

Title: Longing for a Home in a Better Country
Date: May 21, 2017
Subject: Heaven
Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:1-10; Hebrews 11:14-16, John 14:2-3

Five years ago in August Jean and I, our kids Nate and Tiffani, their spouses Sierra and Mark and grandson Caleb took a trip out West for 17 days. The trip was memorable for many reasons. We went to places I had never been – Yellowstone, Glacier National Park, Jackson Hole, the Grand Tetons. There was the grandeur of God’s majestic creation as seen in the mountains. We saw lots of bison, deer, antelope, goats, one bear but no moose. Nate really wanted to see a moose. An unexpected thrill was to fly in a four passenger plane piloted by my nephew. Some didn’t want to go up, thinking a crash would put a damper on the outset of the vacation. Almost forgot, we stopped at Mount Rushmore, The Corn Palace and Wall Drug.

The expedition was also memorable for what came to be known as “Black Thursday.” Everyone but Caleb and I got sick as we travelled to Lincoln for Jean’s parents’ 60th anniversary celebration. The blame was placed on the restaurant we ate at on Wednesday evening in Laramie. Not a pleasant experience as one after another succumbed and we repeatedly had to pull over on busy I-80 so someone could throw up.

We survived and look back on the trip with fond memories. As wonderful as the trip was, the anticipation was, as is often said, half the fun. Get brochures from the parks. Check out the internet. Plan the itinerary -- the route, sights to see, places to stay, restaurants, ice cream shops. Check the long range weather forecast and the normal temperatures so we’d know what clothes to pack. Get a vehicle to carry all of us and our stuff. Not enough room. Add a car top carrier. Make and buy snacks. A lot of preparation and anticipation. Truth be told, there were times the anticipation outperformed the reality of the experience. Didn’t see any moose, the Tetons could have been grander, the weather could have been nicer, done without the forest fires.

Does that ever happen to you? You look forward to something with great anticipation – the release of a movie, graduation, driver’s license, job, Christmas gifts -- and when the thing happens, it isn’t all it was cracked up to be? There’s kind of a letdown. We can anticipate that our anticipation, the looking forward with excitement, is sometimes the best part.

It’s not going to be true of heaven. It will far out-perform any and all expectations. All of the anticipation will be blown out of the water by the reality. There won’t be any let down. “Oh, is this all there is? I thought there’d be more. It’d be bigger. More impressive.” The movie Field of Dreams has a baseball

player emerge from the cornfield to ask the Kevin Costner character, “Is this heaven?” “No, it’s Iowa.” Now as nice as Iowa is to some people, most would be disappointed if a baseball diamond in a cornfield was heaven. The same is true of John Denver’s song “Country Road” in which he opines about West Virginia being “almost heaven.” Nice, but heaven?

For whatever reason, many followers of Christ don’t anticipate heaven enough. They don’t think about it and plan for it as they do a vacation. It seems they’re content to get the base covered on getting to heaven but then spend little time thinking about the place where they will spend time without end.

A lot has happened the last two weeks to make me think more about heaven. Jean and I left two Sundays ago to see her dad who was then in the hospital. While at their home I noticed a book on the coffee table. I started reading and found it absorbing. It’s called “A Better Country: Preparing for Heaven.” I’ll weave in some of the author Dan Schaeffer’s insights beginning with this: “For years we have been warned, ‘Be careful of being so heavenly minded that you are no earthly good.’ Most of the Christians I’ve met are in little danger of that. They think such small, impoverished thoughts about heaven, yet most will profess that they can’t wait to get there. You will often find, however, that someone’s desire to go to heaven is far more attached to some current trial or suffering they want to escape on earth rather than a desire for their idea of heaven itself. When the trial passes and their earthly lives get better, often their passionate desire to go to heaven subsides. Heaven for some, is mere escapism from trouble... If you ask the average Christian what heaven is going to be like, you often get little more than ‘It’s going to be beautiful,’ or ‘It will be perfect.’ Certainly we know that emotionally we’ll be far better off, but there tends to be very little discussion of anything more specific since we’ve become hesitant to consider clear biblical allusions to heaven as anything more than symbolic. But what will it be like to live there?” (Schaeffer, p. 19).” (Dan Schaeffer, A Better Country, p. 12, 19).

