



**BETHEL**  
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# **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

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## **An Introduction to Heaven**

When was the last time you thought of Heaven? Is the knowledge of heaven that which drives you into the ministry of God's kingdom? Or have you lost your longing for the return of Christ?

These are important questions to consider, especially in the age in which we live. It used to be that heaven was at the forefront of the church's thinking; you see it in their writings. But then again that was when the church was being persecuted. Today we live in an age in which the "aliens and strangers" of this world, the Church, have become quite comfortable living in this foreign land we call the United States. And thus, far from heaven being at the forefront of our minds, we actually downplay and discourage any serious discussion and thought about heaven with sentiments like this: "He is so heavenly minded, he is of no earthly good!"

In 1453, the Turks were approaching Constantinople in order to capture the city. The Roman Empire

was long gone, and this, its capital, was all that remained. And yet, under the leadership of Mohammed II, the Turks would conquer the city and impose the religion of Islam on its inhabitants.

Now from this conquest arose a rather interesting tradition. During the sacking and pillaging of Constantinople those leaders of the Eastern Church headquartered in the city were sequestered in a tower fighting for “orthodoxy.” And what was the battle?

- Was it the virgin birth of Christ?
- Was it the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures?
- Was it over salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone?

No! The leaders were addressing two incredibly important questions:

- First, if a fly fell into holy water, does the fly become holy or does the water become defiled?
- Second, how many angels could fit on the head of a pin?

It is examples like these that have caused Christians to be wary of seriously talking or thinking about heaven. In fact, the belief can be found that if we focus too much on glory that we will lose our passion for witnessing. Many believe the church will become out of touch with reality if it focuses upon heaven. However, the Bible tells us that the church will only good to the world if it is heavenly minded.

According to the Scriptures, it is NOT “heavenly mindedness” which leads to uselessness in this world, it is worldliness (Matthew 5:13-16; Romans 12:1-2). And thus, the story of the church leaders in Constantinople was not an example of heavenly mindedness, BUT earthly mindedness. Angels on pin heads and flies in holy water are NOT the concerns of heaven; they are the interests and meditations of this passing world!

It is my contention that what the church needs to do in order to recapture and maintain its relevance in our society and be used by God to perform great things for His name is an all-consuming passion for Heaven! Truly it is this passion that leads to the doing of good, effective ministry, and/or relevancy on the part of the people of God in this world.

First, a longing for heaven strengthens the faith of the believer and is the impetus behind great acts of service.

Hebrews 11, the chapter on faith, presents an august a crowd of witnesses to encourage believers to “...lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles [that they might] run with endurance the race that is set before [them].” (Hebrews 12:1). In fact notice the witnesses called upon:

Hebrews 11:7, “By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household...”

Hebrews 11:8a, “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance...”

Hebrews 11:11a, "By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive..."

Hebrews 11:20a, "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau..."

Hebrews 11:21, "By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff."

Hebrews 11:22, "By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones."

Hebrews 11:24-25, "By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin."

Hebrews 11:29a, "By faith they [Israel] passed through the Red Sea..."

Hebrews 11:30a, "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down..."

Hebrews 11:32-34, "And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight."

We are surrounded by a great crowd of witnesses, the men and women who lived by faith. Yet, what is it that led these believers to live "as aliens and strangers" on this earth? What is it that strengthened their faith such that they could do so much for the glory of God and the furtherance of the Gospel? These men were not super men, but sinners. How is it that they lived so differently than God's people today? They had a passion and a longing for heaven.

Hebrews 11 speaking of Abraham and his life of faith says:

Hebrews 11:10, "...he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

Hebrews 11:13-16a, "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one..."

We read of the life of Moses:

Hebrews 11:26, "...[he considered] the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of

Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.”

Hebrews 11:35: “Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection.”

Hebrews 11:39-40a, “And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us...”

What is it that inspired the faith of the saints of old in their renunciation of this world? What is it that led talented, powerful, gifted, and wealthy believers to live as vagabonds on this earth? What is it that will strengthen our faith as we serve the Lord? Each of these struggling, weak, and sinful people had a longing and a passion for Heaven! It is only as we long for heaven that we are of any benefit to this world and in the kingdom of God!

A longing for heaven is the basis for endurance in the face of persecution. 1 Peter was written around 62 to 64 A.D. By this time, the early church was past its infancy and entering young adulthood. No longer was it identified with Judaism *per se*; it had become a distinct movement/religion in the Roman Empire. As such, the “Nazarenes” or Christians were singled out and now had become the object of persecution. And so, Peter wrote this epistle to ones who were scattered throughout the ancient world, living as aliens, facing severe persecution, and thus in need of encouragement to endure. He begins with this encouragement:

1 Peter 1:6-9, “In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.”

Peter’s focus is upon the Christian’s welfare in the Kingdom of God. The early Christian’s backs were against the wall and they were struggling! Peter exhorted them to endure, not to give up, but to stand strong in the Lord and the basis for the believers to persevere, to stand strong in the face of severe pressure and opposition is this

1 Peter 1:5-6a, “...protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. *In this [future salvation/heaven] you greatly rejoice...*”

The word for “rejoice” carries the nuance of “exulting” or “boasting in.” The idea is that of placing one’s hope/confidence in something! Because this early persecuted church had placed their confidence and hope in their future salvation/heaven, they were enabled to endure in the face of severe persecution!

