

Meditating on Heaven: Death and the Afterlife

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Class One: Introduction

Why this class?

"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."- Job 1:21

Personal: Recently have been reminded by God's grace of just how short our lives are; just how little we seem to do for God in our time here; how bereavement is more and more common as I age and am reminded of the brief, mist-like, vaporous quality of our short lives here.

(1) What is our prayerful goal of this class? Meditation on Heaven and a heightened Spiritual-mindedness

Not to make us regret- but to encourage us that even those who came in at the "last hour" and served God, were abundantly rewarded because of grace alone in Christ alone.

We are told to avoid wasting our lives and our time; we are also told that God does above and beyond all that we can ask or imagine with what we give to him in our service to Jesus Christ.

Why death? So "pessimistic"! "Such a downer!" "A bummer!"

(2) Is it important to think on our deaths? Why or why not? Thinking on death can lead us to find heaven; as Christians thinking on our deaths can lead us to meditate on our heavenly journey and end ahead of us.

Yet we grant death a euphemistic term and allow it to sneak around with no notice at all!

Like "water closet" instead of toilet or "having an affair" rather than fornication against God and their own flesh.

We say: "She passed..." "He passed away..." **No! They died!**

The truth: No one but Christians can face the reality of death!

When unbelieving family members and doctors make decisions on the sick and elderly saying: “We should just let them die in comfort; it will cause their suffering to cease” they have suddenly become religious people walking by faith! Why?

No one really knows if allowing them to “pass in comfort” will bring more relief; to promise such things is to make religious decisions and walk by faith “in the name of medicine”. When doctors speak this way they are revealing their true religion (and it is not necessarily “science” and/or “medicine”).

But—Jesus says differently. Unbelievers will not be in a better place; to let them die sooner is not necessarily wise and it will not relieve their suffering- -because they will go to a far worse place- -frightening and dark beyond all imagining!

Not even the common grace of God will exist in the place they are about to depart to!

Psalm 90:12: “So teach us to number our days that we might get a heart of wisdom.”

Matthew Henry counseled pastors: “It ought to be the business of every day to prepare for our last day” (Quoted in ‘When Sinners Say ‘I Do’’, 181).

It won’t be long before my lifeless body will just be lying there- -we must live in light of this reality!

The class will be entitled “**Meditating on Heaven: Death and the Afterlife**” and will begin on Sunday, June 6th during our Sunday school hour.

***“Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.”***

My prayerful goal in teaching this will be to help us as a congregation to mediate daily and with purpose on the future life and the glory that is to be revealed with to us as God’s people.

Be prepared.

Many are not prepared for death. For many of us, we can’t even believe so many years have passed and that we *are old* half the time (not as old as the next guy; or not as sick, etc).

You may remember in **C. S. Lewis’ The Screwtape Letters** how the wicked Screwtape writes to Wormwood, rejoicing in another “human war”. Wormwood is apparently rejoicing because there is fighting. Screwtape reminds him that some could die courageously and brave and that would defeat their purposes for death.

Additionally, if there is war, men think on their deaths; and sometimes prepare for it, knowing that they probably will not live much longer.

He wrote: “How much better for us if *all* humans died in costly nursing homes amid doctors who lie, nurses who lie, friends who lie, as we have trained them, promising life to the dying, encouraging the belief that sickness excuses every indulgence, and even, if our workers know their job, withholding all suggests of a priest or pastor lest it should betray to the sick man his true condition! And how disastrous for us is the continual remembrance of death which war enforces. One of our best weapons, contented worldliness, is rendered useless. In wartime not ever a human can believe that he is going to live forever” (23-24).

Polls seem to indicate some are preparing and hoping for heaven??

According to pollsters, belief in heaven is on the increase. A 1990 poll indicated that 78% of Americans believe in a place called heaven (compared to 72% in 1952). Many folks believe that there is a heaven and that they will go there (many who confess this do not necessarily know Jesus Christ- -some think they have a “good-to-excellent” change of going there!).

Sinclair Ferguson has written: “Despite heaven’s so-called popularity, it is probably true that people give less concentrated thought to it than they do to the location of the annual family vacation. Only when events rudely awaken us are we pressed into asking more serious questions.”

