

THE HOPE OF HEAVEN



GRIEF COURSE

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Grief Course

THE HOPE OF HEAVEN

Week 8

The seventh and final need for those who grieve is our need for an afterlife and being reunited with our loved ones in heaven. A recent *Pew Research Study* found nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults say they believe in heaven. Two-thirds of U.S. adults believe that deceased people are reunited with loved ones in heaven.

And yet there are many people who do not believe in an afterlife in heaven. Some believe in oblivion after death. While others believe an individual may be reborn into this world and begin the life cycle over again, likely with no memory of what they have done in the past.

It's been said, "There are no atheists in foxholes." Research psychologists argue that religion was born from a fear of death when people faced their own mortality. Times of extreme stress or fear can prompt belief in a higher power and afterlife. Such a sudden change in belief has been called a foxhole conversion.

I think about the conversation Jesus had with the two criminals on the crosses next to him. Although one of the criminals crucified with Jesus poured abuse on him and taunted him, other reprimanded his fellow criminal and then directed a request to Jesus: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). Jesus replied, "I solemnly assure you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). "Paradise" refers to the dwelling place of the righteous dead, a literal heaven, the place where God dwells.

After Jackie died, heaven became more real to me and our family than ever before. I formed a close attachment to heaven. I know it, I feel it, I long for it. Those of you that have lost a loved one know may know exactly what I'm talking about. I researched heaven and I did a sermon series on it at church just weeks after Jackie died. Heaven is the ultimate hope for every believer, to "dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Psalm 23:6).

GOD PUT ETERNITY INTO EVERY HUMAN HEART

Have you ever felt like there is something else after death? I sure have. C.S. Lewis said, "If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world." The band Switchfoot, echoed this sentiment in *Meant to Live* with these lyrics:

"We want more than this world's got to offer
We want more than the wars of our fathers
And everything inside screams for second life
We were meant to live for so much more."

The wise King Solomon wrote God has "set eternity in the human heart" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). And with that awareness of eternity comes a hope that we can one day find a fulfillment not afforded by the "vanity" in this world.

"In the human heart" is talking about our mind, soul, and spirit. I believe we are spiritual beings, first and foremost, and that we live in physical bodies. Our spirit is eternal while our bodies on this earth are temporal. Yet we will receive new bodies in heaven (2 Corinthians 5:1-5). Solomon says God places eternity into our heart and soul.

The word "eternity" (Hebrew = *olam*) refers to God's placing an eternal longing or sense of eternity in the human heart. I believe this longing is twofold. It's a longing to know God and it's a longing to spend eternity with God in heaven.

A Longing for God

This longing to know God was expressed by St. Augustine in his *Confessions*, "Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee."

Humans operate in a different way than any other life forms. Animals don't have a longing to know God or for heaven. We have a sense of eternity in our lives; we possess an innate knowledge that there is something more to life than what we can see and experience in the here and now. Psalm 42:1-2 says, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Jesus knew how burdened we can become by life and so offers an open invitation to anyone who is laboring under a heavy toll and seeks to find rest for their soul. Who better to carry our load than God Himself and Jesus, being God, can carry what we are not able to carry including our grief. Come to Him and He promises to give you rest.

A Longing for Heaven

Our longing for Heaven is seen in a song, not the song of the decade, but voted the song of the century. I'm referring to *Over the Rainbow* sung by Judy Garland in the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. It's interesting that the first verse of the original tune was omitted from the movie. The popular version starts with the chorus. Songs don't normally start with the chorus but this one did. Here are the lyrics to the original song that you've probably never heard before:

"When all the world is a hopeless jumble, and the raindrops tumble, all around,

Heaven opens a magic lane.

When all the clouds darken up the sky way, there's a rainbow highway to be found.

Leading from your windowpane to a place behind the sun,

Just a step beyond the rain.

Then the song goes into the chorus:

"Somewhere over the rainbow, Way up high

There's a land that I heard of Once in a lullaby.

Somewhere over the rainbow

Skies are blue

And the dreams that you dare to dream Really do come true.

God Gave Jackie Glimpses of Heaven

The greatest job I ever had was taking my Jackie to get a hamster. Jackie loved animals and always wanted a hamster. Before her diagnosis getting a hamster was her favorite subject to talk about. Now, my wife and I are not fans of the rodent. Why in the world do people want to have rodents (rats, mice, gerbils, and hamsters) as pets and keep them in their homes is beyond me. The reality was our neurosurgeon told us that Jackie was going to die soon so we figured why not get her a hamster. Carrie assigned me the task of taking Jackie to the Roseville pet store to pick out a hamster. I don't think I've ever seen her more excited than in that moment.

