



Catalog No. 7239
 Revelation 7:9-12
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 November 5th, 2006

HEAVEN IN US BEFORE WE ARE IN HEAVEN

“There is darkness without, and when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendour, no vastness anywhere; only triviality for a moment, and then nothing.” Those are the words of Bertrand Russell shortly before his death, and in two sentences he captured what many people today feel about life and death. In the West we find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that this material world is all there is. There might be a suspicion of an after-life of some form, but it is an irrelevance. For most people the prevailing philosophy is eat, drink and be merry, for “tomorrow we diet.” That is, avoid thinking about ultimate issues by maximising on present experience. As far as most people are concerned, all religions are mocked by the hard white smile of the skull.

It has to be said that we Christians have not always portrayed an image of heaven and the after-life that has attracted people. Ernest Gordon, who wrote *Miracle on the River Kwai*, said that when he looked at Christians he felt that they were the kind of people “who had extracted the bubbles from the champagne of life. I would have preferred a robust hell to the grey sunless abode of the faithful.”

We Christians think about heaven in rather the same way as we think about death. Die? That’s the last thing I’ll do. Heaven? That’s the last thing I’ll think about.

Maybe you know the story of a minister visiting an elderly couple. The husband was seriously ill in bed, and before the minister went to see him, the wife said: “Do say something cheerful and hopeful to him won’t you, not about heaven and all that.” We feel too much at home here, don’t we? We are too earthbound, too secularized. But the real world is the world of heaven; this present world is the world that is passing away.

By contrast to how many of us think, the great Puritan preacher Richard Sibbes was once described in this way: “Of this good man let this be written. Heaven was in him before he was in heaven.”

My suggestion this morning is this: if heaven is in us now, then we will know what on earth we should be doing. If we understand the realities of heavenly worship, we will be motivated to engage wholeheartedly in our earthly mission.

The book of Revelation lifts the curtain, giving us a glimpse of what heaven will be like. It is an unveiling, and we find several songs of heaven which are wonderfully colourful sections of scripture. The multitudes appear, the atmosphere is charged with excitement, the worship is demonstrative and noisy. For these are people who have come through great difficulty and

suffering, and John’s writing was a special encouragement to Christians in that position.

We’ll look at three characteristics of heaven. And as we look at what heaven will be like, let’s ask if it is true of us as it was of Richard Sibbes, that heaven is in us before we are in heaven. And this will help us understand not only the final outcome of the mission of God but also our present motivations, the inspiration for joining that mission wholeheartedly.

1. The Vision is of God’s family

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, (Rev 7:9a)

John’s vision of God’s family in heaven included representatives from every part of the globe. He piles up the expressions – nation, tribe, people, language – to show that the redeemed aren’t from a restricted group, but from all over the world. It’s a universal family – and God aims to be worshipped by converts from every corner of the globe.

This is reinforced many times in the book of Revelation: “Then I saw another angel flying in mid air with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people. And he said with a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water’ (Rev 14:6-7).

And there’s an intriguing reference in chapter 15. John describes those who held harps given them by God “who sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb”: They sang “All nations will come and worship before you.” (Rev 15:4)

The Song of Moses is recorded in Exodus 15: it’s a wonderfully God-centred celebration after they crossed the Red Sea. And it was sung on Sabbath evenings in the synagogue, celebrating that fantastic deliverance from Egypt.

And now in heaven, the song of Moses is joined to the song of the Lamb – the one who has triumphed over every enemy, and has delivered not just a nation, but people from every nation: “all nations will come and worship before you.”

And John states that this international community is innumerable: a great multitude that no one could count (7:9). This recalls the promise to Abraham in Genesis: “God took him outside of his tent and 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. I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.”

That's John's vision. All of Abraham's true offspring, all of the servants of God from throughout the centuries, from every part of the globe, as far as his eyes could see: a great multitude streaming in every direction, but each standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.

And that's heaven. And if heaven is going to be populated by people from every nation and tribe and people and language, then God's missionary purpose is worldwide. And if heaven is in us before we are in heaven, we will be passionately committed to that international goal of worldwide mission. We will be deeply concerned to see John's vision of God's family become a reality.

It needs to be said, though, that for most of our churches this is increasingly difficult. Let me mention two reasons why:

i) There's the mood of our age, with its tolerant spirit, where anyone who stands up for absolute truth is branded a divisive fanatic. You can't be so dogmatic as to assert that the Christian faith is for the whole world. (“Any stigma is good enough to beat a dogma with.”) “It's nice for you; it's OK for Europeans or Caucasians, but don't try to absolutize it; don't try to universalize it.”

