

Heaven Is...

Valley Center September 29, 2007

After a long departure of more than a month, they returned; the twelve, bearing the fruits of Canaan. Between the shoulders of a couple of them was a rod, on which were the lushest and largest grapes anyone had ever seen; grapes from the Valley of Eschol (which means "clusters"). One of those spies who had looked over the land and came back with a good report was Caleb. This week I have aspired to walk in his sandals. I wanted to be Caleb this week. It's been my purpose to "look over the land", as best as I could, and come to you with a "good report." I've endeavored to bring back a few of the "grapes of Eschol". What would Jesus say to His people today? I think He might talk about heaven! It was one of His favorite topics. You'll notice that the sermon title is "Heaven Is..." implying an incomplete sentence. I'd like to suggest five different words to complete that title.

Heaven is *real*. Even though we can't see it, heaven is real. There are lots of things we can't see, yet we accept their reality. We can't see electricity, but we know it exists. We can't see the wind, but we know it's there. For the Christian, who lives "by faith and not by sight", heaven is just as real as these things. There is a reality to evil: all you have to do is see any newscast and you will be convinced of that. There likewise is a reality to the good plan that God has devised for His children. That's why I don't consider it wise to use words that pertain to our eternal destiny in a careless, thoughtless way. To say in a casual way, "Oh heavens," might not be a sin, but it depreciates the majesty of what God has planned for us. In the same way, to say, "Oh hell" or "damn" might not be a sin (those words are in the Bible, aren't they?), but if they are said without thought as to the tremendous issues brought to view by those terms, it is not wise. Heaven is real, and when we speak of it we should appreciate the magnitude of what that word encompasses.

It's interesting that in the languages of both the Old and New Testaments, the words most often used for "heaven" are plural. The Hebrew word is *shamayim*, which comes from the root *shameh* which means "lofty" and appears over 398 times, translated in the KJV as "heaven" in all but 21. You will recognize that it is a plural form in Hebrew because of the "im" ending. In the same way that "cherub" is singular and "cherubim" is plural, so also *shamayim* represents the "heavens." And because in Hebrew grammar there are actually three forms (singular, dual and plural), we know that when they used this term they were speaking of at least three "heavens."

Notice what Harper's Bible Dictionary says: "In biblical Hebrew the word for heaven is always plural. Under that influence, the Greek word for heaven in the NT also frequently appears in the plural. Heaven was the place of the stars, sun, and moon (Gen. 1:14-16) and of the birds (Gen. 1:20; Deut. 4:17). It is also the abode of God (1 Kings 8:30) and where God is enthroned (Isa. 66:1; Exod. 24:9-11).

So "heaven" was where birds fly (the "atmosphere"), where the stars are ("space"), and where God lives. Paul, in vision, described his ascent into the "third heaven." II Corinthians 12:2. The first two are easily verifiable; the third is just as real.

We accept, as Christians, the Word of God as a reliable source of truth, and the Bible clearly identifies a place called "heaven" as the current dwelling of the Lord and the future inheritance of the saints. Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also." John 14:2, 3.

There is another Witness to the reality of God's promises. Paul wrote, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." Now, most people stop reading right there. But Paul is not through with his thought. He goes on to say, "**But** God *has revealed* them to us through His Spirit." I Corinthians 2:9, 10. In other places, Paul uses the analogy of "down payment" to describe the presence of the Spirit in our hearts. "Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a *deposit*." II Corinthians 1:21, 22. "Now He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who also has given us the Spirit as a *guarantee*." II Corinthians 5:5.

What does this mean? Just this: Have you felt and experienced the influence of His Spirit in your life? Have you, as you look in the rearview mirror of your life, seen His guidance? Have you noticed that you're not the same person as you used to be, that certain things don't appeal to you as they used to? Have the ways of the world lost their attraction and do you now find them shallow and without meaning? Do you recognize that a life built on a pursuit of things that don't last is not what you're really after? Have you seen changes in your life that you didn't really plan for, but just seemed to come as you spent more time with Him each day?

