

Heaven on Earth

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Isaiah 60:15-22

Sermon Series:
Gospel in Life

***“Joy is the
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heaven.”***

- C. S. Lewis

Maria Shriver has written six best-selling books.

Until recently, she was married to Arnold Schwarzenegger, former governor of California. Her uncle was former president John F. Kennedy. One of her best-selling books, *What's Heaven*, is written expressly for children. It has lots of pictures of puffy clouds and blue skies. “Heaven,” says Shriver “is somewhere you believe in....It's a beautiful place where you can sit on soft clouds and talk to other people who are there. At night, you can sit next to the stars, which are the brightest of anywhere in the universe....If you're good throughout your life, then you get to go to heaven....When your life is finished here on earth, God sends angels down to take you up to Heaven to be with him....[And Grandma is] alive in me....Most important, she taught me to believe in myself....She's in a safe place, with the stars, with God and the angels....She is watching over us from up there....I want you to know [says the heroine to her great-grandma] that even though you are no longer here, your spirit will always be alive in me.”

This is more or less what millions of Americans have come to believe about heaven. What she has written is essentially a cut-and-paste job of overly sentimental beliefs about heaven.

The notion that we will sit on soft clouds, no doubt strumming harps, sounds perfectly boring to my way of thinking. Martin Luther once said, “If you are not allowed to laugh in heaven, I don't want to be there.” I think C. S. Lewis is onto something when he writes that “Joy is the serious business of heaven.”

In Mark Twain's classic, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the Christian spinster Miss Watson takes a dim view of Huck's fun-loving spirit. According to Huck, “She went on and told me all about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was go around all day with a harp and sing, forever and ever. So I didn't think much of it....I asked her if she reckoned Tom Sawyer would go there, and she said, not by a considerable sight. I was glad about that, because I wanted him and me to be together.”

Miss Watson had nothing to say about heaven that Huck found appealing. And nothing,

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- Ecclesiastes 3:11

I suppose, that appeals to us either. What would have attracted Huck is a place where he could have done meaningful and pleasurable things with enjoyable people. If Miss Watson would have told him that we will one day live in resurrected bodies on a resurrected earth—with gardens and rivers and untold adventures—surely this would have gotten his attention!

Every civilization in history has the innate sense that we'll live forever somewhere. Australian aborigines pictured heaven as a distant land beyond the western horizon. The early Finns thought of it as a tropical island in the Far East. Mexicans believed they went to the sun and the moon after death. Native Americans believed in the afterlife they would hunt the spirits of buffalo. “God has set eternity in the hearts of people,” Ecclesiastes declares (3:11). The instinct for eternity is written on the human heart.

Every major religion has something to say on the subject. Muslims believe heaven is reserved for those who do good deeds. Hindus believe they will return in a different form determined by karma to pursue the next stage in their destiny. Heaven in the Jewish religion is the place where the righteous go after death. Taoists believe living in harmony with the universe is heaven. Buddhists hope to disappear into heaven like a drop in the ocean, losing

one's identity in the great formless beyond called nirvana.

What does the Bible teach about heaven? I recommend two books for your consideration: *Surprised by Hope*, written by N.T. Wright, and *Heaven*, authored by Randy Alcorn.

We're not going to make any progress if you hold onto the notion that heaven is an ethereal realm where disembodied spirits live. Heaven, in Scripture, is an actual place where God and people dwell. Jesus said, “I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2-3). He likens heaven to a mansion with many rooms. It's a space/time universe where we are surrounded by sensory delights and breathtaking beauty.

Most often in Scripture, heaven is depicted as a city. Some of you don't like cities. They're congested, crime-ridden and polluted. But this city is unlike any you have ever experienced. The last two chapters of the Bible speak about heaven as a New Jerusalem, coming from heaven to merge with Earth.

Judging by what is said at most funerals today, you'd think nearly everybody is going to heaven. Wishful thinking, perhaps?

