refuse to live in obedience to Him with unrepentant sins? What about so many who believe the myth that the bliss and joy of heaven is automatically given at death to all people? Those who walk in a daily faith relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior are actually saddened by such spurning of Christ’s Person & Work. While they wait

for the coming of Jesus, Christians desire to bring Christ to bear upon the lives of those living without hope or living with a false hope. It's easy to sit in judgment upon those who scorn Christ's forgiveness. It's much more challenging to love them in Christ with the desire for the Holy Spirit to bring them to repentance and faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Such a dependance upon the power of Jesus is imperative to you're waiting for His return while striving to bring Christ to a world lost in the darkness of sin. We are perseverant in this witnessing task because we know Who is Lord in the midst of it all. Verse 21 of our text reminds us that Jesus has the power *to subject **all things** to Himself*. This includes, most of all, sinners. You cannot make someone become a Christian. You cannot even persuade them into faith. You don't have that much control. You simply strive to be faithful as citizens of heaven to confess Jesus Christ as your "Lord . . . crucified, died . . . buried," risen "from the dead" and "ascended into heaven" where He "sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty." As you wait for Him to come from there "to judge the living and the dead," look for "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting" in "the world to come" with heart and eyes fixed on Jesus alone for your salvation. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding,  
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.