These are evidences of His Spirit at work in your life! This is God's "guarantee," His "deposit" that **all** of His promises will come true for you! These are things that you know to be true in your heart, which no one can argue against. Answered prayers, providential leadings, slow but sure transformations in your priorities, goals and habits; these are the witnesses that God's Spirit is indeed present in your life. No one can take these from you! You know heaven is real, because you know God has changed you! This doesn't mean you can "rest on your laurels", but it does mean that God wants you to be confident in His promises, and His plan for you. Heaven will be a *real* place with *real* people who engage in *real* pursuits, without the frustrations and hindrances that sin has brought. The image of playing a harp on a cloud is found nowhere in the Bible.

Heaven is real; heaven is also beautiful. God is a lover of beauty. It is Satan who has perverted God's gifts of beauty and twisted them to suit his own purposes, but just because the enemy has misused what God has made, don't lose sight of the fact that God loves beauty. Of all the character attributes of God, I think the one we overlook or minimize the most is this one: God is creative. You might think that that goes without saying. After all, He is the Creator. But I think it's worth our time to pause on this thought for a moment. We admire people who exhibit great creativity, in art, music, literature or architecture. But the One Who is the most "creative" of all is God! Eternity will never exhaust the new delights which will forever be meeting the eyes and ears of the saved.

There are many beautiful things here on this earth, despite the three-fold curse that rests upon it. From the mountain's grandeur to the delicate flower that graces your front yard planter there are still scenes today which invite our marvel. But, as the saying goes, "You haven't seen nothin' yet." When sin cast its dark shadow across this planet, much of God's beauty was obscured. Sin threw its dark cloak of ugliness across the spectacle of what God had made beautiful. Now we see, as the Apostle said, "through a glass darkly." What will it be like when the curse of sin is removed and we see God's beautiful universe through undimmed eyes!

Right now, the part of the electro-magnetic spectrum that is visible to the human eye is only a small percentage. Right now, that part of the frequency scale that is audible to the human ear is only a small portion. What will it be like when our vision and our hearing have been opened as God intended?

Jesus told us that He has gone to "prepare" a place up there for us. I have no doubts but that He has done a masterful job, and that there are exquisite features of that city that He is anxious for us to see and enjoy. The Book tells us something about that city. It says that it is "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. He carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. And her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. And the construction of its wall was of jasper; and the city was pure gold, like clear glass. And the foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all kinds of precious stones. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass." Revelation 21:2, 10, 11, 18, 19, 21. Jasper is a form of quartz that can be red, green or brown. That sounds like a pretty nice place to live, doesn't it! How much would you pay for a condo in a city like that?

Probably the most beautiful building on the earth today is the Taj Mahal. This is its history: "Once upon a time there lived an Arab woman named Arjumand Banu. We know very little about her, except that she lived in Agra, India, and was the Sultana of Shah Jehan, the greatest of the Mogul emperors. She must have been a good woman and a good wife, because, after eighteen years of married life, and within twelve months after his accession to the throne, in 1629, she died in giving birth to her fourteenth baby. And her husband loved her so much that he sheltered her grave with a mausoleum which, without question or reservation, is pronounced by all architects and critics to be the most beautiful building in the world--the most sublime and perfect work of human hands. It is called the Taj Mahal, which means "The Crown of the Palaces."

<http://www.asianartmall.com/tajmajal.htm>

When I was at the Taj Mahal earlier this year I saw walls that had embedded jewels. Crimson carnelians glowed like fire when a flashlight was held against the surface of the wall. Twenty-eight different gems and jewels, many of the same ones we're told are in the foundations and walls of the New Jerusalem, are employed in the construction of this beautiful building. But it's nothing like what God has built! The "Crown of the Palaces"? Just wait till you see what God has made! The seven star hotel in Dubai? It wouldn't hold a candle to it! I have news for Paris: It's not the real "City of light". Here's a news flash for Rome: It's not the real "Eternal City."

I want to point out a word that is used twice in those verses we just read. It's the word "adorn". God's city is going to be "prepared like a bride adorned for her husband." Remember that Jesus Himself is the One Who is doing this "preparing." We hear these days that there might be a White House wedding in store for Jenna Bush. I imagine there will be some lavish spending and preparing for her special day. In Greek the word "adorn" is the word "kosmeo" which means "to beautify, to polish, to put in order," and is translated (KJV) "adorn," "garnish" and "trim." What words in our language do we get from this term? We get the word "cosmos" which means "world," and we get the word "cosmetics".