Let’s hook to Scripture. Begin in 2 Corinthians 5. We touched on heaven two weeks ago when we studied Job and Paul. They lived their lives not according to feelings which they certainly had, but by faith. We don’t deny that we have feelings/emotions, just don’t base our approach to life on them. Had the TobyMac song “Keep Walkin.” Still not going to imitate him. Now look at part of the “why” we live the way we do.

READ 2 Corinthians 5:1-10.

Two homes – a home on earth and a home in heaven. The passage deals with the initial state after death, but the concept of home carries forward to when the true being is clothed with the glorified body at the resurrection. The home in heaven is mentioned three times as home (1, 8, 9) and twice as heavenly

dwelling (2, 4). It's a building made by God in contrast with what human hands throw together. It's not some flimsy shack made of wood, brick, steel, concrete, and stone. The luxury hotels in Vegas will get old and be blown up or torn down to make room for newer structures. European medieval castles have lasted for 1000 years but needed to be extensively retrofitted to be modern residences. God is building something that will not only stand the test of time but of all eternity. It won't wear out, get run down, crumble because of wind and rain.

These words about our heavenly home are frequently heard at funerals and grave side services. The idea of being at home with the Lord came up at the funeral for Jean's dad. Jean and Nate spoke as well as Jean's sister Colleen and her niece Nicki reading words her dad wrote. They celebrated Don's life by sharing about his wit, the example he set and his faith in Christ.

The pastor also shared memories, saying he sometimes called Mr. Essink dad because of the vital relationship started in his teen years. He said Don was an ordinary man. He wasn't rich or famous, and hadn't made extraordinary accomplishments according to the world's view. Then he asked, "What difference does it make now? None, the only thing that matters is that Don prepared for heaven by placing his trust in Jesus Christ as Savior. And now he's enjoying his home in heaven and those other things don't matter."

Schaeffer elaborates on the importance of home. "Home. The place I belong. The place I am known. The place I want to return to over and over again. It is such a precious word. It means so many things all at once; family, friends, buildings, rooms, familiarity, love, belonging, security, roots, and memories. There is no other word exactly like it. Home is a place of retreat, comfort, and security, where we enjoy special relationships with family. Fond memories, sights, sounds and smells remind us we are home, and, when we are away from it, make us long to return...Home on earth was never meant to be more than a shadow of our eternal home in heaven, because at its best, it cannot completely fulfill its promise to us. We are always left wanting more, hoping for more out of home, watching sadly as what we cared for most is slowly taken from us. As C. S. Lewis poignantly asked, "Has the world been so kind to you that you would leave it with regret: There are better things ahead than any we leave behind" (A Better Country, pp. 66, 67).

Even though Paul adamantly prefers to be at home with the Lord, he insists there's no need to hurry. He's quite content to exist in this home for a little while longer. He knows that we'll have plenty of time to enjoy the heavenly home with the Lord.

A second passage is Hebrews 11:13-16. Abraham's example of faith is interrupted by comments about all the people of the past who have operated by faith. READ Hebrews 11:13-16.

“They were looking for a better country.” They did the comparison. They could see what this world offers. They experienced its pleasures and wonders. They had the option of putting their focus and energy into this world. Yet, this world, as good and nice as it might be, was viewed as a distant second to what was to come even though what was to come was relatively unknown, a shadow. It didn’t matter because they placed their trust in the Lord and knew him.

