

Dr. Bruce Humphrey
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A Festival of Friends (Feb 9)
Revelation 21:15-21 and Philippians 1:21-26

“Mack realized also that he felt no pain, not even in his usually aching joints. In fact, he had never felt this well, this whole.... Delirious and delicious joy welled up inside of him....” As the procession of lights/children approached he realized “each was dressed in distinctive garbs that Mack imagined represented every tribe and tongue.” (p. 211)

What are the popular images of heaven? I suspect most people think of halos and harps. Heaven is where people sit around on clouds with nothing in particular to do. I don't know about you, but for me one word comes to mind: BORING!

I am intrigued at how Hollywood often portrays heaven. The plot line generally goes like this. Someone dies and goes to heaven only to learn that he needs to return to earth for one more task. After spending a very few moments in heaven getting the assignment clear, the hero returns to earth. Of course, the interesting part of the story happens on earth. The story ends when the person completes the task and returns to heaven to receive his halo and take his place in the clouds for eternity.

Notice how little time in the story actually happens in heaven? Where is the energy in this Hollywood plot? It is certainly not in heaven. Nothing much happens in heaven. The fun stuff is happening on earth. C. S. Lewis recognized this tendency to see heaven as boring. He reminds us that "our notion of Heaven involves perpetual negations: no food, no drink, no sex, no movement, no mirth, no events, no time, no art." He invites us to consider a view of heaven where the reason for the negations is that they are left behind for activities that are even more enjoyable. Lewis suggests that "the joys of Heaven are an acquired taste." Have you ever enjoyed something that at first you didn't think you would like?

With Lance Armstrong headed past our church this weekend, I am thinking about why anyone would want to ride a bike up hill over a hundred miles. Sure, when we were children we enjoyed riding bikes because it made us feel grown up and set us free to go beyond the local neighborhood. But there is a big difference between a kid riding up to the grocery store and bicyclists who ride hundreds of miles in training for major races. There must be some reward in it that few of us experience.

In fact, athletes who have learned to push their bodies to the limits develop a natural high from the good hormones pumping through their bodies. Pushing yourself to that level is an acquired taste. In fact, I understand that once athletes reach the level of pushing their bodies regularly to these limits, they become addicted to the natural high that floods the body afterwards. It is actually one of the toughest addictions to break.

How do we acquire enough of a taste of heaven to want to push ourselves further? The answer may surprise you. "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I

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may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.”
Philippians 1:21-26

A pastor died and went to heaven. As he was waiting in line at heaven's gates he heard Saint Peter give directions to the man in front of him. The man, a taxi driver, was assigned a large beautiful mansion on the main street of heaven. The pastor became excited. "If that taxi driver got a big mansion, I can't wait to see what I get for eternity," the pastor thought.

As the pastor stepped forward, St. Peter gave directions to a small house on an alley. "That is your place for eternity." The pastor complained. "Wait a minute! I preached the gospel my entire life and that guy just drove a taxi. I should be getting the large mansion not him." St. Peter rechecked the records and then answered. "Yes, it says here that you preached the gospel. However, it seems that when you preached people slept. When he drove the taxi, people prayed!"

How does heaven work? I love the way *The Shack* invites us to explore fresh images of heaven as a place where each person is a unique combination of lights and each relationship reflects the dazzling uniqueness of the combined light. How does this compare with the familiar Biblical images of heaven as having streets of gold and walls of gemstones? Heaven's gates are pearls. What do these biblical images teach us?

When was the last time you picked up a piece of an iron gate and carried it around in your pocket to show it off to a friend? Husbands, have you ever given your wife a piece of plaster as an anniversary gift? How would children react if their grandparents proudly presented them with some pavement picked up while vacationing in a distant city? Gold is pavement in heaven. Precious gems are plaster in the walls of the heavenly city. Pearls are gates. The very things that are prized and given in order to bring joy to loved ones here on earth are not objects of joy in heaven. In other words, the joys of heaven are not found in earthly treasures.

