

The First Heaven

By Ricky Jones

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Revelation 21-22
Preached on: Sunday, April 6, 2008

Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Tulsa
10616 E 100th St
Tulsa, OK 74133

Website: www.redeemertulsa.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/redeemertulsa

We are studying Easter. This is the third week of Easter. We have one more week. We will study it again next week. And we are trying to do a little bit of a progression that makes sense in my mind and that is pretty difficult, actually.

And the progression is this. The first Sunday of Easter we celebrated Jesus' death in a historical space and time, 1970 or so years ago, and that victory over death that he experienced. And then last week we studied both Jesus' being seated above all principalities, above all powers, above all thrones and authorities and his victory over us, raising us, regenerating us out of our spiritual death and sin.

This week we are going to begin looking at the victory that we will begin to experience because of Easter at our death. And we are going to look at that both this week and next week and we are going to be reading from Revelation chapter 21.

I had a hard time picking a passage to read because there are so many great ones. And I am going to be drawing texts from all over the Bible, reaching out a lot like this. So just be ready for me to reach and...but this is, I thought, as good a description as any that's in the Bible.

Revelation chapter 21. Hear the Word of the Lord.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the

spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”¹

And then beginning with verse 15.

And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare; its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel’s measurement. The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoptase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass.

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.²

Amen.

¹ Revelation 21:1-8

² Revelation 21:15-22:5

All men are like grass and all of our glory is like the flowers of the field and the grass withers and the flowers fall, but not the Word of God. The Word of God stands forever. Amen.

Several...well, not several, about four years ago my wife went out of town on a little wife's retreat and I was left with the boys and it was warm that weekend. It was in January, but in Mississippi that means nothing. You have no idea what the temperature is going to be like and it was very warm that weekend and I had promised the boys I was going to take them camping and then it rained. And so obviously you don't go camping in the rain and that is obvious to everybody except your three year old at the time who really liked to go camping.

And so I made a solemn promise, "Next weekend we will go camping. I promise."

The next weekend the high was about 33, but I had made a solemn promise. So we went camping in January. It was 33 degrees and I had this vision in my mind. We had three sleeping bags for the four of us, right? And so my vision was for this big double sleeping bag I had me and my youngest were going to sleep in that together and keep each other warm. That really sounded good.

Well, anyway, we got there and it got dark. It got more and more cold. It got windy and, you know, we ate our hotdogs, we roasted our smores. It gets dark at like 4:30. And so we have kind of done everything there is to do and we are freezing so we jump in the tent and we play in the tent for a while. We wrestle and tell stories. And eventually we get quiet and fall off to sleep and I have got this three year old in my bosom, right?

Well, the problem with that is this. You don't move much when you are sleeping like that and so I wake up in the middle of the night, the dead of the night with this entire half of my body paralyzed, just completely asleep and immense pain and now I am just laying there awake and I still can't move and the wind is whistling through the tent. I am imagining all these just terrible diseases my children are coming up with. And I think for a while I will be able to make it through the night and it becomes clear that I am not going to be able to make it.

And so I get up and I am wondering, I'm thinking, "Well, I'll just stay up until morning. It is probably almost morning anyway."

And I walked to the van which was not parked that far away and I get into the van to get warm and I turn the keys so I can turn on the heater and the clock pops up on my dash and it's 9:15 PM. And so I am sitting there. I'm thinking, "Oh, how am I going to make this?"

And so I'm...nothing comes to me and then finally I went, "It's obvious." And I turned the car on, hit the heater, let it warm everything up. When the car got warm I went and I grabbed the boys still asleep, put them in the van, drove home. I was in bed by 10 o'clock in my own bed.

The funny thing was the next morning especially for the three year old. My older boys kind of woke up enough to realize what was going on and they agreed with me that it was the right thing to do, but my three year old was dead asleep the entire time and he woke up the next morning and at first he is like, “Yeah, of course, I woke up in my bed.” And then over breakfast he...it hits him and he realizes, “Wait a minute, I went to sleep in a tent. I woke up at home. I went to sleep in a tent and I woke up at home.”

Jesus at the resurrection achieved for us ultimate and complete and total victory over death so that death no longer has a sting. It no longer has victory over us and, instead, what the Bible teaches us about death is this that when you finally lay down and close your eyes and go to sleep, you will be going to sleep for the final time in your earthly tent and you will be waking up, by your Father’s strength you will be carried home and you will be waking up for the first time in your bed at home. That is what death is for the believer.

