

Metaphors of Mercy and the Experience of Heaven

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I was raised in the church to never question the authority of my pastors and teachers and consequently I became a pre-millennial dispensationalist by default (and long before I could pronounce it). I received my first instruction in eschatology at the age of eight from a couple of Billy Graham movies depicting the rapture and tribulation, which left me traumatized by nightmares about being "left behind." Maybe some of you saw the same movies. As a preteen I had already read Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, as well as an older, obscure novel from my dad's library entitled, *In the Twinkling of an Eye*. I still remember the description of the clouds "parting like a scroll" in the opening scene, straight out of the Bible. At summer camps the songs we sung around the campfire included Larry Norman's "I Wish We'd All Been Ready." And so I had that saturation early, and regularly, throughout my growing up years. I do distinctly remember, however, as I got older, questioning my bible teachers in high school about the phrases in the gospels like "this generation" and "some standing here," and I do remember being dissatisfied with the party-line answers, but since I had been taught not to question authority, I quickly learned to put eschatology in the category of "things I will never understand," rather than face my growing cynicism head on. (And I simply remained a dispensationalist by default).

Looking back now on that initial encounter as a teenager with what I *perceived* to be contradictory statements in Scripture, I realize that it began what grew throughout most of my adult life until recently into a passionless and purposeless approach to most of the Bible. Of course there were exceptions to that: passages I would go to again and again for comfort or inspiration, or even to be instructed in how to live as a wife, parent, and friend. And certainly the Bible knowledge I had obtained over many years of Scripture memorization and instruction in bible study methods in church and Christian high school, and a year of bible college, is even now, and *especially* now, a priceless gift. A few years ago my interest in the relevance of end-times prophecy was briefly inspired when a friend introduced me to the "Left Behind" novels. I actually made it through about #9, at which point I got bored. What I didn't articulate or even fully recognize at the time was that a familiar sense of dissatisfaction was setting in reminiscent of what I had felt when I had first questioned those time statements in the gospels as a teenager. What I also didn't articulate at the time was that I was headed toward a crisis of faith. My children were getting older and thinking more critically for themselves, and asking some tough questions (just in general, not specifically about prophecy), and I was confronted with my own intellectual dishonesty toward what seemed to be contradictory statements in Scripture. If the Bible wasn't reliable then Christianity wasn't true. However I was far from concluding the Bible was not reliable. And my faith in Christianity, specifically in the cross of Christ, never wavered; but I was forced to confront my dishonest approach to the time statements of Jesus in the gospels. (And at this time, as well as I thought I knew the New Testament, I wasn't even aware of all the time statements in the epistles, and I certainly wasn't aware of the "in that day" and "at that time" contexts of the Old Testament prophets' visions

of the cross and the New Heavens and New Earth, which I now know to be the most beautiful words ever written.)

I had gone through a period of a few years when I would experience anxiety whenever I picked up my Bible to read. I so wanted to get back into it, but I was almost afraid of what I would find, so I mostly stayed away from it. It seemed as if the older I got, and the more I had learned through life experience, the more critically I looked at the Bible, the more I questioned its relevance to my life, and this world; and I simply ceased to be appeased or comforted by the party-line answers I had resigned myself to when I was younger. I was forty (something) years old, and had been a Christian my whole life. And now I had a decision to make: either resign myself to a passionless, mediocre, going-thru-the-motions faith; or pursue the hard questions to the end no matter where they led.

Thus began the joyous, thrilling journey of discovery I have been on for the past three years. What began with a few time statements turned into a hundred, and opened my eyes to a little thing called "audience relevance," which later led me to take the plunge into a deep sea of metaphor from which I will never emerge. And I have no desire to. I assure you, the water's fine.

