

Heaven

Revelation 21:1-7

(The following is the substance of an address given by David Silversides at an after-church meeting at Loughbrickland Reformed Presbyterian Church on 25th July 1999.)

Our theme in this address is heaven. “Death came upon all men for that all had sinned.” That is the teaching of the word of God. That death which comes upon all men still comes even on the redeemed, even upon justified sinners. The fact that our sins are forgiven if we are Christians, does not mean that we do not see death. God has been pleased to delay the application of redemption to the body until the last day. He does not deliver his people from that sickness and death which is common to men. At the last day, he will raise their bodies to glory but not until then.

Physical death is a means of doing good to the people of God. The observation of death in others and the apprehension of death as something which surely awaits us ourselves, is a means in the conversion and the continuing sanctification of the elect of God while they live in this world. So we should not overlook that death, the death of others, and the certainty of our own death, is an instrument that God uses for the good of his people while they live. When it comes to our own death if we are Christians, it also marks the point of the completion of our sanctification as life in this world is brought to an end.

It is at death that the souls of believers are made perfect in holiness.

1. What is Heaven?

The Scriptures teach that those who are in Christ go to heaven. So, first of all, what is heaven? That may seem an almost unnecessary question but it needs to be asked and answered. The word 'heaven' or 'heavens' is sometimes used of the physical universe. Psalm 19:1, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork." Psalm 8:3, "When I look up unto the heavens, to the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained." But it is also used of the dwelling place of God. Now when we say the dwelling place of God, we must be clear. God is everywhere. He is omnipresent. God is present everywhere but he most fully manifests his presence in heaven. So Deuteronomy 26:15, "Look down from thy holy habitation, from heaven, and bless thy people." Jonah 1:9 refers to God as "the God of heaven." Ezra 1:2, "The LORD God of heaven." 1 Kings 8:39, Solomon at the prayer of the dedication of the temple says, "hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place." Matthew 6:9, the Lord Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Our Father which art in heaven."

So much is heaven the dwelling place of God, the place where God most fully manifests his presence, that in Scripture sometimes heaven is used as an equivalent of God. So the kingdom of God is also called the kingdom of heaven. The prodigal son in the parable, Luke 15:18 says, "I have sinned against heaven." There heaven, because it

is so much the dwelling place of God, is used as an equivalent for the name of God. John 3:27, "John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven." Again, it means given from God because God dwells in heaven.

It is also the place where Christ in his glorified human nature dwells. He is said to be at the right hand of God, at the right hand of the Father, at the right hand of the Majesty on High. He is the Lamb in the midst of the throne. To go to heaven, then, is to go to the dwelling place of God where the glorified Redeemer is.

2. When do Christians go to Heaven?

It should be understood that only true Christians, those born of the Spirit and united to Christ, do go to heaven, but when do they go to heaven? To some the answer may be obvious but it is surprising how many Christians are unclear on this point. The soul goes to heaven at death immediately. 2 Corinthians 5:8, "We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord." Earlier on, the Apostle Paul has said that he desires to be clothed upon with that building of God and so on, so the ultimate goal of the believer is when he is glorified in body and soul. Nevertheless between death and the resurrection, the souls of believers are in heaven and even if that means being absent from the body, it means being present with the Lord and so is vastly desirable compared with being present in the body and absent from the Lord. Philippians 1:23, "For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to

depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you." There the Apostle Paul speaks of a desire to depart, that is through death. That is obvious from verse 21, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain," for dying, departing by death, means to be with Christ which is far better. Now his body would be in the grave but his soul is with Christ if he dies. Luke 23:43, to the thief on the cross who said, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom," the Lord Jesus says, "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." The so-called Jehovah's Witnesses introduce a comma after "To day." That is not right. It is, "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise." It was today that Christ would be in paradise and it was today that the thief who died in Christ would also be in paradise.

So we should have no doubts whatsoever that when a Christian dies, his soul goes to be immediately with Christ. "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord ... Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours." The Shorter Catechism is on scriptural ground in Answer 37, "The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves till the resurrection."

3. What are the Characteristics of Heaven?

a. There is the Presence of God and of his Christ in his Glory.

This is what makes heaven to be heaven because God is there and Christ is there, and the Lamb is the light thereof. This follows from what we have seen earlier that heaven is the dwelling place of God and that the exalted Redeemer ascended up to his right hand. Revelation 22:4, "they shall see his face." 1 John 3:2, "We know not what we shall be but we know that we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." In Revelation 21:16, using Old Testament terminology to describe heaven, "And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal."

