

“Missing Heaven”
Isaiah 65:17-25
April 13, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

The title of this sermon has a double meaning. “Missing heaven” can be understood as a place we can miss by failing to get there. I was in Philadelphia earlier this week and needed to catch a train from the airport to my destination in the city. I was on a tight schedule and the train from the airport runs every 30 minutes, at 13 and 43 minutes after the hour. My plane was about twenty minutes late getting in, and I arrived at the train at 45 minutes after the hour, missing it by 2 minutes and causing me to be about 30 minutes late to my destination. It is possible to miss heaven like I missed that train, except that the Bible teaches that there will be no opportunity to catch a second train to heaven. So we don’t want to miss our opportunity of getting to heaven.

There is a second sense of the words “missing heaven.” Heaven is that place our hearts long for even now, even if we are not aware of it. We miss heaven like we miss home when away from it, because we were designed by God for a heavenly home.

In our concluding sermon on the book of Isaiah, we’re going to focus on heaven. Throughout his book, Isaiah has blended the themes of judgment and hope. But there is a change as we move through the book. In the early part of the book, judgment was the dominant theme and hope less dominant. In the last part of the book, that emphasis is reversed, with hope being far more dominant than judgment. The difference is Isaiah 53, that great chapter featuring the work of the servant of the Lord, the one who was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. Because of him, we can have the bold confidence of entry into heaven. So let’s look today at the topic of heaven, beginning with a description of it and then concluding with a look at how a person can have confidence of getting there.

I. The Absent Things You Won’t Miss

Before we get into the specific description of heaven found here, I need to say a word about how this section of Scripture should be approached. If we don’t understand this language as metaphorical, I believe we will be led astray in our interpretation of this passage. A literal reading of this will yield a meaning that contradicts other passages in the Bible. For example, verse 20, interpreted literally, would say that there will be death in heaven, which contradicts this passage as well as many others. It says that **“the young man shall die a hundred years old.”** But verse 18 says that those in heaven will **“be glad and rejoice forever.”** Since dead people don’t rejoice, a literal

interpretation is impossible. If you think about it, it must be this way because we have an insufficient experience of things to grasp heaven in a literal way. If you were given the task of describing color to a blind person, you would have to resort to metaphor. A literal statement such as, “orange is a blend of yellow and red,” would be meaningless to someone who has never seen yellow and red. One of the encouraging implications of this metaphorical approach is to recognize that no matter how great the Bible describes heaven, the reality will be greater still. No matter how good a person can describe color to a blind person, when the blind is given sight, the reality will be far greater than the description.

The first category I would like us to focus on in Isaiah’s description of heaven is to consider all the bad things that are currently present in this fallen world, but will be absent in heaven. Notice three things in particular that make life on this earth so bitter and hard, all three of which will be absent in heaven. There will be no regret and sorrow, no meaninglessness and no curse. First, there will be no regret and sorrow. **“And the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind”** (v. 17). The former things Isaiah means are the **“former troubles”** of the previous verse, which summarizes all the trouble Israel had gotten itself into because of its sin. God says these will not even come to mind. Has your sin gotten you into trouble, so that every time you think about it your heart is flooded with regret? I think about some of my sinful failures as a pastor, as a father and as a husband, and it brings grief to my heart. Perhaps there is a broken marriage in your background, and your heart is filled with regret every time you think about it. If you could turn back the clock and live those years over again, you would do things very differently. I have pastored long enough to know that these regrets never completely leave us in this life. We never get over them as long as we live. So it is good news indeed to read that these former things which we cannot bring to mind without a flood of regret will never come into the mind again.

How will God do this? Does this just mean that in heaven we will be better at denial than we are in this life? Many people seem to succeed in not allowing the former things to come to mind by a successful effort at denial. Will heaven be characterized by the universal success of our efforts at denial? No, because the next verse tells us that the regret will be washed away in a flood of joy at what God has done. **“But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness”** (v. 18). The word *create* is significant there. In the Bible, when God creates something, he does so by bringing order out of chaos. We have made our lives chaotic by our sin, but God will do a miraculous work of transforming the tear-filled and sin-caused chaos of our lives. So if your selfishness as a husband or wife has ruined your marriage, in heaven you will look back on it and see that it was the crisis of the resulting divorce that God used to bring you to himself in a new way. God has redeemed your tears. Heaven will be a place where our regrets are dealt with not through denial, but through a flood of joy at God’s grace to us. Think with me about that phrase **“rejoice forever.”** Can you

imagine a situation of eternal joy? One of the difficulties of life in this fallen world is the sense of the dark cloud that is never far away. Even when we come to an oasis of joy in our lives, the joy is significantly reduced by the thought that we can't live in the oasis. We just know that times of sadness will continue as long as we have breath. Can you imagine a time when we will no longer be able to see any prospect of sorrow as far into the horizon as we can see? We will forget what sorrow feels like. **“No more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress”** (v. 19). Death is the cause of such sorrow in this life. The tragedy of a parent outliving a child will not occur in heaven.

In heaven there will be no meaninglessness. A common Old Testament way of describing the vanity or meaninglessness of life is to talk of someone laboring on something, only to have another enjoy the fruit of that labor. But in heaven, **“They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit”** (v. 21). We all desire that our work stand the test of time. No one wants to give years of their life to something that will be obsolete by the time it is finished. In the 2002 movie, *About Schmidt*, Jack Nicholson stars as Warren Schmidt, an executive for some Midwestern insurance company. He has given the decades of his work life to this company and is now retiring. Being a dutiful employee, he has carefully catalogued and boxed the years of his work, expecting it to be useful to his successor. One scene of the movie shows him returning to his office after his retirement to see if he can be of some assistance to this young man who has taken over for him. Upon hearing that there is nothing he can do to be of help, he leaves the office through the loading dock area and sees all his boxes, representing his life's work, piled up in the trash area awaiting removal. In heaven, there will be a restoration of our necessary connection with work. Heaven won't be a place of idle leisure, but a place where the original design of work will be fulfilled. We are created in God's image to do useful work, the kind that brings great joy to the heart, and in heaven it will be restored.