Abraham is the example du jour. He looked forward to the city built by God (v. 10). He had ample opportunity to expand his influence in Ur and Haran. He could become the greatest man in the area. He chose to act upon God’s promise and followed him to a better earthly place—Canaan. He made a home, but it was a temporary home. The promise of the earthly land didn’t satisfy his soul. He viewed himself as an alien and stranger. He looked for, longed for a permanent home. It was yet to come. The reality is that this world is the shadow and the next is the real. Every once in a while heaven’s shadow crosses our paths.

All the heroes of faith viewed earthly life the same way. Temporary. A tent. They were moving on. They had opportunity to return to the country they’d left if they were thinking of a physical country. They chose not to go back. They left it physically but they also left this world emotionally and psychologically and spiritually. They chose to focus on the better country, the city God prepared.

Jean’s mom’s pastor graciously asked me as a son-in-law to participate in the funeral service. He wanted me to read Ephesians 2:1-10 as his message would be based on it and then one that I would pick and then pray. John 14 came to mind.

Jesus said he was going to prepare a place for his disciples, a special place unlike anything any person has known. Some say that each individual will have a unique place tailored for that individual, specifically suited for that person and what he is to receive. It’s sometimes lightheartedly stated that the Lord created the world in six days, so if he’s been working on heaven for almost 2000 years, it’s going to be pretty good. It’s a place where we will never be hurt again nor will we hurt anyone with our words or action. It’s place of total love. Everyone we meet will love us as we have longed to be loved and we will love the same way.

Schaeffer, “It would be good for us to ask ourselves what better or more perfect heaven could be imagined. What better atmosphere could be dreamed of? What better future could be planned for us? What better solution for the transformation of both people and institutions and even the physical universe could be hoped for?” (A Better Country, p. 163).

The promises of Christ prompted Joe Stowell, pastor and author, to write, “The mission of Christ was never intended to culminate at the cross. The cross and the empty grave were merely a means to kick the door of heaven open for us so that we could go home to be with Him. Home is where you feel comfortable,

secure, safe, and in peace. In a very real sense, Jesus Christ had become the disciples' home away from home. As long as they were with Him, they felt at home. That is exactly why they were so traumatized when He told them that He was leaving them (John 13, 14)" (Eternity: Reclaiming Passion for what Endures, p. 74).

We come back to the idea of home. Jesus is home. Comfortable, secure, safe, and in peace. Separation from him evokes dis-ease and distress.

One of the interesting things is that we have the opportunity to furnish our heavenly home. In the past few weeks I've come across a number of verses of Scripture in my daily reading that have to do with getting ready for heaven. One is "Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:18, 19). Sounds a lot like Jesus who tells us to actively "store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matthew 6:20). Wise people are engaged in building treasures and bringing greater pleasure to the Lord through their service.

Lewis, "If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope of the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is not part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We're halfhearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased" (The Weight of Glory, p. 26).

May need some helps in preparing and looking forward. Created a list of verses on anticipating heaven. Most will have a quick connection to how we are to live. You can do your own search. Also a list of songs about heaven.

Schaeffer's closing challenge, "It is a mistake to believe that our thoughts of heaven are irrelevant to our present lives. It is precisely your belief or doubt about the reality of heaven that drives many of your most important decisions and values...Our faith will determine what we invest in for eternity. Maybe we need to truly ask ourselves what we *really* believe. We too glibly give lip service to certain truths but don't really live as if they are true. Do you believe there is a heaven waiting for you? Do you believe the next world is eternal and therefore far superior to this one? Do you believe what Jesus said when He warned us not to lay up for ourselves treasure on this earth, but in heaven? Do you believe we ought to really set our minds on things above and not on things on this earth? Do you believe that your works done on this earth will one day be

judged to determine your eternal reward? Do you believe that you have limited time to prepare for eternity? If you've answered yes to these questions, there is one more question to ask: Are you living as if that is true?" (Schaeffer, pp. 12, 147). Then he asks two more questions – "Has your life been changed by this truth? How are you, right now, preparing for heaven?"