I came to believe the Lord did indeed return in the glory of His father, with His holy angels, in the generation of some who were standing there. I came to believe this rather quickly, but not at all hastily. There were times I had to intentionally yield my fear and my desire for comfort, to my commitment to pursue truth. And in all honesty, the matter of His return has become, and forever will be for me, an issue of *conscience*. My conscience would no sooner allow me to deny that He has come to indwell His people, and bring us into the Holiest of all—heaven—than it would allow me to deny that He is God, and that He died on the cross for my sins. I have often stated that in order to deny He is King now, and has fulfilled everything he promised, I would have to pick up my Bible with the deliberate intention of ignoring what it says; in which case of course there would be no reason for me to pick it up again. But far from being ambivalent about what I read in the Bible now, I have come to look forward to reading it with enthusiasm and anticipation of seeing what I know will always be something new and beautiful. These words from David have come to describe my spiritual journey, and my own pursuit of the knowledge of God:

One thing have I desired of the Lord, and that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold His beauty, and inquire in His temple (Psalm 27:1).

That was the *one thing* David desired more than any other. More than heaven? Actually, this is a description of heaven, and yes, if we are believers in Jesus Christ, we are there now. The nuance here which might get missed, even by people who readily acknowledge that the "temple" is not referring to a physical building, but God's presence with His people, is the fact that we, his people, *are* that temple. And there is only one, a holy temple of the Lord, built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets.

Friends of mine, with whom I have had some wonderful discussions about Christ and His kingdom, often state to me that while they appreciate all they are seeing in

Scripture of the beauty and glory of what we have in Christ, and especially the paramount significance of His forgiveness, "I just can't believe that *this* is all there is."

Is this all there is? First we need to define "this". And we need to ask ourselves the question, what is the Bible (which tells us of heaven) about? Is the Bible about cosmological history, or is the Bible about redemptive history? And if we agree that the Bible tells the story, from beginning to end, of redemption, then we need to ask ourselves, with what was God's redemptive plan concerned? Was it to perfect the consciences of His people and bring us into face to face communion with Him, and with each other in Him forever; or was it to recreate the physical planet (as if there is something the matter with it)?

Secondly, we need to acknowledge what we have in Christ as a direct result of "redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (Ephesians 1:7). I am going to list some of those things, and preface them with an adverb that is not in the Scriptural contexts, but is suggested by the question, "Is this *all* there is?"

In Christ, we have *merely*...

Been cleansed of all unrighteousness and been made the righteousness of God (1 John 1:9; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

Been raised up together to sit in heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6).

Been perfected forever by His one offering (Hebrews 10:14).

Been presented holy and unblameable and unproveable in His sight (Colossians 1:21f).

In Christ, we have *merely*...

Come from the east and west, to sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 8:11).

Come to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect (Hebrews 12:22f).

In Christ, we *merely are*....

The temple of the living God. He dwells in us, and walks in us; He is our God and we are His people (2 Corinthians 6:16). We *merely are* the many mansions in the Father's house (John 14:2).

So when say we are not in heaven yet, because this can't be all there is, we should pray with Paul:

That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give us the spirit of

wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: The eyes of our understanding being enlightened; that we may know what is the hope of his calling, and what are the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, And what is the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places....and [are you ready?] raised *us* up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 1:17f).

David said:

In thy presence is fullness of joy, and at thy right hand are pleasures forever more (Psalm 16:11).

My friend once commented to me that she thought heaven would be a place of no more tears, or sickness. And indeed it is. The Bible equates the absence of sickness and the wiping away of all tears with the forgiveness of sin. Once we realize that the prophecies of a new world to come that we used to interpret literally and physically are beautiful metaphorical pictures of far greater *spiritual* blessings, and that they all found their fulfillment in Christ, in Whom "all the promises of God are yes, and Amen," we will begin to see the consistency of this language through all of Scripture. The kingdom the prophets saw is the same kingdom which Jesus proclaimed was "at hand" and "not of this world," and "within you." It is the kingdom which Paul said was "not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" (Romans 14:17).