It is when our sight is set on the things above that we are able to endure the things of this world. It is when our heart is smitten by the incredible plans that God has for us that we are able to bear the

fiery missiles of the evil one. When Christ gazed upon the “joy set before Him” He was enabled to, “...endure the cross, despise the shame, and so sit down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2b).

The history of redemption testifies that it is only as our passion and longing is fixed on heaven that we are able to stand in the midst of persecution and worldly stress!

Thirdly, a longing for heave produces a passion for holiness.

Colossians 3:5-15, “Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come, and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, *and* abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its *evil* practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him- *a renewal* in which there is no *distinction between* Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all. And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things *put on* love, which is the perfect bond of unity. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.”

Paul is concerned for the believer’s holiness. It is not enough that the Colossians were saved, they must also strive for purity of life, thought, heart, and passion. In fact, if we were to summarize Paul’s exhortation here, we’d see Paul calls us unto purity:

Colossians 3:5, “Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.”

Colossians 3:8, “...put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth.”

Colossians 3:9, “Do not lie to one another...”

Paul calls us to godly living:

Colossians 3:12b-13: “...put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.”

Colossians 3:14 calls us to love and unity. Colossians 3:15 calls us to the peace of Christ. As Christians our love for Christ should drive us to want to be holy, pure, and undefiled. God bought us at a high price, the blood of Christ. As such, we don’t want it said that we wasted God’s investment. Rather we want it said that as vessels of honor, we fulfilled the calling which God placed on our life!

Yet, most of us live in Romans 7. The things we want to do, we do not do. The things we don't want to do, we are shocked to discover that we do! So what will it take for us to get our focus off of "the passing pleasures of sin" such that we live as faithful servants of Christ, priests to our God and Father? A greater gaze upon the heaven that awaits us!

This is what served as the springboard into Paul's exhortation for holiness in Colossians 3.

Colossians 3:1-4, "If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory."

A mind set on heaven will lead one to purity and holy living (Colossians 3:5-15) a passion for glory (Colossians 3:1-4) and usefulness in the body of Christ.

A longing for heaven will produce the fruit of a thankful disposition.

Romans 1:21, "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened."

For those given to grumbling and complaining, this is a shocking verse. In fact, when properly understood, it represents a challenge to all God's children. Did you know that one of THE characteristic sins of the non-believer is ingratitude? In fact, we see two things in contrast to the Christian:

- (1) The non-Christian does not honor God,
- (2) The non-Christian is not grateful to God!

Now if you look at the first attribute of the non-Christian, we immediately say, "Amen!" Not to honor God is a serious sin, and we know that!

1 Samuel 2:30, "...those who honor Me I will honor, and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed."

Yes, ingratitude! One of THE marks of a child of God is that he has a grateful disposition (Colossians 3:15). You might say with me, "Yikes! I'm not big on gratitude!" If that is the case, then it could very well be that you don't have your hope, confidence, and gaze fixed on glory! speaking of the coming glory that awaits us in Christ (Hebrews 11:27), the Hebrew writer exhorted:

Hebrews 12:28-29, "Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire."

Gratitude in the life of the child of God is the basis for acceptable worship. Let us show gratitude, BY WHICH we may offer to God acceptable worship. If gratitude is the precursor for acceptable

worship, then what is the precursor to Biblical gratitude? The realization of the unmovable kingdom which we have received in Christ! Or another way of putting it, a gaze fixed firmly on heaven!

When the child of God becomes “grumbly” and ungrateful, when he is characterized by complaining and negativity, he testifies to a heart that is world-bound. But to gaze for any length of time at the glory that awaits us is to be moved to gratitude and praise.

We confess that God is sovereign, yet in mathematics we still compute chance. Given the world in which we live, there is predictability to things which can be quantified. With this, there have been times when I have considered myself to be rather-, well to use the word John Calvin might have chosen, unlucky! It just seems that God doesn’t want me to win at many things.

- I’ve never won a contest of chance.
- I never won the lottery or a drawing- but then again, I’ve never bought a ticket for a lottery or drawing, but you get the point. In fact, the chances of winning the Colorado Lottery is 1 in 146,107,962! And I guarantee that I will not be the ONE in 146 million!

Now with this Eeyore thinking, to believe that this is just the way my life works. God doesn’t want me to win; He probably has something against me.

But one day it dawned on me. If the chance of winning the Colorado Lottery is 1 in 146 million, what are the chances of God saving me? To compute the chance of winning the lottery you have to take into account the number of those who will buy a ticket. In the same way, to compute the chance of being saved, you have to take into account every individual that has ever lived, which is far more than those who will buy a lottery ticket. When I did this, I quickly recognize that the chance of an individual born on this planet and being reconciled to God is astronomically slim. It far surpasses the “odds” of any lottery.

That means if you are saved this day, you are “the luckiest man/woman in the world!”- using the language of the world. And you and I have the gall, having come to Christ who has born our burden, to be heavy laden? Before us is the Kingdom of Heaven and you are allowing yourself to be weighed down by...

- A difficult job?
- A bad marriage?
- Finances?
- Ill-health?

Samuel Rutherford put it this way:

O thrice fools are we, who, like new-born princes weeping in the cradle, know not that there is a kingdom before them? (Samuel Rutherford, 2010, p. 20)

Or in the words of Paul:

2 Corinthians 4:16-18, “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying,

yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

Cast your gaze upon eternity and you will confess “it were a well-spent journey though seven deaths lay between.”

## **Bibliography**

Samuel Rutherford, A. A. (2010). *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*. Charleston, SC: Nabu Press.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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## **About the Preacher**

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on October 23, 2011. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.