

# “Eternity in our Hearts”

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-11



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This was not the sermon I had planned to share. I was going to repeat the one that I did last week at the Memphis campus. You know, if it was good, it ought to be good twice. But then yesterday, I did a funeral (we have been doing a lot of those lately), and I began to think about how distorted our views of eternity are, compared to the way Jesus saw it. So I invite you to think with me in some new ways about heaven, hell and eternal life. I have entitled this sermon, “Eternity in our Hearts.”

The teacher in Ecclesiastes writes,

**“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” (3:11)**

Most religions of the world have some form eternal life in which they believe. The Jews have Paradise and Sheol. Hindus achieve Nirvana. The Kamakaze pilots believed they were earning it when they did suicide missions into our ships in World War II. The Muslim zealots believe their self-surrender and giving of their lives in war will do the same for them. Christians believe in heaven and hell. It seems to indeed be true that “God has placed eternity in the hearts of men and women and boys and girls.”

What people seem to be unable to accept is that eternity cannot be fully understood. After preaching for 25 years and standing at more than 400 gravesides, I am sure of one thing, that eternity has been fully misunderstood. For instance, let’s talk about hell for a minute. I have been told all my life that “God sends people to hell.” Yet, I read in scripture that “God is not willing that any should perish but all should find eternal life.”

I have been told all my life that “hell is for all those who do not except Jesus Christ as their personal savior.” When I read the Bible, I find that hell was made “for the devil and his angels,” not for people. When Jesus talked about hell it was more often about hypocritical believers than non-believers. It was for rich people who ignored the plight of poor people. Hell was a place where wickedness of soul, heart and mind exacted its full punishment. As a choir director in college I sat there as the pastor preached a 45-minute sermon to a congregation that was targeted at saving a severely mentally handicapped girl in that congregation, so she would come forward and not have to go to hell. Tina remembers as a first grade girl the preacher scaring her so badly that she ran forward saying, “I don’t want to go to hell. I don’t want to go to hell.” How far that is from the words of Jesus, **“Let the children come to me and do to not hold them back, for such is the kingdom of God.”** Yes, John 3:16 says that when we believe in him we “have everlasting life.” We’ll talk about that one a little later. Yes, the book of Jude says that we are to save people “as from the flames.” But contemporary preaching has gone too far. It was the Puritans and Jonathan Edwards who decided the best way to bring somebody to Jesus was to scare hell out of them. When are we going to figure out that people can be scared much better at the movie theater, by watching the Exorcist or the Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> series?

Where is hell anyway? Some early writers thought it was somewhere in the depths of the earth. Earth is pretty hot at its core! When Jesus talked about hell in the bible, he was referring to a literal place. The

word in Greek is “Gehenna” and it was a garbage heap outside of Jerusalem. There trash, refuse and even unclaimed bodies were placed and periodically burned. The odor was awful and the burning was horrific. The bible doesn’t tell us where hell is. But here is my biggest beef with hell-centered preachers and teachers. They actually believe that if the person professes faith in Jesus Christ, then the hell question is answered and the biggest issue has been settled. In reading Jesus, I think that he was more into getting people out of earthly hell than keeping them out of eternal hell. In fact, I believe one of the things that makes American Christianity so shallow at times is that we think once we have said the sinners prayer, hell is no longer a problem. I think it is a problem. And we have families and individuals who sit in church and they are going through a living hell pretending everything is just fine. Worse, we have a world around us experiencing hell and we do nothing about it. Those Muslims don’t believe in Jesus anyway. They’re going to hell. Who cares? That’s all right. The Muslims think the same about us. We’re infidels and they think we are going to hell. In the meantime, we have a hell on earth that religious people are propagating. I want to suggest that Christians should have a lot more humility about hell, and that we should be committed even more to getting people out of it here than keeping them from it in the hereafter. That’s the hell we can do most about.

Now let’s get to better news. For I also notice that people have got heaven all figured out. I have been told all my life that heaven is “paved with streets of gold,” “we will all be playing harps,” and “we will sing God’s praises continuously.” The truth is that heaven is described differently in every place. Like hell, heaven is described as a metaphor for something so beautiful that it defies description. When John described heaven in Revelation, he was reaching. When he describes the walls of the New Jerusalem, they architecturally could never stand up, but he is describing the indescribable. It is beautiful and its bigger than he can say, which begins to address a previous question. There’s room for everybody up there. But is heaven “up there?” I don’t know. The only way to know what heaven is like is to go there. And I’m not ready yet. I do know that heaven is disease-free, war-free, pain-free, bigotry-free, famine-free, sin-free and death-free. I don’t know much more. But that’s enough.

But again, my beef with those who preach and teach about heaven is that they have failed to understand Jesus on what eternal life is. Heaven is not just about the future. When Jesus told us “that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life,” he was talking about now as much as then. Eternal life is as much about quality of life as about length of life. In fact, I believe that you and I are drawn together at St. Luke’s Lubbock, in the words of Man of La Mancha, “to march into hell for a heavenly cause,” and also to dilute hell with heaven. I believe there is hell is because the Bible says it exists and I have seen it here on earth. I believe there is heaven because the Bible says it exists and I have seen it here.

You have been surrounded by the gift of eternity all your life. When your mother held you as a baby and took care that you were fed, she was passing on a love that was given her by her mother. In that love was more than milk. It was love that says “you belong to me.” In that love was a glimpse of eternity. When Sunday school teachers and parents and other people told you about God’s love and you were surrounded by a church family, you were given a glimpse of eternity. When I was fourteen years old and I invited Christ into my life, I had the experience of being loved like I had never been loved before, and I experienced an even bigger glimpse of eternity.

At the birth of our own children, I saw life in both its earthiness and holiness and I saw a glimpse of eternity. I have moments in worship where in the music of the choir or the joy on faces that I transcend the limits of earth and space and experience eternity. I have experienced times in the wonder of creation – standing against the wind, rowing against the tide and standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon and experienced glimpses of eternity – that place that is filled with God-wonder and God-grace. I have seen answers to prayer and I have seen the surrounding community of the Church when we didn’t get the

answers we wanted and I have seen eternity. This past week as I heard 288 children singing “And your feet I stand and listen” with hands raised, I wept as I caught a glimpse of eternity.

That is why I believe that when we get to heaven we will not find heaven strange at all. For we will have seen so much of it before. It will just be more, and it will be forever. In the meantime, we are called to bring more of heaven to this earth. We invite people to follow Christ. We demonstrate the love of Christ. We receive the love of Christ from other people and allow them the joy of being part of things eternal. I have been told before, “Give ‘em hell.” But I shall choose to give ‘em heaven and for those in hell, I shall choose to love it out of them. “God has planted eternity in our hearts.” God only plants what he expects to grow. May God grow heaven all around you. And all the people said, AMEN.