What we are going to be studying for the next two weeks is this. This week...there’s two stages to heaven. There’s what’s called the intermediate state and then there is the ultimate eternal state and the intermediate state is what we think of as Christians in our century as heaven. It is not where we will ultimately stay, but it is where we go at our death. At our death our bodies rest in the grave until the resurrection and our souls go immediately into heaven. They are made perfectly righteous and they go to be with Jesus. And while they are there they are made whole and complete. And that is what we are studying about today.

We are studying about that intermediate state, the place that we go immediately after death. It is a place that was won for us by Christ at the resurrection and it is a place where we will be with the Lord.

Now, preaching about heaven is something that we do not often do, especially in the United States in a traditionally white church. We don’t preach about heaven very much. I don’t know if it is because we are embarrassed by it. There’s a lot of reasons why we may or may not.

There was a student at seminary named Sunday Joseph Otenga and whenever there was a...whenever there was a preaching assignment he always preached about heaven. He was from Nigeria and he bore the scars of his Christianity on his body and every time he preached he would always preach on heaven and he would always make the same point.

He would say, “I have been in America for two and a half years now.”

I am not going to pretend to have his accent. I can’t do it. It would sound stupid.

“I have been in America for two and a half years now and I have yet to hear a single sermon on heaven.” He said, “In Africa we preach on heaven every week. I wonder if

you Americans do not preach on heaven because you are too busy making heaven on earth.”

Now I think he is very right about that, that we tend to focus all of our energy, focus all of our life trying to form this world into our heaven, trying to make this world right. And that has gotten...has a terrible impact upon us. It leaves us very much impoverished and there are at least three reasons for that.

The first reason is that when we preach on heaven we are reminded of our hope. The surest thing that will leave you hopeless in your sin is this idea that things are never going to get better than they are now. That is why back in 80s—those of us who have vivid memories of the 80s—and the whole “Just say No” campaign and this idea of basically the way we were taught to stay off drugs was they would come into class and they would show you all the terrible things that happened to you if you take drugs and it did absolutely no good especially for the people who were already taking drugs.

Why did it do no good? Well, if someone has developed a habit to escape life, then telling them that life is bad doesn't help. Telling them that they are really messing everything up only makes them want to escape more. If you want someone to be freed from a habit that they are doing to try to escape, you have to give them hope.

You cant' say, “If you keep doing this you have no hope.”

They say, “Well, great. I had no hope anyway. I'll just do more.”

And what we have to realize is that we were all in that spiral of addiction and we all implicitly believed that life is not going to get any better than it is right now. And we need to be daily reminded of the day when we will walk with Jesus and when he will make us to drink from the streams of the river of life and he will apply to us the leaves of the tree of life that are for healing and that we will be better, we will be better.

The second reason...the second thing that comes from understanding heaven and reflecting on heaven is it gives us perspective. It gives us perspective on this life. A lot of us struggle with bitterness and I want you to understand that. If you take judgment day and heaven away from reality there is no justice. There is no justice. And if that living with the sense that there is never justice, there is never going to be justice will make you bitter. It will make you bitter.

There is a story of a man who would...he was in a small town. He was a farmer and he hated God and he hated church and he had a farm that surrounded this church and he only worked that farm on Sundays. And he would come and he would plow his farm on Sundays and would seed that acreage on Sunday and he harvested that acreage on Sunday. And in the fall after he had sold his crop he published...took out an editorial in the paper and said, “This is how much money I made while you Christians were wasting your time near my acreage.”

And the editor, who was obviously a Christian, he kind of stuck a little addendum on there and said, “Not every account has been settled.”

We need to believe in heaven, that God has not settled his accounts here, that there is going to be a day of reward that is going to be real, that is going to—as Paul says—“Make our sufferings here seem unreal, not even worthy to be compared with the glory that waits on us.”³ And when we lose that we get bitter and we get angry because we don’t get what we feel like we deserve. We don’t feel like there is any benefit to following Jesus. We don’t feel like there is any benefit to be faithful and so we just want to serve ourselves.

We lose hope. We lose perspective and, finally, we lose purpose. And we are going to really talk about this next week, but I want to go on and whet your appetite. What the resurrection shows us is that everything that we do on this earth, everything that is done in the name of Christ will last eternally. It is an amazing thought and really I have been struggling hard to process it over the last couple of weeks and I am going to do my best to explain it next week, but what the resurrection teaches us is—as the apostle Paul says—is that because of the resurrection our works are not in vain. They will all pay off.

