

# Heaven

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[ 0 : 00 ] If you have your Bible, you can open it up to John chapter 14, John chapter 14.

Last Sunday, we were thinking about Jesus' words to his disciples on the evening of his betrayal. And I'm just going to read the first six verses of this chapter again to remind us of what's going on in the story this morning.

So John chapter 14, verse 1 to 6. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me.

In my Father's house are many rooms. If that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, that you also may be where I am.

You know the way to the place where I am going. Thomas said to him, Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?

[ 1 : 26 ] Jesus answered, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

We considered these words last Sunday from the perspective of the disciples and their troubled hearts. And we focused on Jesus' main thrust here, which is that they ought not to worry, but instead to trust God, to trust Jesus.

Even though he's leaving them, he will be coming back again and they will be together again. If you missed last week, you can listen to that audio on the church website.

We have it posted there. And we started there because it's so important that we hear these words of Jesus in their context. The way that the disciples would have heard them as best as we can.

What did it mean to those seated around the table that night? Well, this morning, we want to consider these words from a different angle.

[ 2 : 33 ] Some of you may have been wondering last week, Josh, how did you manage to preach a sermon on John chapter 14, verses 2 and 3, and not even mention heaven once?

Well, that was deliberate because heaven is a big topic in the New Testament. And I wanted to save that discussion for this morning so that we can talk about it more fully rather than preaching two sermons last Sunday.

So here we go. Verses 2 and 3, Jesus says, These words of Jesus are some of the first that come to mind for many when they think about the promise of heaven.

But many of our Christian brothers and sisters have understood these words of Jesus in different ways to mean different things. Why is that?

Well, one reason people have come to different ideas about heaven from this passage is because of the differences in Bible translation. Some of you are probably familiar with the old King James version of the Bible, which says, In my Father's house are many mansions.

[ 4 : 10 ] The word mansions made it into many Christian hymns of the past several hundred years. Sing the wondrous love of Jesus. Sing his mercy and his grace.

In the mansions, bright and blessed, he'll prepare for us a place. Or, My Jesus, I love thee. I know thou art mine.

It has a verse in that song that says, In mansions of glory and endless delight, I'll ever adore thee in heaven so bright. Now it sounds wonderful, doesn't it?

The idea that we get from this is that each one of us will have our own mansion. A large, spacious, beautiful house that puts the million dollar mansions of this earth to shame.

So how is it then that every other Bible translation in English simply says, Many rooms or many dwelling places? I mean, come on now.

[ 5 : 16 ] Well, if we dig into this a little deeper, we find out that back in the days when they spoke Middle English and William Tyndale was first translating the first English translation of the Bible, the word mansion simply meant dwelling place.

It had no implications of being a rather large or lavish or luxurious house. The word was derived from the Latin word mansions, which also simply meant dwelling place.

And then, when we finally got around to collecting up all the manuscripts of ancient Greek writing, we came to see that there too, the Greek word beneath all of this, simply meant dwelling place or room or abode.

It doesn't mean there's a problem with the King James translation. It was a good translation for its day. Mansion meant dwelling place. The problem is that since then, the English language has changed so much.

So much so that today, when somebody says mansion, our minds immediately go to large house, luxurious house, spacious, extravagant home. And so translation differences have affected our ideas of heaven.

[ 6 : 33 ] I hate to break it to you, but Jesus is not promising the disciples that they will each get their own large, spacious, beautiful house that puts the million-dollar mansions of this earth to shame.

Let's look a little closer at the text and what he is saying to them. He says, My Father's house has many rooms, dwelling places, living spaces.

If we read carefully, we see that Jesus is not talking about many houses, one for each of us. He's talking about one house, the Father's house, God's house, which has many rooms, many places within it to live.

This should change our idea of heaven completely, shouldn't it? The point is not that we will all someday get to go live near God, like just in the house down the road from where he lives.

No. The point is that we who belong to Jesus will all someday get to live with God, in his house, in the Father's house.

[ 7 : 53 ] This speaks of the closeness of relationship that God desires with us. He doesn't want us just nearby. He wants us right there with him, in his presence, in his own place.

And so that's the first reason we get some different ideas from this passage about heaven, translation differences. But there's another reason. It kind of brings us to our next reason for our different ideas of heaven.

Some brothers and sisters in Christ will take these words of Jesus in a little more of a material sense, while others, myself included, will take these words of Jesus a little more metaphorically.

To illustrate the difference, let me ask you, is Jesus saying that his Father lives in a massive house that has separate individual rooms within it, one for each of his people?

Is he talking about an out-of-this-world, lavish, apartment-style building somewhere in heaven where we will all have our own room in God's house someday?

[ 9 : 02 ] Or was Jesus speaking figuratively, as he often did, to convey in terms that we would understand that we are someday to live with God in his place, and that there'll be no shortage of space for all of his people?