Jesus chastised those who sought after a kingdom which could be sensually perceived and experienced when he said to some of those who followed Him:

You seek me, not because you saw the miracles, but because you ate the loaves, and were filled. Labor not for the food which perishes, but for that food which endures unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give to you (John 6:26f).

Yet many Christians today are still waiting for a Kingdom which can be touched and tasted. And this is why it matters what we believe about both the timing and the nature of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. In a traditional presentation of the gospel message I would often hear as a young child, the gift of salvation was presented as an unopened gift. It is free, the teacher would tell us; it costs you nothing. But in order to benefit from this gift, you have to receive it. You have to hold out your hand, take off the bow, and the wrapping paper, and claim it for yourself. Now, regardless of whether this presentation of the *gospel* was Biblically accurate, I am reminded of it when I consider the fact that there are so many Christians who are, in their minds, waiting for redemption, and all of its blessings, which they already have. Instead of *experiencing* "fullness of joy, and pleasures forever more," which are theirs right now, they are "*laboring* for food which perishes."

Proving the kingdom has come, and even saying we believe we lack nothing, and have already been "blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 1:3), is one thing. Tangibly experiencing these things is another. How do we, by God's design and direction, *experience* His presence and face to face

communion with Him? What I have come to believe and continue to see revealed throughout Scripture, is that the way we experience communion with God is through communion with God's people; that our communion with God's people is inseparable from our communion with God; and that God has both *designed* and *commanded* our communion with one another as the way we would experience His presence eternally.

In John 15, Jesus said to his disciples, "This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you." He also said to them, "You are my friends, *if* you do whatsoever I command you." In other words, "you are *my* friends, if you love *one another*." John later wrote, "We love Him, because He first loved us." And he demonstrated His love, in a word, by His mercy.

Mercy is what He came to *do*:

Luke records Zechariah's prophecy: Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he has visited and redeemed his people...To *perform the mercy* promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant...To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, through the *tender mercy* of our God (Luke 1:68f).

Mercy is why He came, it's how He loved us, and it's how He taught us to love one another.

One of my favorite characters in all of literature, Portia, in Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice," describes mercy this way:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown.
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings.
But mercy is above this scepter'd sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings;
It is an attribute of God himself;
And earthly power doth then show like God's
When mercy seasons justice.

There are two things in Shakespeare's view of mercy which stand out to me:

The first is that out of all qualities possessed or displayed by human authority or power, mercy is the most "God-like". It is the attribute of a king which above all others displays divine character. The implication being, that its source is divine.

Psalms 145 says that the Lord's "tender mercies are over all his works."

And the second, is that the "double blessing" inherent in mercy is only experienced

when it is reciprocated. There is a blessing for the one who gives, and for the one who receives.

This is confirmed by Scripture as well: When we show the mercy to one another that He has shown to us, He in fact tells us, "You have done it unto me." And thereby we experience communion with *Him*.

It sounds so simple, doesn't it? But if it were really that simple to grasp and apply, then lives and relationships would be dramatically impacted, and we don't often see that happening. Instead we see people glossing over what it means to be forgiven, guilt-free and blameless, and looking for something *more*, something *else*--let's admit it: something *physical*. But it is actually something far less, sadly.

What I am learning more and more about the beautiful way God has designed heaven (our communion with Him and one another in His presence) is that even though our forgiveness was a once and for all accomplishment (Hebrews 10 tells us that by one sacrifice He perfected us forever), we experience the impact of our restoration to God over and over by both restoring and being restored to one another, as we extend mercy to each other. It is this repeatable experience of restoration on this horizontal plane which serves to continually remind us of the eternal restoration which Christ has accomplished in bringing us to God. I look at mercy performed in our human relationships as little snapshots or carbon copies of God's mercy to us. It is the way He has given us to see and remember, and also to visibly display the Kingdom within us to the world. But that analogy still falls a bit short, because our relationships with each other in Christ are more than just pictures of our relationship with Him; He dwells *in us*, so He is *in* our communion with one another: "Wherever two or three are gathered" (wherever God's people are restored to one another), He is there.

