

Heaven

Just what is heaven like? We really would like to know. In its essence it is simply this: In heaven we will perfectly enjoy life with Christ and accordingly also with all the saints and angels who are there with us.

That life is eternal. In heaven we will never again experience death. It is important to remember the essential definition of death: Death is separation. In Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve sinned, they experienced the first kind of death, the death that is a separation from God in unbelief and rebellion. Horrible indeed was that separation. Just read the account again of their encounter with God after they had sinned. What do you see? You see fear as they hide from Him, anger when He speaks to them, loathing of God and of each other as Adam seeks to pin the blame for his sin first on God, then on God's greatest gift to him, his wife.

Few indeed can say that they have never experienced in life this kind of death. Our sins too bring this kind of separation. In our guilt we hide from God and foolishly hope either that He did not see us or doesn't care enough to be bothered about our guilt. But then the sins come, as we say, home to roost. We suffer pain or loss. We get sick and lose loved ones. Conscience will not leave us alone. And so we get angry with God: "Why did You let this happen to me? It's all Your fault! You could have prevented my folly! But now I suffer in shame! Yes, and it's also the fault of my parents/my spouse/my friends/society/my lousy job/demanding relatives!"

All of that is death, a separation from God brought about by our sin. But the whole purpose of the gospel from Genesis 3 to Revelation 22 is to show us the Saviour who has removed that death, that separation, by His coming and by His death and resurrection for us and for our salvation. Often in this life that sweet message of the gospel has brought us to life, to real life, the life that trusts in the blood-bought forgiveness. We nevertheless prove our need for the gospel again and again when we return to death by further wilful sin. But in it all Jesus keeps calling to us with life, just as He said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:10-11).

In heaven, our life will never again experience this kind of death, this spiritual death of separation from God in rebellion and unbelief. That is no small blessing: Never again to be afraid of God or anything else; never again to feel the gnawing of conscience on the soul; never again to know the temptations that threaten to rip us away from the enjoyment of peace with God, peace with our own soul, and peace with those around us. So great will that blessing be that it is scarcely possible for us to imagine it in the here and now. St. Paul sums it up when he says shortly before his own death, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory for ever and ever. Amen." (2 Timothy 4:18).

Just as heaven will be an eternal life without any more spiritual death, so it will also be eternal life without any physical death. For after all is said and done, physical death and all the sickness and pain that announce its advent are nothing more than the result of spiritual death. That's what God told Adam (Genesis 3:19). And that's what every cemetery witnesses to us each day. But with spiritual death gone, so too will physical death disappear together with all that announces its approach. Hunger and thirst, pain and sickness of every sort, these all are heralds of death; they announce its inevitability. While they may be satisfied or softened or put off for a while, they always return to declare, "You are fragile, you are frail, you are mortal; and the day is coming when need and pain will not be put off but will win the victory over the mortal body. As strong as you think you are and as wise, one day a tiny germ, a bit of cholesterol in the blood stream, or a microscopic virus will do you in." "As that ancient gravestone put it so well: Where you are, I once was; where I am, you too soon shall be!"

In heaven that is all past and gone, just as its causes of temptation and sin and guilt are gone. How tenderly, how beautifully, how perfectly that condition is described in the last book of the Bible:

Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; He will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 7:16-17)

The picture is perfect! Jesus is at its centre. And we, each one of us are the tender objects of the Father's love for the sake of the Lamb. His sacrifice has placed us, as it were, in the Father's lap as His dear children. Who would not long for such a blessed state! Who could keep from love unbounded for such a Saviour, such a Father and yes such a Holy Spirit who has brought us even now to foretaste of that bliss in the enjoyment of his Word and sacraments!

That's what it means to have eternal life. It means the end of any spiritual or physical separation from God. It is the everlasting enjoyment of life as God intended it to be for us at creation and as Jesus perfectly restored it for us by all that He did in His work for our salvation.