

The Surprises of Heaven, Part Two

Revelation 19:11-16

Early in January of 2014, Katie Kropas of Weymouth, Massachusetts, went to the hospital complaining of stomach cramps, only to find out those weren't stomach cramps. An hour later, surprise! She gave birth, to a healthy, ten-pound baby girl.

Kropas said she experienced no symptoms one might associate with pregnancy, except for swollen feet, which she thought had something to do with working as a caterer for 50 hours a week. She had also gained 40-50 pounds, but again, she thought that had something to do with sneaking bites of the food she was catering.

The definition of a surprise is that something happens which you didn't expect. Two weeks ago we began looking at "The Surprises of Heaven," and we discovered that heaven will be full of surprises, things we weren't expecting. We saw that we will be surprised to discover that many of the things we've believed about heaven are not true; that it is much more beautiful and glorious than we have ever imagined; and we will be surprised to discover how worthless are the things we loved here on earth.

Today we pick up with a few more of those things which will surprise us when we arrive in heaven:

1 We will be surprised to discover how wide and long and high and deep is the love of God

The love of God has been called "the deepest expression of God's character." When we talk about the love of God, we are only beginning to scratch the surface of what He is like. There are so many, many places in the Bible where we can turn to learn about the love of God.

This is a classic passage on the love of God for us, and how it makes a difference in our lives: *Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?... No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35, 37-38, NLT).*

That's beautiful, isn't it? But Ephesians 3 is where we learn that the love of God is so immeasurable that we cannot even comprehend it. That's where Paul wrote that understanding the vastness of God's love is not something which comes naturally to us; in fact, he said he was praying that somehow his readers could understand it. Here's what he wrote: *"I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ"* (Ephesians 3:17-18). As we've explored before, when Paul used those terms "wide and long and high and deep" he wasn't trying to give us dimensions or measurements; he was trying to impress on us how vast and immeasurable God's love really is.

He also told us that in our own human knowledge we cannot even comprehend it. He said that he was praying that they would *"know this love that surpasses knowledge..."* (3:19).

So many songs have been composed about the love of God, and yet all of them together do not completely describe how immense it is. The number of books that have been written about God's love would fill the largest library, yet if we piled all of them together in one heap, and studied them until our days came to an end, we would still not have even an adequate understanding of His love for us. It's not that we're dumb; it's that God's love is so wonderful and deep and strong that our finite human brains just can't take it all in.

When we walk through the gates of pearl into heaven, for the first time we're going to begin to understand the love that God has had for us since before time. We won't grasp all of it at once; in fact, since God is the only One Who knows everything, we may never understand all there is to know about it. I believe that as we move through eternity, we're going to discover more and more and more the wonders of God's love for us. The truth of John 3:16 which reads, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son..."* will become so real to us that we will be dazzled that He could love us that much. The reality of Jeremiah 31:3 where God says, *"I have loved you with an everlasting love"* will cascade over us in unending waves. And suddenly, for the very first time, we're going to comprehend the words of 1 John 3:1—*"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"*

God's love is wide and long and high and deep. It is so wide that everyone is included. It is so long that it stretches from eternity to eternity. It is so high that it reaches all the way to heaven, with no detours. And it is so deep that it envelops even the deepest, darkest sin you've committed, and heals the ragged wounds of your soul. We're going to be surprised to learn of the vastness of God's love.

2 We're going to be surprised that some of the people we've looked down on and even despised are actually there, and we're going to be with them for eternity.

If you ever visit Phoenix, Arizona, you can get on Highway 93, headed northwest, and in just a little while you will find yourself in a little city called "Surprise." In 1938, Surprise, Arizona, was founded by Flora Mae Statler on just one square mile of farmland. Why did she name it "Surprise"? Mrs. Statler said it was because "she would be surprised if it ever amounted to much."

In the year 2000, Surprise had a population of just over 30,000; only ten years later the city had grown to nearly 120,000 people, an increase of 281%. Surprise is a thriving city with much potential for even further growth. Mrs. Statler would indeed be surprised if she could see it today.