So this city representing heaven is foursquare, the length and the breadth and the height are equal. Now that was true of the most holy place in the temple. That was the place where God most fully manifested his presence on earth, and so we are meant to understand that this is the place above all else where God manifests his presence.

b. There is Perfect Fellowship with God.

The promise to Abraham was that God would be his God and believers have God as their God. We are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. Whether in the Old Testament or in the New, in Christ and in the covenant of grace in him we have God as our God. So the risen Christ said to Mary, "I ascend unto my Father and to your Father and to my God and to your God," because in Christ, his God is our God; we are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. He is

the heir by right and we are heirs in him, wherefore he is not ashamed to be called our God.

In heaven, this fellowship in the bond of the covenant of grace in Christ reaches its perfection. So in Revelation 21:3 which we read, "And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God." The bond of the covenant in Christ Jesus, that fellowship in the covenant of grace reaches its perfection in heaven. In Psalm 16, "God is mine inheritance and the portion of my cup. Thou hast maintained my lot." God himself is the inheritance of his people.

c. There is the Complete Absence of Sin.

Now this is true in the intermediate state. By the term 'the intermediate state', we mean the state of the soul between death and the resurrection at the last day. As we read from the Catechism, the souls of believers at their death are made perfect in holiness. So in the intermediate state, the condition between death and the resurrection when the soul goes to be with Christ and the body is still in the grave, the soul is made perfect in holiness. It joins the spirits of just men made perfect, Hebrews 12:23, hence the perfect fellowship with God which we shall have in heaven where there is no sin. It will exceed our highest moments of joy in the presence of God in this world. It will be unmarred by sin. It will be uninterrupted and unending.

Our fellowship with God in this world, though cause of exceeding joy, is always marred by sin but in heaven we shall love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, something we have never ever done in this world. Even the godliest of men have never in this world loved God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength because we are still sinners up until the day we die, but in heaven we shall love God as never before. There will be no sin, no weight that so easily besets us. We shall love God with our whole being. "Nothing that defileth shall in any wise enter therein," Revelation 21:27.

There will be a perfect fellowship among the redeemed. There will be no sin to mar this fellowship either. It is evident that there is fellowship among the people of God in heaven. The Scriptures speak in social terms, not social in the sense of chitchat, but in the sense of being together. "The general assembly of the firstborn", Hebrews 12:23. The people of God are described as the whole family in heaven and earth, Ephesians 3:15. In Matthew 24:31, the elect are said to be gathered together: "And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other."

Heaven is described in the book of Revelation as a city. This indicates that there is contact and fellowship, togetherness among the people of God in the presence of the Lord. They sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, Matthew 8:11. There is a marriage feast of the Lamb, the marriage of the King's

Son and so on. These things indicate that the people of God are in fellowship together with one another and with their Lord in the perfection of holiness.

There will be recognition of one another in heaven. At the transfiguration, even though the disciples were not glorified, they recognized Moses who had died, and they recognized Elijah who had not died. They recognized both even though they had never seen them before. When their eyes were opened, the disciples recognized the risen Christ also. Mary said, "Rabboni," when she saw the risen Christ. The disciples said, "It is the Lord." We read that they were glad when they saw the Lord. There was recognition.

Fellowship on earth is part of the enjoyment of life eternal which is perfected in heaven, and therefore the fellowship among the people of God reaches a sinless perfection in heaven with the Lord. Sin mars our fellowship on earth but not in heaven. There will be no envy. In heaven there is a sense in which all receive the same. In Matthew 20:9 in the parable of the vineyard, those who bore the heat of the day and those who came into the work late on, all received a penny. Everyone in heaven will be eternally blessed and fully satisfied and yet there are degrees of glory in heaven. Luke 19:17-19, in the parable of the pounds one man is told, "Receive thou authority over ten cities." Another is told, "Receive thou authority over five cities." Luke 19:17, "And he said unto him, Well, thou good servant: because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities. And the second came, saying, Lord, thy pound hath

gained five pounds. And he said likewise to him, Be thou also over five cities."

So there are degrees of glory in the reward of grace. Our entitlement to heaven is in Christ and yet God in his grace is pleased to recognize in heaven what his grace has enabled us to do in service to Christ while we are in this world. He pleases to do that. This will mean differing capacities for the enjoyment of God and yet all will be full to their capacity of that enjoyment. In other words, everyone in heaven will enjoy God to the full extent of which they are capable of enjoying God, even though that capacity will vary from one to another. All will be satisfied in heaven in the enjoyment of God and there will be no envy because there is no sin. There will be a perfect contentment with all of God's arrangement, a perfect fellowship among the redeemed and a perfect fellowship with the unfallen holy angels.