Perhaps the disciples were thinking in a little bit more material and earthly kinds of ways. Perhaps they heard Jesus say earlier that he's going away to prepare a place for them, and the thing that came to their minds was simply, well, I guess Jesus would take us now, but there must not be room for us wherever he's going.

So maybe he's going there to prepare a place and make sure that there's room enough for us to stay, beds to sleep on, whatever, and then he's going to come back to get us and we'll leave Jerusalem and we'll stay there with him for the next phase of this plan of God while things maybe cool down a little bit here in Jerusalem.

I don't know. Jesus seems to be answering this worry or this concern of the disciples and to be assuring them, it's not for lack of room that I'm going to prepare.

It's not because my father's house needs some renovation work done so that there's space for you to stay there with me. My father's house has many rooms.

[ 10 : 26 ] The problem, as we'll see later on in the story, seems to me that the disciples still don't fully grasp where Jesus is going. That he's leaving this earth, that he's going to his father, that he's going out of this world and not just to some distant or remote place here on earth.

And this kind of explains why Jesus would use metaphor here because the things of heaven, where Jesus is going, are not the same as the things of earth.

The disciples are used to the things of earth. They're used to things like houses with rooms in them and so these are terms that they understand. Jesus uses those terms, just as he often does in other places.

Fig trees and vines and all kinds of other parables. So whether we take these words in a material sense or in a more metaphorical sense, we'll really change our idea of what heaven is like.

And this matters too as we think about what it means for Jesus to prepare a place for us there.

[11:37] What does Jesus mean by that? I'm going to prepare a place for you in my father's house. If we think of Jesus' words in the material sense, we might imagine that Jesus is up there, as I often used to as a child, in a celestial city somewhere with God the Father, and that right now he's undertaking a massive construction project, building the new Jerusalem with his own two hands or perhaps renovating or adding rooms onto the Father's house and ensuring that each room is furnished and ready to receive us for when he comes back for us.

Is that the picture that Jesus has in mind? Or if we take these words a little more metaphorically, is it that the Father's house already has room enough for all of us?

That there are already many seats around the Father's table, enough for all of us? But is it that those seats, those rooms, cannot belong to us until Jesus does some very important preparatory work on our behalf?

I would suggest to you that without Jesus going to the cross and dying for us and then ascending into heaven and doing the work of a high priest for us, there can be no place for us at the Father's table.

There can be no place for us in the Father's house. Is that what Jesus means when he says, I'm going to prepare a place for you in my Father's house?

[13:16] So that's the second reason why people come to different ideas about heaven based on this passage. Some take a more material view, a more tangible view of what Jesus is talking about and others a more metaphorical view.

A third reason that we often come to differing ideas of heaven from passages like these has to do with what we've come to understand about heaven from all the other passages in the Bible that speak of it.

And there are a good number of passages in the Bible that speak of heaven. And we really, in one sense, need to, as best we can, try to consider all of them at the same time and see how they fit together.

It's kind of like building a puzzle. And if you've ever worked on a puzzle with somebody else, you soon find out that some people build puzzles differently than you do.

Some of us like to start with the corner pieces and then the edge pieces. And then we work our way from the edge along the discernible features, the things that really stand out towards the middle.

[14:25] And we kind of leave those fuzzy looking things like the grass and the sky for last. Other people are wired totally different. They like to look at the shape of the pieces and just find any random piece and just start putting them together and get these little islands of pieces and start moving them around and fitting them together and working their way towards the edge.

It's kind of the same thing when it comes to the passages that speak of heaven and last things in the Bible. Which passages that you've heard first or which passages that you have thought about more deeply kind of affect how you fit the rest of them together.

And this too accounts for differences among us in our ideas of heaven. An example of this is the very meaning of the word heaven. If we go back to the very beginning of the Bibles that we have it says that God created the heavens and the earth.

Does that mean that there are multiple heavens? Heavens plural? Most of us will quickly acknowledge that the word heavens can refer to the sky. It can refer to space.

The place where the galaxies are. The stars. The planets. And so already we've got our work cut out for us in building this puzzle because we have to sort out whether the word heaven is being used to refer to planets, galaxies, space kind of heavens or is it being used to refer to like the spiritual realm or the place where God dwells beyond all that.

[16:01] And then eventually we come to the teachings of Jesus and he often referred to the kingdom of heaven and how it has come near. Well what's the kingdom of heaven?

Is it a celestial kingdom? Is it the kingdom of the spiritual realm? Is it a kingdom that has borders and boundaries somewhere up there? Is it a destination?

Or does the kingdom of heaven have more to do with its origin where it comes from than its final location? We might come to a familiar passage such as Philippians chapter 3 verse 20 to 21. Paul's writing to the church at Philippi. He says but our citizenship is in heaven and we eagerly await a savior from there the Lord Jesus Christ who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

If this was the first or the only passage we read about heaven we might assume that heaven is a place that is somewhere up there to which we belong if we have Jesus.