To proclaim Jesus and his cross as the only way in a world of pluralism is to invite opposition and derision, and in this atmosphere it is not easy for Christians to hold to their conviction about worldwide mission.

ii) Then there is another trend in our society which is affecting Christians. It's the paradox that as global communication networks improve, at the same time there is a shrinking of our horizons.

I recently visited Christians working in the institutions of the European Union in Brussels. They explained that, at a time when you would expect stronger partnerships between churches and Christians across the continent, the reverse appeared to be happening. There was a drift towards the narrow concerns of the sub-region, or the national or the denominational, or the local.

It is not uncommon for our main interests and concerns as Christians to focus on the personal, or on family life, or the local church. And they are all proper concerns. But if heaven is in us before we are in heaven, it can't possibly stop there. The tribalism, nationalism and individualism of our culture should not be allowed to extinguish John's vision of God's international family.

That's why John's vision of heaven is important for us now. I'm very thankful that I was brought up in a church where many older believers regularly reminded us of that international vision. As one man used to pray: “Lord, we pray for

all the people in the uninhabited parts of the world.” We understood what he meant. He had a longing for the gospel to advance around the world.

And it's happening. We are seeing a greater advance in the church's mission than in any previous century. It is this fact which lies behind the establishment of the JSM/Langham programs. There are more people worshipping in churches in mainland China today than in the whole of western Europe; something like 10,000 new believers each day in China; there are more Anglicans in Nigeria than in the UK, Australia, Europe and North America combined. There are approximately 1600 new churches planted every week. Seventy-five per cent of the world church is now in the South.

John's vision is becoming a reality – and the vision of God's international family must be in our hearts, on our lips, touching our pockets, shaping our prayers, transforming our churches.

The vision is God's family. Secondly,

2. The reason is God's gospel 7:9,10

It's a great privilege for me to work in an international context, and in our work with the Langham Partnership we encounter all kinds of differences: West Indian music; the Latin American embrace; different views of time in African and Latin cultures; Russians who stand for prayer and whose pastors greet you with a kiss ...

Our worldwide Christian family is enriched by all of these differences. But in a world of fracture, of tribalism, how is it possible to live together?

This is what we read in the Song of heaven:

**And they cried out with a loud voice,
“Salvation belongs to our God,” (7:10a)**

God's gospel, expressed in the saving work of Christ, transcends all cultural, linguistic, racial and national boundaries, and we find God's family untied through Christ's work. Verses 9 and 10 give a wonderful insight to the worship of heaven. We will look at three things in verses 9-10: What they wear, what they hold, what they shout.

i) What they wear:

They were wearing white robes. (7:9b).

At its simplest, this is symbolic of their right relationship with God. Leon Morris points out that the Greek noun signifies long robes and is more appropriate to glorious garments than to workaday clothing.

Verse 14 records that the blood of Christ had cleansed them from sin, and now they are standing before God, justified, clothed in Christ's righteousness.

ii) What they hold:

and were holding palm branches in their hands. (7:9b)

This is a symbol of victory and rejoicing. Palm branches were often associated with the Feast of Tabernacles – the joyful party and holiday at the end of the harvest season, when everyone gave thanks for the successful ingathering of the harvest.

They had singing processions bearing palm branches and together they gave thanks to God for delivering them, and bringing them into the promised land. The feast also pointed to the harvest in the end time, just as Isaiah had prophesied: “God would gather his own from all nations, swallow up death for all time, and wipe tears away from all faces.”

So John sees the celebration in heaven, with people from all nations, redeemed by the one Lord Jesus Christ, at that great ingathering of God’s harvest. Heaven is a celebration of Jesus’ triumph.

iii) What they shout:

And they cried out with a loud voice:

**“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.” (7:10)**

It’s been called the salvation shout. In Revelation 5, John sees that the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who comes in triumph, is the Lamb who had been slain. The Conqueror is the one who submitted to God’s purposes on the cross. So John sees ever widening concentric circles breaking into praise, until all creation joins in the song.

The reason is God’s gospel!

Let me make two points of application:

i) Notice that here in the heavenly choir (verse 10) from different nations and languages, there is no confusion of tongues. Babel is a thing of the past, and as Philip Hughes puts it, “this is a shout of unanimity which is heard as a single voice.”

Certainly, they’re diverse: it’s possible that the original reading of Revelation 21:3 is “he will dwell with them and they shall be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.” The Christian community endorses cultural pluralism. It enriches the celebration of God’s grace. God’s purpose is not to obliterate the distinctions and diversity, but to gather them into the one diverse but unified assembly.

And that’s heaven. But is heaven in your heart? As far as Jesus was concerned, this unity is essential to the effectiveness of worldwide mission, “so that the world might believe” (John 17:23).