This is really what Jesus meant when He said, "As you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me." He loved us first and taught us how, and we love Him back when we love each other. And that is the *experience* of heaven, because it's the experience of His presence. And His presence is what heaven is. (We see this defined irrefutably in the book of Hebrews.)

This brings us to a very familiar parable which Jesus told about the kingdom of heaven, and those who were about to inherit it (the context, which is often interpreted broadly and globally, is actually rather specific and exclusive):

When the Son of Man comes in His glory [He] will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 'For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? 'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 'When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me' (Matthew 25:31f).

That great sage, Bono, quoted from this passage in his now famous remarks to the National Prayer Breakfast. He stated, "It's not a coincidence that in the Scriptures, poverty is mentioned more than 2,100 times. It's not an accident. That's a lot of air time, 2,100 mentions. You know, the only time Christ is judgmental is on the subject of the poor. 'As you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me.' (Matthew 25:40). As I say, good news to the poor."

It has become quite in vogue to "socialize" the "good news" of the gospel, by recasting Jesus as a social or political revolutionary, and by characterizing what one modern writer has called His "secret message" as a prescription for *social* change in our day, as this example from Bono indicates. And many Christians unwittingly find themselves complicit with this social gospel, when they interpret these references to feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and sheltering strangers merely physically.

A mere surface reading of this passage will motivate us to care physically for others, and we are not dismissing the importance of that. After all, Jesus fed people physically, and he healed people physically. But we must also remember what He said in the context of describing the nature of His Kingdom, and how Jesus defined what Bono refers to as "good news to the poor":

Blessed are the poor *in spirit*, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven; and blessed are they which hunger and thirst for *righteousness*, for they shall be filled (Matthew 5:3f).

In John 6, Jesus said:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world...It is the *spirit* that quickens; the flesh profits nothing: the *words* that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life ((John 6:47f).

We have just seen Jesus contrast spiritual food with physical food, and declare which is essential for eternal life. Even in the context of feeding people physically, Jesus always pointed to the fact that physical food was not their true need. He had much more to offer than a temporal satisfaction of a physical hunger. In light of that, returning to Matthew 25, and remembering that its context is the Kingdom of Heaven, and the identity of those who were about to inherit it, and the intimate, reciprocal relationship between Christ and His people as expressed so beautifully and tenderly by the words, "you have done it unto me"; we must understand that a merely physical interpretation, which ignores that context, will completely miss its intent. The Kingdom of Heaven is eternal, all people in it are eternal, and the ministry they have to one another, even while inhabiting this temporal realm, has eternal significance. But a merely physical focus is leading to some erroneous, even gospel denying, conclusions. Here is a rather extreme example of how the 'physicalization' of Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom leads to a socializing of the Gospel which not only dismisses His redemption of His people, but also fails to

recognize the spiritual nature of the Kingdom, and the spiritual meaning of the metaphors Jesus used to describe it.

Steven White, commenting on the weblog entitled "Emergent What?" a website with the self-described mission of responding to criticisms of the so-called "emergent church," writes:

"The topic of social justice in my mind is a Kingdom issue and it is a way that Jews, Muslims and all can participate in the Kingdom. We must not forget the parable Jesus gave concerning His judgment. "When you have done it to the least of these you have done it unto me". [notice how he leaves out the phrase "my brethren"—he ignores the context by taking out this qualifier.] We must also not forget the negative, [which is] when you have failed to do social justice you have failed to love Jesus. So when Jews, Muslims or whoever are living out Love to their neighbor they are in fact participating in the Kingdom of God."

But Isaiah prophesied of the New Covenant Kingdom:

Thy people shall be all righteous: they shall inherit the land for ever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified (Isaiah 60:21).

