

There have always been questions in people's minds about heaven, especially for those that don't know Jesus Christ or those that have not studied the Bible regarding the subject. There is a lot of confusion and misinformation. After preparing this message I realize that we need to take an extended look at the subject and I will attempt to do that in the coming new year.

In 1991, when Eric Clapton's son Connor died tragically, he penned the words to a song that was haunting and really didn't answer the questions it asked. Maybe you remember this. Listen to a little bit of it. . . .

Video

"Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. ² There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? ³ When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. ⁴ And you know the way to where I am going." John 14:1-4 NLT

Historically, Christianity has built its hope around eternity in heaven. In the Roman catacombs, where the bodies of many martyred Christians were buried, there are tombs with these inscriptions:

In Christ: Alexander is not dead but lives.

One who lives with God.

He was taken up into his eternal home.

Pictures on the walls of the catacombs portray heaven with beautiful landscapes, children playing and people feasting. In AD 125, a Greek man wrote to a friend about Christianity, explaining why it was so successful: "If any righteous man among the Christians passes from this world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God, and they escort his body with songs and thanksgiving as if he were setting out from one place to another nearby."

There was a time when heaven was the goal; the main goal, the driving force behind living faithfully. The apostle wrote: "To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain . . . I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far." (Philippians 1:21)

We are all terminal!

As human beings, we have a terminal disease called mortality. The current death rate is 100 percent. Without the soon return of Jesus Christ all of us are going to die. I know we don't like to think about it but let me break it down for you.

Worldwide 3 people die every second, 180 every minute, and nearly 11, 000 every hour. If the Bible is correct about what happens to us after death, it means that more than 250,000 people every day go either to Heaven or Hell.

God will use suffering and impending death to unfasten us from this earth and to refocus our attention on what lies ahead of us. What I would like us to do today is to allow God to refocus our minds and to reinstate the importance of heaven in our lives.

In 1952, young Florence Chadwick stepped in to the waters of the Pacific Ocean off Catalina Island, determined to swim to the shore of mainland California. She's already been the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways. The weather was foggy and chilly; she could hardly see the boats accompanying her. Still, she swam for fifteen hours. When she begged to be taken out of the water along the way, her mother, in a boat alongside, told her she was close and that she could make it. Finally, physically and emotionally exhausted she stopped swimming and was pulled out. It wasn't until she was on the boat that she discovered that shore was less than half a mile away. At a news conference the next day she said, "All I could see was the fog . . . I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it."

Our shore is Jesus and being with Him for eternity in a place that He has personally prepared for us. You have to see it. You have to want to see it. Just what is this place called heaven and why would we want to be there for the rest of time?

Heaven is not an unending church service. It is not floating around on clouds and strumming a harp all day. John Eldredge in *The Journey of Desire* wrote these words: "Nearly every Christian I have spoken with has some idea that eternity is an unending church service . . . We have settled on an image of the never-ending sing-along in the sky, one great hymn after another, forever and ever amen. And our heart sinks. Forever and ever? That's it? That's the good news? And then we sigh and feel guilty that we are not more 'spiritual.' We lose heart, and we turn once more to the present to find what life we can."

The fact is we are all headed to eternity. None of us know the day or the hour. We don't know how old we will be or where it will happen but with great assurance I can tell you that you will one day wind up in eternity. So for a few minutes let's try to figure it out.

1. You can't talk about heaven without talking about hell.

The bottom line is that we were born into this world as sinners and without accepting the salvation offered by Jesus Christ's death and resurrection we will not go to heaven. Heaven is not our default destination. No one goes there automatically. Unless our sin problem is resolved, the only place we will go is our true default destination and that is hell.

Romans 3:23: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Sin truly separates us from God. God will not allow sin in His presence. It is critical that you make sure you are going to heaven and not hell.

2. You can't get to heaven without making a reservation.

Ancient cities kept rolls of their citizens. Guards were posted at the city gates to keep out criminals and enemies by checking their names against the list. In Revelation 21:27 we find that a reservation will be needed to get into heaven. *“Nothing impure will ever enter, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.”*

A few years ago professional singer Ruthanna Metzgar was asked to sing at the wedding of a very wealthy man. According to the invitation, the reception would be held on the top two floors of Seattle’s Columbia Tower. She and her husband were so excited to attend.