There's an important principle and truth contained in these Scriptures. The truth is that God loves beauty. Gold and precious stones embellishing His city will be in abundance. There's nothing inherently wrong with gold, jewels and adornment. But, there is a problem. Because the human race sold out to sin, it is most natural for us to want to put self in the forefront, to glorify ourselves instead of giving glory to God. We have an "I" problem. Self-denial, sacrifice and humility are the classes taught in the school of Christ. So "for right now," God asks us to not get caught up in external adornments. One day we'll walk on gold. But for today, God asks us to live a life that says, "Not I, but Christ." That statement should be made by not just our attitude toward adornment, but by our cars, our houses and every choice in life. There's nothing wrong with pearls; someday you'll walk through a gate that is made of the largest pearl you could ever imagine. But for right now, since we have fallen natures that crave attention, He asks us to focus on the inner beauty rather than the outward beauty.

If you look up "adornment" in the Bible, you'll find that there are about as many texts that speak positively about it as negatively. But, those that speak positively point us toward heaven, when sin will be gone. You won't be struggling with a nature that says, "Look at me." Those texts that speak negatively warn us against making what we look like on the outside something that hinders our spiritual walk. What did God call us to be? Christmas trees or fruit trees? "For right now," He says, "let your focus be on those things that enhance your Christian walk. The day will come when gems and jewels will be everywhere, delighting your senses."

Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "You will be with me in paradise." The word He used originally came from the Hebrew word "*pardes*," which means "park, forest or orchard." It's used three times

in the Old Testament, twice by Solomon, who I'm sure had trained gardeners and landscapers to beautify his palace grounds. Ecclesiastes 2:5; Song of Solomon 4:13. God has not only prepared a "city" that is beautiful, but heaven itself is like a "park." A couple of summers ago we were able to visit the Bouchard Gardens in Vancouver, Canada. What a beautiful exhibit! But even in that place of beauty, flowers die. At one point, my wife and I noticed a commotion, so I walked over to where the disturbance was. It seemed that there was a snake sunning itself on top of one of the hedges! It reminded me of something I read in Genesis. Heaven will be a park with flowers that don't fade, and without the presence of the one who tempted Eve through a speaking serpent.

Heaven is real, heaven is beautiful. Heaven is also *near*. I believe we are living in the time that the Bible describes the last days. I believe that the signs telling us, "He is coming" are all around. Who would argue that the world is the same as it was 50 years ago? Just in the last few decades man has devised means by which the candle of life on this planet can be snuffed out by the mere push of a button. Yes, there have always been wars, earthquakes, pestilences and other disasters, but the frequency, intensity and the potential for mass destruction of these is increasing at an alarming rate. Knowledge has been increased, as the prophet predicted. Unfortunately, much of this knowledge has been employed to make man wise to do evil.

At the same time, the Good News of Jesus is making headway in places that had been closed for centuries. The curtain of communism fell in the Soviet Union, making way for Christianity to grow. The Gospel is making inroads in India and China now like never before. We are in a period of great world evangelism. The world of the internet has opened the way for the proclamation of God's Word in places not accessible otherwise.

I heard a story this week from a dear friend that I would like to share. "I am former president of AWR (Adventist World Radio) and I was thrilled, but cautious about this story. I have now been able to check it, and it is true. Praise God. We should be grateful but not surprised. The country of origin is being withheld for obvious reasons, but we have every reason to believe the veracity of the story." So wrote Pastor Don Jacobson, whom I know personally. I also wrote to Adventist World Radio and received a confirmation of this story from Marvin R. King, Web Manager at AWR. Ben Schoun, president of AWR wrote the following:

"Adventist World Radio broadcasts to a number of countries where people do not have freedom to worship according to their consciences. In fact, many times the people in these places suffer great persecution for following the Christian faith. In one such place, which will remain nameless for the security of the people involved, Christianity had not penetrated at all, and the government wanted to keep it that way. It is a very isolated area made up of tribal people who only followed tribal and ancestral religions. The strong determination by the government is reflected by the fact that one man recently was shot dead trying to go to this area without proper permission.

In spite of the road blocks and the special permits required for anyone to go into this area, AWR received piecemeal information that a large number of people were listening to the AWR radio programs. The radio waves had jumped over the soldiers, the police, the roadblocks, and all the efforts to keep these people from being "tainted" by influences from the outside world, including Christianity. That is cause for rejoicing in itself. But there is more to the story. Just within the last two months AWR received a confirmed, reliable report that told the following experience. There were six different tribal villages in mountainous regions that had absolutely no contact with each other. They live in mountainous regions. The individual who brought out the report talked with the chiefs of each of the six villages, and each of them told the same story without awareness of events in any of the other villages.