And Hebrews 11 defines the heavenly country that Abraham and all of the Old Testament believers looked for—their inheritance—as "the righteousness which is by faith."

And in Matthew 25, Jesus is addressing those same righteous when He says, "come, inherit the kingdom."

So the problem we have when we interpret the metaphors in Matthew 25 physically, is that physical applications lead us outside of the specific audience Jesus was addressing, and thereby they lead us away from the relevance of his words to that audience. And His words are "spirit and life" to *believers*.

It is also important to note that Jesus' use of these metaphors we are going to look at briefly--feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and sheltering the stranger—was not new to His disciples. They were well acquainted with the repeated metaphorical use of these very physical things throughout their Old Testament Scriptures. It is not merely my goal to show how Scripture defines these metaphors, but what I would hope for us all to see is how they practically apply to our experience of His presence every day, by presenting us with ways to show His mercy, which are both tangible and spiritually significant.

"I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat"

I wonder if Peter recalled these words just a bit later when Jesus, after his resurrection, asked him three times, "Do you love me?" Peter answered, "Lord, you know I love you," to which Jesus replied, "feed my sheep." Jesus was saying, "You prove your love for *Me* when you love My *people*. In fact, when you love them, you love Me; when you feed them, you feed Me. This is the reciprocal nature of the feeding of Christ. We have feasted upon His flesh, the "spirit and life" of His *words*,

and as we have believed in Him we have been forgiven and cleansed. Remember that Peter was probably feeling ashamed at this point, because He had denied knowing Jesus and hid in fear. He was in need of comfort and restoration, and the assurance of Jesus' love. It was never a matter of that love or forgiveness being withheld. The cross had already removed his guilt, and he was already blameless in God's eyes, as are we. Peter was grieved when Jesus asked Him a third time. But Jesus knew about Peter what He knows about all of us: that when we fail in our behavior, the fact of our communion with Him will not be accompanied by the feeling of our communion with Him. Our minds are in need of the comfort and peace the truth of His word brings. That is why He commanded Peter to feed His sheep; and that is why He has commanded us to encourage one another with His word. He has given us the answer to the prayer He taught us to pray for "daily bread", by causing us to be fed and to feed one another off the fat of the land we have inherited together.

Listen to these words from Isaiah:

They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places. They shall not hunger or thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them: for he that has mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them (Isaiah 49:9f).

Paul said to the Colossians:

Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which you are called in one body; and be thankful. Let the *word of Christ* dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord (Colossians 3:15f).

I used to hear passages like this and view them as rather esoteric and indefinable in practical terms; and the artificial picture I would get of people walking around talking to each other in sing-songy King James English didn't help. But if we have experienced being fed from the Source, if we truly know that His words are life, those words as we apply them should naturally flow out to the comfort and edification of those we are living that life *with*. Of course apart from intentionally engaging in community with others this isn't going to naturally happen, which is why we must never separate our communion with God from our commitment to God's people.

"I was naked, and you clothed me"

In Christ we have been covered with robes righteousness and clothed with the garments of salvation and praise:

To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the *garment of praise* for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified...I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he has *clothed me* with the garments of salvation, he has *covered* me with the robe of righteousness (Isaiah 61:3f).

Christ purchased these coverings for our nakedness (the shame of our sin) by experiencing nakedness and its shame on the cross, when He bore our reproach upon Himself:

"I can count all my bones. They look, they stare at me; They divide my garments among them, And for my clothing they cast lots (Psalm 22)...for your sake I have borne reproach; shame has covered my face (Psalm 69)."

Jesus became naked and ashamed for us so that we would never be naked and ashamed again. God will *always* see us clothed in the righteousness of Christ, the beautiful garments of His salvation. "Love covers a multitude of sins," and loving one another as Christ loved us, we *should be* covering one another's faults. But it happens, doesn't it? We sometimes feel without that covering when we fall prey to merciless accusers, even within the church. The righteous asked Jesus, "when did we see You naked, and clothe You?" When we clothe a fallen brother or sister who may otherwise feel naked and exposed by covering their faults and restoring them in meekness (Galatians 6:1), He answers, "You have done it unto Me."

