

Title: "What is heaven like?"

In the early 15th century, the passage by ship from Europe to India was practically impossible. The southernmost tip of Africa was known for its tremendous storms. For centuries no European even knew what lay beyond that cape. No ship attempting to round that point had ever returned to tell the tale. Among the ancients it was known as the "Cape of Storms". But then in the sixteenth century, a Portuguese explorer, Vasco De Gama, successfully sailed around that very point and found beyond the wild raging storms, a great calm sea, and beyond that, the shores of India. The name of that cape was changed from the Cape of Storms to the Cape of Good Hope. This story is a great analogy to Heaven. Until Jesus Christ rose from the dead, "death" had been OUR Cape of Storms. No one knew what lay beyond that point. No one who past that point had ever returned to tell the tale. No one, that is, until Jesus. On an Easter morning, 2000 years ago Jesus defeated death. Suddenly, like those ancient explorers, we now can see beyond the storm to an sea of great calm and peace, to the hope of heaven and eternal life.

"What do you think heaven is like?" Some people who have experienced near-death tell stories of a bright light. "Follow the light." "Follow the light." Others think of a place where we will see our loved ones who have gone before us. Some think of a place where every desire you have will be fulfilled. Like a Thomas Kincaide painting heaven is like a beautiful garden. Scripture speaks of the Bosom of Abraham, where all those who have suffered will be comforted, where those who have been persecuted vindicated, where there will be justice. where everyone will see the Lord and worship him. What is heaven like? I think this is a great question to ask. I think that as Christians, at some time in our lives, we should ask ourselves the question: "what is Heaven like?" Not just in general, but for us in particular. The very core of why we go to church, why we study scripture, why we are Christians at all orbits around the question "what happens after we die?" It is a good question.

I have an excerpt from a song performed by Mercy Me, called "I can only Imagine." These are the words... "I can only imagine"

Surrounded by Your glory
What will my heart feel
Will I dance for You, Jesus
Or in awe of You be still
Will I stand in Your presence
Or to my knees will I fall

Will I sing "Hallelujah"
Will I be able to speak at all
I can only imagine
I can only imagine

The lyrics speaks of opposites... will I stand or fall, will I shout for joy or be silent. The reason it speaks in paradox is because it is trying to say that Heaven is so beyond our comprehension that we have no words to describe our experience. The song speaks of the futility of any attempt to speak about that which is unspeakable. It tells us that there are no words to truly describe the joy of heaven.

Why do we have so much problems describing heaven? The answer is... “:We don’t have the words.” There reason is that when it comes to knowing the things of heaven, we are spiritually deaf, and blind. This is why “we can only imagine” It’s like describing a rainbow to a dog. We can describe to him the beauty and splendor of this colorful heavenly display. But he won’t believe us. He will never understand, because dogs are colorblind. They can’t see rainbows, so they can’t believe in them.” By our human nature we are like colorblind dogs in spiritual matters. There is so much all around that God wants for us to see of His kingdom and of His will. Yet we stare right through the best of it because we are spiritually blind. Yet just because you do not have the vocabulary to properly describe something, doesn’t mean it is not beautiful. Though we by our nature are blind to God there is healing. That which we cannot see with our physical eyes, we will see by faith.

Scripture records the story of a blind man being given sight. At first you might think this healing was just Jesus’ compassion. But there is more to it than just compassion. In Jewish teaching, the handicapped, the physically imperfect, were considered “unclean.” unworthy to come before God. God would not hear their prayers. According to Jewish doctrines, they were born with defects because of some sin which they committed in the womb, or a sin which their parents committed. That which they suffered was their own fault and there was nothing they could do. They were permanently cut off from society. they were permanently cut off from God. Could you imagine how horrible that would be like? Could you imagine what it would be like if you were fired because you were not physically perfect, you didn’t have the right color hair or skin or body shape.? Could you imagine how you would feel if you could never get a job never go to school because you weren’t part of the “In” crowd. Could you imagine how horrible it would be if the prejudice was because of something that we couldn’t change? How would you feel if you knew you would never be accepted never be

loved because you were different. This would be horrible. When Jesus healed the deaf man, he was doing more than being compassionate for the physical suffering of the man. In healing the man, in making the man “clean” Jesus was restoring the man’s relationship with his people. Jesus was restoring the Man’s relationship with God.

But the miracle did not stop there. You see, there was more than one kind of blindness going around that day. Though the man was physically blind the people around him were “spiritually” blind. And the sad part was that they didn’t even know it. Since the time of Adam and Eve, sin has been a part of this world. All their descendants, you and me inherited a physical characteristic... a physical defect called “sin.” Sin is an indelible part of our Earthly selves. Sin caused us to be blind to God. And because of this, all of mankind was “unclean” before God. All of mankind was unworthy of going to heaven. And had we been left in that situation, we would have had nothing but Hell and suffering to look forward to. To the question “what happens after death?” the answer is “Hell and suffering.” Bum deal.

But God did not leave us in that situation. God in his infinite love, promised that he would bring someone to help us. That someone was “Jesus.” God promised that He would come to save. This is the other miracle, the other healing which occurred when Jesus healed the blind man. The miracle Jesus really sought after, was not the physical healing of the blindman, but rather the healing of the spiritual blindness which bound his people, the spiritual blindness which kept them from seeing their savior. And by the power of the Holy Spirit the eyes of many who heard were opened. For those who would believe in him, for those who would have faith in Jesus, they were no longer blind to God. At one time God spoke to each of us and our eyes opened. At our Baptism, God healed us and our spiritual eyes were opened. We still do not see heaven with our physical eyes, but a different miracle has occurred. We see with eyes of faith. When it comes to Heaven, we still can “only imagine.” But what has changed is that “we trust our Lord.” “we have faith in Jesus.” We see by faith.

What does it mean to see by faith? I have a story. A father and his son were walking their brand-new dog to a church meeting hall. As they were walking the subject of Heaven came up. “What is heaven like?” asked the son. The father tried to describe what Heaven was like as best he could. But as they reached the church hall, in despair, the son cried, “how do you know?” “There are so many possibilities.” How can I be sure which is right? How will I know what it is going to be like? In answer, the father closed the door on the dog as they entered the

hall, leaving the dog outside. They could hear the dog in its eagerness, scratching the door to be let in. The father said, "Do you hear our dog scratching at the door?" "He has never been to this church hall, yet he wants to get in." Do you know why? He does not know. There are so many possibilities. He cannot be sure what it is going to be like in here. But there is one thing that he does know. He knows that we are here. And he wants to be with us.

When it comes to heaven, we do not know. There are so many possibilities. We cannot be sure what it is going to be like there. But there is one thing that we do know. We know that Jesus is there. And we want to be with him. We may not know what Heaven is specifically like. But we do know that Jesus is there. Our savior, the one who loves us and has promised a place for us. our friend, who says he has plans of good for us, Jesus, has gone before us. And so we do not fear.

However, there is a whole world of people out there, 145,000 of them within 3 miles of us, who are blind to God because they do not know Jesus. They have not had their eyes opened. And because of this they are afraid of the door. They are afraid because they do not know what is on the other side. They are afraid of the door because they do not know that Jesus is on the other side... They are afraid because they do not know Jesus. God is calling us to introduce them to Jesus, to help them get to know Jesus, to let them know His love, comfort and hope. Bring them here. Jesus is here. In the waters of baptism, with the bread and wine of communion, God will heal them their eyes will be opened. Though they will never see with their physical eyes "what heaven is like," they will know with the eyes of faith that their Lord who has gone before them has prepared a place for them.
Amen