Imagine that your greatest fear has been taken care of! It has in Jesus Christ- -He holds the keys to death and Hades- -Jesus has taken away the slavery to fear that all mankind have been enslaved to! Jesus has been to death and back! He returned better than before- -this is our promise for all who believe!

^{ESV} Hebrews 2:14-15: Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

(3) My Goals for you to learn in this class:

- Be sober.
- Be alert.

^{ESV} Mark 13:33-36: Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants¹ in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay

awake. ³⁵ Therefore stay awake - for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows,¹ or in the morning - ³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

- Be wise.

ESV **Luke 21:34** "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap.

ESV **1 Corinthians 10:12** Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

ESV **Ephesians 5:15-17**: Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise,¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

- Be humble.

What else?

- Become less attached to the world.
- Put the fear of God in us so that we would avoid sin like the plague.
- Be discerning about time and companions along the pilgrimage.
- Live life today like it is your last.
- Say: "If the Lord wills..." when you are planning.
- Be evangelistic and warn the lost of their terrible predicament.
- Meditate on heaven more frequently and with great passion.

This class is simply a pastoral preparation for dying well 'in the LORD'.

Hopefully through the class, God will grant you greater assurance of His love (2 Peter 1:9-11), and that you can finally with confidence answer the age-old question: "Mama, where's Grandma?"

Hopefully, this class will help you to prepare yourself and your loved ones for death, and that you will die in hope and confidence of the Savior who perfectly kept God's commandments for you, and died under the curse of the Law for you because of your great sins.

Hopefully you will come to rejoice more in your union with Jesus in both life and death, and to learn to die daily; to realize by God's grace the insignificance of your present possessions, and the glorious inheritance of the saints that will one day be revealed (Ephesians 1:15-23).

Jonathan Edwards in one of his “resolutions” he made for living for Christ in this world resolved: “To think on my death and the corruption of my flesh each day of my life.” Edwards resolved this so that he would live each day for Christ and the hope to be revealed.

Richard Baxter wisely counseled: “Do you therefore continually perceive that death is even at hand, and time near an end, and then it will make you continually more wise than death makes most; and to redeem your time as others purpose to redeem it when it is already too late” (Part 1, Chapter 5; Directive IX).

You say to me: “But I’m young! “...It will be a long time before I die.”

Really? Are you sure? How do you know?

Listen to godly wisdom: “Do not let pride cause you to value yourselves on the blossom of youth, for while you are in your blooming years, you are but ripening for a grave; death gives the final stroke, without asking anyone’s age. Glory not in your strength, it will quickly be gone; the time will be soon, when you shall not be able to turn yourselves on a bed, and you must be carried by your grieving friends to your long home.... Value not yourselves on your beauty, which shall consume in the grave; remember the change that death makes on the fairest face...” (Boston, 334-35).

*ESV Psalm 49:14 Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd, and the upright shall rule over them in the morning. **Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell.***

*ESV Job 14:20 You prevail forever against him, and he passes; **you change his countenance, and send him away.***

Thomas Watson wrote: “Death so changes the body and puts it into such a frightful dress that non fall in love with it but the worms” (83).

Richard Baxter advised: “Promise not long life to yourselves, but live as those that are always uncertain of another day, and certain to be shortly gone from here. The groundless expectation of a long life, is a very great hindrance to the redeeming of our time.... Young people, and healthy and affluent people, are under the greatest temptation to the loss of time....

...Dream not of rest and plenty for many years, when you have no promise to live till the next morning...” (*Christian Directory*, Part 1, Chapter V, Directive IX).

(4) How does Scripture speak of our lives?

ESV Job 14:1, 5-6: "Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble....Since his days are determined, and the number of his months is with you, and

you have appointed his limits that he cannot pass, ⁶ look away from him and leave him alone, that he may enjoy, like a hired hand, his day.

ESV Job 7:7 "Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good.

ESV Psalm 90:5 You sweep them away as with a flood; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning:

ESV James 4:14 yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

ESV Psalm 102:11 My days are like an evening shadow; I wither away like grass.

ESV Psalm 103:15 As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field;

ESV James 1:10 and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.

ESV 1 Peter 1:24 for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls...

- Our lives are “like grass”; “like an evening shadow”; “a mist”; “a breath”

We live in a tent, not a temple.

(5) Why are we so committed to the world and to this life? They both betray us when we are in our greatest need; they both betray us when we’re dying.

