

The Bible and the Afterlife

Glimpses of Heaven – A Biblical Study of Paradise

Revelation 21:9-24

9 Then one of the seven angels...said to me, "Come with me! I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." 10 So he took me in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God. 11 It shone with the glory of God and sparkled like a precious stone—like jasper as clear as crystal. 12 The city wall was broad and high, with twelve gates guarded by twelve angels. And the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were written on the gates...18 The wall was made of jasper, and the city was pure gold, as clear as glass. 19 The wall of the city was built on foundation stones inlaid with twelve precious stones...21 The twelve gates were made of pearls—each gate from a single pearl! And the main street was pure gold, as clear as glass. 22 I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light. 24 The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the world will enter the city in all their glory.

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Study Guide

Monday, May 14 – Paradise Restored - This week our study guide readings will focus on what heaven might be like. You'll want to use your sermon notes as you reflect upon the various passages of scripture. One way we might infer a bit of what heaven might be like would be to look at what the Garden of Eden was like – this was paradise before sin entered the world, and with it, death. Read Genesis 1:28-3:19 looking for how life was originally meant to be by God, and what changed after Adam and Eve sinned. What can you infer from this about what heaven might be like? You might read the story a second time; you'll find there is more here than you might see at first glance.

Tuesday, May 15 – The Messianic Age - The Hebrew Prophets sometimes painted a picture with words of what life would be like when God restored all things. This restoration was associated with the coming of the Messiah; hence it is called the Messianic Age. Christians believe this began with Jesus' earthly ministry, death and resurrection; but will not be completely experienced until his Second Coming. These scriptures represent the prophetic vision of life in heaven. As you read them, what do they teach us about what life will be like when God makes all things new? Read Isaiah 2:1-5, Isaiah 11:1-9 and Isaiah 65:17-25. Note that the prophet paints a picture of the new heaven and new earth that is based upon what he knows of this earth. How should these pictures of heaven shape how we live on earth now? Isaiah 2:4 is found on a large monument across from the United Nations headquarters in New York – why?

Wednesday, May 16 – Jesus and Heaven We learned this last weekend that Jesus came, in a sense, as the Son of the Heavenly King, and he made a way for us to enter heaven, gave us instructions on how to get there, and gave us, in his ministry and teachings, glimpses of what life is like in heaven. The Laws of Nature were harnessed by him and what is impossible for us was possible for him. His resurrection body is the only glimpse we have of what our own bodies might be like in heaven. In each miracle of Jesus we catch a foretaste of heaven – a place where the blind see, the lame walk, the sick are made well. In his multiplication of the fish and the loaves we see a glimpse of a heavenly realm where there is no hunger or poverty. In his love of sinners we see a heavenly realm where God has welcomed the lost. In his teachings about the first and the last, and our need to become like children, and his call for us to be servants he teaches us about how life works in heaven. Read Matthew 18:1-4. What does this tell us about heaven? How might this shape how we live today to prepare ourselves for heaven? Read John 14:1-4. Now, let's look at Jesus' resurrection body and see what we might infer about our heavenly bodies from these passages. Read Luke 24:28-35, 36-43. What was Jesus' resurrection body capable of?

Thursday, May 17 – The Heavenly Vision of the Apostles - In the New Testament the Church was meant to be a community that gives a foretaste of heaven and, when believers gather for worship Christ is present in their midst in a way that foreshadows heaven. Read I Corinthians 15:35-58. Verse 58 gives us the implication of our hope in heaven for our daily lives. Hebrews refers to heaven as our "Sabbath rest" – when you think of rest and renewal, what do you think of? How might heaven be like this? While the apostles speak frequently of our hope for eternal life, they seldom try to describe what heaven will be like. Why do you think this is?

Friday, May 18 – The New Jerusalem - Today we turn to the Book of Revelation where we have the most detailed pictures of what heaven will be like. As you read, ask what the author is trying to convey about heaven by his metaphorical description. Read Revelation 21 and 22:1-5. How can your hope in heaven positively shape your Christian life and faith today? This life is the journey that has heaven as its final destination. Are you preparing for heaven now? How?

“Visions of Heaven”

Revelation 21:9-24

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SLIDE 1 The Bible and the Afterlife – Visions of Heaven

As you are seated, please take out of your bulletin your sermon notes and your study guide. The sermon notes are an outline of today's message and there are places for you to write things down. There are passages and questions that will allow you to do your own study and research on this theme that we will focus on today.