What Jesus says is this. “Even every cup of water given to a child in my name will be rewarded.”⁴

Nothing will be missed. Nothing will be lost. Whenever we take a homeless person in, whenever we feed someone who is hungry, whenever we help the poor, whenever we help a small child, anything we do in Christ’s name has purpose, eternal validation. It is going to last forever because of the resurrection. All the things we do for ourselves will fall away.

The resurrection: It gives us purpose, it gives us perspective and it gives us hope and I want to turn to that now. And what we are describing here today is, like I said, it is the intermediate state. It is like, well, honestly, I don’t know why she gets it so right, but it is pretty much exactly what J.K. Rowling described in the last book, Harry Potter called [?] in the chapter called “King’s Crawl Station.” That is pretty much exactly it. It is just...our souls don’t go and dwell in the new heavens and the new earth. We go and dwell in what Jesus called paradise and it is a temporary place. It is a temporary place while we wait for God to renew the heavens and the earth. And it is a place where we are restored. It is a place where we are made holy and perfect. And it is a place where we experience three things. We experience safety, we experience healing and we experience love.

The first thing I want you to see about the intermediate state is that there is no more fear. There is nothing to fear. Ever since Adam and Eve sinned we have lived with this overwhelming awareness of our vulnerability that we are daily dying, that we live in this...that life on this earth is lived in the shadow of death and we feel that vulnerability.

³ See Romans 8:18

⁴ See Matthew 10:42

And what God describes for us in heaven is this place where he says in Isaiah, “They will neither harm nor destroy in all my holy mountain.”⁵

In Revelation 21 he says, “There was no more sea.”⁶

Well, you think, “Dang. I was going to sail for a couple of million years in heaven.”

And that is not what he is talking about. It is not saying no recreation, but the sea...if you look at the sea especially in Revelation, but really throughout the entire Bible it is a place of chaos. It is a place of great danger. And what God is saying is, “There is no chaos. There is nothing out of control. There is no danger there.”

He says that the gates will never be shut. There is nothing that we have to fear coming in from outside.

He says there is no darkness. Do you know why children are afraid of the dark? It is because they are smarter than you. Bad things are in the dark. If you were wise you would be afraid of it, too. There is going to be no darkness, only light.

What does that mean? It means there are no fears from without. There is nothing out of control. There is no wickedness. There is no car wrecks. There is nothing that you have to fear is going to happen when you walk outside the door. There is nothing that is going to touch you.

What does that mean for us today? It means this. It means that we are not always going to spend eternity worrying about our children. It means we are not going to spend eternity worrying about our loved ones.

Bryan Chapell is a pastor at Covenant Seminary in St. Louis. He is actually the president and when was a pastor there was a tragedy in his church and this girl was riding her tractor with her granddad and there was a tractor accident. She died. She was a little girl, like six years old. And Dr. Chapell went to visit this bereaved mother and he had no words to say. And they were sitting in silence with the television on, you know, just kind of on for distraction and one of these, you know, public service announcement commercial things come up and it was a “Say no to drugs” type commercial. And there is a guy on the screen with, you know, the terrible hair and just the bedraggled face, just looks evil, kind of the way we wish drug dealers looked so we would be easy to stay away from them.

And the woman starts screaming at the television. And she said, “You’ll never touch my baby. You can’t get my baby now. She is in heaven. She is in the lap of God and you can’t touch her.”

She died. Then finally her baby was safe and she couldn’t be touched.

⁵ See Isaiah 65:25

⁶ Revelation 21:1

I remember so well one night when my son woke up in the middle of the night from a nightmare or whatever and I went and I held him in my arms and just kind of being pensive and looking out the window and holding him and comforting him and began to think about heaven. And I began to think, “I wish the worst thing he ever had to fear was a nightmare. I wish anything that bad ever happened to you I could say, ‘Oh, it’s not real, honey.’ But the fact of the matter is there are real things on this earth that are going to hurt you and I am sorry and I wish you could just go to heaven now and be safe.”

It is important for us to know there is nothing from without that can hurt us there. And there is nothing from within that can hurt us there. There is no more darkness. There is no more shame. There is no more fear. There is no more voice from within us telling us, “You are a failure, you don’t work.”

