Excited About Heaven!

First in a new series: Heaven’s Joys (Part one)

# Scripture: Colossians 1:3-23

# Key thought: We look forward to heaven: our eternal destination.

# Intro:

There was a songwriter and choir director who lost her mom. Summer came around and she began to think about music for choir for Christmas. She began to wonder what her Mom’s first Christmas in heaven might be like. She began to put her thoughts into music and that Christmas, her choir sang a new and original musical called,
“Christmas in Heaven.” It was about a young woman who had lost her mom and had a dream that she visited her mom in heaven. Her mom introduced her to the original cast of Christmas — angels, Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds. A climactic song, “When We See the Lord,” described the sense of awe and worship when we lay our crowns at his feet and lift our hearts in praise. The closing song connected the audience personally with the theme as the choir sang. “Heaven Seems Closer When Your Loved Ones Are There.” The songwriter’s comfort from God shines through as the choir sang, “Now I’m not afraid of going to my heavenly home someday; The power of death is broken for Jesus paved the way.” In case you haven’t guessed, the songwriter and choir director was my wife, [JoAnne DeSerio Jones](https://joannedeseriojones.com/).

Today we start a new series of messages about heaven. We don’t talk about heaven much except when someone dies. And we definitely don’t have all the answers. But the Bible does give us information to help us understand why we should be looking forward to heaven and how that expectation should motivate us. One of the big contrasts between the church of today and the apostles is that the church of today is very present-day oriented. Everything is about how to live today, how to have abundant life now, about the present gifts that God gives. It seems for most of us, this world is where it’s at, at least we act that way and talk that way.

We can’t relate to John Bunyan’s famous allegory, “Pilgrim’s Progress,” with its concept of life as a pilgrimage toward a heavenly city. And we are puzzled when the book of Hebrews describes us in our comfy well-appointed houses as “Foreigners and strangers on earth…longing for a better country—a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:13, 16).

The apostles were concerned about daily life too, but they drew their motivation from the Christian’s future according to the promises of God. They knew that if they looked to the reward to come then “God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (Heb. 11:16).

So, in this series of sermon’s let’s think about heaven together.

# Heaven – various meanings

The word heaven is used in different ways. And it is important to understand that because the word it is sometimes used in more than one way in the same passage.

## The phrase that means completeness

Let’s begin in Genesis. The first use of the Hebrew word that is usually translated heaven or heavens is in the very first verse of the Bible.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. Gen 1:1 KJV

This expression about the completeness, the comprehensiveness of the creative sovereignty of God is reflected twice in our text this morning. It becomes an idiom that we see repeatedly in Scripture referring to the fact that the sphere of God’s power or Jesus’ power includes everything.

In [the Son] all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. Col 1:16 NRSV

Through [the Son] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. Col 1:20 NRSV

## The heaven above us

Then in Genesis one, we also see the idea behind the most physical and tangible use of the word. I’ll read first from the NRSV.

And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." So, God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. Gen 1:6-8 NRSV

The NRSV has smoothed the way for us moderns by translating the concepts. But it has obscured the original use of the words. Listen to the KJV of these same verses.

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.
Gen 1:6-8 KJV

Later in verses 14, 15 we find this follow-up.

And God said, let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so. Gen 1:14-15 KJV

The Hebrew word which the NRSV translated as “Sky” is the word usually translated “heaven” as the KJV does. Here it is clear that the word “heaven” in this passage refers to the skies above us. So still today, we understand when someone tells us to look up into the heavens and see the stars, they are referring to what is physically above us.

This usage of heaven as referring to what is over our heads when we go outside is present in our text this morning as well.

 “You who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, [the Son] has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him — provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.
Col 1:21-23 NRSV

## Our Father who art in heaven

But even in the book of Genesis, in the beginning stages of God’s revelations to us, the word “heaven” did not for long remain only an expression for the physical universe over our heads. In Genesis 21:17 the angel of God calls to Hagar “from heaven.” In chapter 22, verse 11, the same happens to Abraham as the angel calls out to him “from heaven.” Then in Genesis 28, Jacob has a dream of a ladder whose top “reached to heaven” (Gen 28:12 KJV). And the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, was above the top of the ladder. So now already in Genesis, the word “heaven” becomes an expression for something way beyond the physical, it becomes an expression for the place where God dwells. Many times in the OT, one of the expressions for the divine is the “God of Heaven” (Gen. 24:3,7; Ezra 5:11; Neh. 1:4; Ps. 136:26; Dan. 2:18).