Today we bring to a conclusion of our series of sermons on the Bible and the afterlife. In this series we have been asking the kinds of questions that all of us wonder about. What is Heaven like? What is hell like? Is there a hell? What happens at the last judgment? What really is the Christian hope? What do you believe about reincarnation and resurrection? What do we believe in?

We have been wrestling with these questions and trying to answer them. We have been asking what the Bible teaches us about what happens to us when we die.

Today we reach the climax of this series of sermons in which we asked the question, "What is heaven like?" I am guessing that you have some ideas about Heaven. Some of you are sitting in church today and you

don't really even believe in God so you don't even believe in heaven and you're not sure what to make of this sermon or this topic. Yet you are here today for some reason. You are curious about it and you have thought about it at some point in your past about what Heaven might be like. All of us have some image or some idea of what Heaven might be like.

As we have done in each of these sermons we went to downtown Durango and asked people, "What do you think heaven is like?" This is what they said. Take a listen.

VIDEO Heaven Interviews

SLIDE 1 (Repeat)

What do you think heaven is like? I like some of those pictures we just heard—a place where there is no suffering and a place where people love one another—a place where there is peace and joy.

Today we wonder about what Heaven looks like. So we are going to take a look at what the Bible teaches Heaven is like. Let me begin with this statement. The Bible holds out heaven for us as a goal and a destination for human existence. It is God's vision for our future. Those of you who studied leadership know how important vision is in any endeavor. The Bible says in Proverbs that without a vision the people will perish. Vision is very important.

In business, one of the most important roles of leaders is to cast vision. The leader helps to share the destination and where everyone is trying to get to, and then get everyone to push together to achieve that vision. Our vision in this church is to be Jesus Christ to the world. We say it each week in worship and I try to reiterate it each week in my sermon so that we remember that this is what we are about and this is where we are heading.

God has laid before us this vision of an eternal kingdom, a heavenly Jerusalem, a Mt. Zion that will never perish. Today we want to find out what that looks like.

Let's remember that any language we use about Heaven is by its nature going to be metaphorical. It will be a simile or something like what we vision. The Bible is going to try to describe for us something that is outside of our experience. We have never been there before and we cannot fully comprehend what Heaven will be like. So everything the Bible

says about Heaven is merely metaphorical. It is something greater than all the words we find in the Bible.

SLIDE 2 What the Bible Says About Heaven

While the Bible talks about Heaven and very seldom describes it in detail. There is very little detailed description of Heaven. In fact the most detailed description of Heaven is the passage that we heard just read a moment ago from a book of Revelation. Even in this passage it becomes clear that this is metaphor. This can't be taken literally and we are to read it as a metaphor.

Are the streets in heaven actually paved with gold? Probably not. But for the biblical author the most amazing thing that he can describe, and the only way he could think of to describe something that is so magnificent beyond what you can comprehend, was to say, "The streets are so shiny they radiate. They are like gold."

When he was thinking of how to describe the city he said, "It is pure like a bride prepared for her husband." Is heaven actually a bride? Of course not, but it is like a bride being prepared for her husband with Jesus being the husband.

In the book of Revelation it describes the walls of the city in heaven as being 1400 miles high. They are also 1400 miles wide and 1400 miles long. It is a huge cube and what they were really saying is that it is bigger than you can imagine. It can hold all of the possible people in the whole world if it needed to. That is sort of what the biblical author is saying.

Then he describes the gates of heaven. Do you remember what he says the gates are made of? It is not just pearly gates it is that each gate is a single pearl. That's an awful big oyster! I have never seen an oyster that big. But that is really not the point of this metaphor. The point is that pearls are beautiful and they represent purity. They are glorious to see so if you were to look at Heaven you would see something that is radiant and magnificent. It is something more spectacular than you have ever imagined or believed.

This is what Paul says about Heaven. He says, ***"The eye has not seen, nor has the ear heard, nor has it been conceived in the hearts of human beings what God has in store for those who love him."*** You can't even conceive it. Your thought processes are not grand enough. We are limited to words and ideas that we have before us and I think this is why

the Bible does not detail have been too much. What ever it would describe the fall short of what Heaven is like in reality. Instead God gives us pointers and says, "Now you imagine all the most wonderful things. You take away all of the evil and horrible things and simply take all that is good and you begin to get a vision of heaven."

Today we are going to look at some of the Bible's visions of heaven and what we can infer about heaven from the biblical text. Then we will share with you some stories of persons from within our own congregation who have had glimpses of heaven—or after life experiences. I am going to end with a light hearted vision of my own of what heaven might be like.