Have you ever tried to nod your head and say “No,” or shake your head and say “Yes”? During the 1980s I used to visit Bulgaria. I was not aware on my first visit that they have reversed these signals. As I preached, heads began to shake. So I decided I needed to preach more fervently. Heads shook more fervently! If we tried to do this in our culture, we would be giving two contradictory signals at same time. But this is one of the main problems in Christian mission. We say “yes, we are all one in Christ,” but at the same time we shake our heads

– our disagreements, our wrangles, our visions, communicate a very different message.

Well, is in heaven in us now?

During the Yugoslav wars I was able to visit Christians in Serbia, and was moved by the experience of praying with a group of Christians from both Croatia and Serbia who preceded it by standing and linking arms to sing “Bind us together”: “There is only one God, there is only one King, there is only one body, that is why we sing, Bind us together.”

If the church is the community of the cross we must render all divisions irrelevant. We are a new community with an unparalleled social inclusiveness.

So what on earth are you doing? Is heaven in your heart? Are we celebrating with that one voice? Are our churches working together? Is our mission committed to evangelical partnership and cooperation? Because it is God’s gospel.

ii) The second point of application is what is sometimes referred to as the “scandal of particularity.” In heaven they are united through Christ’s work. There at the centre of the countless multitude is the Lamb who was slain.

Today it’s possible that the reason why so many Christians are not caught up in the mission of God’s worldwide purposes is their failure to believe that Jesus Christ in the only way. But John’s vision demonstrates that there is no other name. The task of mission has its greatest motivation from this fact: salvation belongs to our God.

What they wear, what they hold, and what they cry out, all say that Jesus is the only way. It is a Christo-centric vision.

John Stott on the place of Christ in mission: “Nothing is more important for the recovery of the church’s mission (where it has been lost), or its development (where it is weak), than a fresh, clear and comprehensive vision of Jesus Christ.”

When he is demeaned, and specially when he is denied, in the fullness of his unique person and work, the church lacks motivation and direction, our morale crumbles and our mission disintegrates. But when we see Jesus, it is enough. We have all the inspiration, incentive, authority and power we need.

That’s the answer to the needs of this fractured world where he sends us. That’s the answer to the brokenness and weaknesses of our own lives – it is Jesus, who died and rose again. There can be no greater motivation. If we have Jesus, we have enough.

So: The vision is of God’s family; the reason is God’s gospel. And thirdly,

3. The Focus is God’s glory

All the angels were standing round the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God saying, “Amen!”

**Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks and honor
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.
Amen!" (7:11-12)**

Each of the seven qualities is preceded by the article – *the* blessing, not a blessing. It is the praise, the glory above all others which should go to our God for ever and ever. The focus of heaven when the harvest is finally gathered in will be the glory of God. That's why, if heaven is in us, we are called to anticipate that celebration here on earth.

As the psalmist exhorts us: "Declare his glory – among the nations" (Ps 96). Is that worship or mission? It is both (what Ed Clowney once called "doxological evangelism"). For both are motivated by a longing to declare God's glory.

Our task is to call our friends, our neighbors, our work colleagues, our fellow students, all people – to worship him. As John Piper says: "mission exists because worship doesn't. Jesus was an evangelist for worshippers, And the reason for our lack of concern, our limited giving to missions, our half-hearted prayers, is our little felt emotion of burning desire for God's glory."

What outrage do you feel that people are worshipping other gods? We see different religions practised in our neighborhoods, our place of work, our schools. Henry Martin, a 19th century Cambridge scholar, served the Lord in India, and died as a young man. He described how he watched people prostrating themselves before pagan images, and even heard someone describe a vision of Jesus bowing down to Mahomet: "I was cut to the soul at this blasphemy. I could not endure existence if Jesus was not glorified. It would be hell to me if he were thus dishonoured."

He had a passion for God's glory. That's why worship, without a missionary burden for men and women of all races, is hypocrisy. Worship and the cause of global mission are inseparable.

So what on earth are we doing? Is heaven in our hearts?

Here is our definition of heaven: Heaven is God's Family, Saved by God's Gospel, celebrating God's glory.

There is no better place to fix our eyes – on Jesus in heaven, and the celebration of his triumph in which one day soon we will participate. That's where this mission of God is heading. And that's why we call one another to give our lives fully to that cause, to live our lives in ways which will truly "Declare his glory among the nations."

David Bryant uses the expression "World Christian," which he defines in this way: A world Christian is someone who is so gripped by the glory of God, and the glory of his global purpose, that he chooses to align himself with God's mission to fill the earth with the knowledge of his glory as the waters cover the sea. The burning prayer of the world Christian is:

Let the peoples praise thee, O God,

Let all the peoples praise thee. (Ps 96:3)

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