

# Heaven is (Eventually) a Place on Earth

Good to see you guys this morning. If you've got a bible, go ahead and turn with me to **Philippians 3**. It's **going to take us just a bit**, but we'll get there eventually. You may have noticed for the first time in a while, I did not say "Matthew" just now. And that's because we are taking a break from our Matthew series. If you're new, we've been studying the gospel of Matthew for about the past four months straight. And we'll hop back into Matthew in the new year.

But **today, we're kicking off a new series** called *In Knoxville as it is in Heaven*. Chances are, especially if you've been around our church for long, you probably recognize that phrase. **Maybe from the lobby wall on your way in, maybe from the stickers or magnets or even t-shirts...we tend to plaster that phrase on a lot of things around here.** But we got to thinking a while back as a staff: **even though we use that phrase a lot, I don't know that we've ever taken an extended amount of time to talk about what it means, or what we mean by it.** **There was one Easter Gathering**—I think our first ever Easter Gathering as a church—where we talked about it. But it was brief, and frankly, not very good—and even if it was, I'm pretty sure like 15 of you were there for that. So it felt like it was high time to go into a little more detail on all of it: *what do we mean* when we use the phrase "in Knoxville as it is in heaven"?

Well for starters, that phrase is **not original to us**. As many of you know, it is a **play on Jesus' words** from his famous "Lord's prayer," found in Luke and Matthew (we just can't manage to stay away from Matthew, apparently). But there in the Lord's prayer, he tells his disciples that they should *pray* for God's kingdom to come, his will to be done "on earth as it is in heaven." *Knoxville* is obviously a part of *earth*—if you didn't know, now you know. But that's one of the primary things Jesus wants his disciples to pray for. And **because that is one of the central things Jesus said to pray for, we also think it should be central to how we go about life as well: we want to live in Knoxville as it is in heaven.**

Now, obviously there are **two main parts** to that phrase: *Knoxville*, and then *heaven*. I figure all of us are pretty clear on what is meant by "Knoxville" (if you aren't, I do not have time to catch you up on that). So I figured we'd start off **talking about the other half:** the idea of "heaven." **Now when most people think about heaven,** I think they tend to envision some nebulous location, likely somewhere up above the clouds. There are harps and angels there—maybe the angels are babies in diapers, maybe they aren't. And people exist there in some sort of trance-like state, where they float about from place to place. I think that's the picture that at least a lot of us have in our heads.

And the *belief* by most people is that **we go there when we die**. And for a lot of Christians, that idea—the idea of going to heaven when we die—is what matters *most* to them. It's the most *important* thing about being a Christian. **Such that if you were to just pull aside a random person** on Market Square and say “what is being a Christian all about?” If you didn't get a sarcastic or negative answer, you'd probably get something like “Christians believe that if you do or believe the right things, you will *go to heaven when you die*.” That's what many people *outside* the church believe, and honestly it's what a lot of people *inside* the church believe too.

And there are **plenty of reasons people think that**. So many sermons in church settings like this one center around this idea of going to heaven when you die. The sermon ends with a person on stage asking everyone if they are confident of their “eternal destiny” (i.e. where they are going to *go when they die*). Sometimes we are taught to start “evangelistic” conversations with people by asking a question like “if you died tonight, do you know where you would *go*?” (Which is a pretty morbid way to start a conversation with someone you don't know, if you ask me.)

Christian **bookstores**, wherever they still exist, have shelves stocked with book after book about *heaven*: books describing what heaven will likely be like, books about people who almost died and went to heaven for an hour, or a day, or a week and have returned to write a New York Times bestselling book about their experience. We even sing songs and hymns about how we are one day going to leave this world behind and fly away to another place with Jesus. **An overwhelming focus of many Christians and Christian traditions centers around this idea of “going to heaven when you die.”**

Now I'm **not here to say** that all that **isn't important**, or isn't worth *talking* about. It absolutely is. But I do wonder if sometimes we've given that stuff a little more emphasis than the *bible* gives it. You might be surprised to know that the bible actually gives us very few passages about heaven, in terms of “the place we go when we die.” We get about five passages in the entire New Testament.<sup>1</sup> And they are incredibly brief and vague in how they describe it—they basically just say “we will be with God.” ~~The apostle Paul said he knew a guy who got to experience heaven, but then wasn't permitted to talk about it (I think God wanted to save that for people's book deals later on).~~

**The bible actually spends very little time talking about what most people think of as “heaven.”** Very little time talking about God rounding people up and evacuating them **out of earth into heaven**. Instead, the biblical authors seem much **more interested in talking about another** of God's objectives when it comes to heaven. And that's

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 23:43, 2 Corinthians 5:6-8, Philippians 1:21-23, 1 Thessalonians 4:14, and 2 Corinthians 12:2-4.

