

Heaven help us; heaven is in the news! Signs all across our country announce that Judgment Day is coming. Christian radio host Harold Camping calculated the date of the rapture, that is, when Christians will disappear from this earth and be taken into heaven. The date was May 21, 2011, which was yesterday. That's either an "oops" or an "uh oh."

Some enterprising atheists announced that they are providing a pet sitting service for Christians who are concerned about their dogs and cats that will be "left behind." For just \$129 you could have the eternal security of knowing that your precious pet was in good hands; well, maybe not-so-good hands. They did offer a discount for second pets, and had taken in several hundred dollars. Of course, if the rapture did not take place on the 21<sup>st</sup>, they did have a no money back policy.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, physicist Stephen Hawking generated headlines when he asserted, "that there is no spiritual ascent into heaven upon death."

"I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail," he explained. "There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark."<sup>1</sup>

Heaven help us. What are we to make of all this? What is heaven? What is Jesus promising us about life after death when he says, *John 14:2-3 (NRSV) 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.*<sup>2</sup> Enjoy your stay.

## ❶ MANSIONS OF GLORY

Our pew Bible is the New Revised Standard Version. It is the most accurate in terms of the meaning of the original Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible, but that doesn't always satisfy.

Fifteen years ago, when our lesson from John first came up in the lectionary, I dutifully read, *In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.* A dear lady in the church was not impressed. As she was leaving she said, "You can have your "dwelling places," pastor. I've got a mansion in glory."

So, do we have a "mansion in glory" or a "dwelling place"? What is Jesus telling us?

<sup>1</sup>

[http://news.yahoo.com/s/ac/20110516/cm\\_ac/8483123\\_stephen\\_hawking\\_denounces\\_heaven\\_abandons\\_decorum](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ac/20110516/cm_ac/8483123_stephen_hawking_denounces_heaven_abandons_decorum)

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version.* 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

First, on the “mansion” versus “dwelling place” question; the answer is “yes.” The difference in terminology is between what “mansion” meant to William Tyndale when he first illegally translated the Bible in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and what it means today. For his efforts, Tyndale was arrested, tried for heresy, strangled and burned at the stake, but his work lived on. “The fifty-four independent scholars who created the [King James Version](#) of the bible in 1611 drew significantly on Tyndale's translations. One estimation suggests the New Testament in the King James Version is 83% Tyndale's, and the Old Testament 76%.”<sup>3</sup>[\[2\]](#)

“Mansion” for us means palatial estate. We think of the properties on Museum Road in Wyomissing. We think of Falling Water in the Laurel Highlands, or the Biltmore Estate in Ashville, NC. We think big; Donald Trump big. That’s our “mansion of glory.”

For Tyndale, a “mansion” was a temporary residence. The Greek word was used for inns. It was the place you stopped on your way to somewhere else. It was a “dwelling place” where the clerk behind the counter said to us, “Enjoy your stay.”

So when we die, do we go to a celestial Motel 6? Is Jesus leaving the light on for us? No, as Jesus said to the thief on the cross, *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”*<sup>4</sup>

When we die, we go to Paradise. That is where we dwell. We enjoy life after death. We go there body and soul. We are who we are. Our identity remains; we’re not disembodied spirits floating on the ether; we’re not angels playing harps while we float on puffy clouds. We know who we are; we know and enjoy reunion with those who have gone before; we know and enjoy the presence of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as we’ve never known it before. We enjoy our stay.

That dear old lady in Pleasantville may not have known her Greek vocabulary or understood the development of the English language, but her theology was rock-solid. We have a mansion in glory, and when we arrive, the house-warming party will be joy like we’ve never known! No more tears, no more sorrow, no more suffering or pain or death. No more! We’re in a mansion of glory in Paradise, and when the day of resurrection comes, it will get even better!

Our place is prepared. Jesus welcomes us with a smile and says, “Enjoy your stay.”

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## ➊ GOING TO HEAVEN

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<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Tyndale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Tyndale)

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 23:43). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

The Bible draws a distinction that we blur. We read about the “dwelling place” and “Paradise” and we think these are synonymous with “going to heaven.” We think that “heaven” is where we go after we die. We go to heaven by leaving earth.

Jesus did not do that. He died on Good Friday. He was resurrected on Easter Sunday. He was with the disciples and transformed them into apostles. He ascended into heaven, and in the words of the Apostles Creed, “he will come again to judge the quick and the dead.” As he says in John, “I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.<sup>5</sup> “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>6</sup>

“Going to heaven” is going to the Father. Where is the Father? *Revelation 21:1-5 (NRSV)*  
<sup>1</sup> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” <sup>5</sup> And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.”<sup>7</sup>

On the day of resurrection, we do not leave earth for heaven; heaven comes to earth. Heaven and earth are transformed, because the power of sin is vanquished. Evil’s rebellion against the Creator’s good purpose is ended. Rather than being animated by a human spirit that has been corrupted by sin, we will be animated by the incorruptible spirit of God. N. T. Wright, whose book Surprised by Hope has opened my eyes to the breadth of the Scripture’s witness on this, suggests that this may be why Mary and the disciples had trouble recognizing Jesus after his resurrection. Jesus is the prototype of the resurrection; the first fruits which demonstrate what is to come. We’ve never seen someone animated by the spirit of God. We’ve only known people whose life-force was a human spirit.

This brings us back to Stephen Hawking’s critique, and the critique of many who say that the hope of heaven is a distraction from dealing with the real problems on earth.

<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 14:3). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>6</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 14:6). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

<sup>7</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

If going to heaven is leaving earth, then our work on earth has no value. Why bother? On the other hand, if heaven is coming to earth, then our work is of eternal value. When heaven comes to earth, every effort we have made to make this world a better place will be rewarded. N. T. Wright describes the outcome this way: “Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one’s fellow human beings and for that matter one’s fellow non-human creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world – all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make. This is the logic of the mission of God. God’s recreation of this wonderful world, which began with the resurrection of Jesus and continues mysteriously as God’s people live in the risen Christ and in the power of his Spirit means that what we do in Christ and by the Spirit in the present is not wasted. It was last all the way into God’s new world. In fact, it will be enhanced there.”<sup>8</sup>

Going to heaven is not a reason to wait for pie in the sky. Going to heaven is a reason to get going; to do what we can do in the here and now to give a taste of pie to a world that is longing for real hope.

We did that this week when we hosted Family Promise and helped two homeless families on their journey to a better life. We did that the week before when we fed the folks at Opportunity House. And to all you folks taking meals to shut-ins when you think nobody’s looking, or helping out that neighbor who’s going through a rough time, Jesus has his eyes on you. You’re offering a taste of pie; a slice of heaven here on earth.

One day, he’ll tell us about all the things he’s seen. He’ll show us how all that hidden goodness and love has changed the world from the earth we know to the heaven we hope for.

Until that day, get going. Offer a taste of heaven here on earth, so that when our Lord does return, we’ll be prepared to take our place as he says to us, “Enjoy your stay.” Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. New York: HarperOne, 2008. 208-209.