[17:17] A place from which he will come back and then take us to be with him where we will live forever with God as citizens. But then we also have to consider how the Bible ends.

It ends with this spectacular vision given to John about what will happen in the distant future. There John describes what he sees in this vision Revelation chapter 21 verses 1 to 3 he says then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and there was no longer any sea.

I saw the holy city the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying look God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them they will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.

if this was the first or the only passage that you read about heaven you might conclude that heaven is not so much a geospatial location as it is the place where God is the place where he dwells we might conclude that our final destination will not be in some celestial city way up in the galaxies but instead perhaps that our final dwelling place will be in this city that comes down from heaven to the new earth God coming down to live with us among us on the new earth already you can see why Christians have come to all kinds of differing ideas about heaven perhaps in some ways we've been a little bit too influenced by that sort of Christian pop culture that perpetuates itself in every generation but perhaps in other ways we're all just trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle together a little differently trying to make sense of the various things that we read in the Bible about heaven and then we come to a passage like this in John 14 verse 3 it seems like

Jesus is basically saying here I'm going somewhere to prepare a place for you and then I'm going to come back and get you and then I'm going to take you to be there with me very naturally very easily we might assume from this passage that heaven is a place way up there and that's what Jesus is getting ready for us he's going to come and get us he's going to take us back there and we'll be up there somewhere forever with God and with Jesus after he returns but then we probably should consider what will this new earth that God's making at the end before is it just something for us to admire from up in heaven as we kind of look down at it or will this new earth be our final home is that what's meant by this new Jerusalem the city where God dwells coming down from heaven to this new earth so that now the dwelling of God is with man with his people again we should pause and consider two possibilities one is the more tangible that Jesus is promising to make heaven ready for us and then come back and take us to be there in heaven and live with him forever there the other more metaphorical that Jesus aim and goal is to get us into the father's house the place where he dwells so that we are part of the family so that we are close perhaps that this is not so much about going to a geospatial place but about being received into a close intimate relationship with the father where we live with him and he with us never to be separated again it's probably obvious to you all which view I take but here are a couple details in Jesus' own words in this passage that lead me that way notice the language of Jesus we're going to do a little fill in the blank here and if I go and prepare a place for you

[21:52] I will come back and take you to what do we want to put in that blank heaven that place what does Jesus say to be with me to be with me he finishes the sentence in terms of relationship more important than the location is the relationship that Jesus is coming back to have with them that's the big goal here for Jesus it's not just to get you to a place it's to get you to be with him I'm going to take you to be with me and what surprises me every time I read this is that Jesus doesn't stop there he goes on to say essentially the same thing again let's read the rest of the verse he says I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be what goes in the blank heaven in heaven in that place no that you also may be where

I am it's not about location location location it's about whose presence we're in it's about relationship with Jesus relationship with the father that's what makes wherever he's going to take us worth being there it's that he's there not that we'll all have mansions or all the stuff of earth that we could never attain here I mean if that's really what we're in for I mean that's idolatry that's greed the treasure of heaven is not having all kinds of created things to worship and love more than God when we get there the treasure of heaven is having the creator himself it's being with him it's being in that place where he is nothing to separate us from him think about this the way the disciples are probably thinking about this they hear

Jesus say the house of my father where is the house of God well back in those days it was the temple that was the place where God lived among his people in earlier times it was the tabernacle God would cause his own presence to appear right there in the most holy place of the temple and everything about the temple and the tabernacle was a reminder that we cannot come close to God as sinful human beings but now Jesus is saying I'm going to go away and make preparations so that you can live in the house of God my father not just come occasionally with a sacrifice making sure to keep your distance and do all the stuff right no I'm going to make preparations so that you can take up residence in the very dwelling place of my father permanently like a member of the family living in the same house so that you can be with me and with the father where

I am that's what heaven is all about and so when I read these words I may be a little weird bird but I don't hear Jesus telling them about a place way up there in the galaxies that he's coming back to take us to not a destination but a relationship a change of household a family something Jesus will do that will see us welcomed into the very dwelling place of God forever to be with him and to be with the father one more detail that leads me this way comes in verse four Jesus probably with a twinkle in his eye says you know the way to the place where I'm going Thomas said to him Lord we don't know where you are going so how can we know the way

Jesus answered I am the way no one comes to the father except through me these words probably deserve a whole sermon but let's stay on target for this morning the way to the place where Jesus is going it's not a set of travel directions it's not a set of coordinates in relation to this universe it's not about travel or dimension it's here that Jesus seems most obviously to be speaking in metaphor he says the way to the place that I am going is a person I'm standing right in front of you I am the way again it's all about relationship and to drive this whole emphasis on relationship home he states it yet another way in terms of relationship he says no one comes to the father except through me so where is