A Hamster Named Emily

We drove to the pet store, and she carefully examined all the hamsters, picking up each one of one up and holding them, ten in all. She finally chose a baby brown and white dwarf hamster. It was a girl. She named her hamster "Emily."

Jackie held Emily on our drive home from the pet store. I will never forget that day. It was a sunny spring day, and I had my Volvo sunroof open, and the sun was beaming down on us. Jackie turned and looked at me quizzically and asked, "Daddy, when I get to heaven, will I see Jesus right away?" I assured her that when she got to heaven that she would indeed see Jesus immediately. She smiled.

A few seconds later she asked, "When I get to heaven, will I get to see Grandpa?" Her Grandpa, my dad, had passed away a year earlier. She really loved her grandpa, and it was the first time Jackie ever lost someone she loved. I assured her that she would get to see Grandpa in heaven and be reunited with him.

Then she paused for a moment, turned, and looked at me while holding Emily up in her right hand and asked, "Daddy, can I take Emily with me to heaven?"

The first two questions were easy. This one was a bit more difficult to answer. I thought for a moment. I knew the correct theological answer, but I assured her and said, "Yes Jackie, you can take Emily with you to heaven – we can arrange that!" She grinned from ear to ear with delight.

Then I looked over at her and asked, "Sweetie, you don't really think you're going to die do you?" I'll never forget her response. She looked at me square in the eye, smiled and said, "Silly daddy, we are all going to die someday." Wow. Her answer took my breath away. Out of the mouths of babes.

Looking back, I see how amazing that conversation really was. God was preparing my baby girl for what she was about to face by giving her glimpses of what heaven would be like. When the day would come that she'd pass from this life to the next, instead of being fearful, Jackie was looking forward to it. She was ready to go to heaven, to meet Jesus in person, and to be reunited with her grandpa.

God gave her a spiritual sixth sense that she was going to be arriving in heaven soon. She would be leaving our home, which she dearly loved, to go to her ultimate eternal home in heaven. And she was okay with that. Her focus was on seeing Jesus and having her hamster with her when she did. I will never forget that conversation for the rest of my life. Over the years, I've reflected on our conversation more than any conversation I have ever had. Her questions and response still fascinate me and bring me great comfort.

Jackie had a deep curiosity about heaven. She even asked Carrie if angels were going to accompany her to heaven one day. "Absolutely," Carrie replied. Again, God was preparing Jackie for her transition to eternity.

Heaven is Our Home

There truly is no place like home when heaven is your home. Each of us have a divinely implanted awareness that our souls live forever. This world is not our home. The Apostle Paul said, "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20). A former staff member and songwriter, Bob Sobo, wrote these beautiful lyrics in his song *Heaven is My Home*: "My trust is not in earthly things to satisfy my soul my hope is set in Christ my king and heaven is my home."

Reunited with Loved Ones

Knowing there is a heaven gives us hope. Joy can be found even in the midst of great sorrow knowing that if we are in Christ, this separation is only temporary. We will be reunited, and therefore, as believers we don't grieve as the world grieves. Instead, we grieve as those who have something real to look forward to.

Paul said, "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

There is comfort found in imagining yourself tightly wrapping your arms around your loved one again one day, thinking to yourself about what it will be like to see them again face to face.

Imagining the experience of heaven. I can't wait to hug Jackie again!

There is peace found in imagining your loved one standing in the presence of God, thinking about the streets of gold they are walking on, and the indescribable joy they feel. There is healing in thinking about the beautiful community they are enjoying with their brothers and sisters in Christ without any sin to blemish or interrupt those relationships.

John said, "He 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" (Revelation 21:4).

The Fear of Death

Death is the fear of everything we fear all wrapped up into one. We all fear what we don't know. Death looms large over the human race. When we experience loss, it's common to also think more about our own mortality. I don't want to depress you, but you're dying and so am I. The moment you took your first breath you were closer to your last breath. Living with an awareness of death can be a good thing and can motivate us to leave a positive legacy in our wake.

In a commencement speech at Stanford University, Apple founder Steve Jobs said, "Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new." He concluded his speech with these words, "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life." Good advice. God has given you but one life to live. Don't waste it.

