

“WHAT IS HEAVEN...AND HOW DO I GET THERE?”

Haggai – Zecharia 11; John 14:1-6

Living God’s Word—A Walk Through The Bible

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Pastor Nathan J. Thompson

I remember nearly 20 years ago when Kim and I visited my parents at their park model winter home at Valle del Oro in Mesa, AR. During this stay my father and I had some very good visits about my parent’s end of life decisions and plans.

One thing he had me do was to read my Dad & Mom’s final will and trust. One thing that really touched my heart about this document was how their will strongly reflected their faith in God and their strong financial commitment to Jesus Christ and his mission.

My father was approaching his 80th birthday and he wasn’t sure how much longer he had to live on this earth. He wanted to explain to me how some strong percentages of their remaining assets will go to missions like Madagascar where my Grandfather was a missionary; to Luther Seminary for the training of pastors; to Global Health Ministries; to the church; etc.

My father then died at age 84 and my mother of course died this past December at age 94. It was this faith-centered will that helped give my parents some peace in these later years, and it is this will that has now guided the disbursement of their remaining assets and is blessing these Christ-centered ministries and missions in their death.

I hope each one of you older people has a will and that you have explained to your family what your wishes are—believe me it is so much easier for them. I also hope you have possibly included that a percentage should go to Messiah and/or some other possible Christ-centered missions. Unrestricted gifts to Messiah’s mission endowment fund will bless countless mission opportunities for many years to come.

That same winter Kim and I visited my parents one of their closest friends, Olive, died very suddenly from a stroke shortly after being with my parents one evening. Her husband, Arnie Thompson, was a retired pastor and nursing home administrator from Alexandria, MN. My Dad and I took Arnie out for pizza one night when we were there, and we had a great visit together.

A cute story my Dad shared with me from Olive’s funeral some weeks earlier (Arnie asked my Dad to preach at her funeral in both Arizona and at First Lutheran in Alexandria), was how one of Olive and Arnie’s granddaughters was at the visitation the night before, and again at the church before the service. Her comment on that second day was that this could not be her grandma lying there, because her grandma would never wear the same dress two days in a row.

One of the great blessings about visiting with my parents and people like Arnie was to hear, and experience, their strong belief in Jesus Christ and the strong assurance they had of living with Jesus forever in heaven. Their discussion of their own death and of their spouse was not one of fear or wonder, but of anticipating being with Christ forever.

Jesus in John’s Gospel gives us a vision of what heaven will be like where he says, *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are*

many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."

What a beautiful passage this is where Jesus promises that he has prepared a place for each one of us in heaven; where through his death and resurrection there is room in his house for you and me. Jesus promises that he will personally come back and take all who believe in him, all who have lived by faith, to live with him in everlasting glory and celebration.

In the final books of the Old Testament people like the prophet Zechariah also point Israel to this hope of Jesus' eternal reign where he says: *"Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey's colt."* (Zechariah 9:9 NLT)

And in verse 16 Zechariah continues: *"On that day the Lord their God will rescue his people, just as a shepherd rescues his sheep. They will sparkle in his land like jewels in a crown. How wonderful and beautiful they will be! The young men will thrive on abundant grain, and the young women will flourish on new wine."* (9:16-17) This is a beautiful picture of Christ's redemption now and for all eternity.

When I think of my parents it was that assurance of John 14, and of many other promises of Jesus, that was the center and foundation throughout their lives. The interesting thing is that it was because they had this assurance and had kept their eyes on their eternal reward--this filled them with joy, purpose and direction; it guided them in the priorities they lived by. It filled their lives with vibrancy and fulfillment.

It has often been said that it is only as we face the reality of our own death that we will be able to truly live. Knowing the final chapter enables us to live right now in confidence and hope. It is my sincere prayer that each one of you has this assurance of faith in Jesus Christ; that you know there is a place for you in heaven.

Stephen Covey, bestselling author of the book, ***"Seven Habits Of Highly Effective People,"*** uses as one of his principles for people to be successful in business and life, to always "begin with the end in mind." In order to better explain this concept he asks us to picture ourselves going to the funeral of a loved one.

We are to picture ourselves driving to the funeral chapel, parking the car, going into the building, seeing the flowers, hearing the piped in music. Picture the faces of friends and family, of the sorrow and love they are sharing together. Then picture going to look at the casket; and lo and behold coming face to face with ourselves. This is our funeral; all the people have come to honor us; they are there to express love and appreciation for our lives.

As we take our seats as the service begins we notice in the bulletin that there are going to be four speakers. The first one is from our family; it could be a child, our spouse, a brother or sister, niece or cousin. The second speaker is one of our friends who knew us very well as a person. The third is a colleague from our work or profession, and the fourth is a person from our church.

The question then Covey asks is this: what would we like each of these speakers to say about us? What kind of spouse, mother, father, relative and friend would we like to be known as? What contribution to life would we want them to remember?

Stephen Covey begins with this exercise because he says that if we begin with the end of our lives in mind; if we have a clear understanding of our destination and goals, then that will help us better understand where we are at right now. It will help guide our steps each day.

I would also add to Covey's principle that we keep the end in mind as to our eternal home; that Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us. To do this as we live by faith will then give us the right destination and goals; will influence every aspect and priority of how we live each day.

To live by faith in Jesus, to keep our eyes on him, reminds us of what is really important in life. It helps us to see that life is not meant to be lived only for me but for others. It helps us to see that through Christ we have the ability to make a positive difference in the people around us; that we can share the gift of forgiveness and love with each other.

To keep my eyes on Jesus and on life everlasting also helps us to see the importance of the church; the importance that my priorities and existence is centered in the church. In order to live by faith we know that we cannot do it without regular and faithful worship; without sharing in the Lord's Supper; without hearing the Word of God proclaimed and learning from that Word; without being surrounded by the community of faith.

Those who keep the end in mind center their lives in the church because they find joy and life in being part of Christ's mission; because they want to serve others; because they want to be nurtured and strengthened in their faith. They also set that priority for their children and family because they want more than anything that their loved ones, as well as all people, also know Jesus and that all people share in the assurance of life everlasting.

Those who focus on Jesus, who keep the end in mind, also have a whole different attitude about money and material things. Since heaven is our eternal home we know that success, wealth, and earthly things are all temporary at best. Through Christ therefore we find the joy of giving; of helping to make a difference right now; of overflowing with love and generosity.

Jesus said in Matthew 6:19-21, *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth or rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."* To keep the end in mind keeps our hearts in the right place.

Jesus said, *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also."*

How about you, my friend? Do you have that assurance of heaven in your heart? Do you know and believe in Jesus who is "the way, the truth, and the life?" May each one of us commit our lives to Jesus Christ; may we keep the end in mind as we live by faith each day.