**God's desire to bring *heaven*, to *earth*.** God bringing heaven to *earth* is a much bigger *focus* within the biblical story. Now it's an easy storyline to miss, because sometimes you have to read between the lines to see it. But it's a story that runs, quite literally, from cover to cover in the Scriptures.

So here's my ask of you: give me about **five minutes to give you** a 30,000-foot flyover version of the story of the whole bible and show you this theme. And then bring it back down to earth in Philippians 3 and talk about what all of it means for you and I today. That sound good? I hope so, because I don't have anything else planned.

So the **story of the bible starts** with God creating a man and a woman, and putting them in a garden. But it wasn't just *any* garden—this was a garden where *heaven and earth overlapped*. We're told that Adam and Eve literally walked in the garden with God himself. It wasn't that they were on earth and God was *somewhere* else—they were *together, with* God, in the same place. There was this **constant, unbroken relationship** between God and humanity.

But then something happened. A **serpent invaded the garden** and convinced Adam and Eve that they didn't need God. They didn't need his power, his authority, his truth. That they were better off living in their own power, their own authority, their own truth. And they listened. And in an instance, **sin drove a deep wedge** for the first time ever between *heaven* and *earth*. For the first time ever, heaven and earth were *separated*.

So there was **heaven, and then there was earth**. *Heaven* was where God was. It was where his will was done and where things were as he wanted them to be. And *earth* was where humans were. Where *their* will was done and where things were as *they* wanted them to be. And it says that in between, there was this *chasm*—this *division* between the two. Such that there was a flaming sword between heaven and earth guarding the way back to God's presence. Sin had created a *rift* between *heaven* and *earth*.

But **from the beginning, God had a plan**. He had a plan to bring the beauty and the realities of heaven *back to* earth once again. He had a plan to infiltrate the broken, degenerative value system of earth, with the *beautiful, live-giving* value system of heaven. And that plan centered itself around him sending Jesus *from* heaven, *to* earth. Such that Jesus shows up on the scene and from the very beginning of his ministry has one primary message: "the kingdom of *heaven* is (what?) *here*." The kingdom of *heaven*, is *here*. It has arrived. It's at hand. It's in our midst. Jesus had come to begin renewing *earth* with the realities of *heaven*.

At the **cross, when Jesus released his last** breath, the bible tells us that there was an earthquake, and the temple curtain was torn from top to bottom. In context, this is trying to show us that the chasm between heaven and earth has begun to heal because of the cross of Jesus.

And **one day**, we're told that **God will finish** that process. He will bring *heaven*, in all of its fullness and glory and beauty, back to *earth*. We're told that a place called "the New Jerusalem"—this new city that represents everything God wants his world to be—that it will come down *out of heaven* to meet *earth*.<sup>2</sup> And it will create a new reality for all of those who know and follow Jesus. And on that day, we're told there will be no pain, no sickness, no death, and no mourning. All of the things that sin has broken will be healed. And even the things that were *once* broken will no longer be remembered.<sup>3</sup> **Everything that God wants his world to be, will be. And everything that God does not want his world to be, will be gone for good.**

And we're told that *on* that day, **those who follow Jesus** will "reign forever" *with God...on the earth*.<sup>4</sup> Not that they'll float around from place to place in *heaven*—but that they will reign and live and feast and enjoy God's creation...*on the earth*. This is where the world is headed. Which means—and if you zoned out for the past five minutes, here's the big idea in the simplest terms I can put it—that **heaven eventually is returning to earth**. Which means the *fantastic* song from the 80s was *almost* right: "heaven is (eventually) a place on earth." I think that song is about something else...but you get the idea.

**That**, believe it or not, is the **overwhelming focus of the biblical storyline**. **Our story, and the world's story, does not end with God snatching us all up into heaven and leaving the world to burn. It ends with God returning heaven to earth and repairing and remaking and renewing everything that sin has broken.** It ends with followers of Jesus enjoying God's presence and God's goodness forever and ever. It ends with us enjoying the realities of *heaven, on earth*.

Now, with all of that unpacked—and thank you for indulging me...if you got distracted and started checking your email, you can come back with us now—with all of that unpacked, it **leaves an important question**: *what does that mean for us, now?* That's a story about the *future* of the world—what does that mean for us, living in the *present*? If you and I reshape how we view our lives and our world with *that story* from the Scriptures, how does it change the way that we live? That's where **Philippians 3** comes in. Take a look with me, first at v. 20:

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<sup>2</sup> Revelation 21:2

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 65:17

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 5:9-10

[20] But our **citizenship** is in (where?) **heaven**.

Okay, just stop right there for a second. Paul **just dubbed himself** and the Philippian church—and by association, *us*—“citizens” of heaven. “Citizens of heaven.” Did that seem weird to anybody else? Did the Philippians used to *live* in *heaven*? Did they go get their *documentation* in heaven and then go live in *Philippi*? No. Okay, then in what way exactly then are they *citizens of heaven*?