In the children’s book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* C.S. Lewis has the ship come up to an island which is the island where dreams come true and it is shrouded in darkness. And when the men hear that they are going to the island where dreams come true they get all excited. And they go, “Oh, man, which dream? I always dreamed I’d, you know, have a million dollars. I always dreamed that I would end up with, you know, so and so for my wife.”

And the man who had actually been there said, “You idiots. Are you not listening? I didn’t say it was a place where day dreams come true. I didn’t say it was a place where fantasies came true. This is a place where your dreams, the real dreams, the ones you have at night come true.”

And all of the sudden they started rowing in the opposite direction as fast as they could.

Have you ever noticed how few of your dreams are good? What do we dream of? Inadequacy, failing the big test, the inevitability of death, right, falling. We dream of something trying to get us, hiding.

And God tells us that when we are in heaven we will be surrounded by light and there is nothing impure and there is nothing to be ashamed of and we will know what it means to have that void within us complete and full and we will be safe.

Heaven is not only a place where there is no more fear. It is a place where there are no tears. I apologize for the rhyme. It is a place where Revelation seven says, “God himself will wipe every tear from our eyes and he will lead us to the rivers of life and make us to drink from its waters.”⁷

Romans eight tells us that the sufferings of this present life aren’t worthy to be compared to the glories that are being held for us there.⁸ It is a place where we realize that our struggles are temporary and fleeting. They are not comparable to the weight, the glory, the permanence of heaven. It is a place of emotional and mental and relational healing.

⁷ See Revelation 7:17

⁸ See Romans 8:18

It is a place of emotional healing. What does that mean? What does it mean for God to wipe every tear from our eyes? I believe it means for one time we will finally get perspective. And I think those of you who know me know I am not going to kid with you. I know there are bad things that happen. And there are people in this world who have been terribly hurt by people they trusted, by people they should have been able to trust.

And that nagging experience that we have is that feeling that says, "Why did God do that to me? Why did it have to be that way?"

And from the perspective of heaven I believe we will finally see why it had to be that way. We will finally see. The old example is right from this side of heaven looks like the backside of a tapestry and it is chaos. It makes no sense. But from that perspective we will see the whole picture and it will make sense to us.

I saw a great example of that this week. I went to the men's crisis pregnancy banquet and it was good. It made me cry and that is all that really matters. And the first thing they did was they had the testimony of a woman who got pregnant out of wedlock, thought about aborting the child. She was only 14 years old. And she went to the men's pregnancy center and was counseled and somebody shared the gospel with her and she was converted and she had the baby and her daughter is grown up and is a beautiful 20 year old now.

But one of the things I started thinking was this. Now, understand me. I am not pro abortion. Everybody got that? Raise your hand if you understand. Ricky is pro life, ok? This is going to be a dangerous illustration if you don't get that.

All right. If Roe v. Wade had never been decided, if abortion had never been made legal in this country, would that 14 year old girl have heard the gospel? I don't think she would have. I don't think there would have been crisis pregnancy centers all over the country if Christians didn't have something fight against. Now, I am not saying that's why God did it. I don't know. When I get to heaven I'll tell you. But that's one reason. Thousands of women in a very dangerous and scary point in their life are hearing the gospel who would not have heard it if Roe v. Wade had not gotten passed.

From that perspective things make sense to us and from that perspective when we get to heaven the things that have personally happened to us that hurt us are going to make sense to us. I have had students before who have had to watch their parents get buried. I have had family members before who had to watch their parents get buried and their parents, their fathers were bad people. They were bad. There was nothing good, nothing redemptive about their lives.

And all I could do was put my arm around them and say, "That's a terrible thing." It is terrible to watch a funeral of a parent, always. But when the person was just bad and was abusive and died unrepentant, it is like there is nothing good that came out of us. And all

I could do was put my arm around him and say, “I’m glad you exist and you wouldn’t exist without him. I am glad you are here.”

The perspective of heaven, God is going to wipe the tears from our eyes and we will understand, finally. It is a place of emotional healing. It is a place of mental healing where we will understand things for the first time.

And one of the great thoughts of heaven for me: My sister is mentally retarded and she is kind of tough to talk to and you never really know if she is talking to herself or to you and the conversation is pretty much the same either way and she is fun. She is sweet. She is dear. But, you know, she is honestly a little bit a burden. And it is a sweet, precious thought to me in mind because my mom had mourned her, you know. I mean there’s these things you always dreamed of when you get a daughter, the wedding day and all those great things. And my mom is never going to get any of those things. And one of the precious thoughts in my mind is that my sister’s first clear thought, the first thing she will ever understand with clarity is: That’s Jesus. And I am with him now.

It is a place of mental healing. It is a place of relational healing. It is a place where Isaiah tells the lion and the lamb will lie down together. It is a place where Revelation tells us that every tribe, every tongue will gather around to worship.

Now maybe you think, “Oh, cool. God is going to win.”

That is a huge issue of reconciliation. Every tribe and tongue is going to be together and worshipping. And do you know what that means? It means that some of you are going to hug your parents for the first time. Some of you are going to be able to say, “I love you, dad,” for the first time in your life and mean it.

It is a place of reconciliation, of relational healing, of emotional healing, of mental healing. It is a place where there is nothing to fear, there is nothing to cry about. And, finally, it is a place where there is no loneliness. There is no loneliness because shame will be removed. There is no loneliness because we will be with God and there is no loneliness because we will be welcomed home.

There is no loneliness because our shame will be removed. Why do we feel lonely?

Some of you know this feeling. Actually I think all of you do, but some of you just hide it better than others, that feeling of being in a group and being absolutely alone, that feeling of nobody here knows me and if you did you wouldn’t want anything to do with me and so I am not going to let you know me. And that is a feeling of shame, of keeping everybody at arm’s length, of walking through life giving the Heisman trophy pose.

And what God tells us is that in heaven we will wash our robes in the blood of the lamb and they will be white and we will not be ashamed anymore and somebody will know us.

A friend of mine had an intern, a female intern who had to come to him and confess to him one day that she was involved in an internet chat relationship with a married man and she was leaving one on one, she was spending just hours and hours a week on the internet doing this. She would leave RUF early to go and do this and she sat in his office. She is crying and she looked up at him and she said, "I am so ashamed."

And he walked over to her and he picked up her chin and he said, "You are so beautiful to me right now. You are in Christ." And he said a benediction over her and he let her know that she was beautiful in Christ.

"He will beautify the meek with salvation."⁹

And that's the experience of being in heaven, to be known, to have nothing to fear anymore. It is a place where our shame is removed. It is a place where we will be with God.

There is no need for a lamp because the lamb is the light and we will behold his face day and night. We will be known and we will be received. And we are going to be so surrounded by God it is as if we he were the light. He will be the light. How can you be more surrounded by anything than you are by light? You are going to be in his presence with him face to face.

That means this. I want you to imagine the time in your life when you most felt someone's presence, when you most felt received.

When I was in second grade... How old is that? Eight? When I was eight my brother, his high school basketball team was in the state championship, or the state tournament; they didn't make it to championship. [?] In the state tournament and growing up in a small town the way you do basketball games is this, right, because there's like a gym with 70 people in it. You know, you get to the gym and you run around and when the game is over you go find your mom and you go home.

So we go to the state tournament and mom sits down and I went to run around. It was in a huge gym with thousands of people in it. Yet it never occurred to me that I was lost. And then the game, you know, got over. I heard the horn and I started walking towards the door and started kind of going in directions that I didn't mean to go, you know, kind of getting swept away with the crowd. And I got scared so I reached up to grab my man's hand and the man whose hand I grabbed didn't look anything like my mom and I was terrified.

I just screamed at him. I am sure everybody thought he had done something bad. And I started crying and I was lost and I was sure that my mom had finally seized this opportunity to be done with me and I was going to be at this gym forever. And I just sat...I got out to the parking lot to find her. I just couldn't find her and I just cried and I cried and finally when people had cleared out I heard my voice being called out over the

⁹ Psalm 149:4

parking lot and there is my mom and I run and I just jump up into her arms and she embraces me in this big bear hug and I knew that I was safe. I knew that I was welcome. I knew that I was not alone.

Have you ever felt that sense of just being absolutely overwhelmed with someone loved to have you? If you can imagine that moment for just a second I want you to know this. You will never feel that bad in heaven. That is the loneliest you will ever feel there. The lamb himself will be with you and he will surround you with his love and you will be welcomed home for the first time.

Please pray with me.

Our Father in heaven, we praise you that you rejoice over one sinner who repents.