We see this concept of heaven as the place where God dwells and where we one day hope to be in our text today. It is that usage of the word that will occupy our minds and hearts for the remainder of this series of messages.

We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Col 1:4-6 NRSV

# Ancient cosmology

# Heaven – the dwelling place of God

What do we mean that heaven is the place where God dwells?

The Psalmist wrote:

I lift up my eyes to you, to you who sit enthroned in heaven. Ps 123:1 NIV

But the person who brought this concept to life for us is Jesus himself. Repeatedly he spoke about the fact that he had come down to earth from heaven with a message and a mission given to him by God, his Father and our Father.

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. John 3:13

For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. John 6:38

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.” John 6:51

And he taught us to begin our prayers with the thought, “Our Father who art in heaven” (Matt. 6:9).

Jesus had come to represent the kingdom of his Father in heaven and to spread his rule in the hearts and lives of humankind. That’s why he spoke of the “kingdom of God” or the “kingdom of heaven.”

Because of Jesus we have no doubts that heaven is the dwelling place of God.

Sometimes when we think about heaven, we get hung up on how to describe it. But think about your home. What really makes your home a home? Is it the architecture? Is it the couches? Is it the good food in the refrigerator? Is it how long you have lived there? Well, these may all contribute to your experience of home, but home would not be home without the people. You could change all the stuff but not the people and still have home, right? Well, it’s that way with heaven too! Whatever it looks like, and I know it will be something only the creativity of God can bring to pass, that will not be the main thing. It will be the Father and the Son who are the main persons! That is what will make it our heavenly Home. It is, first of all, the dwelling place of God. And then, many other people who have gone before us in the family of God will be there too. They will also make it be home.

Remember, it is not our heavenly home because it is going to be a grand place, though it will be; it is our heavenly home because it is our Father’s place!

# Heaven – the believer's destination

But Jesus did more that confirm for us that God is in heaven and assure us that he had come down from heaven. Jesus promised us heaven as a destination.

Paul in Colossians calls this the “hope held out in the gospel” (Col. 1:23).

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. Col 1:21-23

Paul goes so far as to announce that for Christians, “our citizenship is in heaven” Phil. 3:20). Paul also taught,

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.
2 Cor 5:1 NIV

Jesus assured us that we could have treasure in heaven which was far superior to having treasure on earth.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Matt 6:19-21 NIV

Peter speaks of this inheritance we have in heaven.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 1 Peter 1:3-5 NIV

Jesus told Mary after his resurrection.

Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" John 20:17 NRSV

He had already promised his disciples;

My Father’s house has 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. John 14:2-3

What an amazing thought. God wants us to share his heavenly dwelling place. Do we know where that is? No, we don’t. But it is more than enough to know that it is where Jesus is. It is our amazing destination.

Some people today say that when they die, they will be put in the ground and that will be it. But, followers of Jesus have a better hope, a hope held out in the gospel message, a hope of eternal life with Jesus in heaven. Hallelujah!

# Conclusion

I was working through an online devotional series in the Bible app recently that included testimonies of people who had near death experiences. They were not all the same, but they were all beautiful in their own way. One reported an experience involving light. Another reported seeing a walk lined with other-worldly flowers. A third related sensing being loved deeper than ever before. What is heaven like? We don’t know exactly, but we are given some hints in the Bible too. Some of those will be the subject of this message series. But our greatest goal is not to understand all the detail, but just to be ready. We do that by opening our heart to Jesus, trusting in his provision for our salvation, accepting the forgiveness he offers us and seeking to walk in his ways day by day. Jesus said,

Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Luke 12:37 NKJV

When the great Puritan, John Owen, lay on his deathbed, his secretary was writing to a friend on his behalf. The secretary began, “I am still in the land of the living...”

“Stop,” said Owen, “Change that to say, ’I am yet in the land of the dying, but I hope soon to be in the land of the living.’”

That, my friends, is a Christian who has the “hope held out in the gospel” of which Paul spoke in their heart. That is someone watching for the day when Jesus comes for him. May we ever be in that company!