That's exactly what's going to happen to many of us when we get to heaven. We're going to be surprised when we look around and see people whom we thought would never amount to much, people whom we thought would never get there. We can read in the Scriptures and learn that there are some who will definitely not be there. The Scriptures make it very plain that only those who have followed Jesus Christ as Lord, who have trusted that His payment on the cross provided forgiveness for our sins, and who live in obedience to Him, will be the ones who are allowed entrance into heaven. Those who have rejected His invitation to drink of the water of life will be rejected.

The Bible also makes it very clear that not everyone will be there. There are many Scripture passages which highlight this truth, but here are two which are found in the seventh chapter of the gospel of Matthew: *"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (7:13-14). "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (7:21).*

Don't miss the truth of what those verses are saying. Not everyone will be there. Common sense tells us that some will and some won't. If the matter were left to us to decide, we would probably choose those who dressed nicely, lived in nice homes, spoke well, and were polite and considerate of others. We would choose those who were clean and healthy, people who were attractive and strong. We would use the same criteria that many human organizations use here on the earth. But something inside tells us that those standards are not the same as the ones God uses.

First Samuel 16:7 tells us that *“The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”* So who **will** be there? Once again, let’s turn to the Scriptures, because since the Bible is where we even learn that there *is* a heaven, it makes sense that we should look in its pages to find out how to get there. John 1:12 tells us *“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”* And that’s just the beginning.

We don’t have time to explore every one of the verses that tell us how to get to heaven, but here’s just two more: *“If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved”* (Romans 10:9). *“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12). We don’t get to heaven by being good, or famous, or popular, or rich, or an American, but only through Christ.

“Where did you get that idea, preacher?” I got it from the Bible, from Jesus Himself. He said, *“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (John 14:6). “Wait just a cotton-pickin’ minute, pastor! Are you saying that I don’t have to be handsome or beautiful, or drive a nice car, or have a certain level of income to get into heaven?” Yes, I’m saying that, because that’s what the Bible says. “Now hold on, pastor! Are you saying that I don’t have to be an American to get into heaven? Are you also saying that I don’t have to be of certain race or ethnic background to get into heaven?” Yes! Double yes! That’s what I’m saying, because that’s what the Bible says. You see, regarding all those things, God. Doesn’t. Care!

Here’s what it comes down to. John 3:36 reads, *“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.”*

So I’m going to get to heaven, and I’m going to look around, and see Jesus, and Paul, and Moses, and Abraham. And there’s Rahab. Wait a minute; Rahab? Wasn’t she a harlot? Yes, she was, but she got in, because she believed. And there’s David. But didn’t he commit adultery, and have someone killed? Yes, he did, but he got in, because he confessed his sins, and believed. Others—perhaps even you—are going to look around when they get inside the gates of heaven, and they’re going to see me, and they’re going to wonder, “What is **he** doing here?” because they will know something about my past. They will be judging me on the basis of my behavior, words, attitudes or something else, and conclude that I shouldn’t be there. And they will be correct. I do not deserve to go to heaven. And neither do you.

We’ve said this before: God doesn’t send anyone to hell. That’s our default destination: it’s where we’re going anyway, unless God stepped in. He intervened through His Son, Jesus, who died on the cross and saved us from our sins.

It won't be Surprise, Arizona, but one of the surprises of heaven will be that some of the people we looked down on and even despised here on the earth are actually there, and we're going to be sharing space with them for eternity. And we're going to find out that our judging and hatred and our prejudice toward those other people were some of the sins Jesus died for.

3 That our being allowed entrance had absolutely nothing to do with our own goodness, just as the Scriptures have said all along.

The Bible declares that we all have sinned. *"Everyone has turned away, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one"* (Psalm 53:3). It says, *"We all, like sheep, have gone astray..."* (Isaiah 53:6). It also says, *"All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away"* (Isaiah 64:6). And that's just the beginning of what the Bible says about our sins.