SLIDE 3 Genesis 2 – Paradise Restored

As we look at Scripture the first vision of heaven is found in the first book of the Bible. In Genesis chapters 1, 2 and 3 we read about the Garden of Eden which is paradise. God created the man and the woman and place them in Paradise. Throughout the rest of the Bible, when heaven is described, what it is trying to describe is a restoration of paradise. Paradise was lost when human beings disobeyed God and turn their back on God's will. That entire story is telling us about the human condition. The rest of the Bible gives us glimpses of heaven that are meant to take us back to the book of Genesis and the picture of paradise we find there, even the descriptions we read in the book of Revelation.

In Genesis, the Garden had trees planted there. Remember that there is the tree of life which holds the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. There also is a river that runs through the center of the Garden of Eden. In the book of Revelation we read of all holy city or a New Jerusalem that has a river running down the center of the city with trees on either side that are producing fruit. Paradise and Eden are restored in the book of Revelation.

When we go back to the book of Genesis we might begin to infer some things about Heaven from the description of paradise and the Garden of Eden. If we look at what paradise was like at the beginning it might paint for us a picture of what Heaven will be like when we arrive there after this life.

Adam and Eve were placed in the midst of the Garden of Eden where they had a wonderful things tea eat and drink and marvelous things to see. I will tell you that they were vegetarians. There was no killing of animals in

the Garden of Eden. That happened after they were disobedient and then God gave them the animals eat. This means it is highly unlikely that you'll be eating under the golden arches in heaven. You probably will be eating something else that is little healthier for you. But you will eat and we will talk about why in just a moment.

We look at the Garden of Eden we see there is a man and a woman and God has given them to each other as helpers. That tells us that paradise probably includes companionship and helpers which includes other people. However in the Gospels we find Jesus telling us that there is no marriage in heaven. We are going to try to understand that in just a few minutes as well.

In the book of Genesis we find that Adam and Eve were given work to do when they were in Paradise. It did not feel like work however. It was not to boil and hard labor and it was not until after they were disobedient that their work became hard. God said that they would toil under the sweat of their brow in order to make the land produce AFTER they had pushed Him away. But to begin with it was work that did not feel like work.

That is a helpful vision or idea for me of what Heaven will be like. I have a job where some of what I do I don't really enjoy that much, but a lot of what I do I really love. I would do it even if I didn't get paid for it. In fact, when I retire I am counting on doing it and not getting paid for it but I am only going to do the parts I like! I have retired pastors who come to our church to tell me this all the time so I figure what I retire I wouldn't say that to. I love to teach and talk with people about faith questions. I like to visit people in hospitals and be there in times of crisis, and I'm counting on being able to do those things even when I retire.

So if God told me I get to do this in heaven that would be my idea of heaven, to get to have those kinds of conversations and to care for people. I think you will have that kind of meaningful work in heaven that brings you joy.

Some people think you sit around on clouds and play harps. I am rhythmically challenged when it comes to playing instruments and that sounds like hell to me. At one church I served I tried to play the bongos and they called me "bongo boy", and that was not meant to be a term of endearment. Now if you are a harpist that may be what you are called to do but I'm guessing that for most of you it will be something else that is more meaningful for you when you arrive in heaven.

If there is an eternal city that means there will be people there living in close proximity and there will be things to do, but the things we do I think we will love. I don't think we are going to regret having to do them. That's a little bit of what we might find in Paradise—a place with no sin, no brokenness or no disobedience.

As we move on in the Bible to the section of the Hebrew prophets we find here another picture of heaven, or the restoration of all things.

SLIDE 4 The Messianic Age (Isaiah 2 and 11)

We find a nice day at chapter 2 verse 4 of powerful picture of what the heavenly realm might look like. It tells us...

SLIDE 5 "The Lord will mediate between nations and will settle international disputes. They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war anymore." -Isaiah 2:4

That is a powerful picture of the heavenly kingdom. It will be a place where human beings don't hate each other anymore. It will be a place where we don't do terrible things to each other anymore and there is no more injustice. As one, along with all of you, who pray for those folks listed in our bulletin who are serving in the armed forces right now, I look forward to the day when men and women no longer die in war anymore or are sent off into battle.

You may know that in the wall across from the United Nations building in New York City there is an engraving of this passage of Scripture from the book of Isaiah which promises that day will come.

