

THE JOYS OF ETERNAL LIFE

Eternal life 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. It's all there already in that beautiful summation of the gospel in John 3:16: "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life.*"

Anything else that we can say about heaven is really just another way of saying that it is eternal life with Jesus at its centre. Thus, heaven is the everlasting experience of perfect joy. Jesus was fond of picturing that joy for us as the joy of a wedding banquet at which He is the Bridegroom and His church - each believer and all believers together - is the bride. He did that in some of His parables about heaven and about Judgment Day (e.g., Matthew 22:1-14; 25:1-13). From our Second Reading today, Revelation 21:1-7, John sees the church coming down out of heaven as a beautiful bride accompanied with shouts of joy and praise to God that the wedding banquet of the Lamb has begun and will never end.

Already in the Old Testament the theme of heaven as the experience of everlasting joy is expressed often, especially in the Psalms and in Isaiah. Psalm 16:11 tells us that even now we know such joy but that ultimately, we will experience it fully and forever. David says, "*You make known to Me the path of life. In Your presence there is fullness of joy. At Your right hand there are pleasures for ever.*" The path of life is, of course, God's Word, in particular the message of the Gospel. To the extent that we depart from it in this life, to that extent our experience of joy in God's presence is marred or lost. Glory of glories! In heaven such departures will be no more. Therefore the joy of heaven will be full and perfect in every way. Isaiah puts our entrance into heaven this way: "*Those whom the LORD has ransomed will return. They will enter Zion with singing. Everlasting joy will be on their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*" (Isaiah 35:10).

To say much more about the nature of our joy in heaven is to attempt a description of the indescribable. For, again, how do we begin to imagine a condition in which all sin and temptation and guilt are forever vanquished together with their painful consequences? St. Paul bids us be content with the assurance that God has given us for that joyous and eternal life when he says, "*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time do not deserve to be compared with the glory that is about to be revealed to us,*" (Romans 8:18), and, "*That is why we are not discouraged. Rather, even though our outward person is wasting away, our inward person is being renewed day by day.*"¹⁷ "*For our light and momentary trouble is producing for us an utterly extraordinary and eternal weight of glory.*"¹⁸ "*We do not look at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen. For the things that are seen are temporary, but the things that are not seen are eternal,*" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).