In my two years of Confirmation class, Bible memorization was a big part of our curriculum. I am only able to recall a single verse from those forgotten years: John

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3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Eternal life is a gift given by God to anyone who professes belief in Jesus Christ as Savior from sin and seeks to follow him as Lord of his/her life. This gift cannot be worked for or earned. It’s not dependent on our acts of mercy but solely on God’s grace and mercy.

Most Christians are horribly insecure about where they will spend eternity. If you profess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, relax already. If you haven’t yet trusted Christ with your life, I urge you not to put this decision off any longer.

When believers die, we enter a realm called heaven. Although heaven is sometimes described as sleep in Scripture, it’s not a state of unconsciousness. Until the time of our resurrection, we are held by the conscious love of God in a place of restful happiness.

When Jesus comes to earth, what Scripture calls “the second coming,” we will be given resurrected bodies. We will enjoy a new corporeal existence. The distinctive thing about these resurrected bodies is their immortality. Plato believed human souls to be immortal, but the Bible states immortality is something only God possesses by nature. God will give to resurrected believers immortal bodies that are no

longer subject to decay and death.

Our bodies are not the only thing to be resurrected. Get this—the whole earth will be resurrected. God will re-create the earth. God will purge the earth of sin and liberate it from disease and death. It’s comparable to a significant upgrade to our computers. It will be like the old program, only better, way better!

There was a time in my life and ministry when I thought God was going to abandon earth and start all over again with heaven. I see it differently now. Although we talk about heaven as being “up there,” one day it will be down here. Heaven will someday be relocated on earth. While we often talk about going to heaven, Scripture most often describes heaven as coming to earth. Earth will become heaven—a literal heaven on earth.

A vision for this New Earth is depicted in Isaiah 60. In verses 15-16, heaven will be a place of everlasting joy and unprecedented rejoicing. In verse 17, it is characterized as a place where peace and righteousness will rule. Verse 18 describes this New Earth as a place where violence and destruction will be eradicated from the face of the earth. Verses 19-20, in language strikingly similar to the last two chapters of Revelation, it will be the place where God will be

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its everlasting light. In verse 21, this New Earth will be a place where justice shall reign. In verse 22, it will be a place where the meek will rule with power.

You can forget those images of lounging on clouds and strumming harps. There will be work to do on God's New Earth; work we'll relish doing.

Okay, so what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life? In 1st Corinthians 15, Paul devotes a whole chapter to this matter of resurrection. He concludes, "Therefore my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (15:58).

Paul writes that whatever you do for the Lord will not be in vain. Now, hear this! Every service to the poor, every dollar given to feed the hungry, every cup of cold water given to the thirsty, every work of art or music inspired by the love of God, every act of stewardship on the earth, every moment caring for and teaching children, every deed done to spread the gospel—all of it will find its way through the resurrecting power of God, to this New Earth. Every act of mercy and obedience will carry forward from this world to the next.

Jesus taught his followers to pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. On the basis of this Lord's

Prayer, he commands us to go and make it happen. There is no retreat from this world; he calls us into mission to this world. Our job is not to save souls off the burning ship. Our call is to participate in the resurrection of Jesus Christ in every facet of life.

Florence Chadwick was the first woman to swim the English Channel in both directions. In 1952, she attempted to be the first female to swim the 26 miles between Catalina Island and the California coastline. She began her swim flanked by boats to ward off sharks. Whenever the sharks came near, they were driven away by rifle shots. As she progressed in her swim, a heavy fog rolled in. Her mother and trainer continued to offer encouragement. They told her it wasn't much farther to land, but all she could see was the fog. After 16 hours, she gave up and was pulled from the water, only to learn that the shoreline was a half mile away. At a news conference, she said, "Look, I'm not excusing myself, but if I could have seen land, I might have made it." She tried the same course two months later and was successful. She made it because she kept a mental image of the shoreline in mind.

The shoreline of heaven is shrouded in fog. Paul writes, in 1st Corinthians, that "We see only in a mirror dimly" (13:12). One day we will see face-to-face. If we can look through the

fog to picture our final destination, we'll make it.

Sometimes I hear people say, "It doesn't get any better than this." Right when you think, "it doesn't get any better than this," it will!

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