SLIDE 6 Picture of wall at United Nations Building

This is a powerful vision of what it will look like on that day. In chapter 11 of the book of Isaiah we read and other vision of the messianic kingdom and what it might look like. Listen to these words from Isaiah 11: 6-9.

SLIDE 7 "In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard will lie down with the baby goat. The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion, and a little child will lead them all. The cow will graze near the bear. The cub and the calf will lie down together. The lion will eat hay like a cow.

SLIDE 8 *The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra. Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm. Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for as the waters fill the sea, so the earth will be filled with people who know the Lord.*"
--Isaiah 11:6-9

That is a compelling vision of the messianic age—a time when all of creation will be in harmony. Even the animals will not destroy one another anymore, and the knowledge of God will permeate all things.

There is one other inference we might make from this passage that is a bit of a stretch but I'll make it anyway. I get asked that question frequently,

SLIDE 9 **"Will my pets go to heaven with me?"**

Is there a place for my dogs and my cats and my hamsters and all the other critters I lived with in heaven?

For some theologians this is an easy question. They would say that the answer is no because your pets do not have a soul. But then you have pets and you begin to question this. As a pastor I have done a number of pet blessings and even pet funerals. I have buried cats and dogs and bunnies and even a snake. I actually have prayers that you can say when your dog or cat or other pet dies that I have given out to many of you because those of us who have pets realize they become a part of our families. I sit at the graveside of each of these moments and I cry at every one of them along with our kids. Actually I didn't cry at the snake's funeral but you get the point.

When I was standing out there burying each of these creatures my prayer was simple. "God, all creatures great and small belong to you. You formed them all. I don't know if these little creatures have a soul or not. But if they do, I entrust them to you. Take care of this little one who has brought so much joy to his family."

I really don't know whether when we get to heaven there will be animals there or not. But I know that this passage of Scripture tells us that in the messianic age God cares even about the animals, and that there will be harmony even among the creatures, and not just for humans but among all the created order. That is a pretty powerful vision of the kingdom of have in but there are still more.

SLIDE 10 Jesus' Teachings, Miracles and His Resurrection Body

The teachings of Jesus and his miracles and his resurrection body tell us something about the kingdom of heaven. Christians believe that God became flesh and lived among us in Jesus Christ. So when we look at Jesus we will see something of the heavenly realm breaking into the earthly realm. So we listen to Jesus and we hear the things he said and we infer what haven't will be like from those things.

Jesus said, "In the kingdom of heaven the first shall be last and the last shall be first." That tells you something about what heaven will be like. Maybe this is bad news for us. There are many of us in this room who have had a chance to be first in this life. We got to live in the big house. We got the corner office or even better yet we got to work out of our home and live in Durango. This does not mean you will not be in heaven, but it does mean that there are some who will experience something delightful possibly before we do because we got to be first here on earth.

I realized that when I get to heaven God is not going to care a whole lot about the fact that I got to pastor one of the biggest churches in our conference and live in Durango, Colorado. I think he will love me like everybody else, but I have a hunch he will say, "You know you got to live in Durango, and pastor a great church, and go to fun seminars in wonderful cities, and play on beautiful golf courses, but let me show you some of the people that I really treasure." And the superstars in heaven will be some of those pastors who toiled in small churches in small communities and helped to rebuild when the tornado had come and the press had left. They were the ones who were never recognized along with the missionaries who gave their lives for the cause of Christ.

This last week I got news that one of our retired pastors had died while serving as a missionary in China. He also had been a pastor at the McCurdy School where we will take a mission team in a few weeks. His name was **Rev. William A. Davis** and he retired from the Rocky Mountain Conference in 2004. He also served as a chaplain at the Community College of Denver and a small church in Las Animas, Colorado. I know from looking at the places where he served that he never got a big paycheck or probably got to preach in front of as many people as are here today. But I imagine that now that he is in heaven he has a special place where he is first. That's part of what Jesus says.

He says, "In heaven the greatest among you will be the servants." Those who are servants and who have a servant's heart will be exalted in the next life and I have a feeling they will be surprised and a bit embarrassed by all the attention.

Jesus says that in heaven those who will be there will be those who think like a child. That does not mean we think childishly or simplistically, but that we have a simple faith that trusts in God and is willing to be obedient to what God asks of us.

He also tells us that in his father's house there are many rooms or dwelling places. I have to be honest and that unless there is a cleaning service or somebody doing the lawn for me I really don't want a mansion in heaven. I would be happy to have one of those maintenance-free condos. But Jesus does say we will have dwelling places and whatever that means we are willing to live somewhere in heaven and not just float around on the clouds.

When we look at Jesus' body after his resurrection that tells us something about what heaven might be like. We only have one example that we know of a resurrected body. The apostle Paul says that your earthly body will be destroyed and then you will have a heavenly body. But what will our resurrection body look like? What will it be like? The closest we can surmise from this would be Jesus' resurrection body.

You remember that Jesus was able to appear in a room where the doors have been locked in each it shows up. This means he has the ability to move around in different ways than we do here. At the same time he looked very physical and they were able to touch his body. Sometimes he took upon the appearance of a stranger and sometimes he appeared just like himself so the disciples recognized him.

I appreciate this about Jesus and his resurrection body and that he was able to eat food when he was with the disciples. This tells us we probably will be able to eat and consume things in heaven, but we will do it with great joy. I have a hunch that will be able to do it without worrying about Slim Fast or the South Beach diet. I think we will be able to enjoy with what God gives us and we won't consume more than our fair share when we get to heaven.

When we look at Jesus' miracles we see glimpses of the kingdom of heaven breaking forth into this world. This is how we are supposed to look

at the miracles of Jesus. They are kingdom visions that help us to see what the kingdom of God looks like. So when Jesus touches the eyes of a blind man in a blind man is able to see that tells us that in the kingdom of heaven there is a complete restoration of those who are broken physically in this world. When he touches the lame and the lamer able to walk, or when he touches the leper and they are cleansed, or the man who is mentally ill and Jesus touches him and he is made sane, that tells us something about the kingdom of heaven.

This is a blessing to us when we think about our loved ones who move on from this life to the next.

Matthew Joyner became a member of the United Methodist Church when he was eight years old. An entire Ministry was formed by Matthew and his family at the church where he grew up and the "Matthew's Ministry" has touched lives throughout the world. He was a little boy who never spoke a single word his entire life. He died in his last year at the age of 21, and yet he profoundly influenced the world around him. Here's a picture of Matthew.

SLIDE 11 Matthew Joyner

Here is what we envision. Jesus gave us a glimpse of what the kingdom of heaven looks like. As Matthew and or the kingdom of heaven upon his death for the first time he was able to speak. He was able to shout and to sing and can you imagine all the words that were stored up that he could not wait to get out? He is now able to run and dance and play like never before. How can we not celebrate that? How could we not give thanks to God for that kind of gift that comes in the gift of eternal life?

Before Matthew was born one of the physicians said that his was not a life worth saving, and yet God had other plans for him. Because of Matthew there are churches throughout our country who have barrier-free facilities; provide adaptive Christian education; offer social/fellowship opportunities so that caregivers can have a night out; assist in special needs implementation and awareness programs; and offer respite care during worship.

We praise God for the promises of everlasting life we find in the Scriptures, and the hope we have at the miracles of Jesus are pointing towards what heaven will be like.

Finally we look at the Epistles of the book of Revelation.

SLIDE 12 The Epistles and Revelation

In the epistles we read Paul saying something like this.

SLIDE 13 *“When this earthly tent we live in is destroyed we have a building not made by human hands but eternal in the heavens.”*

1 Corinthians 13 is a picture of what I think heaven might be like if you read carefully. Remember that this is the great love chapter. We said that Hell is where there is a complete absence of love and if that is the case that heaven is a place where you are surrounded by love. 1 Corinthians 13 tells you what love looks like, and what it doesn't look like. You read that and think about what that might say about heaven.

In that passage Paul also says that currently we only see in part and we don't see everything, but in that day when we are with Christ we will see things clearly. I look forward to that day.

Finally he says that we shall be known as we are known. That means that people who have known you in this life will know you in heaven and you will know them and I am grateful for that as well.

The book of Revelation finally pays for us a picture of heaven not only as a place where streets are paved with gold, but also a place where there will be no more sorrow, no more suffering, no more pain and no more death. God himself will wipe away every tear from every eye.

That is a powerful vision of heaven.

There are questions that we have as thinking people about heaven. Today I don't have time to answer all for that I have listed so I will just focus on two of them.

Questions Thoughtful People Ask

We a party talked about what you might do in heaven and purgatory we will have to cover some other time. I would love to teach you about how we might look at that as Protestants today but we just don't have time to do it justice so we will hold off on that for another day. But let's talk about marriage in heaven for just a minute.