So heaven is a world of love, a world of harmony. Christ taught his disciples to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In heaven, not only God's decreed will but his preceptive will, what he approves and requires, is done always and in all things. Our souls will delight in seeing God honoured and all that we see will honour God. In heaven God will be our chiefest joy in perfection, and therefore we will delight in seeing God honoured with a perfect delight, a complete delight. Everything in heaven will honour God so that everything we behold in heaven will be a cause of joy because everything will honour the God whom we now love without sin. There will be no frustration of any kind in heaven. Everything in heaven

will be a cause of joy. God is there, Christ is there in his glory, and everything in heaven honours God and his Christ.

4. The Differences between the Intermediate State and the Final State.

What are the differences between the intermediate state, that is the believer's state between death and the last day, and the final state of the believer after the resurrection to glory of the last day?

a. The Full Vindication of the Honour of God and of his Christ.

The Lord Jesus Christ must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet. The glorified spirits anticipate this in the intermediate state, and they will rejoice in its accomplishment in the final and eternal state. It will be cause of increased joy to the people of God in the final state that Christ's honour has been fully, eternally, irreversibly vindicated; that his Lordship has been displayed; that every knee shall bow and every tongue shall swear that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Is not this something we long for if we are Christians, to see Christ honoured and owned of his Kingship? Whether in grace or in judgment, whether willingly by the redeemed or in horror by the damned, Christ's honour will be fully vindicated at the last day. The glorified spirits of the redeemed anticipate it, but at the last day it will actually be accomplished to the increased joy of the people of God.

b. There is the Resurrection of the Body.

The application of redemption must ultimately extend to the reversal of all the effects of sin and indeed much more besides, and so the last enemy of death must be destroyed. 1 Corinthians 15, "For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet," that is, until the last day. "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." Death is the last enemy not simply because it is the last great trial of faith of the individual Christian's life in this world. That is true, but that is not what this verse is talking about. It is the last enemy in the sense that its reversal is the last of the benefits that Christ has purchased for his elect to be applied to them.

The reversal of the effects of sin upon the body, making man mortal, will be reversed at the last day. The resurrection body will be more glorious than even that of Adam and Eve before the fall. The resurrection body will not simply be that of Adam and Eve prior to the curse of God and the effect of that upon the body. The body was in a provisional condition for the probationary state of Adam and Eve. 1 Corinthians 15: 45, "And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. Now this I say, brethren, that flesh

and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption." Here the comparison is not merely between the body of man since the fall and the glorified body of the redeemed. It is not just the body of man in his fallen condition compared with the glorified state. Especially in verse 45, the comparison is between the body of Adam even by creation and the glorified body so that the resurrection state of the body will exceed in glory even that of man by creation and much more man after the fall and under the curse and with mortality.

Verse 50 states, "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God." The blood-sustained body was suited to this life but not to the eternal state. That is why in Scripture blood sums up the life of man or beast in this world and so there is no marriage in heaven, though fellowship in the Lord as expressed in marriage between two Christians, will continue. As Jonathan Edwards anticipated on his deathbed and said to his wife, "We trust that our union has been primarily a spiritual one, and so in death will continue forever." The fellowship in Christ that is expressed in the marriage of two Christians, will continue but marriage itself does not. So in Mark 12:25, "For when they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels which are in heaven." Marriage and the bearing of children pertain to this life and they are to be used in the kingdom of God. The institution of marriage is of God for this life and it is precious but it is not to be idolized but brought into the service of the kingdom of God which

shall never end even though the marriage ordinance and the family ordinance will. Therefore the question of whether to marry and if so whom to marry as well as the rearing of children must be governed by the interests of the kingdom of God which never ends.

As well as the resurrection body, there is the renewed creation, 2 Peter 3:12, "Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness." And again Romans 8:20, "For the creature" (or the creation) "was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body." In this passage we are taught that the resurrection of the body to glory will also be accompanied by the renovation of the creation. As we read in Revelation 21, "there shall be no more curse, behold, I make all things new."

The Christian is already in principle a new creature in Christ but that renewing, the work of grace in the soul, is completed at death. At the last day the body is renewed

as it is raised to glory and the creation is renewed and made more glorious than even prior to the fall. That is part of the inheritance of the people of God. In Matthew 19:28 the Lord uses the word 'regeneration' of this: "And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." He refers there to the renewing of the universe. The glorified and redeemed world will have redeemed sinners, regenerated sinners, renewed sinners with renewed bodies and a renewed creation.

So the Christian, then, is ultimately to be delivered from sin and all its consequences. He is delivered entirely from the guilt of sin when he is brought to faith in Christ. He is being delivered and will be completely delivered from the presence of sin at death. And he will be delivered from the physical consequences of sin on himself and the creation at the last day so that all that sin has brought upon man will be reversed and more than reversed for the elect of God. The guilt of sin is taken away when we become Christians. The presence of sin is being taken away as we are sanctified in this life. The new birth is the start of this process of sanctification. Sanctification is continued between the new birth and death, and at death there is the completion of sanctification, of deliverance from the presence of sin. Then at the last day, there is the reversal of the physical effects of sin when this mortal, this body, shall put on immortality and this corruptible shall put on incorruption. Even the effects of sin and the

curse of God upon the physical creation will be reversed and more than reversed in a new heavens and a new earth as part of the inheritance of the people of God.

5. Will we Know the State of the Damned and will it Distress us?

Here we come to a difficult and indeed a delicate point. Will we know of the state of the damned and will it distress us? Why do we sorrow now over unbelieving sinners? We should sorrow. The Apostle Paul sorrowed. In Romans 9:1 he expresses it in the most extreme terms: "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh." And in Romans 10:1, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved."

Why do we sorrow now? God shows love to the non-elect in this life as well as the elect and he commands us to do the same. We are to be patterned after God. What God does, we must do. Those to whom God shows love, we must show love. Matthew 5:43, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

So we are to be patterned after God. God commands, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Our neighbour may be elect or non-elect but we are commanded to love them. We are commanded not to love those whom God does not show love to. God does not contradict himself in that way. He commands us to show love to all men in this world because he shows love to all men in this world but in the next world, God will not show love to the non-elect. The lost in hell will be deprived of all expression of divine lovingkindness. God will not love the lost. His kindness to them was for this life; it fell short of saving them, and he shows no love to them in the world to come. Those who are not the objects of God's expression of love will not be the objects of our love either. We will be conformed to God and in the next world, those who are not the recipients of divine lovingkindness will not be the objects of our love either.

In the Old Testament, there were prefigurements of this. At the Red Sea, God delivered his people and they did not sorrow, they rejoiced. They rejoiced in the overthrow of the Egyptians. In Isaiah 65:13, "Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, my servants shall eat, but ye shall be hungry: behold, my servants shall drink, but ye shall be thirsty: behold, my servants shall rejoice, but ye shall be ashamed: Behold, my servants shall sing for joy of heart,

but ye shall cry for sorrow of heart, and shall howl for vexation of spirit." And in chapter 66, verse 22, "For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the LORD, so shall your seed and your name remain. And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD. And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcases of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh." 1 Corinthians 6:2, "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life?"

It becomes clear that the saints of God will have a role in the judgment of the world and the judgment of angels. It is incompatible, therefore, with that role, that they will sorrow over the lost. It is also incompatible with the blessedness of heaven that they will sorrow over the lost. Revelation 14:10, "The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name." Then in chapter 18 and verse 20, there is the fall of

Babylon, "Rejoice over her, thou heaven, and ye holy apostles and prophets; for God hath avenged you on her."

The redeemed will take no pleasure in the miseries of the lost but neither will they sorrow over them as they do in this world, but they will rejoice in the justice of God. They will rejoice to see the Judge of all the earth do right. Here in this world, we rightly weep and pray for our neighbours but not then. Of course, we cannot anticipate that. We cannot emotionally and mentally anticipate that because we are still here, but suffice to say that we will not be in ignorance but neither will our knowledge cause sorrow or mar the blessedness of heaven, the joy in God and in Christ and in the fellowship of the redeemed and the holy angels.

Well then in closing, cultivate heavenly-mindedness. Seek grace to cultivate delight in God and in his Son and delight in the fellowship of the godly. In Psalm 16, the Psalmist says, "My goodness extendeth not unto thee, O Lord, but unto the saints, to the excellent in the earth in whom is all my delight." What does that mean, 'my goodness'? He means 'my well-doing.' He cannot help God. He cannot do God a favour. God does not need him. But he showed his love to God in his delight and in seeking to do good to the saints, the excellent in the earth. He delighted in the people of God. So we should seek to cultivate by the grace of God heavenly-mindedness so that we find our joy in those things which endure everlastingly in glory. What are they? Delight in God. Delight in Christ. Delight in holy fellowship with the people of God. These are the things

that we should cultivate. Other things will not last but these things last.

Ignore all the nonsense about being too heavenly-minded to be any earthly use. We need to be heavenly-minded to be of earthly use and we need to be heavenly-minded so that when death comes and when we anticipate death, it will not fill us with horror because we know that in the next world we will be continuing to find our joy in those things which, however imperfectly, we delighted in while we were in this present life. So then, cultivate heavenly-mindedness; cultivate joy in those things in which the people of God will joy forevermore. "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory." Amen.