William Lutz shares a story that his uncle told which helps put our earthly treasures into perspective. His uncle was stationed in the Philippines near the end of World War II. One day a local Philippine bank was hit and its vault exploded. Money flew into the air and covered the street of the embattled city. Excited American soldiers began scooping up armfuls of cash. They were rich! Then, as quickly as they felt a surge of joy, imagine their dismay when they realized that the cash was actually Japanese occupation money. Just a few months before, this very cash would have been an immense wealth, but now it was worthless. Their victory over Japanese occupation forces had rendered this cash useless. In fact, the soldiers ended up using stacks of the cash to light their campfires. In this same way, the joys of heaven begin when we discover what really counts.

The Apostle Paul struggled with whether to go and be with the Lord in heaven or remain on earth and continue his ministry there. We could understand his longing if Paul were struggling with depression like the writer of Ecclesiastes. "And I thought the dead more fortunate than the living" (Eccles. 4:2). Some of us have wished for heaven simply because we were exhausted, depressed, maybe even suicidal. We thought of heaven as a place of relief. But that was not Paul's state of mind when he wrote to the Philippians. Paul struggled with wanting to be in heaven during his most enthusiastic and joyful letter, Philippians. This is the letter where he celebrated that they gave to support his mission. He celebrated that his time with them made a genuine difference in their lives. In this

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context of celebration and joy his mind jumped to thoughts about heaven. Why did his mind jump to heaven at a time like this? I think it was because he understood what really counts in God's eternal economy. He saw a connection between serving and giving here on earth and the joys of heaven.

This spring we have a group of students in class to join our congregation. Each student is required to perform an act of service as part of putting their faith into action. A few years ago a high school student performed her act of serving by accompanying a deacon to visit one of our shut-in seniors. By the end of the hour she had discovered how much fun it was to listen and learn, share and dialogue with this senior. Having completed the assignment, she decided to return on her own and visit the shut-in woman a few days later. Before she knew it three hours had zipped by in interesting conversation. Over the next several months she continued her visits, no longer as a class assignment, but as a ministry of joy. That student discovered that the more we give and serve, the more we develop our capacity for joy.

Heaven is a place of perfect service. This is why giving and serving here increases our appetites for the joys of heaven. Serving leads to joy not only in heaven but starting here and now.

In one month we will have our annual "faith in action" weekend. We worship that weekend by serving others. In place of attending a one hour worship experience here in the sanctuary, we donate three or four hours to the local library, build habitat homes, volunteer with the hospital, paint parking lots, sing for nursing homes, and serve in multiple ways to bless the community. Why? We have discovered that serving not only blesses others but actually increases our heavenly joy.

C. S. Lewis reminds us that historically those Christians who had the greatest impact on earth turned out to be the very ones who took heaven most seriously. The Evangelical Christians in England ended the slave trade in the early 1800's. Christians ended gladiator sports that involved battle to the death in the Roman Empire. Thus, Lewis wrote, "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next."

Next time we think of heaven as the place of beautiful mansions and streets of gold, let's remember what the main reward is. God rewards our faithfulness here by granting us greater opportunities to serve there. The Apostle Paul saw the connection. He knew that the joys of heaven begin here on earth as we serve and give, letting God bless others through us.

Years ago a missionary retired and returned to the United States. On his flight home he wondered who would greet him at the airport. He hoped there might be some church members who had supported him through the years. He day dreamed of a Welcome Home banner displayed for his arrival.

The day he landed at the airport, he looked out his window and saw a huge crowd cheering. He was overwhelmed. "They remembered!" As he exited the plane, however, he watched as the crowd moved toward another plane where some new rock and roll band named "The Beatles" was arriving.

That night he prayed, "Lord, I don't understand. I have served you faithfully. What is

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wrong when people pay attention to some rock and roll band, but nobody notices when a faithful servant comes home." The Lord whispered to the missionary, "My child, you are not home yet."