

**"IMAGINE HEAVEN"****Date:** May 30, 2021**Speaker:** Roni Sasaki**KESSID****SCRIPTURE + SPIRIT****Question to Ponder : "What is Heaven Like?"**

- I've been thinking about Heaven lately. Maybe it's because I'm getting older. Maybe it's because this weekend, we celebrate Memorial Day, a day to honor those who have given their lives defending our country? Or maybe it's because we've been in this pandemic for over a year and so many people have made references that the end times seem to be near.
- We may walk away from today with more questions than answers. And that's OK, because there is no way in the short time we have together that I can even make a tiny dent in this topic. My hope for you is that you will begin to ponder for yourself - what is Heaven like
- After all, I became a Christian because I wanted to go to Heaven - NOT hell.

**Focus on Heaven**

- I don't know about you, but mostly these days, I seldom think about Heaven unless I'm at a funeral. Then I think about Heaven because of the comfort that it brings - assuming that the person in question has actually made it to Heaven. And then, I typically picture the welcome they received as they walk through the pearly gates, with hugs from Jesus and cheers from all those who have gone before. Perhaps there's a band playing and a choir singing - all to welcome the new resident.
- It's funny because the promise of Heaven, or eternal life with Jesus is a foundational piece of our belief system. **So why is it that we don't think about it more often - perhaps another question to ponder.** Maybe because it requires death from this life, and we really don't like to think about death.
- Perhaps another reason we don't ponder Heaven more is because we get so caught up in living here on earth that we forget that this place is only temporary - that there is another place prepared for us after we leave earth.
- The Bible tells us to not only think about Heaven, but to prepare for it.

*(Vs) Colossians 3:1-2 ESV – If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.*

*(Vs) Matthew 6:19-21 – "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

- I admit that I mostly focus my time on laying up treasure here on earth. I spend a lot of time working in my business and taking care of my home. Most of my energy is on how to thrive while here on earth. The really interesting phenomena is that by focusing on what is above and laying up treasure in Heaven has a way of enhancing all that is here on earth.
- We keep our sight moving forward toward the direction we are headed and the goals that we are seeking. I've spent a good deal of time being coached and coaching others to set and achieve goals. There are two tools that go hand in hand that drastically increase a person's outcome when it comes to reaching a goal. The first is to create a vivid picture in your mind of what you want. The second is to focus on what it is that you really want and are moving toward, rather than focusing on what you don't want or are moving away from.
- When I started working on this sermon, my first thought was that there is no way to imagine what Heaven will be like because it is so far removed from what we experience now. And that God in all His majesty and glory and creativity has built something beyond our musings, which He likely has. And yet, I've changed my tune after reading both the Bible and books by experts who have extensively researched this topic. God has given us many clues, both here on earth and in His word.

*(Vs) 1 Corinthians 2:9 – But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.”*

- We may find it challenging to imagine what Heaven will be like and therefore we close down that lens that allows us to visualize something that we have not seen. But what if we use scripture to fuel our imaginations. Heaven is NOT unimaginable, but that doesn't mean that what we can imagine is all that there is. After all, there is a 100% chance of death on this earth, unless Jesus returns during our lifetime.
- This is what I do know - God, in His love for us, always pours out the best of all that He has to offer.
- I love this quote from Charles Spurgeon:

**“His favors are always performed with the love of His heart. He does not send to us the cold meat and the broken pieces from the table of His luxury, but He dips our morsel in His own dish, and seasons our provisions with the spices of His fragrant affections.”**

**– Charles H Spurgeon**

### **The Earth is Under Sin's Curse**

- Another reason as to why we may struggle to imagine what Heaven will be like is because this earth that we currently live on is cursed by sin. And it's very difficult for us to imagine what life could be like without sin.
- But this planet wasn't created that way. Genesis chapter 1 describes God's creation of the Heavens and the Earth. Seven times it says, “And God saw that it was good.” One of them referred to the light being good and 2 of them say that it was VERY good. God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, a beautiful place that fully embodied God's masterpiece of creation.
- And then sin enters into the picture in Chapter 3 and God's curse to Adam is described in Genesis 3:17-19.

*(Vs) Genesis 3:17-19 And to Adam he said, 17 "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."*

- This curse became vividly clear to me when last Saturday, my husband Derek and I, hiked to the top of our property. We live in the Washougal River Valley or Canyon - whatever you want to call it. Our property was burned in the wild fires last Fall and all the underbrush was gone - making it possible for me to climb up the hillside.
- They say that after a fire, the soil is rich and plants grow really good. I was excited after the fire was out because all of our blackberries had burned. They grow like crazy and I've always joked that blackberries are a direct result of Adam's curse because they take over everything. We realized that if I was going to make it to the top of the hillside for the first time ever, since we moved into our house over 28 years ago, we'd better get it done right away because the blackberries were already flourishing in the rich black soil.
- As we climbed, we saw many signs of new growth, but what dominated every patch of dirt was blackberries and sticker bushes.
- Surprisingly, there were flashes of beauty that pushed their way up through the thorns.
- Imagine what earth would be like without sin. Perhaps this is a clue as to what Heaven is like. This incredible place that God created is not too shabby when you focus on all the beauty that surrounds us - the intricacy of the eco system, from the mountains, to the valleys, to the beaches, to the plains, and the deserts, to the glaciers, and the rain forests and so much more.
- The beauty and creativity that continues to shine through on this sin riddled planet is breath taking and only one example of what God is capable of when He "Seasons our provision with the spices of His fragrant affections.
- And that just the physical part of creation. What about our relationships - the interaction with others, both personally and in a community. What would it look like if there was never a misunderstanding, or broken promise, or betrayal, or prejudice, or hatred, or fear, or insecurity, or wars? What could our relationships and communion with others be like with total trust and connection.
- Right now, you may feel as if you are like those wild iris that at any moment are at risk of being overtaken by all the thorns and stickers. Because all that is good and beautiful and full of love on this planet is from God. But this planet is tainted by sin.

**The Thief on the Cross**

- We get some major clues of what Heaven is like when we look at the interaction between Jesus and the thieves that hung on the cross next to Him when He was crucified. The first mocked him and told Jesus that if he was God to save himself and save them also. The second thief rebuked the first, saying, "Do you not even fear God?" He also admitted that they deserved to be there because of their deeds, but Jesus had done nothing wrong.

*(Vs) Luke 23:42-43 – And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."*

**There are 4 things we learn about Heaven in the interaction while these men died a brutal death.**

**The first is: Who will be in Heaven...**

- There is no way I begin a conversation about what Heaven is like without talking about who will be there.
- In a 2017 Harris poll, 84% of the population believe in some sort of after life for the soul. Of these people, 76% believed they are going to Heaven after they die and only 2% of those who believe in an afterlife expect to go to hell.
- Only those people whose names are written in the 'Book of Life,' because it is a place without sin.

*(Vs) Revelation 21:27 ESV – But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.*

- Talking about who will be in Heaven and conversely, who will be in Hell, is not popular policy in our current culture. We've become a society that believes everyone gets a trophy and anything less than 100% inclusivity is considered prejudice, judgmental and at the very least is not politically correct. I believe this is why we seldom even hear sin called sin anymore. Christians, in particular, have been accused of this and I'm not going to say that it's not deserved in some cases. Sometimes we forget that we are ALL equally sinners, born in sin, destined for hell. But for the saving grace of God through Jesus's sacrifice on the cross, none of us would be eligible for entrance into Heaven.
- God's gift of grace is all-inclusive to those who chose to receive it, but Heaven is exclusive, and we should be desiring that everyone gets there.