Well it helps to know that Paul is writing to Philippi, which was a **Roman colony at the time**. So he’s borrowing from the idea of *Roman* citizenship. What Rome would often do when they acquired a new territory or city or area is that they would plant Roman *citizens* there in the new colony, whose job it was to bring the values and customs and art and culture of *Rome*, to that area. They were “citizens of Rome” whose job it was to “*Romanize*” Philippi for the better. Paul grabs that operational understanding of *citizenship*, and he applies it to their relationship with *Jesus*.

So listen: when Paul uses the expression “citizens of heaven,” he’s **not saying, as some Christians do**, that “heaven is our *home*,” and that we’re just supposed to keep to ourselves and live in a bubble and bide time until God takes us *back* there. That’s not his point. In fact, in some ways, he’s actually saying the *opposite*. He’s saying that we should *actively work* in our day-to-day lives to bring the values and customs and culture of *heaven*, to the place on earth where we live. He’s saying that *they* should *heavenize Philippi*. And that *we* should *heavenize Knoxville*. That we should live in Knoxville, as it is in heaven. That we should *infiltrate* the value system of *earth*, *with* the value system of *heaven*. Are you following all that?

Now, I don’t know that I *have* to **make this clarification**, but I am going to anyway. When I say we are called to infiltrate the culture and values and practices of earth with heaven, I don’t mean that we *do* that by force or by violence or by political power, or even by coercion. I don’t mean we find a Christian somewhere, we elect them the new president, and we enact a theocracy where we compel people everywhere to obey the Ten Commandments *or else*. The kingdom of God *does not come* through force or violence political power or coercion.

**In fact, that was one** of the most frequent things Jesus had to *correct* people on during his time on earth: *they* thought he was coming to bring the kingdom by force and power and political might, and he instead said he was bringing the kingdom like a tiny mustard seed that slowly grows into a tree. Like yeast slowly working its way through a batch of dough. Do you hear the difference? God’s kingdom isn’t *enforced and coerced*—that’s not

how it works. Like I said, don't know that that's what any of you *thought* I meant, but always worth clarifying. Especially since there was a little something that happened this past January at the Capitol where some people who claimed to be Christians had that a bit confused. So that's *not* what we mean.

Instead, here's **what we mean**. We mean that we bring heaven to earth by simply **living a radically different way**. We bring heaven to earth by *loving and serving* our enemies rather than hating and canceling and tearing them down. We bring heaven to earth by seeking the good of our neighbors as passionately or more than we seek our own. We bring heaven to earth by seeing our money as a tool for good in our world rather than a means to our own comfort and convenience. We bring heaven to earth by using our homes as ways to welcome the lonely rather than ways to escape from the world. **We bring heaven to earth not by forcing the kingdom of heaven onto Knoxville, but by demonstrating to Knoxville a radically different way.**

Which means **when we see people and relationships and systems in our city that are broken, our first instinct shouldn't be to look at those things and condemn them or judge them or complain about how broken they are. Our first instinct should be to see those things and go "oh, that's a part of our city where heaven hasn't yet broken in.** But *I've* been put here as a citizen of heaven. It's *my job* to participate with God in bringing the culture and customs and values of heaven to *earth*. So in light of that, how might God want me to be a part of having heaven break in *there*?" That's our job as followers of Jesus. Does that make sense?

Okay, let's **finish out this idea** from Paul, let's read v. 20 again into 21:

*[20] But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there (from heaven), the Lord Jesus Christ, [21] who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*

So **make no mistake** about it: we **are still waiting** for something. We are awaiting that day we talked about earlier when Jesus will return and will bring the kingdom of heaven in its *fullness*, once and for all. When he makes all that we have done in part, *complete*. When he brings "everything under his control." But **notice two things** about what happens on that day. First, we don't float off *into heaven*, but rather *Jesus* comes *from* heaven, to earth. It says we await a savior "*from there*."

And second, notice that **the language about what will happen** on that day isn't the language of *escape* and *removal*, but rather of *renewal* and of *transformation*: "[he]...will



transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his *glorious* body.” He will make *us* like we were always meant to be. And we’re told elsewhere that on that day, he’ll actually transform *everything* to be as it was meant to be.<sup>5</sup>

So all of this means that our “waiting” isn’t a *passive waiting*—it’s *active* waiting. It’s that **we work *actively* to bring the realities of heaven to earth, and we await the day when God will do *fully* what we can only do in *part*.** And *listen*: the last thing I want you to see is that those two things are very connected to one another: **knowing that God will one day *complete what we do, motivates us to work all the harder in the meantime.***