[ 27 : 49 ] Jesus going the location is kind of besides the point it's the person he's going to the father yes he is going to heaven I'll acknowledge it says that in other passages but what's the beauty of it what's the point of it that's where the father is that's where God is why to prepare a place for the people I need to make preparations so that they can dwell with him and how do sinners get to the father Jesus says I am the way you need to come to me you need to come through me it's only through relationship with Jesus that anyone can be welcomed into the father's house that anybody can be made part of the family of God to stay to live with him there's no other way says

Jesus doesn't matter what similarities there are between other religions and this Jesus says unless you come to me through me you can't get to the father's house you can't take up residence in one of those many rooms that are there what an exclusive claim why so exclusive I would suggest it's exclusive because the preparation that Jesus is going to make at the cross and before the throne of God is essential it's required without it we can't come anywhere near where God lives he must atone for our sins first he must enter heaven and he must intercede for us at the greater and more perfect tabernacle first according to the author of

Hebrews that's why Jesus must go and do this without the men at the table that's why they can't come with so what do we do with all this well if you're here this morning and all of this is kind of new to you I hope what you hear most from Jesus is that he desires to be with you he desires a relationship with you he wants you to be with him have that close intimate forever relationship with him and with God the father forever and there's no other way to have it except through Jesus have you come to put your faith in Jesus your trust in Jesus have you repented of your sins this promise that

Jesus will come back for us and take us to heaven it's for those who belong to Jesus do you belong to him have you done this if you haven't come talk to me if you're looking for help how to do this come talk to me talk to anyone in this church room that you see that you know knows Jesus we'd be

happy to talk with you to pray with you help you figure out what you need to do for those of us who have already done this for those of us who believe already with all of our hearts Jesus is the Lord he is the savior he is the way let me encourage you sometimes we might get discouraged when we see other Christians coming to different conclusions about heaven about the end times about the rapture about other controversial matters from the scriptures but let me encourage you God has made each one of us different he has led each one of us through a different life story up until this point in our lives and so it's inevitable that sometimes we will try to fit the pieces of the puzzle together a little differently than one another some things are crystal clear in the Bible the core doctrines of our faith the things that we require for membership in the church other things are more like the puzzle maybe not so clear what heaven will be like and the precise order of all those events at the end so let me encourage you to be humble to be gracious to be kind to your brothers and sisters who think differently than you do about these things let me encourage you to really think about what they say and what they see in the Bible I don't know if you've ever had that experience I know I have where you're building a puzzle and you're sure that these two pieces fit together you've got them sitting there and then someone just walks by and they look at that piece and they look at this one no that doesn't go with that one over here it that kind of thing can happen in our midst and it's good when it does if we're humble if we're quick to listen we can learn from each other we can see wonderful things that we may have missed if we just tried to do it all by ourselves we can receive correction and we can correct one another some of you may be wondering whether we should stop singing some of those all these songs are precious to us they've been around for hundreds of years

[ 33 : 59 ] I don't think we need to none of our songs is perfect but I think it is important that we understand what Jesus said and what the scriptures say and what he meant yes it says mansions but it means dwelling place these are opportunities for us to reflect on what heaven will be like what the scriptures say our children in that way too and get them thinking one of my favorite songs back in the day was somewhere in outer space God has prepared a place you probably know that one the countdown song you get in the rocket countdown blast off to heaven I still love that song it's so catchy it's so wonderful it's kind of wrong I think let's sing it anyway and let's teach our kids not just somewhere in outer space and that going there is not like a flight in a rocket ship

Jesus is coming back to take us there finally I just want to press home to our hearts the main truth of these words for us who believe we have a great and wonderful hope and that great and wonderful hope goes so far beyond created things and stuff it transcends the most beautiful of places our hope our glory our greatest joy will be to be with God forever now don't get me wrong I believe that heaven will be full of created delights full of beautiful things and all of those things will reveal more and more of God's goodness they will point to his power and his love love I don't expect that we'll spend eternity just sitting on a cloud and singing if the old earth is as good and beautiful as it is surely the new earth will surpass the old but all of it will serve to glorify God to magnify how wonderful he is and to increase our enjoyment of him and inspire our worship of him it's relationship with our great and glorious God that will make heaven heaven and so I encourage you in your thoughts of heaven think mostly about him being with him being with Jesus he's what heaven is all about let's pray Lord Jesus we thank you for this precious promise that we're not all left to ourselves but you're coming back and you're going to take us and from that day on we will be with you forever as close as we possibly can be no more sin no more struggle no more frustration no more anxiety oh we long for that Lord I pray and ask that you would fill our hearts with that truth that promise that you gave your disciples that evening I will come back and take you to be with me come soon we pray Lord Jesus Amen after next canown if I did come to