It was everything you would think of at such a reception. Waiters were in tuxedos offering amazing hors d’oeuvres. There were stunning decorations and even a satin banner announcing the wedding feast.

A maître d’ with a bound book greeted the guests outside the doors to the grand ballroom. “May I have your name please?” “Ruthanna Metzgar and this is my husband Roy.” He searched the M’s but didn’t find their name. “Could you spell it please?” She spelled it but after searching the book, the maître d’ looked up and said, “I’m sorry, but your name isn’t here.”

“But there must be some mistake,” Ruthanna replied. I’m the singer. I sang for this wedding!”

“It doesn’t matter who you are or what you did at the wedding, without your name in the book you cannot attend the banquet.” He motioned for a waiter and said, “Show these people to the service elevator please.” They walked past beautifully decorated tables laden with shrimp, whole smoked salmon, and magnificent carved ice sculptures. They walked past the orchestra preparing to perform. They wound up on an elevator that took them to the parking garage.

On their way home it was pretty quiet but when Roy asked what had just happened this was the reply Ruthanna gave. “When the invitation arrived, I was busy and I never bothered to RSVP. Besides, I was the singer. Surely I could go to the reception without returning the RSVP!”

She began to weep – not only because she missed the most lavish banquet she’d ever been invited to, but also because she suddenly had a small taste of what it will be like someday for people as they stand before Christ and find their names are not written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.

Throughout the ages, so many people have been too busy to respond to Christ’s invitation to His wedding banquet. We are quick to assume that attending church, being baptized, singing in the church choir, or helping in a soup kitchen or some other ministry of the church – will be enough to gain entry to Heaven.

Sin has consequences but God provided a solution! *“The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Romans 6:23

We are told that “God made him (Christ) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor. 5:21) Although Jesus died for our sins and to pay the penalty for sin we don’t just automatically receive salvation.

Forgiveness is not automatic. If you want to be forgiven you must recognize and repent of your sins. 1 John 1:9 says, *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”*

You can’t get to heaven without repenting of your sins and accepting Jesus Christ as your Savior.

3. You can’t get to heaven without being willing to die!

Of course the song we opened with today is a metaphor for so much of life. Everybody wants life to be like heaven but nobody wants to pay or do what it takes to have a “heavenly” life.

C.S. Lewis: “I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same.”

Have you ever been to an aquarium where fish made to swim in the ocean are swimming in a glass box? There is something wrong with that picture. I think it is awesome to see and I am thankful for the opportunity to be up close and personal with such majestic animals but they weren’t made to be contained; they were made for the vastness of the great ocean.

Fish may not know any better but I wonder if they have instincts that tell them that this is not really their home.

If we turn off the noise and clutter of our lives and listen very carefully we can also know that this fallen world is not our home. We were made for a better place. The Bible continually confirms this fact. Heaven is better – no, far better – than anything we have down here. Heaven is our home, our real home. As Christians our allegiance is not ultimately to the United States of America it is to God’s Kingdom.

To die is to go home. Home is about comfort. Home is a home cooked meal, a comfy bed, family, friends, front porches, stories, sweatshirts, couches, and conversations. Randy Alcorn writes:

“Home as a term for Heaven isn’t simply a metaphor. It describes an actual place – promised and built by our bridegroom; a place we’ll share with loved ones; a place of fond familiarity and comfort and refuge; a place of marvelous smells and tastes, fine food, and great conversation; a place of contemplation and interaction and expressing the gifts and passions that God has given us.”

Sometimes when people are faced with the reality of a terminal illness or imminent death they may be tempted to feel as though they are leaving the party early so to speak. There is

disappointment over leaving and what they will miss. The truth is the real party is underway at home – where they are going. They are not going to miss the party they are going to join the party that is already underway. One by one we leave this world and disappear while those left behind conduct a funeral and grieve. In reality, when we die we are not leaving home we are going home.

Jesus said, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.” (Luke 6:21)

He also said, “There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:10)

I am still processing the death of both of my parents in the last five years. Not processing the grief or sadness so much but thinking about life. A few weeks ago on a beautiful crisp October morning we honored my dad and mom’s request and sold off all their earthly belongings at an auction. And I mean everything. From jars of screws in the garage to pieces of furniture that were in their home before I was born. The collection and accumulation of stuff is something we all do. Some of it is dearer to us than the rest but here’s the deal; it’s not going with you when you die. Not one thing. Not one dollar. Not one investment or property or toy.