SLIDE 14 Marriage in Heaven

We have already noted that Adam and Eve were in Paradise in the book of Genesis and they were companions and helpers for each other in the Garden of Eden. The only passage of Scripture that troubles me when

it comes to heaven is what Jesus says about marriage in heaven. All the other passages I find encouraging. But Jesus said when he was talking to the Sadducees that in heaven there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage.

I think to myself, "Now wait a minute God. One of the best parts of my life is being married to my wife Tami. I treasure that the thought of not being married to her in heaven troubles me." But here is how I have come to understand this as I have wrestled with it. First of all we get to heaven we will know the answer and will know what Jesus meant, but this is what I make of this passage for myself today.

I think what Jesus meant is that when you get to heaven you have an opportunity to love everyone with a deep love. Right now we are limited in how many people we can love in a way that is self giving. In heaven however we will have an opportunity to love deeply all those people around us.

I envision that heaven will be a place where we will know our friends will have people that are companions and walk with us on a journey, but that does not mean the person who was our mate will not be with us also. I think we'll have that person who we love deeply, that we have a special bond with, and that we will carry that bond into eternity with us.

But I don't think there will be sexual intimacy in heaven, which is part of what defines marriage. There will be the friendships and the closeness and the sharing together and the journey and the adventure.

Some of you might be wondering why there would be sexual intimacy in heaven. I had someone put it to be this way that I think was helpful. If you were to try to explain physical intimacy to child they might ask the question, "Well, is it as good as candy?" That is because candy is only the greatest thing a small child can imagine. For us, maybe when it comes to physical touch which might be the apex of our experience, it may seem like candy to a child compared to the blessings of touch we haven't heaven that will be different from what we experience here on earth.

All that said, I trust God with this whole idea of marriage and heaven and I'm counting on the fact that my partner and my best friend will be a part of that journey with me in the kingdom of heaven.

SLIDE 15 The Communion with the Saints

What about the Communion of the Saints, or those who have gone before us? Some of the questions we ask go like this. Can we talk to the dead? Can they talk to us? Should we pray for the dead? Do they pray for us? Let me try and answer those questions very briefly for you.

When it comes to talking to the dead the Bible says that we are connected to those who gone before us in Christ. There is an understanding of what theologians call the Communion of Saints which means that we all belong to the same body of Christ. We are connected with all those who have gone before and are part of Christ's body. They are serving God and Heaven and we are serving God here on earth.

But when it comes to talking to the dead I have wondered how this might work. I think it's perfectly normal to go to the cemetery and you have a conversation with your loved ones who died. I think that is therapeutic and it can be helpful. Maybe from time to time God says to your loved one, "I want you to come over here and here in this conversation."

But I am also thinking that when I am in heaven doing all kinds of really cool stuff for God I don't want my kids to be able to call anytime they want and take me away from that so I have to go listen to them! That probably would not be heaven for me and I'm thinking it might be the same for our loved ones who have gone on before us. It may be helpful for us but it may not be helpful for them to always have to listen to us. I do think there are moments when God probably does let them listen in.

My grandfather who is very special to me died 2 1/2 years ago. He was very invested in our adoption process for our children and while he was not alive when we brought them home I have to think there have been moments where I have been holding my children, or praying with them at their bedside at night, and God has said to my grandfather, "Hey Howard, come here. You have to see this."

When I do weddings for young couples and either the bride or the groom has lost a parent a picture that might be one of those times where God says, "Come over here I want to see this." I don't know if that's true but I think it might work that way.

I do know there are times at the dead have spoken to us. There are times that you have had visions of this or you have had conversations with a loved one who's gone before you. This doesn't happen very often and usually for some reason we can completely understand, but I can't discount

the number of people in our congregation who have told me this. So I think sometimes God allows that connection to be made, but that is not the norm.

I also know this. In this sanctuary, as we gather for worship on Sundays or for weddings or for funerals, is where the line between heaven and earth is the thinnest. You see they are worshiping in heaven and we are worshiping here on earth and we are connected by our common faith. There are people who tell me, "I feel closest to my deceased loved one when we are gathered here for worship," and I think that is right.

Some have asked me if they should pray for their loved ones who are dead. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I am not going to pray for their safety because I know they are safe already. I don't need to pray for their healing because they are healed in heaven. What I have done is something I did just a few weeks ago when it was my grandparents wedding anniversary. They are both deceased now but I still have their anniversary date in mind calendar program. The day I came to their anniversary I said a special prayer that day. "God today would you bless my grandparents in a special way. I know they are with you right now so please let them know they are loved and missed down here on earth." That makes me feel closer to them when I talked to God who can see that person right now.

I pray for my wife and kids every day and I don't see that changing one I had to heaven. Of course I will still be praying for God's blessings and God's care for them. Only then I will not have to worry about their future because I know what is on the other side and I will be experiencing that and waiting for them. That gives me a piece knowing that God is in control, but I still will pray for them I think.

Now you could sit here and take my word for all these things but I thought it would be important for us to hear from some of you who have had afterlife experiences. So for the last few weeks I have met with several of you and to persons agreed to share on video what happened to them. You're going to hear from Tara Safran who had her experience in the midst of a serious illness when she was 19 years old and she nearly died. You also will hear from Larry Phelps who had a serious accident eight years ago when he was working up at Purgatory. Let's listen in.

VIDEO Afterlife Experiences 1

SLIDE 16 Why Heaven Matters Now

That peace that Tara talks about and that perspective that Larry gave us is why Heaven matters now. There was a time in our culture when heaven was thought to be by intelligent people something that was unsophisticated. Even when I was in seminary I had a professor who had the attitude that only unsophisticated people needed in heaven and that really if you are mature you wouldn't need this idea of heaven.

I think that's ridiculous. First of all, the Bible makes heaven a profound promise in our lives. It is the destination that each of us is heading towards. It is God's vision for the future and it affects us here and now in very positive and profound ways.

And if you have a vision that you work towards that vision. God has said that in the kingdom of heaven there is no more poverty. There is no more war. There is no more violence. There is no more injustice.

If that is what heaven looks like, and you are citizens of the kingdom of heaven and that is where you're going, then you should start working towards that here on earth. So we desire, we long for and pray for, and we work for a time where there is justice and peace and for people to eat and for the restoration of this order. We don't believe that we by ourselves will bring God's kingdom here on earth, but believing that we work toward that vision until someday when we see it fulfilled, even if it is after this life.

We pray this together every week—join me.

SLIDE 17 Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.

Heaven calls us to put forth our lives in pursuing God's kingdom vision. We are called to long for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. Not only that, but a clear picture of heaven gives us courage and boldness.

SLIDE 18 Courageous Living

When we flew on an airplane to Ukraine a year and a half ago I had a few people ask me if it was really safe for us to fly overseas, especially since September 11, 2001. Do you know what I thought when they asked me that? If the worst thing happened to me, if I died in a plane crash or in a former Soviet country, that just means I have a short ticket to heaven. This is the ultimate destination I'm looking forward to. Why would I grieve that?

Understanding that heaven is the ultimate destination gives me a boldness and encourage to say I am willing to risk more than I would be willing to risk if I did not know where I was going after this life was over. Heaven gives us that boldness and that courage.

SLIDE 19 The Triumph of Hope

Heaven also gives us hope and hope is very important. Hope affects your physical well-being and your mental well-being. It affects your relationships. Heaven and the resurrection are the ultimate triumph of hope.

God has said, "You know what. When your loved ones are passing away you don't have to be afraid. You are going to see them again someday." That gives us hope.

When you are facing your own death God says, "You know what. Death is just a passageway from this life to the next. You have only been in grade school. Welcome home after this life is over." That gives us hope.

When we listen to the news and hear about global warming and all the world's problems heaven calls us to work towards a just world. But the vision of heaven also tells us not to be cast down by all the doom and gloom predictions and our world. You want to tell me that an asteroid is going the earth and destroy us in six years or 60 years? I probably would be a bit frightened by that is what most people, but I know that is not the end because God has promised a new heaven and a new earth. There is a triumph of hope no matter how dark the circumstances because of the promise of everlasting life in the kingdom of heaven.

I would like to end by letting you hear once again from Tara and Larry. You see I asked them, "What difference did your afterlife experience make in your life?" Here is what they said.

VIDEO Afterlife Experiences 2

SLIDE 1 Visions of Heaven

Let me share with you a few more stories from our congregation. One member in our church was with their brother-in-law when they were dying of cancer. Two days before his death for three hours he laid in his bed and had visions of heaven. During this period of time he was able to talk with everyone in the room, he knew who they were and he had conversations with them. But he began to see things that they could not

see. He said that he was seeing mountains and a river and flowers. He could even see himself and he was completely well.

Then he began to say things like this, "Oh my goodness! It's unbelievable! You can't imagine!" At one point he simply said, "I am just so excited." Then he said, "How do they keep quiet so long?"

