

## **HOW DO WE KNOW?**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, July 17, 2017  
based on II Corinthians 5:1-10***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a summer sermon series entitled, “The Hope of Heaven.” In this series, we are considering many aspects of the Biblical promise of heaven.

In the passage from II Corinthians, Paul says, “For we know that if the earthly tent that we live in is destroyed, we have a house not made with hands eternal in the heavens.” (II Cor. 5:1) Paul speaks of the transitory nature of our earthly life by referring to our earthly body as a tent, and he speaks of the solid nature of what God has in store for us by speaking of our future destiny as a “house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” And concerning this promise of life eternal, Paul says, “We know.”

But how do we know? How indeed do we know that when this earthly life passes there is something yet greater that awaits us? How do we know that the idea of heaven is not just wishful thinking? This is the question that we are considering this morning. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

We have noted in past weeks that there is a universal “sense of heaven” among human beings—that across all cultures and times people have had a deep-seated feeling that we are meant for something beyond this world, some sort of life beyond the grave. You can see this perception everywhere—from Mayan and Incan cultures to Viking society to India or China or ancient Egypt—people in completely disconnected cultures all across history have had a sense that we are intended for an eternal destiny.

We generally find in life that the deep longings or desires that we have correspond to something in reality. We have desires for food and for water and for air, which correspond with the fact that we were made for these things. We have a longing for relationships, because we were made to be in relationship. We have a longing for purpose in life, and indeed it is possible to find such purpose.

We also have a longing for heaven. The longing for heaven is not the same thing as the longing for the continuation of life. The longing for the continuation of life is something you feel when you meet a bear on the path. All creatures have a kind of longing for the continuation of life. The longing for heaven is something greater. It is a feeling, deep within every human being, that there is something incomplete about this life and that we are intended for something more. It is a longing for a fulfillment that nothing in this world can ever quite supply.

If our longings correspond generally to reality, it makes sense that this profound longing for a destiny and a fulfillment beyond this world corresponds with a reality that is out there. C.S. Lewis put it this way: “If I find in myself a desire which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.” (*Mere*

*Christianity)*

So that basic human “sense of heaven,” that feeling that we are meant for an eternal home, is itself a very strong indicator that there is in fact a heaven that awaits us. The most reasonable way to account for the fact that human beings in every time and place have had an idea of heaven is to recognize, as Ecclesiastes puts it, that “God has put eternity into the human heart.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

There are other indicators of the reality of heaven. Do a google search for evidence or proof of heaven, and you will come up with a huge number of books about near-death experiences. You will also find one or the other of those books being debunked, but what is striking is the enormous number of people, including people in our own church, who have reported this sort of experience, where they have been on the edge of death and have in some sense witnessed a world beyond. Whatever you make of this kind of experience, it is at least a pointer toward a future that God yet has in store.

There are also the experiences of people who have lost loved ones who report an unusually vivid connection with the recently departed. This is an experience of what Christians call the communion of the saints, a spiritual connection with those who have entered into eternity. Such experiences once again point to the reality of eternal life.

Nevertheless, many people today are skeptical about the whole idea of heaven. A recent poll of Americans showed that while 62% of Americans believe in life beyond death, 17% do not, and 21% don’t know. (Rasmussen Reports, June, 2017) Those who are skeptical can find good common ground with the Bible!

Although almost all ancient cultures affirmed some sort of life beyond death, Biblical faith is an outlier. We noted this fact early in this sermon series—that while the Bible affirms that *God* dwells in eternal heaven, most of the Old Testament says nothing about human beings going to heaven after death. Ancient Israelites were certainly exposed to the ideas of other ancient cultures and their sometimes elaborate notions about the afterlife, but the general Old Testament attitude was well expressed in the book of Ecclesiastes—“All go to the same place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the breath of animals goes downward to the earth?” (Ecclesiastes 3:20-21)

The Old Testament maintains a questioning and skeptical attitude because even though human beings may have a sense of eternity, human perceptions—from the Biblical perspective—are not enough to establish something as true. From the Biblical standpoint, when it comes to the great truths of life, we only know something to be true if God *reveals* it to be true. Since, in early Old Testament times, God had not yet revealed anything about eternal life, the people of Israel did not believe in eternal life.

Wishful thinking has no place in the Bible. There is no thought of people going to

heaven . . . until God prepares to act, through Jesus Christ, to open the way to heaven. In late Old Testament writings, there are the first glimmers that God would act in such a way that all humanity could enter into an eternal destiny. And this finally is what God does through Jesus Christ. As we have noted previously in this sermon series, it is Christ who makes everlasting life possible, by rescuing us from our bondage to sin and death, and rising from death to life. So the New Testament, in contrast to the Old, is very clear that we do have the promise of heaven through Jesus Christ.

How then do we know that there is life with God beyond the grave? We know because God through Christ establishes that truth. This is how Paul could have such confidence—because he was not dreaming up ideas about heaven; he was taking hold of what God has revealed to us in Christ.