I acknowledge that I am a sinner, and you do, too, but at the same time, we still like to think that we're pretty good people. Many of the problems of the world, we believe, are caused by other people, and if they would only straighten up, things would look a lot better around here. But the Scriptures tell us that *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23). So, since sin is a universal problem, then we have to concede that we're part of the problem, too.

We can certainly see the sins of others easily enough, but it's more difficult to spot our own. But even if we go through our entire lives blind to our own sin and the seriousness of it, when we get to heaven, we're going to realize that we really *are* sinful, and that our sin is awful and horrible in the sight of God; in fact, God hates sin and how it separates us from Him and from each other. Deuteronomy 25:16 says that God *"detests"* sin. Zechariah 8:17 tells us that God *"hates"* sin. When we read the gospels and we realize that The Father gave up His one and only Son to die for us that we might enter heaven, we have to conclude that God hates sin because Jesus died a horrible death to pay for it!

We cannot claim that we are not sinners! *"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us"* (1 John 1:8). A couple of verses later, we read, *"If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar, and his word has no place in our lives"* (1 John 1:10). But when we get to heaven, we're going to realize with utter clarity how horrific our sins are—and we're going to be surprised—even astounded—that we were even allowed inside the gates.

We're going to realize then that our being allowed entrance into heaven had nothing whatsoever to do with our own goodness. We will understand then as never before that getting into heaven

wasn't the result of our accomplishments, possessions, family or friends, but had everything to do with the amazing grace of God. Titus 3:5 assures us that *"he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."* Then verse seven says that we, *"having been justified by his grace...might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."* Ephesians 1:7 reads, *"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace."* That is what the Scriptures have said all along. We're going to be surprised—shocked—that the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus was extended even to people like us.

4 That God has indeed removed our sins "as far as the east is from the west."

As you have heard me say more than once, the book of Psalms is perhaps my favorite in all of Scripture, and Psalm 103 is right at the top. It is filled with so much promise! Take verse 8 for example: *"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love."* Verse ten give us eternal hope: *"he does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities."* But you've got to hear verses 11-12; let the words wash over your spirit; soak yourself in their truth: *"For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."*

Do you get that? Oh, I know I've said it before, but I'm going to say it again, and this time, let the words grab hold of your heart. If you could leave the South Pole and travel in a straight line to the North Pole, you would cover a distance of 12,430 miles. We can measure how far north is from south. But we cannot measure how far east is from west. If you go as far east as you can, there is still somewhere east of there. This is yet another proof that the Bible is God's Word!

The psalmist was saying that God has removed our sins from us to a distance which cannot be measured. We can talk about that removal of our sins, but we won't fully realize it until we get to heaven. We won't actually comprehend it until we walk in the gates, understand how sinful we really were, and realize the colossal dimensions of the love of God, then perceive for the first time that our sins have been removed from us so far that no one can measure the distance. Then we're *finally* going to *begin* to understand.

Sure, we say we've asked for forgiveness, and we say that we believe God has forgiven us. But somehow we keep blaming ourselves. We keep kicking ourselves. We keep living as if we are not forgiven at all. But in heaven we're going to realize that the sins we've been carrying and the guilt we've lugged around because we think the sin is too big for God to forgive, has indeed been forgiven if we have confessed it. And that realization will absolutely astound us.

Yes, when we get to heaven, we are certainly going to be surprised. The love of God is bigger than we've ever imagined it could be. Some of the people we've looked down on and even despised will be there, and we're going to be with them for eternity. We're going to be surprised that our being allowed entrance had absolutely nothing to do with our own goodness, just as the Scriptures have said all along. And then, so it all will make perfect sense to us, we will understand that God has indeed removed our sins "as far as the east is from the west."

Are you ready to go to heaven? Yes, you want to go, but are you ready to go? Have you confessed those sins Jesus died for, and have you repented of those sins? Are you following Christ in obedience? Are your eyes fixed on Jesus? Are you ready?