*(Vs) Romans 10:9-13 ESV – Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

- The one thief called on the name of the Lord that day - not with eloquent words or perfect theology. He confessed his sin, claimed Jesus as God, and asked to be remembered.

**The second thing about Heaven that we learn is from the word today : "Today you will be with me in Heaven."**

- There is no waiting period. No long slumber. No holding pattern. The thief was welcomed into Heaven immediately upon his death.

**Thirdly, Jesus said to the thief you will be with me in Paradise.**

- The use of the word "Paradise" in this passage represents the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 3, the Lord banished Adam and Eve from the Garden, and here we get another clue for our imaginings that Heaven is either much like the Garden of Eden, or could be the Garden, the place where we go when we die to hang out with God and His Son Jesus.
- This takes us back to God's original sinless creation where there was beauty, great pleasures, and harmony with the people, the plants, the animals and with God.

**And fourthly, Jesus said "You will be with Me" : Heaven is the place where we dwell with God.**

- More than all the beauty and perfection and riches that are in Heaven, the very word Heaven is the place where God dwells.

*(Vs) John 14: 2-3 NKJV – In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.*

- In the days of Jesus, it was a common practice to send someone from the traveling party on up ahead to make lodging arrangements and prepare the way for the group. So that when they arrived, they had a place to stay, food to eat, and even entertainment.
- Jesus assured his disciples that he was going on ahead of them to prepare a place where they could all be together.
- What about the word Mansion? What does this mean exactly – a huge impressive house for each of us?
- When I think about a mansion, I think about Bill Gates' house up on Lake Washington. I took this picture from a sail boat. It's kind of hard to see through all the trees, but you get the idea that a massive, very expensive house is tucked up on this hillside above the water. He's one of the wealthiest people and it's easy to equate his house with a mansion that is promised to us in Heaven.
- The wording of this verse doesn't necessarily imply a massive home, although I believe there will be beautiful homes in Heaven, but an abode, a place to dwell with God - forever, or eternally.

**Our longing for Heaven is a longing for God.**

*(Vs) Psalm 63:1 – O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*

- Being with God is the heart and soul of Heaven. Every other heavenly pleasure will derive from and be secondary to His presence. God's greatest gift to us is, and always will be, himself.
- As wonderful as Heaven is right now, the Bible is filled with prophecies and hints of what is to come after the Second Coming of Jesus. In fact, most of the verses we use to describe Heaven are from Revelation and are from the vision that John had of the New Heaven and the New Earth.

*(Vs) 2 Peter 3:13 – But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.*

- It's as if we've come full circle. Genesis tells us about God's creation of the Heaven and Earth - the beginning of time. Revelation tells us about God's creation of the New Heaven and the New Earth - the beginning of eternity. God, in His sovereign plan, has always desired communion with us in the place that He created for us to be with Him.

*(Vs) Revelation 21: 1-5 ESV – Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”*

*(Vs) Revelation 22:1-5 ESV – Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.*

***“What God made us to desire, and therefore what we do desire if we admit it, is exactly what he promises to those who follow Jesus Christ: a resurrected life in a resurrected body, with the resurrected Christ on a resurrected Earth.” – Randy Alcorn***

- Can you begin to imagine what life with God in Heaven is like?
- What is it that you are looking forward to when you get to Heaven? Perhaps you can't wait to see those you love who are already there. Or maybe you are excited to have your health restored and pain and suffering removed. Maybe you have a long list of questions, and you can't wait to sit down with Jesus and learn from him.
- I've always hoped that when I get to Heaven, I will have a new real leg. That's not to say I'm not grateful that I was born with only one leg because I know that this "disability" has brought so much good into my life. But I will admit that I want to walk on those golden streets of Heaven without a stager.
- More than anything, I want to walk by Jesus's side and look into God's loving face and fully experience all that He has prepared - and gone before to make perfect for us. When we look at God's creation and we look at the words in the Bible, we can imagine what Heaven will be like.