Paul speaks about all these themes in the passage we heard from II Corinthians. He begins by comparing our earthly life to a tent as he says, “In this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling” (II Corinthians 5:2); and he goes on to say, “While we are still in this tent [that is, in this transitory body], we groan under our burden . . .” (II Corinthians 5:4) Notice how often he uses the word “groan.” The older you get, the more groans you’ve got. The original Greek word here is στενάζω (*stenadzo*), which refers to a struggling in discomfort. Paul is speaking here directly out of his own experience. He had a host of physical ailments, some of them chronic. He also was using a very familiar image when he compared our earthly existence to a tent—as he was a tentmaker by trade. He knew how even the best tents wear out; and the purpose of a tent, in the first century Roman Empire, was not so you could stay in it forever, but so that you could journey to a greater destination. So Paul speaks of how we recognize our transitory condition and feel ourselves drawn beyond this world toward a greater heavenly home. It is significant in this regard that the Greek word στενάζω, or groan, indicates not only a complaint about present circumstances, but also a yearning or a sighing for a better place; and thus it ties in with Paul’s statement that “we are longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling.” So Paul refers to that universal human longing for eternity that we have been discussing this morning.

But Paul was grounded in Biblical teaching, and he knew that there is no way that sinful and mortal human beings can ever enter into eternal life unless a dramatic change in our circumstances is brought about by God. To talk about this change, he uses one of his favorite words when he says “we are longing to be *clothed* with our heavenly dwelling.” The Greek word here is ἐνδύω (*enduo*), meaning “to clothe oneself.” Paul uses this word repeatedly in his writings to talk about spiritual transformation. In his letter to the Colossians, for example, he says, “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, meekness, and patience . . . and above all put on—or clothe yourselves with—love.”

(Colossians 3:12,14) Or in writing to the Ephesians he says, “Clothe yourselves with the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness.” (Ephesians 4:24) In such language he is actually drawing on Old Testament imagery; as Isaiah said, “God has clothed me with garments of salvation, God has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness.” (Isaiah 61:10)

When you change clothes you of course change your appearance, but in the ancient world a change in clothing could also indicate a change in status. The same thing continues today, for example, in the Tour de France, which is happening right now, where the front runner wears a distinctive yellow jersey; and if there is a change in the lead, there is a change of clothing—the jersey moves from one rider to another –as it did a couple times this past week. So in the Scriptures a change of clothing is an image of a change in our spiritual condition.

Thus when Paul talks about the great change that must take place for us to transition out of this mortal life into eternity, he uses precisely this image; he again uses the word ἐνδύω—to put on or be clothed with—as he says, in I Corinthians, “This perishable body must put on (ἐνδύω) imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.” (I Cor. 15:52-53); and in our passage from II Corinthians he says, “We wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed (ἐνδύω), so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.” (II Cor. 5:4) Clearly, entrance into heaven is not automatic; there must be a change in our condition—we must be “clothed with new life.”

Along this line, there is a very interesting parable of Jesus about a wedding banquet [*Jesus said, “the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son . . .” Matthew 22:2*]—the wedding feast being an image that Jesus uses on more than one occasion for God’s eternal Kingdom. In the parable, a man shows up at the banquet without a wedding garment. [*There was a man who had no wedding garment. Matthew 22:11*] He is cast out of the banquet into the outer darkness. [*The king said, “Cast him into the outer darkness . . .” Matthew 22:13*] We will return to that parable in the future in this sermon series. But notice the image—you cannot just crash the party of heaven; you have to be *rightly clothed*.

But this then introduces a whole new level of doubt about heaven. Even if eternal life is possible, it may be that you and I are not worthy. Maybe we are like this guy being thrown out of the wedding banquet. What is it that makes us rightly clothed to be able to enter into heaven? The New Testament answer is clear—it is the grace of Jesus Christ. Christ has given his life for us, to set us right with God, offering us mercy and eternal life as a gift. So Paul would say in Romans, “Clothe yourselves (ἐνδύω) with the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 13:14) When we “put on” Christ through faith, we are brought thereby into a new spiritual condition—in which we are forgiven by God, and we are endowed with

the gift of everlasting life. So, as we trust in Christ, we need not have doubts, but can have the assurance of our salvation and our destiny through Christ.

Along that line, Paul goes on to speak of yet another way of knowing that we do have the promise of life eternal; as he says in our passage, “God has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.” (II Cor. 5:5) The Greek word translated here as “guarantee” is ἀρραβώνα (*arrabona*), which actually means “down payment.” This was a very standard term in the Greco-Roman world; you would make a down payment on something to guarantee that the full payment would follow. When we have faith in Christ, God gives us the Holy Spirit—the assuring presence of God within us—and Paul is saying that this experience of the Holy Spirit is a guarantee that God is leading us in love and *will* finally bless us with the promise of heaven.

So while we cannot see heaven from our standpoint in this world, we can know that the promise of heaven is real, because it is a promise given to us by God, made reality through Jesus Christ, and confirmed by the witness of the Holy Spirit within us. Thus, as Paul says, “We walk by faith, not by sight” (II Cor. 5:7), and we can know that we are journeying toward an eternal home.