Boston wrote: “This world is a false friend who leaves a man in time of greatest need, and flees from him when he has most to do. When you are lying on a deathbed, all your friends and relations cannot rescue you; all of your substance cannot ransom you, nor procure you a reprieve for one day; nay, not one hour. Yea, the more you possess of this world’s goods, your sorrow of death is likely to be greater...” (331).

Why meditate upon heaven? Because we have “heavy afflictions” and great difficulty in this world of darkness; this pilgrimage is fraught with dangers, toils and snares; we need the “eternal weight of glory” to balance the scales:

ESV 2 Corinthians 4:16-18: So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

ESV Philippians 1:21-23: For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

A long life is hard. Name different ways that the more you live, the harder it is to live.

Augustine said: “Long life is merely long torment.”

Thomas Watson said: “Life begins with a cry, and ends with a groan; but at death all troubles die.”

- Meditation on heaven keeps us from losing heart.
- Meditation on heaven keeps us focused on our renewal not the wasting away of our outer man.
- Meditation on heaven reminds us that this life is preparatory for glory.
- Meditation on heaven keeps us focused and fixed by faith on what is unseen.

I will be using as my resources the following books: Book Three of Calvin’s Institutes; Cornelius Venema’s ‘The Promise of the Future’; John Owen’s ‘Spiritual-Mindedness’; John Bunyan’s ‘The Pilgrim’s Progress’; ‘Letters of Samuel Rutherford’; Thomas Boston’s ‘Human Nature In Its Fourfold State’; ‘If I Should Die...’ S. Oliphint and S. Ferguson; ‘The Heidelberg Catechism’ and other books I may mention and recommend. I plan on incorporating my sermon series on the Book of Revelation in these studies.

These are the questions I will be asking (and seeking to answer Biblically):

- Why is death an intruder in the creation?
- What happens after our death?
- What will the Judgment of God be like? What should believers and unbelievers expect?
- How do I get to heaven?
- What will heaven be like?
- What distinctions should I understand and make between my body and my soul?
- What is the “Glory to be revealed” in heaven for those who believe?
- What is the terrible judgment for those who do not believe?
- Is hell for real? Is it a real place?
- How do I prepare myself and my loved ones for death?
- What is a true and biblically healthy spiritual-mindedness?

(6) “What is your only comfort in life and death?”

*That I, with **body and soul**, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who, with his **precious blood** has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so **preserves me**, that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to **my salvation**; and therefore, by **His Holy Spirit**, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely **willing and ready** henceforth to live unto God.” – First Sabbath Question, Heidelberg Catechism*

1. “The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption...”

“...But their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them...”

“...The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies...”

“...And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day...”

“...Beside these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledges none.”

2. “...At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed...”

“...And all the dead shall be raised up, with the selfsame bodies, and none other (although with different qualities), which shall be united again to their souls forever.”

3. “...The bodies of the unjust shall, by the power of Christ, be raised to dishonor: the bodies of the just, by His Spirit, unto honor; and be made conformable to his own glorious body.”

Let’s pray:

O Lord, I live here as a fish in a vessel of water, only enough to keep me alive, but in heaven I shall swim in the ocean.

Here I have little air in me to keep me breathing, but there I shall have sweet and fresh gales; Here I have a beam of sun to lighten my darkness, a warm ray to keep me from freezing; yonder I shall live in light and warmth forever.

My natural desires are corrupt and misguided, and it is thy mercy to destroy them; My spiritual longings are thy planting, and thou wilt water and increase them; Quicken my hunger and thirst after the realm above.

Here I can have the world, there I shall have thee in Christ; Here is a life of longing and prayer, there is assurance without suspicion, asking without refusal; Here are gross comforts, more burden than benefit, there is joy without sorrow, comfort without suffering, love without inconstancy, rest without weariness.

Give me to know that heaven is all of love, where the eye affects the heart, and the continual viewing of thy beauty keeps the soul in continual transports of delight.

Give me to know that heaven is all peace, where error, pride, rebellion, passion raise no head.

Give me to know that heaven is all joy, the end of believing, fasting, praying, mourning, humbling, watching, fearing, repining;

And lead me to it soon.

- *Earth and Heaven, The Valley of Vision (370-371).*

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