One woman wrote this about her father's passing. She was with her father as he died and then three months later she was with her uncle, who was her father's brother, when he died. Just before her uncle died she was with him in his home and she went to get him a glass of lemonade from the kitchen. When she came back into the living room her uncle said to her, "You won't believe who I've just seen. I have just seen Johnny." Johnny was the name of this woman's father, his brother.

"I have just seen Johnny and we had a really nice talk. He is standing right over there. He is waiting for me." This was very disconcerting for her as she went back into the kitchen to collect her thoughts and while she was in there a loud thud in the living room. She went back out and found that her uncle passed away.

A woman who worked in the ICU unit of a children's hospital said that there were a number of times that children would have near-death experiences and they would describe what they've seen. One child was only six or seven was able to tell her that she felt herself going into a peaceful sleep.

The little girl said that when she fell asleep she was surprised that there was some slight everywhere. She felt something wet on her cheek and she looked up to see her dog, who had died when she was four, licking her face. Both of her grandparents were there and they were talking and laughing and hugging her. She even remembered much of what they had to say to her, and they have ice cream. Then her grandparents told her that it was time for her to say goodbye and they would see her some day but not now. Then they told her to tell her mother, their daughter, but they loved her and they were proud of her. That little girl is alive to this day.

Those are pretty powerful pictures of heaven. I have my own personal glimpses of what I think heaven might be like. I can still remember the first time I pushed my daughter Vika on a swing in the park that overlooks the Animas River, thinking that this is what Heaven must be like being able to push my daughter on the swing forever.

I think there are moments that we have glimpses of heaven on this side of eternity. All of those things are only meant to be foretastes—you pick the best of those moments and you have just begun to scratch the surface of what God has in store for those who love him.

Let me end this on a more lighthearted note. When Tami and I first moved to Durango we only had one dog and that is Mikah. Shortly after moving here we decided that we needed more excitement in our lives. It was not enough to be in a new church in a new community and so we got a golden retriever puppy. Her name is Gwen and some of you have met her and some of you were here the day she came running down the aisle of the church because she got loose on a Sunday morning and came running when she heard the sound of my voice while his preaching.

To one of my fondest memories with Gwen is the first day we took her to a large body of water. Now remember that golden retrievers are bred to swim and to be water dogs. But for the first four months of her life all Gwen had seen was a hose and a bathtub. One beautiful fall Saturday we took her up on a hike to Spud Lake as the aspen were turning. At first she approached the water with a bit of fear. She had never been in the water or she could not touch the bottom before. But here's the thing. Once she got in it, she knew that this is what she was made for.

SLIDES 20-23 Gwen in water

I think it will be much the same when we get to heaven. All you have really known is this life which compared to heaven is like a bathtub, or maybe a hose. You get there and you're not really sure what to do and you're kind of scared at first. But once you really get your foot in the water you begin to realize, "This is what I was made for."

SLIDE 1 Visions of Heaven

Heaven is what you are made for. God gives you this heavenly vision and the question is, "What will you do with it?"

Will you pursue that vision your whole life, or will you pretend like it's not really there?

Will you seek to know the one you're going to stand before the last day or will you ignore him?

Will you know what the heavenly vision looks like and try to bring it here on earth as best you can, living as a citizen of the kingdom, or will you just forget about it?

God's desire is that in placing that vision before you, you might be drawn to that vision—that you might run the race that is set before you with perseverance until you see Jesus face to face. Would you bow your head with me in prayer?

God offers you the gift of salvation, the gift of everlasting life, but it is the kind of gift you have to receive—you have to actually accept it. You have to say, "I would like that." He is not going to force you to go there. He offers this as an invitation to you.

So for you it is very simple. You might just say to the Lord, "God I want to spend forever with you in that place. I want to see my loved ones again. I want to know that place where there is no more sorrow or suffering or pain. I want to be there with you."

If that is your desire, I hope you will tell him that in your own words and in your own way. All you need to do is say, "Lord I accept your gift of life everlasting..."

How grateful we are O God that you have promised us this gift—that there will be a day when Paradise will be restored—when there will be no more war and no more suffering, no more sorrow and no more pain, where there will be perfect peace, and knowledge of you will permeate all creation.

We are grateful that on that day those who were blind will be able to see and those who are lame will walk and those who couldn't talk will shout. We are grateful that on that day we will share in a communion with you and those who have gone before us that we can't even fathom on this side of eternity.

Help us Oh Lord to live our lives so that we are ready to meet you that day. Help us to walk in that path and to pursue this vision now and always, in Jesus' name. Amen.