

## **Introduction**

A minister was talking to a group of young children about being good and going to heaven.

At the end of his talk, he asked, "Where do you want to go?"

"Heaven!" They all piped up.

"And what do you have to be to get there?" the pastor asked.

In unison they all replied, "Dead!"

As a minister I have found that one of the things that occupies people's minds is that of the afterlife. What will happen to me when I die? What will happen to my loved ones who have died? There is nothing as satisfying as taking the funeral of a committed Christian and knowing that although we are desperately sad to have lost a loved one we are confident that they will be raised to glory with God. I have many times stood in a church leading worship or commending a beloved brother or sister in Christ into God's keeping and had a tangible feeling of presence and continuity. A sense that we are not alone when we worship and that those who have gone before us are worshipping with us.

One of the marvellous things about the Bible, is that it is one whole wonderful story of God's relationship with his chosen people. It starts with Adam and Eve, the people he created to be his friends, moves through Abraham and Moses, with whom he made covenants to seal their special relationship, with the people of Israel themselves and finally we see his promises fulfilled in Jesus Christ and the story spread to all peoples through the church – us!.

Through it all we see a cycle of rebellion and judgement where God made a commitment to his people and then they turned away, the relationship was broken then God turns away in judgement and finally the people call to him for help and God rescues them and restores the relationship.

If we go back to 600BC we see this relationship totally broken. God's people had disobeyed him and he had turned away and

his judgement meant that they were taken into slavery in Babylon and we are reading about this in our morning prayer readings at the moment. The city of Jerusalem had been captured and God's people taken into exile. It is in this context that the prophet Isaiah wrote his prophecies. Jerusalem was in ruins. God's people were in exile in Babylon, feeling totally insecure. It must have felt as if all the bad in the world had won, that the forces of evil had defeated God's people. Then the prophet Isaiah told them something to help them be bold and confident again. He showed them the vision of heaven, of God's triumph over evil and the picture was both of a far future heaven and also a picture of how God would triumph in the present and bring justice and prosperity to his people. He showed them a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. *Read Isaiah 65:17-23*

Isaiah 65:17-23

*<sup>17</sup> "See, I will create*

*new heavens and a new earth.*

*The former things will not be remembered,  
nor will they come to mind.*

*<sup>18</sup> But be glad and rejoice forever  
in what I will create,*

*for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight  
and its people a joy.*

*<sup>19</sup> I will rejoice over Jerusalem  
and take delight in my people;  
the sound of weeping and of crying  
will be heard in it no more.*

*<sup>20</sup> "Never again will there be in it  
an infant who lives but a few days,  
or an old man who does not live out his years;*

That's a familiar concept to Christians isn't it a new heaven and a new earth and we read of it again in Revelation where the apostle John is again painting the picture of heaven when God

recreates the world in his image, where he lives amongst human beings and all pain and suffering is defeated.

Revelation is a book that many of us struggle to understand and can be afraid of and avoid. But it is a book of wonderful images that tells the story of the battle against evil and God's victory over the devil.

In order to understand it we need to look at the context in which it was written –It is generally agreed to have been written during the final years of Domitian's rule as Emperor AD 65-96. Domitian was known for his extreme cruelty, having killed his own brother, and he killed several of the Senators, some in order to confiscate their estates and others because of the animosity between them. He also began the second persecution against the Christians and ordered all descendants of David be put to death.

Numerous Christians were tortured and killed under Domitian's reign, including, according to tradition, the apostle Peter who was crucified upside down at his own request, stating he was unworthy to die in the same manner of the savior. Tradition also has it that John, the apostle Jesus loved, was cast into a boiling vat of oil but that God intervened and he was not harmed, and then was banished to the Island of Patmos, where he received the revelation from Jesus which he recorded.

These were tough times for Christians, times of uncertainty and insecurity, times of fear where it was costly to admit to trusting in Jesus as Lord

In times like this more than any other the Christians needed to know that God was powerful and in control: that the tyrant who called himself a God would not prevail; and that things would be better. They needed a message of hope for the future, of good conquering evil, encouragement to persevere.

## **The book of Revelation**

Ch1: vision of the risen ascended Christ – magnificent and powerful

Ch 2 & 3 Letters to the churches – words of encouragement and warning to help them through the difficult times ahead

Ch 4 – vision of worship in heaven.

Then we see many images and pictures presented to us.

Point out: context –

- Fierce persecution by Rome
- Difficult to speak out clearly against its corruption
- Images had a “here and now” and a “later” application.

Here and now to help them through their suffering

To show them the vision of the future:

Defeat of evil once and for all

Christ’s return and judgement for all

Vindication for God’s people

Heaven – creation as God intended it to be with us at one with him and each other.

The theologian Jim packer says this about heaven:

We cannot visualize heaven's life and the wise man will not try to do so. Instead he will dwell on the doctrine of heaven, where the redeemed will find all their heart's desire: joy with their Lord, joy with his people, and joy in the ending of all frustration and distress and in the supply of all wants. What was said to the child -- "If you want sweets and hamsters in heaven, they'll be there" -- was not an evasion but a witness to the truth that in heaven no felt needs or longings go unsatisfied. What our wants will actually be, however, we hardly know, except the first and foremost: we shall want to be "always...with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17).

What shall we do in heaven? Not lounge around but worship, work, think, and communicate, enjoying activity, beauty,

people, and God. First and foremost, however, we shall see and love Jesus, our Savior, Master, and Friend.

In one of his lighter moments, Benjamin Franklin penned his own epitaph. He didn't profess to be a born-again Christian, but it seems he must have influenced by Paul's teaching of the resurrection of the body. Here's what he wrote:

The Body of B. Franklin, Printer  
Like the Cover of an old Book  
Its contents torn out,  
And stript of its Lettering and Guilding,  
Lies here, Food for Worms,  
But the Work shall not be wholly lost:  
For it will, as he believ'd,  
Appear once more  
In a new & more perfect Edition,  
Corrected and amended by the Author.

John Hannah said : Two things will surprise us when we arrive in heaven: who is there and who is not.

A little girl was taking an evening walk with her father. Wonderingly, she looked up at the stars and exclaimed; "Oh, Daddy, if the wrong side of heaven is so beautiful, what must the right side be!"