"I was a stranger, and you invited me in"

It is the character of the Kingdom to take in strangers, in fact the kingdom is made up of those who were once strangers to God and His promises:

Remember, that you being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and *strangers* from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus you who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ... that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross...Now therefore you are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God (Ephesians 2:11f).

The prophets spoke of the uniting of Jew and Gentile into one household in conjunction with Israel's salvation and eternal inheritance of the land:

For the LORD will have mercy on Jacob, and will yet choose Israel, and set them in their own land: and the strangers shall be joined with them, and they shall cleave to the house of Jacob (Isaiah 14:1).

[Christ speaking] Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and my God shall be my strength. And he [God the Father speaking to Christ] said, It is a light thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give You for a light to the Gentiles, that You may be my salvation unto the end of the earth (Isaiah 49:5f).

In that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign of the people; to [Him] shall the Gentiles seek: and His rest shall be glorious (Isaiah 11:10).

While it is true we will never again be estranged from God, because we have already

come to His light and entered His glorious rest, our experience on this horizontal plane can cause us to doubt that in our minds. Fellowship with another is broken when there has been an offense, and because our fellowship with one another is an extension and a reflection of our fellowship with Christ, when we are alienated from a brother or sister, our *experience* of God's presence is diminished. Repentance and forgiveness is necessary to restore us to fellowship with our brother or sister. He has restored us; now we, in Him, continually restore each other. We live out our restoration by being restorers. Sadly, much of the church today is judgmental and condemnatory and effectually opposes restoration. And that is why the Kingdom is often not recognizable to the world for its mercy to the stranger.

In closing, I would like to read a paragraph written by our good friend Brian Maxwell. When I first read this, I asked Brian if I could borrow it for this conference because it sums up beautifully both why it is so important that we practice mercy toward one another, and how that practice relates to both our understanding and our experience of that too often elusive concept: *heaven*.

Brian writes:

"It took me years as a preterist to shed the preconceptions I had learned and to start 'seeing' redemption for what it is. Heavenly bliss is now seen in us as we forgive others and are forgiven. The restoration that occurs when true repentance and forgiveness takes place between two brothers is typical of God's favor to us when we repented of our self-righteousness and came to Christ by faith. *That restoration is heavenly*. I think the reason many are not able to see this is there is so much false teaching in churches today on the 'timing' and 'nature' of salvation. A futurist [perspective] doesn't teach that we are sanctified, glorified, completely redeemed. [It teaches] there is something more to come, a further 'raising from the dead' so to speak. So naturally the average Christian today seeks after those things...[and] the idea of being in heaven now is ridiculous to the average believer, as it once was for me. We have to change people's over-all view of how scripture is interpreted; otherwise there is not much hope of them 'seeing' heaven now."

Amen to that, and I would add: until we see heaven, there is little hope of *experiencing* heaven.

Finally, consider these words from Isaiah, and please consider them in harmony of Christ's words to His own, "As you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me":

Is not this the fast that I have chosen? ...Is it not to deal your bread to the hungry, and bring the poor who are cast out into your house? And when you see the naked, that you cover him; and that you do not hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth as the morning, and your health shall spring forth speedily: and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your reward. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry, and he will say, here I am. If you take away from your midst the yoke, the pointing of the finger, and speaking vanity; And if you draw out your soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then your light will rise in obscurity, and your darkness will be as the noonday: And the LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in

drought, and make fat your bones: and you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. And [together] you will build the old waste places: you will raise up the foundations of many generations; and you will be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in...Then you will delight yourself in the Lord; and he will cause you to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father: for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it (Isaiah 58:6f).

Thank you.