

## Our Father's House

Psalm 23, John 14:1–6<sup>1</sup>

Recently, as I visited Bonnie, she passed along a little book she had read titled *Anticipating Heaven*.<sup>2</sup> When I saw the book I said to her, “You know, it’s been a long time since I preached a sermon on heaven. I think it’s time I did that.” This sermon is the result.

The author of the book Bonnie gave me opens the book with a story. A dear friend of his was dying from cancer. One evening her husband phoned. “Can you come over? We’re not sure Jan is going to make it through the night.” When he arrived, he found Jan lying on the couch. She thanked him for coming and got right to the point: “How do I do this?” she asked. “I’ve never died before.” Here is a question we all should be asking. All of you hearing the sound of my voice are still alive. We’ve never died before. When we get to that point, how will we die? Have we given that any thought? When we’re young, death seems so far away. We have so much life left in us. We have ambition. We bound out of bed in the morning, ready to tackle a new day. We have many goals—an education, a career, marriage, family. We get tied up in the demands of life. There’s no time to think about death. Death, it seems, is something that happens to old people, to people in their seventies, eighties and nineties.

I read something yesterday. A man stole a motorcycle and rode it at very high speed through the Los Angeles area. The police trailed him by helicopter but made the decision not to try to stop him, due to traffic conditions. A police video was posted online. The motorcycle got up as high as 125 miles per hour through a densely populated area. The police helicopter trailed him for several minutes as the motorcyclist wove in and out of traffic, even driving on the wrong side of the double yellow line to get around trucks. Suddenly, as he shot through an intersection, an oncoming car abruptly made a left turn right in front of him. The motorcycle struck the car and went airborne. The video stopped at that point, but the article reported that motorcycle and motorcyclist traveled over 100 feet through the air before crashing to the street. The motorcyclist died instantly upon impact. What a foolish, senseless death!

But younger people die every day in much less dramatic ways. The Bible says that “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27). All of us—old, young and in between—are going to die. All of us need to ask, “How do I do this?” The time to ask is now. The author of the book Bonnie gave me says that when his friend posed that question, he fumbled for answers, but then

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<sup>1</sup> Quote both Scriptures from the KJV with the congregation.

<sup>2</sup> Michael E. Wittmer, *Anticipating Heaven* (Grand Rapids: Our Daily Bread Publishing, 2019)

the Lord gave him a word for his beloved daughter: “Jan, *you* don’t do this. You’ve walked with Jesus for more than seventy years. Tonight it all pays off. *How do you do this?* You don’t. . . . You don’t do anything tonight but go to sleep in Him.”<sup>3</sup>

The author was alluding to the words of Scripture, “them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him” (1 Thess. 4:14). What a comforting phrase, to sleep in Jesus! Now I hate to admit it, but sometimes, when I’m reading to my grandchildren, I nod off. No matter how much I enjoy reading to them, and no matter how interested I am in the book, sometimes I am overcome by sleep. Some mornings, if I have a really sound sleep, I might wake up and have to reorient myself. What day of the week is it? Do I have an appointment that I have to rush off to this morning? When we are exhausted, when our eyes are heavy and it hurts to try to keep them open, then sleep is a welcome relief. We long to succumb to sleep. Its call is irresistible. All we want to do is lie down in bed, pull up the covers and close our eyes in sleep. So is death, for the Christian. How we long to fall asleep in Jesus and wake up in his very presence!

This afternoon we have read two beloved and familiar Scriptures. These two beloved Scriptures share a pregnant phrase. In John 14 Jesus says that “in my Father’s *house* are many mansions.” David finishes Psalm 23 with the words “I will dwell in the *house* of the LORD forever.” Here are two references to heaven. Both of them describe it as a “house”—the house of the Lord, our heavenly Father. For the Christian, going to heaven is a triumphal homegoing—going to heaven is going home.

How tragic to be homeless! I asked one of our elders the other day about a friend of his who has visited our church a few times in years past. This man has a serious drinking problem. He is an idolater. He loves his alcohol more than God. Alcohol consumes his money. Alcohol consumes his financial security. Alcohol consumes his health. Alcohol is more important to him than anything else in the world. This man is about to be homeless. He is desperate, and ready to give in to the siren song of a stranger who promises to send him \$30,000 if he will just send him a \$500 service fee. It is tragic. Here is a man who is about to be homeless (again!) and about to lose \$500 besides.

How precious is home! There is an old expression: “Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home.” You might stay in a fine hotel room, but it’s not home. A few years ago I served on a committee that was meeting in a lovely city in another state. The committee put me up in the nicest hotel room I’ve ever stayed at. When I saw it I said, “My, this is a nice place.” Later, I asked why the committee put us up in such a fine hotel. It turns out they got a block of rooms at a discount at an online auction. The rooms were available, and the hotel was willing to contract

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<sup>3</sup> Whitmer, *Anticipating Heaven*, 5–6

them out at a discount rather than have them sit empty. But as nice as that room was, and as much as I enjoyed the marble countertops and spotless shower, that room wasn't home. Norma wasn't there, and frankly, I didn't spend that much time in the room anyway because of the responsibility of committee meetings. My home was much more humble—but it was home!

What really makes a house a home are the loved ones that live there. So it is with heaven. The Bible teaches that by faith we belong to God's family: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the *sons* of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:12).

What wonderful promises: "in my Father's *house* are many mansions" and "I will dwell in the *house* of the LORD forever"!

Here is a description of heaven. To dwell in the house of the LORD forever. To be finally at home. Our earthly pilgrimage over. To be finally at rest. Never to be evicted. Never to be homeless!

When we start to use a tube of toothpaste, the first thing we do is recycle the box. Then, when the tube of toothpaste is used up, we toss the tube. Both box and tube have reached the end of their useful life. We have no more use for them, so out they go. But God will never treat his child like a box of toothpaste!

David says, "I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." The word "forever" means literally *to the end of days*.<sup>4</sup> A few Psalms earlier, in Psalm 21:4, David used a more intensive form of the same expression: "... even length of days for ever and ever."<sup>5</sup>

Our true home is with family, to be with the people we love. Such is what we're going to enjoy in heaven—to be with God's people.

So remember the dear friend who was dying from cancer. The phone call comes in, "Can you come over? We're not sure Jan is going to make it through the night." The elderly Christian is lying on the couch. She got right to the point: "How do I do this?" she asked. "I've never died before." Here is a question we all should be asking. You and I have never died before. How will we die?

For the Christian, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. It is to go to our eternal home, where we will worship the Lamb forevermore. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> לאָרֶךְ יָמִים

<sup>5</sup> אָרֶךְ יָמִים עוֹלָם וָעֶד