Japanese warrior folklore says that samurai warriors woke each morning saying, "Today is a good day to die." It's a reminder to stay in the moment and to live each day to the fullest. Knowing we have an expiration date creates value. The knowledge of death is important because it becomes the container in which we value life. Death gives meaning to our existence because it reminds us how precious life is. In fact, life comes out of death.

Searching through scripture can help ease our fears of about death. As we take time to process what our lives might be like in God's presence, with everything we will see, taste, and feel, it helps make the destination of Heaven feel more real and familiar to us. When we take time to think about being in the presence of a good and wonderful God, who we have spent our lives striving to follow, there is a beautiful hope and excitement that comes alive within us.

Jesus Overcomes Death Through His Resurrection

Jesus promised, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die" (John 11:25-26).

The Bible always links sin and death. It says, "the sting of death is sin" (1 Corinthians 15:56) and "through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

Death stalks the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated. Death is no respecter persons. Its shadow haunts us day and night. We never know when the moment of death will come for us.

In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have the answer to the great question of the ages: "If mortals die, can they live again?" The Bible teaches that because Christ lives, we also shall live. The greatest truth that you can ever hear is that Jesus Christ died but rose again, and that you, too, will die but can rise again into newness of life.

The only hope we have for dealing with death is the resurrection of Jesus and it's the only hope we need. The Bible teaches the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is not a spiritual resurrection, as some would have us believe. Jesus' very body was raised by God from the dead, and someday we will see Him.

Since Jesus died and rose again, death cannot separate us from the love of God. Paul said, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

When Jesus died, death was destroyed. Satan, the one who holds the power of death, is will also be destroyed. Death and sin no longer have mastery. Death cannot separate us from the love of God. This is why Paul says: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The death of death in the death of Christ means victory for those who believe in Him. Eternal life and immortality come to all those who believe in Him.

Reunited with Our Loved Ones

This life is not all there is. The hope of being reunited with our loved ones. David said: "I shall go to him, but he will not return to me" (Samuel 12:23). I realize that Jackie will not return to me in this life, but I believe that I will go to her in the next life, in heaven. No more tears, pain, sorrow, or death (Revelation 21:4). We all long for heaven and when we lose a loved one the longing is intensified. The reality of Heaven brings hope.

I'm often asked this question – and my answer is always a resounding yes. Someday soon, I know I will be reunited with all those in my family who are already in Heaven – including my daughter Jackie. And when it happens for each believer, we will fellowship around our Father's throne, finally meeting Him face-to-face. And the family of God – our brothers and sisters in Christ – will be there.

Often the question is asked if those who die as infants will be in Heaven. I have no doubt that they will be. God is the God of hope and salvation, and we can say as King David said when his infant son died, "Can I bring him back again? I will go to him" (2 Samuel 12:23).

Jackie's favorite movie was the Wizard of Oz. The climax of the movie is when Dorothy clicks her heels and recites "There's no place like home, there's no place like home." The church I pastor at when Jackie died, gave me a beautiful, framed poster of the Wizard of Oz that said, "There's no place like heaven." There truly is no place like our home in heaven.

We're just passing through in this life, as Rick Warren says, "Life is a dress rehearsal for heaven (eternity)." I can't wait to see my Savior but also to see with my daughter. Sometimes people talk about the fact that I lost my daughter. As if I left her at the mall or something. My daughter isn't lost. I know exactly where she is. I'm just upset the little stinker beat me there.

My oldest daughter, Jessica, wrote a poem about Jackie and heaven when she was 12 years old, five years after Jackie died. The poem is simply called *Heaven*.

Heaven

Mommy, what's wrong with me?

My head hurts so bad.

You take me to the doctor's and tell me that I'm sick.

Why do you and Daddy look so sad?

I don't want any more radiation, Mommy.

Please get me out of this place.

I want to talk to you, but my mouth won't move.

All I can do is watch your crying face.

Mommy, I can laugh and smile again!

Guess who I can see?

Jesus is calling me towards Heaven;

You always said it is such a great place to be.

Mommy, I'm getting closer now.

I'm walking through big golden gates.

Stop crying for me Mommy cause I will see you again.

And I will be happy up here as I wait.

Jackie played a game I mentioned earlier where she would climb up on the kitchen counter and jump into my arms. At the end of her battle with her brain tumor, she was able to stand up one last time and jump into my arms. In the same way she jumped into her earthly Father's arms, I picture her jumping into her Heavenly Father's arms in heaven. Jackie is home and I will see her again in heaven.

THE END