

Heaven is Family

The three wonders of Heaven, according to one Christian are these: The first wonder was, that we should see so many there we did not expect to see there; the second was, that we should miss so many we did expect to see there; but the third wonder would be the greatest wonder of all,—to see ourselves there.

Heaven is more than a place, and not only a place of rest, responsibility and reward. Heaven is also a society, a community, a family of people that we will know and enjoy forever.

On the surface it sounds commendable to say that in Heaven we will not notice one another at all, we will be so enraptured with Jesus Christ. And certainly, without the presence of God, there would be no reason for us to be together, there would be no common joy that we celebrate, no genuine fellowship, no family bond. Take away the sun, and the planets would be flung off into lonely trajectories into space. But it would not be true to say that we will barely be aware of others in Heaven. On the contrary, living in community with others, living in companionship is part of our makeup.

When God made the universe, He kept seeing the work of His hands as good. The first time we see God saying that something is not good is when He says, "It is not good that man should be alone." And in that statement, God was not only setting the stage for marriage, but for friendship, for companionship, for family, for fraternities and societies, for clubs and associations, for towns and tribes, and eventually for the church itself.

God does not save us in groups; he saves us individually. Nevertheless, when he does so, he saves us to be part of groups, to be joined to communities that, when rightly participated in, will take us much further in knowing and loving God than we could ever achieve on our own.

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also. (1 John 5:20-21)

No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. (1 John 4:12)

As we read Scripture we find out that Heaven will be inhabited by millions of people. So what will this be like? What will the experience of Heaven be in terms of our relationships?

I. Heaven is the Celebration of Family Love

9 After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" 11 All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, Thanksgiving and honor and power and might, Be to our God forever and ever. Amen." 13 Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?" 14 And I said to him, "Sir, you know." So he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 "Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple. And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. 16 "They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; 17 "for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters¹. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Rev 7:9-17)

Now one of the first things you can tell about the society of Heaven is that it is a large one. Heaven is full. It is not painfully crowded, but it is full, and at times, it is loud. The amount of people making up the people of God in heaven is so large that John simply gives up the attempt to number them, and does so for the rest of us too. "No man could count all the people there," he says.

Who makes up this people?

28 And now, little children, abide in Him, that when¹ He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. 29 If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him.

1 John 3:1 Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!¹ Therefore the world does not know us², because it did not know Him.

2 Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

3 And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. (1Jo 2:28-3)

God is Father, Christ is the true Son, and every believer, from Abel to the last living saint on earth is an adopted son or daughter of this family, making up the household of God.

You can tell from reading this, that the mood of the community in heaven is that of celebration, joy, and thanksgiving. In fact, chapter 19 takes this image even further for us.

6 And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia!¹ For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns!

7 "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready." (Rev 19:6-7)

The joy among the people of God is like the joy of a wedding. What happens at a wedding? Celebration, anticipation, gladness for others, shared joys all round. Excitement, splendour, happiness – a wedding day that does not exhaust you, and does not end.

We've been seeing again and again that our world is patterned and copied from the Heavenly, not the other way around. We can understand from our earthly experiences what Heaven will be because there is continuity, similarity, correspondence. Think about human family. What are the very best things about family, when unspoilt by sin?

Family is a place of acceptance. Family, at its best, is where you are known but still loved. You have been accepted. In Heaven, clothed with Christ's righteousness, there by God's invitation, adopted by God Himself, you are forever and completely accepted. You are at home.

Family is a place of loyalty. Husbands and wives make covenants together. Parents show their loyalty to their children's wellbeing, and children return that later in life. This mutual loyalty and dependence bring security, safety, belonging. In Heaven, every saint belongs, and knows that God's very faithfulness, God's loyalty is the very air you breathe. No betrayals, no fickleness, no turning on anyone.

Family is a place of real companionship. You share your joys. You have genuine fellowship. You have friendship and intimacy and unity. Heaven will be a place of deepest and sweetest companionship, shared loved, shared desires, unending and increasing friendships.

Now what is it that messes up families and other societies? Do a tour through the New Testament

and see the things that the apostles are continually warning the family of God against: envy, jealousy, boasting, self-seeking, posturing and hypocrisy, speaking evil of one another, sowing divisions between one another, being touchy and easily irritated. Picture a world where the celebration of family love, the acceptance, the loyalty, the companionship and shared joys are untainted by sin.

Jonathan Edwards described the love in Heaven this ways:

Their love shall be without any remains of any contrary principle, having no pride or selfishness to interrupt it or hinder its exercises. Their hearts shall be full of love. That which was in the heart on earth as but a grain of mustard-seed, shall be as a great tree in heaven. The soul that in this world had only a little spark of divine love in it, in heaven shall be, as it were, turned into a bright and ardent flame, like the sun in its fullest brightness, when it has no spot upon it.

In heaven there shall be no remaining enmity, or distaste, or coldness, or deadness of heart towards God and Christ. Not the least remainder of any principle of envy shall exist to be exercised toward angels or other beings who are superior in glory; nor shall there be anything like contempt or slighting of those who are inferiors. Those that have a lower station in glory than others, suffer no diminution of their own happiness by seeing others above them in glory. On the contrary, all the members of that blessed society rejoice in each other's happiness, for the love of benevolence is perfect in them all. Every one has not only a sincere, but a perfect goodwill to every other.

By the way, if you do nothing but fight with God's people here, you need to check if you are in the family. Because I don't know how someone who despises the brothers he has seen will somehow love and enjoy Heaven where dwells the God He has not seen, and where those same Christians will be for an eternity.

If you do little else but quarrel with God's people, you need to think about how that will look in eternity. "Those people won't be in heaven" Bad assumption. "No, no, one day all those people will come and say sorry to me." Right. If you think there is going to be a long line queuing up to come and ask your forgiveness, you have an imaginary Heaven in mind. Hence all the warning from Jesus to make sure you are in fellowship now as a test of the validity of your salvation. So one way you check if you're going there, and prepare to go there, is to ask, how do I relate to this family of God now? Even in its broken, imperfect form, are they my family? Do I wish to celebrate and enjoy God with them?

No, Heaven is not going to be a soap-opera of conflicts and divisions. Heaven will be a celebration of family love.

II. Heaven is the Consolation for Missed Family Love

28 Then Peter began to say to Him, "See, we have left all and followed You." 29 So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife¹ or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's,

30 "who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time-- houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions-- and in the age to come, eternal life. (Mar 10:28-30)

Peter makes the comment that he, and others, have given up many things, including many of the joys of family, or extended time with family for the sake of following Christ. In other words, Peter says, by following you, we have given up many of the joys of family. And Jesus' answer is that Heaven will be consolation for missed family love.

Some Christians have the idea that godly Christianity means you experience all the joys of a perfect

family. But Scripture makes it clear that that kind of ideal doesn't happen before Heaven. There can be many reasons why Christians don't experience the joys of family.

One is through division in the family. 34 *"Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. 35 "For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law"; 36 "and a man's enemies will be those of his own household1." (Mat 10:34-36)*

When the Gospel comes into a home and one believes and others don't, it sometimes brings conflict. Different values, different desires, different loves make the family not a place of unity, but of division, not a place of shared fellowship, but of wide differences. Many Christians experience the pain of unsaved spouses, rejection from parents for converting, children that are rebellious or uninterested in the faith, extended relatives that sideline them.

Sometimes it is through deepened commitments. As one member of a family becomes more serious about the faith, it seems to alienate him or her from the others. 37 *"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. (Mat 10:37)*

Sometimes it is through commitment to God's church. Commitments to ministry, to missions, to service for Christ means sons and daughters are separated from father and mother by vast distances, children grow up without grandparents. That's what Peter is talking about when he mentions leaving all. Peter was away from his wife and children probably for extended times.

Sometimes that commitment to ministry means someone does not get to marry. Jesus spoke of people who make themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of God (Mat 19:12), that is, those who accept singleness for the sake of the Gospel, and Paul spoke of this too in 1 Corinthians 7.

And sometimes, it is simply God's sovereign choice combined with our choices. Some grow up in cold homes, or abusive homes. Some grow up in foster care. Some grow up in orphanages. Some are raised by a single mother, or by a grandmother or aunt or older sister. Some experience painful marriages, torn apart by betrayal, adultery, neglect, and divorce. For some, marriage never comes, for no fault of their own. For some, children are longed for and hoped for, are never given. For some, children come and are buried by their parents. For some, children come and break their parents' hearts with rebellion and ingratitude.

What is there for believers, who through any or several of these reasons has not experienced the joy of marriage, the happiness of children, the sweetness of good parents, the blessing of extended family? You who never experienced a father with his arms around your shoulder, a child of your own on your knee, the hand-in-hand joy of a covenant lover, do you just lose?

That's what Jesus answers here. And His answer is that the one who for Christ's sake has experienced some loss of family, some deprivation of family joy, will get it all back and more in Heaven. Heaven will be that family love, without anything to spoil it, and without end.

How? Beginning now, the family of God begins to taste this, as we love one another. Being in God's presence, being among the huge family of God will provide parental love, brotherly and sisterly love, the joy of a perfect family.

What about marriage? The Sadducees asked Jesus about this, and their question to Him was, if someone is married in this life, and the spouse dies, and remarries, then if all of those people are in Heaven, who is married to whom? 29 *Jesus answered and said to them, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. 30 "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God1 in heaven. (Mat 22:23-30)*

In Heaven, there will be no marriage between the saints, because we are told that all the saints collectively will be the Bride of Christ. While we can't fully understand that, we can take it to mean that whether you are male or female, the joys of marital companionship, the oneness, the pleasure in the other, the differences blessing the other will be experienced in our relationship to Christ, and go far beyond what we experienced here. The earthly longings, which are not met here even in the very best marriages, will find their fulfillment in our union with Christ.

In short, Heaven will be the complete consolation for all loss and failure in our families on Earth.

A celebration of family love, a consolation of missed family love. But Heaven is something else. Heaven is the continuation of family love.

III. Heaven is the Continuation of Family Love

13 But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. 15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. 16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. (1Th 4:13-16)

Paul tells the Thessalonians not to grieve without hope, because their brothers and sisters are with Christ and will be raised with Christ. Now there is something implicit in Paul's words here. The only way the believers would find this news comforting is if they knew they would recognise and re-unite with those believers now gone. They would see those believers, remember them, recognise them, and enjoy the re-union.

If in Heaven no one will recognise anyone else, then Paul might as well have said, don't grieve for these believers who have died, because you won't even remember who they are in Heaven. Spurgeon considered the idea that believers would not recognise each other to be marvelously absurd. He said of the great feast where we sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, "we shall not sit down with men in iron masks, and see none but great unknowns; but we shall "know even as we are known.

Heaven will indeed be the continuation of much of the family love in Christ begun here. We will know each other, just as the disciples recognised Moses and Elijah on the mount of Transfiguration, just as the witch at Endor recognised Samuel, just as the disciples recognised the risen Christ once they were illuminated. We will see each other, and there will be the sweet delights of continuing our fellowship.

I have done my fair share of waiting for arrivals at airports. It's actually rather enjoyable watching the reunions, especially the families that have clearly been parted for some time. I love watching the hugs that lift people off their feet and swing them around, the teary-eyed kisses, the involuntary laughter, completely oblivious to the rest of the world. Heaven is going to be full of those: old friends, parents, children, siblings who went before the other, beloved partners in the Gospel, and partners in ministry. And I think the Father will love every moment of His children re-uniting.

Some of the strangest and sweetest re-unions for some of us will be with people we didn't get to meet. Those unborn babies who died in the womb, those babies or infants or young children who Deuteronomy 1:39 says "*who today have no knowledge of good and evil, (Deu 1:39)* , we will meet them

there. Of course they will not be babies or children. We will see them in resurrected, adult form, just as Adam was made a mature man on day one, so they will be at their mature and perfected form.

How can we know that infants, the unborn, very young children, the mentally handicapped will be there? There is enough Scriptural evidence.

14 "Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. (Mat 18:14)

David said of his baby that died, *"I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."* (2Sa 12:23) And tellingly, David did not say that of his rebel son Absalom. We also read that Heaven includes representatives of every tongue and tribe, and we know some tongues and tribes have gone extinct without hearing the Gospel. One of the best ways to explain that is that it is the unborn and the little children from those tribes who are in Heaven.

Is this because the unborn, babies, infants, small children are not sinners? No, they are born in Adam. That's why they die. If they were not in Adam and under the curse of sin, they wouldn't die. Best we can tell, God chooses to exercise His lavish, sovereign grace and save every baby that dies in infancy. I stand with Spurgeon and MacArthur and Charles Hodge and B.B Warfield in believing every infant that dies goes to Heaven.

Certainly God could send infants to Hell for being part of the race of Adam, but imagine that soul, first coming to consciousness, finding himself or herself in torment, having no understanding for the reason of the torment, no sense of the justice of God in being in Hell, no idea why their first moment is in Hell, and the rest of their existence will be. I must say that I shudder at that concept of God, even if its believers feel they are championing the sovereignty of God in grimly and stoically holding such a view.

Those will be strange and beautiful reunions, more like meetings of someone who was of you, but you never got to know.

Perhaps someone asks, what about those people we wanted to have there who are not there? Won't we feel eternal pain and sadness at their absence? This is hard to answer, and we can only go on what we know, not what we don't know. We know that Heaven promises fullness of joy, and that sorrow and tears will be put away. If so, it can only be that something in us will change. This may sound harsh, and even unimaginable, but it may be that in Heaven, our love for Christ will be so great and so pure, that our circle of loved ones will be those who love Christ. No doubt believers will feel the sadness of people having rejected God, but if Revelation is anything to go by, the saints in Heaven feel a far greater degree of desire to see justice meted out than anything else. People who love what God loves and hate what He hates will know the justice of Hell and the grace of Heaven in ways we do not now. One thing you can be confident of, God will wipe away your tears, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

What will Heaven be like? Joel James put it this way: "Heaven will be the embrace of a Father who felt compassion on sin orphans, and welcomed us in out of the cold, rainy dark to sit on His lap by a warm fire. Heaven will be family love."