I think Paul **explains this really well** in 1 Corinthians 15 (**you can flip there or we’ll put it on the screen**). In nearly all of chapter 15, Paul is unpacking, in great detail, what we’ve been talking about today. How Jesus is going to return, and he is going to put everything under his control. His kingdom is going to come fully on earth as it is in heaven. And then, after all of that, in the very last verse of the chapter, he gives this practical implication of all of it:

**[58] Therefore** (in light of the fact that Jesus will return and complete *all that is done in part now*), **my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.**

Knowing that Jesus will one day complete what we work towards now **means** not a single bit of our effort is ever in vain. Now, it **would be easy to think** that when he says “your labor *in the Lord*,” he means *church* work. *Ministry* work. Telling people about Jesus, preaching sermons—things like that. But in *reality*, there are all sorts of things you and I do as followers of Jesus to join God in bringing heaven to earth that don’t look anything *like* traditional “church work.”

Followers of Jesus working in **administrative jobs** bring heaven to earth through *order* and *organization*. Followers of Jesus who work as **police officers** bring heaven to earth through participating in *justice*. **Artists and musicians** through expressing God’s *creativity*. **Stay-at-home parents** through raising little Jesus-followers and then releasing them into the world. **Social workers** through expressing God’s compassion. **City planners** by creating environments for people to live and work and enjoy things. **Delivery drivers** by expressing God’s *provision*. And we could go on. **Joining God in bringing heaven to**

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<sup>5</sup> For example, in passages like Romans 8:19-23.

earth doesn't mean you need to change what you do to be more *spiritual*. It simply means that you now view everything you do as a citizen of heaven would view it.

Author and minister **N.T. Wright** puts it like this, and I think this is so helpful:

*What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—will last into God's future. These activities are **not simply ways** of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether.... They are part of what we may call building for God's kingdom.*

And Paul says that **when you “build for God's kingdom”**—when you understand where God's world is headed, how the story ends—it helps you to “stand firm.” To let “nothing move you.” To “give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you *know* that your labor is not in vain.” **When you work towards what God is working towards, not a bit of your effort is wasted.** That's what it means to live “in Knoxville as it is in heaven.”

So I realize **today** has stayed fairly **big picture**. But we're going to do for the rest of the series is press this big idea down into **six specific ways** we feel called to participate in this as a church family. There are way *more* than six, to be sure, but as a pastoral staff we've narrowed it down to six we want to hit on in this series. But with each one, we are going to tie it back to *heaven*: we participate in these things because they are ways that we join God in bringing the realities of heaven, to earth, and to Knoxville specifically.

So this morning, I'll just give you **a preview** of where we're headed:

- Next week, we'll look at *Intimacy* with God: because one day we'll be in perfect, unbroken relationship with God *forever*...we are also invited to live in close relationship with him *now*.
- Then we'll look at *Confession & Repentance*. Because one day we will be free of sin *forever*, we are also invited to regularly confess and repent of our sin *now*.
- We'll look at *Discipleship*: because one day we'll all be like Jesus and brought to complete maturity, we are also invited to help one another become more like Jesus *now*.
- Then *Generosity*: because one day everyone will have the resources they need and no one will be wanting, we are also called to share and sacrifice our resources with others *now*.
- Then *Mission*: because one day every nation and tribe and tongue will be present around the throne, we participate in God's mission to reach those people *now*.



- And finally, *Justice*: because the new heavens and earth is a place where justice is done and all is as it should be, we also participate in doing justice *now*.

With **every week**, we're going to attempt to dial into one aspect of how life in the new heavens and new earth will be, and then talk in detail about how to make those things more and more of a reality in our world *today*.

But this morning, I just want to wrap up with **one last, very important thing**. // I think in some ways, it would be easy to hear everything I just said about us bringing heaven to earth and just interpret it as "cool—so we get to make the world a better place. Got it." And that's true: we *do* get to make the world a better place. But that's also not *all* we're saying. We're not just saying that we do positive things for the world and that's somehow that means we're a part of God's kingdom.

Because, you see, **in order to be in the kingdom, you have to know the *king***. And in order to "build for" the kingdom *of God*, you first need a relationship *with* God. **In fact, I would argue that a lot of the *problem* right now** in our world is that we've got quite a lot of people who *want* to bring heaven to earth, who want to establish a kingdom that looks something *like* God's kingdom—but they're trying to establish that kingdom without a *king*. And that will never work. We all love our own little kingdoms way too much to be able to work together for something bigger...*unless* there's a true, good, king running it all.

So **before we get into the practicals** in the rest of this series, I *do* just need to ask: do you know the *king*? Do you know the one who came down from heaven and climbed up on a cross for you? Do you know the one who left his home and came searching for you? And do you know that participation *in his* kingdom is the best thing you'll ever be a part of? This is the story that he's writing...my question is are you a part of it?

Let me pray for us.