Each chief told that some strangers whom they did not know had come to their village. These strangers were tall and had an aura of bright light about them. These bright beings gave the chief in each village a radio. They showed the chiefs how to use the radio and then carefully showed them how to tune the radio to hear the Adventist World Radio programs. They told them the frequency and the time of the programs. After a few words of encouragement, these strangers suddenly disappeared and the village people never saw them again. In each village, unbeknown to the other villages, the people began to listen to the AWR program, gathering around that radio every day. The reporter said that these village people are now very devout believers. They keep the Sabbath and worship while listening to the radio.

Our AWR producer for this area said, 'I must believe that this is (sic) the angels who care for these people. It is unbelievable, but we must believe. I had goose bumps all over my body when I heard

this report.' Whew! What do you think? Pray for these people. Just identify them as the people to whom angels gave radios. I'm sure the Lord knows who they are. Praise His Name." Benjamin D. Schoun
AWR President.

Jesus said that the message would go to the world "as a witness." He didn't say that everyone would respond, but that everyone would be given the opportunity to know.

All these things are signs for the believer. When these things begin to happen, Jesus said to "Look up." Let your life be lived in the atmosphere of expectancy. Let the prayer, "Your kingdom come" be a reality in your life. Don't let your roots grow deeply in the soil of this world; it will soon be gone. Jesus is coming soon! His coming is the answer to this earth's problems. We have problems today that will never be solved by man's ingenuity. They will grow worse and worse. Let His coming be the focus of your life and your choices. Heaven is near!

Heaven is free! Though we are sinners, Jesus has paid for our redemption with His blood. Although there is no possible way we could make up for our mistakes, Christ has already died the death that we deserve. Christ wrote our names in His will, and when He died, the will was confirmed. The inheritance is sure. You can't do anything to earn it or merit it. You'll never be good enough to get God to love you because of something you did; that's false religion. The truth is that He already loves you with an infinite love. You can't do anything to make Him love you more than He already does!

The Bible says all power is His
And I'm sure the Bible's true
He made the world and all that is
But there's one thing He can't do

He can't love you more than He loves you right now
He can't love you more than He loves you right now
He's the Almighty King Who can do anything
But He can't love you more than He loves you right now

I want to point out something about God's love and this city. What is the name of the city that's described as the home of the saved? It's the New Jerusalem, isn't it? I'm not a parent, so I'm speaking now by observation and not by experience. But if I had a son, and he went somewhere to conduct work for me in another place,

and they treated him shamefully and eventually tortured him to death, and then I built a city, I don't think I'd name the city after the place where my son met such a despicable end! Not even if I put "New" in front of it! I think I would harbor so much hatred and resentment toward the city that killed my son I'd want to wipe the memory of that place out of my mind. And yet God calls His city the New Jerusalem! Sometimes it's hard for us to understand the enormity of His great love! He even offered to give His persecutors a place in His kingdom when He said, "Father, forgive them."

Those who will be lost will discover too late how easy it was to be saved! Don't listen to Satan's lies about how stern or unloving God is! I don't remember reading anywhere that Lucifer fought to get **out of** heaven. I read that he was "cast out," which clearly tells me he had to be forcibly evicted. It wasn't like he wore his fingernails out like somebody buried alive inside a casket would do. Yet that's what he tells people about heaven and God! He makes it seem like heaven is a boring place with no joy. If that's true, then why did he have to be expelled?

Heaven is real, it is beautiful, it is near, it is free and heaven is Jesus. The greatest thing about heaven is not pearly gates or golden streets. It's not about jasper walls or a crystal sea, as intriguing as they are. It's not about flowers that don't fade. The statement "The best things in life aren't things" applies equally as well to That Life. As ornate as the furnishings will be, the supreme reward will be to fellowship with Christ. Without Him, it wouldn't be heaven. To be swept into His presence, where there is unspeakable joy, will be the privilege of the redeemed. There's nothing on this earth that can possibly compare to the experience of being with the resurrected Lord through eternity. You'll be there, won't you?