

Sermon: How to Get to Heaven

Text: II Peter 1:3-11

Gary L. Wackler

January 25, 2009

Introduction: After a long illness, a woman died and arrived at the gates of heaven. While she was waiting for Saint Peter to greet her, she peeked through the gates. She saw that it was so beautiful.

Saint Peter came by; the woman said to him “This is such a wonderful place! How do I get in?”

“You have to spell a word”, Saint Peter told her.

“What word?” the woman asked.

“Love.”

The woman correctly spelled “Love” and Saint Peter welcomed her into Heaven.

About six months later, Saint Peter came to the woman and asked her to watch the gates of heaven for him that day. While the woman was guarding the gates of heaven, her husband arrived.

“I’m surprised to see you,” the woman said. “How have you been?” “Oh, I’ve been doing pretty well since you died,” her husband told her. “I married the beautiful young nurse who took care of you while you were ill. And then I won the lottery. I sold the little house you and I lived in and bought a big mansion. And my wife and I traveled all around the world. We were on vacation and I was water skiing today when I fell, the ski hit my head, and here I am. How do I get in?”

“You have to spell a word”, the woman told him.

“What word?” her husband asked.

“Czechoslovakia.”

Thankfully getting into heaven does not require a spelling test. There are some requirements, however, because not everyone goes to heaven just because they think they are. Currently, if you go to your computer and type in “heaven” and do a search on Google, you can look at over 15,100,000 entries. There certainly is no lack of information to be found. Shows like *Ghost Whisperer* and *Medium* while possibly entertaining, should not be used to understand heaven. There is only one dependable source of truth about heaven and how to get there, and that is the Bible. We may laugh about jokes regarding heaven and hell, but really this is serious business.

In a Harris poll taken recently, 82 percent of Americans said they believed in heaven, and of these, 63 percent said they were likely to go there. Only 1 percent said they were going to hell. Since the mid-1970's, the percentage of Americans who believe in the afterlife has increased slightly, even though other ways of measuring religious belief, including attending services or identifying with a particular faith, have declined, according to surveys by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

It seems to me that how one gets to heaven is like going on a journey. It also seems to me that how one gets to heaven is a lot like a vacation to see family where one just stays. Yes, we're still talking about heaven. We took a couple of short trips around the holidays recently to see our family. Why? Because they love us, and we love them. If that were not the case we would never plan time and sacrifice money to make these short-trips.

Before we go on these trips we need to let our family know that we are coming. They need to prepare to make sure everything is ready. They also have sacrificed for us to come to take care of us while we are there.

I hear a lot of talk, just like you, how uncle Joe that just died is in heaven even though I never saw anything to indicate while he was alive that he was a follower of Jesus Christ. People who go to heaven are expected because they enjoyed God's company and His people while they lived on earth. They came to faith in God through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Listen to the opening verses of this second epistle of Peter's.

II Peter 1:1-2 (NIV) ¹Simon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours: ²Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

It is clear from the very beginning:

I. God Has Made Provisions for His People (vv. 3-4).

II Peter 1:3-4 (NIV) ³His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

A. God called us to live godly lives (v. 3).

God has taken the initiative with us and chosen us to be a part of the family.

John Charles Ryle once said, “If you cannot give your heart to God now, how is it possible you could enjoy God’s heaven hereafter.” (quote from his sermon on “Heaven” taken from Classic Sermons on Heaven and Hell compiled by Warren Wiersbe, p. 44)

Living a virtuous life, one that honors God, ought to be our primary desire.

Everything we do should reflect God’s glory (*doxa* used 10 times in I Peter and 5 times in II Peter) and goodness (*aretas*).

Christians are to show forth the *aretas* (goodness) of their Redeemer not just in word, but in deed as well. The Christian’s life is about imitation of Christ Jesus.

B. God made promises to us (v. 4).

I Thessalonians 4:7-8 (NIV) ⁷For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. ⁸Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.

God does not give us everything we ask for, but everything we need. The Holy Spirit helps us to be like our Father. Without that gift it is impossible to be with God.

Speaking to the Church, Paul makes it clear.

Romans 8:9 (NIV) ⁹You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.

C. God provided escape from this evil world (v. 4).

This escape happens clearly at our baptism when we make a break with what the world wants and begin to seek what God wants. It is an escape from what is dying and fading away compared to eternal life with God.

This does not mean we are not in the world. It does mean we no longer share its values or eternal destination. We can live life that is truly life with the power of God. We escape destruction and separation from God because we are taking a different path. Our guide is the Holy Spirit.

II. God Encourages Progress by His People (vv. 5-10).

II Peter 1:5-10 (NIV) ⁵For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. ⁸For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. ¹⁰Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall,

Green in his commentary (Tyndale, Revised Ed. 2 Peter and Jude, p. 75) calls this: “The Ladder of Faith.” The next three verses form a catalog of qualities to be found in those who follow Christ. Baptism may be the point at which we escape this evil world, but it is only the beginning of this “new life.”

“Moffatt’s quotes a cynic’s description of Christian experience as ‘an initial spasm followed by a chronic inertia.’” - Green, p. 76

We cannot live long on the spiritual memories and thin diet of experiences of the past. We must create new ones, more recent ones. That is exactly why Peter says that we must “add to faith” which is really the foundation of this new life. There are also a number of other qualities. Love ends the list. That is how we are to be motivated as Christians (loving God and our neighbor). We must cooperate with God as he richly supplies us with what we need. We need:

A. to live a virtuous life (vv. 5-7).

faith - is the first requirement; and we need to build our faith through study, prayer and godly action. The false teachers of Peter’s time who live on today were saying that since Christians were justified by faith morality was not important.

goodness - is the idea of excellence. It is said that “the excellence of a knife is to cut, of a horse to run.” But what is the excellence of man? Peter says it is to be Christlike. It is the quality that leads others to commit their lives to God and for his purposes.

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self-control - is not just about food and drink and whatever else may go into the body or be done by the body, but also what goes into the mind. It is submission to Christ’s control. It is a fruit of the Spirit ([Galatians 5:23](#)).

perseverance - is that “temper of mind which is unmoved by difficulty and distress.” It is the “difference between a star and a meteor.” - Green, p. 78

It is an attitude of “no matter what happens” I will not walk away from my promises.

It is the same attitude of our Lord Jesus Christ from whom we should take example.

Hebrews 12:2 (NIV) ²Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

“We are enabled to see our apparent misfortunes in the calm light of eternity.” - Green, p. 78

It is the big-picture perspective and a view of the end-game we have in mind!

godliness - is a reverence for God that works itself out in proper behavior that honors him.

brotherly kindness - is a way of knowing whether a person is of God and “born again.” On a practical level it is about “bearing one another’s burdens.” This is a critical test of *genuine* faith.

I John 4:20 (NIV) ²⁰If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

love - is a word that is used loosely about anything from the weather to Reggae music to escargot. But this love in our text is God’s love. It might be defined “as a deliberate desire for the highest good of the one loved, which shows itself in sacrificial action for the person’s good.” - Green, p. 80

Paul defines it:

I Corinthians 13:4-8a, 13 (NIV) ⁴Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸Love never fails. ¹³And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

While many of these attributes might be found in our pagan neighbors who without a relationship with Jesus will not be going to heaven, the difference is motivation. For whom do we live our lives? Only “God” is the answer that will bring eternal life and a home in heaven.

B. to live a productive life (v. 8).

Just like in the physical world - “lack of spiritual growth is a sign of spiritual death.”
- Green, p. 81

It is a deep knowledge of Jesus Christ that will provide for a good foundation in our lives. It should be our goal to know Jesus better every day.

Philippians 3:10-11 (NIV) ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

An example of how Jesus felt about nonproductiveness is found in the parable of a fig tree (**Luke 13:6ff.**).

C. to live an alert life (v. 9).

Jesus often talks of blindness and distractions that keep us from seeing the truth and following him. It is one of the devil’s strategies to keep us busy with the wrong things. Paul told the church:

II Corinthians 4:4 (NIV) ⁴The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

A lot of things may look right and even seem right, but if they are not from God, they lead to death. And if this is a short-sightedness in v. 9 that means an intentional closing of one’s eyes, there can be no hope for heaven. Unrepentant sin brings death and separation from God.

D. to live a victorious life (v. 10).

We must follow God. There must be an earnestness and diligence to our following God. There is no place for half-hearted, lukewarm disciples. We dare not have attitudes of just doing what is good enough to get by. Our Lord demands, expects, and is entitled to our very best out of love for what he has done for us (salvation) and his precious promise of his present and eternal presence (heaven).

III. God Has Made Promises to His People (v. 11).

II Peter 1:11 (NIV) ¹¹and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

A. to welcome us to heaven.

Not just any welcome, but a rich welcome, like a homecoming beyond our imagination. Heaven is described physically by extraordinary opulence and beauty. God will be there to take up all our attention.

Revelation 21:4 (NIV) ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Heaven will be free from everything that is not good and holy. There will be joy and happiness which sometimes can be misplaced here on earth. It will be perfect.

B. that our stay will be eternal.

We were never meant to die and suffer. God has always wanted us to be his people who would shout forth his praises. Eternal life is only found in and through Jesus Christ. John understood this when he wrote:

John 3:36 (NIV) ³⁶Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”

John 6:40 (NIV) ⁴⁰For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

To get to heaven, you must put your faith in Jesus Christ and follow Him.

Conclusion: All of this, of course, is by God’s grace. No virtuous life, no matter how admirable, assures anyone heaven. Yet with God’s help those who have committed their lives through faith and in love to serve Jesus will find a welcome place around the family table - and we will be home forever.

Heaven is like a journey, and like any journey, there may be difficult times, even dangerous travel, but we have a God who goes with us in every situation. God works patiently with us to help us develop and grow into an adult of whom any parent would be proud.

The difference between a pagan and a Christian is not that one is bad and the other good, or that a pagan is immoral and out-of-control where a Christian is moral and self-controlled. The difference is who they live for. If a person does not live for God, no matter how good he appears, heaven is not where that person will be found.

I hope you both know and love Jesus, today and that you want to live your life in such a way as to always provide a godly example to others. God, the Father wants you to take the journey and come home.

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