

# The Reality of Heaven.

## Introduction (1998)

Few Christian authors today write about the reality of heaven. Books and articles about heaven are considered old-fashioned, individualistic, and irrelevant. The view of heaven has grown dim. Many no longer see gleams of gold in the distance but only a fog. Secularism and materialism have taken their toll. Sigmund Freud told his clients that religious hope is only an illusion. The French novelist, essayist and dramatist Albert Camus stated frankly, "I do not like to believe that death opens upon another life. To me it is a door that shuts." The American journalist Walter Lippman wrote on the subject of immortality and eternal life: "My grandfather believed in it and was happy. My father hoped for it, but had his doubts about it. I am afraid of it. My children do not bother their heads about it." What was formerly represented as our all-embracing hope has now been deprived of its meaning. This sentiment can be heard in popular songs such as "the heavenly blisses for your kisses," for cheap moon light romanticism, and "I've got a harp, you've got a harp, everybody's got a harp," for the boredom of sitting on the clouds forever twanging harps. Our Western culture is fast sinking into cynicism. Skepticism is evident everywhere.

Influenced by Marxism, Protestant liberalism often promotes a theology of revolution. It is more interested in politics than showing people the way to heaven. Influential liberal church leaders claim to speak as Christians but stir up tidal waves of doubt about the Bible and our Christian heritage. They have little inclination to say anything about heaven because they believe that church and theology have dwelt too long on its mysteries. No speculations about the life here after are needed but concrete deeds. How can we even think about heaven when we face the burning questions of hunger, racial discrimination, the possibility of global war? The Church must protest the wrongs and injustices it sees in the world. Heaven is a nice comforting myth, an egoistic escape from the harsh reality of a suffering world. One modern theologian described the church as a movement "of Christians for socialism." Christianity was originally nothing but a social movement and Christ a social Saviour. We must look for "eternal life" on earth. How can we believe in heaven in our age of space exploration?

To the skeptics or those despairing of the thought of heaven, I like to address the pointed question:

If after all that we have lived and thought  
All comes to Nought -  
If there be nothing after Now,  
And we be nothing anyhow  
And we know that - why live?

We would be imprisoned in finitude if there were no prospect for eternal life. Our materialistic consumer's culture, passionately busy with the comforts of this life, needs to restore the vision of the ultimate importance of heaven. What lies beyond death? The Christian does not depend on human speculations or on mystical intuition. He does not live by the grace of modern science but by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Accepting the Bible as God's inerrant Word, he looks beyond death to his glorious destiny in the presence of God. For him death is not the end of life but the start of new beginnings.

The Bible states time and again: there is an entrance into heavenly glory immediately after death (Cf Hebr.2: 10). For the believer death is a great gain. Death cannot separate us from the love of Christ (Rom.8: 38). The Good Shepherd goes with us as we pass through the valley of the shadow of death. The apostle Paul confessed: " For to me, to

live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil.1: 21). Why does Paul call death gain? He knew that the moment he dies, that very same moment he will be with Christ. He longed to depart from this world "and to be with Christ, which is better by far"(Phil.1: 23).

The Bible gives various descriptions of heaven. God has prepared a paradise for all who are saved in and through Christ. The thief on the cross asked Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise"( Luke 23: 42f). Paradise recalls the Garden of Eden; a name found in the book of Revelation, signifying the place of eternal glory and peace, where the tree of life blossoms (Rev. 2:7). The thief did not expect to be remembered by our Lord until some time in the distant future. But the Lord promised him more than he had asked for. There was an immediate passage into glory. The body was laid in the grave; his soul went to heaven, straight from the cross into a glorified state. And the apostle Paul tells how he was caught up to the third heaven, which he called paradise (2 Cor. 12: 3f).

Here on earth we are strangers, aliens and even misfits. This decaying world is not our permanent home. Heaven is our real home. After many years of wandering through the world we arrive in the house prepared for us by our Lord (John 14:1-4). A house not made with human hands (2 Cor. 5:1). When we die we have come home. Our journey is over after we have crossed the river of death. In the house of our heavenly Father, we will be welcomed as members of the Father's family. Only in our Father's heavenly home can we perfectly enjoy the wonder of God's grace and glory. Our heavenly home is not everywhere. Heaven is a real place. This does not mean of course, that our heavenly Father is bound by a place. He is still everywhere present. Our Lord taught us to pray, "Our Father in heaven...your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The apostle Paul wrote: "The God who made it (the world) is the Lord of heaven and earth"(Acts 17:24).

Heaven is a specific place, a created reality and a concentration of God's glory, somewhere in the universe where time and distance are no obstacles. The Son of God left heaven's glory to become man. To announce our Lord's birth, angels descended from heaven. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah came from heaven to strengthen and encourage Jesus in His mission (Luke 9:28-36). In Ephesians 4 our Lord's descend and ascension is spoken of as going from place to place. Heaven and earth are so united in Christ that they cannot be separated anymore. Jesus ascended to heaven to receive authority over creation and the Church from the hands of His heavenly Father. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was possible only after Jesus' departure from the earth (John 16:7). The Bible tells us that after His ascension our Lord was seen in visions, but always in His human form. When the first martyr, Stephen looked up to heaven, he saw the glory of God. And he said, "Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55f). And some day King Jesus will leave heaven's glory with the saints and the angels to return to earth (Rev. 19:14).

What difference does the reality of heaven make to our daily life? Non-Christians are entirely controlled by opinion polls, by "the thing to do" and " by what everybody is doing." They are controlled by the secular mindset of the world. Christians, on the other hand, have victory over the world. We are no longer controlled by it. We will make an effort, a commitment, to set our hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (Col.3: 1). Does the longing for heaven lead to other worldliness, to a flight from the pains and suffering from this world? Heaven is not an asylum for all who don't want to dirty their hands in this world's despairing needs. If our hope of heaven is Biblically justified, then we have a responsibility for this earth created by God. There is no talk about heaven without consequences for the earth. When we speak about heaven, we must speak about earth and vice versa. Heavenly-minded Christians remain true to their Father's world.

The reality of eternal life gives us strength to carry out our tasks until we enter into glory. We see life from the perspective of heaven and listen to the voice of our Lord calling us to discipleship; "He who does not take his cross upon him and follow me is not worthy of me." In the reflecting light of eternity, there is a transformation of all values. We are then liberated from the false notion that happiness is now. We are then protected from the illusion that political action can bring about a utopia here on earth. We are servants of the Most High God and not power hungry masters. Longing for heaven and seeking righteousness here on earth goes hand in hand. A Christian ethic without a focus on heaven is not possible. Our directions for living come from heaven. We don't live with a permanent hallelujah-mood: fear and worry may afflict us, but they are overcome by the promises of joy, life, and peace given to us by our ascended Lord. When we are so heavenly minded that we are earthly good, people will take notice. They will see the difference then in the way we look at politics and labour relations. We are citizens of heaven and are to act as heavenly citizens. If we are going to be like Jesus one day when we enter heaven, we must strive to become like Him now ( 1John 3:3). Life here and now that is not shaped and controlled by the perspective heaven is not merely frivolous, it is an affront to God.

What is death for the Christian? Painful and difficult though our end may be through a lingering illness or a fatal accident, God welcomes us home. We are expected.