One more thing that will be absent from heaven is all vestiges of the fall of the human race into sin, with its many tragic and painful consequences in the world of nature. The wolf, the lion and the serpent symbolize the enmity between nature and humanity. God did not create the world to be a place of danger for humans, but one in which mankind would rule with a beneficent and wise hand. We still long for this. Several years ago, Wendy and I had the opportunity to go on a whale watch off the coast of New England. God was gracious, and we saw several humpback and finback whales come very close to our boat. Without realizing what she was doing, Wendy got so excited that she climbed the deck rail and had half her body over the edge of the boat. The captain had to ask the “lady who was hanging off the boat” to please get back inside the rail. She was longing for this return of harmony between mankind and nature. God will restore it, as he changes the very nature of the animals. The wolf will no longer devour the lamb, and the lamb will no longer fear the wolf. The lion's very nature will be changed from carnivorous to herbivorous,

and the serpent will finally get his due and eat dust for its food. No longer will he be able to trouble the human race.

II. The Present Things You Currently Miss

In the opening verse of this section, God says that he will **“create new heavens and a new earth”** (v. 17). To get the intended sense of this, we should understand it to be saying a *renewed* heavens and earth. Heaven will be the result of a restoration project, not a “do-over” that wipes out the old and starts all over again. It’s like the earth is a grand old building, reflecting the genius of its architect and builder. But the tenants of the building have abused it, and now it’s but a faint reflection of its former glory. But the day is coming when God himself will completely renovate his house, and the entire creation will be restored and even more beautiful than the original. So eternity in heaven will actually be lived on the earth. Our eternal life will feel like coming home for the first time. There will be a deep sense that finally things are as they should be. The first time we bite into an apple, we will recognize it as an apple, but it will be different too. “So this is what an apple is supposed to be!” we will exclaim.

Just as the rebellion of our human race got us into the troubles our world is in, so it will be the full restoration of our relationship with God that will characterize heaven. Note the description of this relationship in verse 24. **“Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.”** Prayer will be answered so immediately that it is as if God anticipated the request and began answering it before it was made. What does this indicate? It means that there will be a perfect harmony between God and man in heaven. We will want the same things God wants, and it will be our nature to do so. Never will we ask in prayer for something that is informed by our selfishness.

III. The People Who Will Miss Heaven

The previous point really addresses this matter. Since heaven will be characterized by a perfect harmony between God and man, the people who will miss heaven are those who have not been so transformed by God as to be in harmony with him. How, then, do we get transformed by God? The first half of this chapter is tied to the half we read by the little connecting word *for* (v. 17). The first half contrasts those who will be judged by God with those God blesses. It is those blessed of God who will be with him in the next life.

I would like for us to notice just one feature of those who miss heaven and are judged by God. It’s also the thing God uses to transform us. Those who miss heaven don’t repent. They don’t repent because they are completely out of touch with their sin. Notice the difference between God’s view of their sinfulness and their own perspective. Verses 2-4 describe God’s view. He spreads out his hands to them all day, calling them to repent. But they don’t

respond. Instead, they **“provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and making offerings on bricks”** (v. 3). In the Old Testament, God specified every last detail of the way offerings were to be made to him. They were to use uncut stones in the construction of their altars (Ex. 20:25). This symbolized an important truth—that true religion was not about human initiative, but about God’s initiative. It’s not a matter of what you can do for God, but about what he has promised to do for you. But they were disobedient in an area where obedience would not have been difficult. Using uncut stones would be even easier than digging, forming and firing bricks. But notice their view of their own righteousness. They say to others, **“Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you”** (v. 5). They viewed themselves as being so much more holy than others that they couldn’t associate with them.

The way not to miss heaven is to repent of sin. Do you receive the convicting work of God’s Spirit and let it lead you to repentance? Let me offer a couple of examples of repentance. I heard of someone this week who was tardy in returning a phone call. It was the kind of call that should have been returned in a couple of days, but was instead returned in three weeks. When the caller did so, he did it with a repentant heart. He didn’t glibly say, “Sorry not to have gotten back to you sooner than I did.” Rather, he said, “I need to ask your forgiveness. I have not cared for you as I ought and I am so sorry for that.” That’s a repentant heart. Let me give an example from my own life. As I read and meditated on verse 2 this week, that God has been **“spreading out his hands all the day”** (v. 2), patiently waiting on me to follow him, I was convicted of my sin of prayerlessness. I saw God as being so patient with me in my practice of so often just going through the motions of prayer, but not having a heart of prayer. Instead of resisting that thought, God granted me a sorrowful and repentant heart. We can’t repent like this unless we know and trust that we have a sin-bearer. Jesus is that sin-bearer, the servant of the Lord spoken of in Isaiah 53. We are transformed as we repent and believe in him.

CONCLUSION:

Let me close with two applications. First, since repentance is the way we avoid missing heaven, pray that God would search your heart and show you your sin.

The second application is to remember that this life is your journey and heaven is your destination, if you have repented and believed in Jesus. I am willing to put up with great discomfort if I know something is just part of the journey. But my heart is fixed on heaven, my home. Christians are called to be willing to live for others, even if doing so leads to suffering. We do so because this is just our journey. Heaven is our home.