Because of this and because of the incredibleness of heaven I implore us to start cultivating our love for heaven. Look for the way there. Talk about it with your children. Build it into the fabric of your lives.

Listen the more our world spins out of control the more I want to go to heaven. This world is not my home, I am just passing through here on the way to a better place. On my way home.

When five-year-old Emily Kimball was hospitalized and heard that she was going to die, she started to cry. Even though she loved Jesus and wanted to be with him, she didn’t want to leave her family behind. Then her mother had an inspired idea. She asked Emily to step through a doorway into another room, and she closed the door behind her. One at a time, the entire family started coming through the door to join her. Her mother explained that this was how it would be. Emily understood. She would be the first to go through death’s door. Eventually, the rest of the family would follow, probably one by one, joining her on the other side. The analogy would have been even more complete if the room that Emily entered had had someone representing Jesus to greet her- along with departed loved ones and Bible characters and angels. Also it would have helped if the room she walked into was breathtakingly beautiful, and contained pictures of a New Earth, vast and unexplored, where Emily and her family would one day live with Jesus forever. Every person reading this is dying. Perhaps you have reason to believe that death will come very soon. You may be troubled, feeling uncertain or unready to leave. Make sure of your relationship with Jesus Christ. Be certain that you are trusting Him alone to save you- not anyone or anything else, and certainly not any good works you’ve done. And then allow yourself to get excited about what’s on the other side of heaven’s door.

The following is often read at funerals of Christians: "I'm standing on the seashore. A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She's an object of beauty and strength and I stand and watch her until, at length, she hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and the sky come down to mingle with each other. And then I hear someone at my side saying, 'There, she's gone.'

Gone where? Gone from my sight, that is all. She is just as large in mast and hull and spar as she was when she left my side. And just as able to bear her load of living freight to the place of destination. Her diminished size is in *me*, not in her.

And just at the moment when someone at my side says, 'There, she's gone,' there are other eyes watching her coming, and there are other voices ready to take up the glad shout, 'Here she comes!' And that is dying.

I once scorned ev'ry fearful thought of death, When it was but the end of pulse and breath,
But now my eyes have seen that past the pain There is a world that's waiting to be claimed.
Earthmaker, Holy, let me now depart, for living's such a temporary art.
And dying is but getting dressed for God, Our graves are merely doorways cut in sod.
Calvin Miller

You have to die to get to heaven but the reality of heaven should affect our activities, our ambitions, our friendships, our recreation and the way we spend our money and time. I we truly believe that we will spend eternity in a world of unending beauty and adventure, will I be content to spend all my evenings watching game shows, sitcoms and ball games? Will I want to invest one waking moment in things that don't matter?

What's going to last forever? God's word and people. Spending time in God's word and investing in people will pay off in eternity and bring us joy and perspective now.

Let me end this today with some scripture. May God's word reach us today. May we be touched by what we hear.

Dear friends, we are already God's children, but He has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He really is.³ And all who have this eager expectation will keep themselves pure, just as He is pure. 1 John 3:2-3 NLT

And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died^[f] so you will not grieve like people who have no hope.¹⁴ For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with Him the believers who have died.

¹⁵ *We tell you this directly from the Lord: We who are still living when the Lord returns will not meet Him ahead of those who have died.^[g] ¹⁶ For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the Christians who have died^[h] will rise from their graves. ¹⁷ Then, together with them, we*

who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸ *So encourage each other with these words.* 1
Thessalonians 4:13-18 NLT

For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down (that is, when we die and leave this earthly body), we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands. 2 Corinthians 5:1 NLT

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. ² *And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.*

³ *I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, “Look, God’s home is now among His people! He will live with them, and they will be His people. God Himself will be with them.”* ⁴ *He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”* Revelation 21:1-4 NLT

Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. ² *It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations.*

³ *No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and His servants will worship Him.* ⁴ *And they will see His face, and His name will be written on their foreheads.* ⁵ *And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever.* Revelation 22:1-5 NLT

Are you ready to go? Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior?