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November 3, 2019 All Saints' Day

THREE QUESTIONS ABOUT HEAVEN

Revelation 7:9-16 Ephesians 1:11-23

On All Saints we remember the saints of old, we remember loved one who have died since All Saints last year, we remember God's promises of what lies ahead for us who trust our lives to God in Jesus Christ.

To those who grieve, this can be an emotional day, a painful day, just by the very act of remembering those we have lost. And yet for those who have grieved for years this can be a helpful day, a day to remember and recall and name those we have lost, to keep them alive in our memories against the fear that they are fading from our memories. We can't remember their faces as clearly; we miss hearing their voices, we miss touching them and holding them; but remembering them, talking about them, saying their names, keeps them a bit more present to us. Watching home movies and videos, looking at pictures, listening to recordings of their voices, brings back memories and their presence. Such remembering is good and healthy. Most of our memories of the dear departed are happy memories and our sadness is because we miss them.

We love to sing our hymn, "For All the Saints Who from Their Labors Rest." The organ fanfares are great, the words and the tune are majestic, we sing it with gusto and the mood is upbeat, triumphant! The words and the music celebrate Jesus' victory over death. The hymn unites us with saints from all the ages, singing together our faith in God and our salvation in Jesus Christ, our faith in the kingdom that awaits us when God's final judgement day brings eternal joy to those who put their trust in him. We sing of our heavenly reunion with those who have died and now live in heaven, and our reunion with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who secured the divine inheritance we await.

Our second hymn, "I Sing A Song of the Saints of God," remembers faithful folks in our past while also celebrating faithful folks all around us now who inspire us. We sing "*...saints of God are just folks like me, and I mean to be one too*" as a recommitment to God and our courage to live the obedient life, inspired by those who have lived and died in the faith before us.

Through my forty years in the ministry, in dealing with death, in people have asked me three basic questions. "Where is my Daddy, my Momma, my loved one now?" "Will I see him/her again in heaven" and "What is heaven like?" Let me share some answers, some reassurance, that I have come to know.

Where is my loved one now? He/she is in heaven, with Jesus. I remind you that when Jesus was crucified, the robber crucified beside him asked Jesus to have pity on him and remember him when he came into paradise." Jesus replied, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Not tomorrow, not when the world come to an end, not when the devil is bound and the millennium has ended. No, Jesus said simply and directly, "**Today** you will be with me in paradise." That is where our loved ones are, in paradise with Jesus.

My Uncle Jimmy is now 98 years old. I called him on Sunday afternoon two weeks ago, and Uncle Jimmy shared that his vision is bad and he can't read anymore; his legs are weak, he can't play golf anymore, he can't drive, he can't help Aunt Veda like he used to. His mind is clear and his humor delightful; but his body is tired and hurts; life is hard when you're 98 years old. He then said, "I'm not afraid of dying. I'm ready to be in paradise with Jesus."

Our scripture reading today in Revelation 7:9-16 celebrates that paradise, that glory, which we will share with the great multitude gathered around God's throne in heaven, the Saints of all the ages gathered safely into heaven, reunited with one another and with our Lord Jesus Christ. The final battle between good and evil has been waged; the devil has been defeated and cast away forever. The Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, has redeemed his people and brought them into the safekeeping of heaven forever and ever. No more pain, no more sorrow, no more grief. Joy and security will reign in the Holy City of God.

Even though our loved ones are with Jesus in heaven, it is normal to feel sad that they are no longer physically present with us. It takes time for God to heal our hearts of sadness, but eventually God will heal our sadness and we will remember our loved ones with happiness and joy. We will remember the goodness and forget our pain.

Second Question: "Will I see my loved one again?" Yes, you will! And I believe you will recognize them. I've not read anything in the Bible says you won't. I believe that when we humans die, we do not lose our individuality, our persona, our uniqueness as a child of God. I believe that God preserves our identity and that though we are glorified in a spiritual body in heaven, our persona is preserved. Jesus did not say that in heaven we would be a drop in the ocean or a speck in the universe, he said that we are going to be a child of God living in God's house.

So, I believe you will see and recognize your loved one in heaven. Though we can't picture what that will be like, we profess our belief in the communion of saints, the ongoing spiritual power and presence of those who have gone before us and who now surround us like a cloud of witnesses cheering us on in our lifetime.

What then of the third question: "What is heaven like?" It's going to be so beautiful, so unbelievably beautiful, that you and I can't imagine how perfectly wonderful heaven is. I have chatted with people who have had near death experiences and they share the

sense of being enveloped in light and peace and joy, absolute joy without fear. In the book of Revelation, God grants the Apostle John a vision of heaven that is beyond anything we can imagine or construct in our minds. John says that heaven will be like a throne and surrounding God on the throne is rainbow composed of every color and precious jewel in the universe, and there is a translucent color emerging from that rainbow surrounding the heavens and reflecting the glory of God. On this All Saints day we celebrate the saints of all the ages in light.

The Bible presents images of what heaven is like – huge beyond measure, a multitude of billions of people surrounded by angels glorifying God in song and joy and thankfulness. No more pain or injury, no more disease. We will be made whole and complete and perfect as God intended us.

No more grief, no more pain, no more a world of darkness and evil,

No more cancer, no more heart attacks, no more starvation,

No more war, no more violence, no more bombings or accidents or crashes.

No more night, no darkness to fear, only peace and light and joy!

The saints now enjoy that place of peace and harmony. And Revelation tells us that when we get home, God himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

Going Home. Max Lucado writes, “The same hands that stretched the heavens will touch your cheeks. The same hands that formed the mountains will caress your face. The same hands that curled in agony as the Roman spike cut through will someday cup your face and brush away your tears. Forever. When you think of a world where there will be no reason to cry, ever, doesn’t it make you want to go home?” (Lucado, 186). The way home is to surrender your life to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

Some of the finest moments of ministry for me are baptisms – celebrating birth and life, weddings – celebrating two hearts committed to a new life together, and funerals – celebrating the life and joys we knew with this person.

Baptisms allow us to share in a family’s precious moment with God as the water and the Spirit show God’s blessings on that child.

Weddings allow us to share two family’s precious moment as God’s spirit unites their children

Funerals allow us to share in a family’s precious moment as God’s spirit reveals to us the life and legacy of that beloved person and we share a glimpse of what heavenly bliss he or she now enjoys, we glimpse the heavenly homecoming God provides us.

If joy at baptisms is holding that child in my arms, bringing him or her into your midst...
If joy at weddings is seeing a groom kiss his bride before they join arms and walk out the sanctuary together...

Then the agony of funerals is knowing that we cannot hold that person in our arms again.

It's never easy to say goodbye. It's never easy to walk away, wanting yet to kiss your beloved one more time. The hardest thing in the world is to say goodbye.

No More goodbyes. But one day we too will go home and see them again. In heaven, we'll never again say "goodbye." We will forever say "HEY! Welcome home!" The saints of all the ages enjoy an eternal homecoming. And the joy lasts forever! Wow!

I've used this illustration from Max Lucado countless times at funerals, and it is fitting to repeat it today. To paraphrase him,

"Before you know it, your time will come.

You will draw near the gates and enter the city.

You will see faces that are waiting for you.

You will hear your name spoken by those who love you.

You will feel their arms around you again and you will hold them in your arms,

You will hug and laugh again, and greet one another with a kiss,
the kiss of peace, the kiss of bountiful joy.

And amidst the crowds, amidst the joyous throng of relatives and friends,
the One who has longed to see you,

the One who would rather die than live without you,

will removed his pierced hands from his heavenly robe and applaud.

He'll say "Welcome home! Well done, good and faithful servant.

Enter into the joy of...my home."

Amen.

Sources

Hamilton, Hugh. "Of Remembering and Forgetting." Trinity Presbyterian Church, Pensacola, FL.

All Saints, October 29, 2006

Lucado, Max. *The Applause of Heaven*. Dallas: WORD Publishing, 1990, p190.

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