

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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DECEMBER 2006

THE CITY IS THE CHURCH

A new book to recently hit the Christian bookstores and will probably become a best seller among conservative Christians is Don Piper's "*90 Minutes in Heaven*". Don Piper, a Baptist minister, was driving home from a conference when he collided with a semi-truck and was pronounced dead at the scene. His story is that he spent ninety minutes in heaven only to be called back to this world where he authors another book which will probably be swept up by gullible Christians looking for some explanation of "life after death" that is not found in the Scriptures. An excerpt of the book says: "My most vivid memory of heaven is what I heard. I can only describe it as a holy swoosh of wings. Myriads of sounds so filled my mind and heart that it is difficult to explain them. The most amazing one, however, was the angels' wings. The swishing resounded as if it was a form of never-ending praise. I heard no sad songs and instinctively knew that there are no sad songs in heaven..."

This book is one of many which recounts visits to heaven. The problem is that no two experiences are alike. Perhaps the most notable of these books is *Embraced By The Light*" by Betty Jean Eadie, a member of the Morman Church, who claims she died and was "escorted through Heaven, a place with perfectly designed buildings that are occupied by beautiful 'beings' composed of light". Her book was released in 1992 and the first printing of 20,000 copies sold out in 10 days and the second printing of 30,000 copies went just as fast. Six months after the first printing the book hit the New York Times best seller list. In 1994 the book was still the number one non-fiction selling book.

No wonder Christians are confused about the subject of heaven. Our songs and hymns further adds to the confusion. We sing "I have a mansion just over the hilltop" and then turn the page and sing "Lord build me a cabin in the corner of glory land". When sermons, especially funeral sermons, go beyond what is written in trying to describe heaven for the sake of those grieving the loss of a loved one compounds the confusion. When most people think of heaven they think of a materialistic, metallic city somewhere in the sky which is the home of the redeemed when they leave this world. This concept and indeed the description of heaven is based in part on Revelation 21 where John describes the city. But does Revelation 21 describe heaven as our eternal abode? (Dare we ask such a question)! Nowhere in this chapter is it said the city is heaven. Note verse 9: "and one of the seven angels ... came and spoke to me saying, "Come here, I shall show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb". The angel did not say "I will show you heaven", rather I will show you "the bride, the wife of the Lamb". No one can dispute the fact that the bride of the Lamb is the church (Eph. 5:27,32). Note verse 10: "And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of

heaven from God". He is giving the details of the statement in verse 2 "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband". The city, the church, is a work of God's grace brought down from heaven by His Son. It sojourns on earth but is a community having its origin in God. He does not say we go "up" to dwell with God, rather He comes "down" to dwell with us. That this is a present reality is seen in Hebrews 12: 22: "You have come to Mt. Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem".

The symbolism of the rest of the chapter describes the church as it should be. It reflects the glory of God in a world of darkness (ver. 11). Christ, the lamb, the true light, drives away the darkness of ignorance, misery, guilt and moral pollution. In and through him and his work the glory of God becomes manifest in the church. The holy city needs no natural or artificial light (ver. 23). The Word is God's light (Psalm 119:105) which is the message of the church and it has no need to use gimmicks to reach people for Christ. It has walls great and high (ver. 12-20). Walls represent Salvation (Isa. 26:1; 60:18). Only the church has the message of salvation. The wall also divides between the holy and profane (Eze. 42:20). The church is a holy people, separated from the world. The 12 foundations is the teaching of the Apostles which they received from Christ the Corner Stone (Eph 2:20). This means the foundation of the church is Christ (I Cor. 3:11). The twelve gates (ver. 13) are for entrance. Jesus first entered heaven itself (Heb. 9:12, 13) and made it possible for us to enter into the very presence of God. This is the prerogative of the church (Heb. 10:19-22). Contrary to modern religious thought, there is only one street in the city (ver. 21; 22:2) and only one way to God and this is only through Christ Jesus (John 14: 6). There is no sanctuary in the city (ver. 22) No sanctuary is needed, for the fellowship of believers with God is direct and immediate. Both God and Christ dwell in the believer (John 14:23), therefore they become the sanctuary of the church. The nations will walk in the light of the church and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it! (ver. 24). This is an astonishing statement. Yet Isaiah 60, which is a prophecy of "the city of the Lord" (ver 14) or the church, states: "the nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising (ver. 3) and "the wealth of the nations will come to you" (ver. 6). Further "the nation and kingdom which will not serve you will perish" (ver. 12). We do not yet see this happening (as the Hebrew writer said "but now we do not yet see all thing subjected to him" (Heb. 2:8) but we do see Jesus and what he has done and who he is. This aspect of the church will someday be fulfilled.

Now, if what John sees is the bride, the wife of the Lamb and the wife of the Lamb is the church does this not destroy the hope of the Christian of "going to heaven someday"? The hope of the Christian as revealed in Scripture is the redemption of his body (Rom. 8:23-25). Not only will our body be redeemed, but the whole creation will be set free from

GOD'S UNORTHODOX WAYS

the curse (Rom. 8:19-22). This means the "heaven" in which the saints will dwell for eternity is a redeemed earth. (Isaiah 65:17-25). After all, did Jesus not say "the meek shall inherit the earth" (Mt. 5:5). This contradicts the thought that we will inherit a "cabin in the corner of glory land" or a "mansion over the hilltop". The promise God made to Abraham and his descendants was "he would be heir of the world" (Rom. 4:13). "and if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendant, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29). It is an unbiblical idea that the earth doesn't matter because it is going to be destroyed and we will all be taken to heaven. Our destiny is an earthly one, a new earth, an earth redeemed and transformed. An earth reunited with heaven, but an earth nevertheless. The thinking that the earth will be destroyed is based upon the King James translation of such passages as Matthew 13:39, 40, 49: 24:3, 35 and Hebrews 9:26 to site only a few where the word "ainos" is translated "world" instead of "age". And a key passage to affirm that this world is going to be destroyed is II Peter 3:11.12 where the word "destroyed" is used. However, the same word is used in verse 6 where it states that the world was "destroyed" with water during the flood. It was not annihilated. I John 2:17 which states that the world is passing away is speaking of this worldly system, not the earth, passing away.

Before we let what we have heard at funeral services and learned from syrupy sentimental southern gospel songs cloud our thinking let's see what the Bible really says about the earth. Genesis 8:21b, 22: "I will never again destroy every living thing as I have done, while the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease". Just how long will the earth remain? We find the answer in Ecclesiastes (a book many theologians like to ignore) 1:4: "A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever". Psalm 78:69: "And He built His sanctuary like the heights, like the earth which He has founded forever". Psalm 104:5: "He established the earth upon its foundations, so that it will not totter forever and forever". Psalm 93:1 and 96:10: "the world is firmly established and will not be moved". Psalm 115:16 states it this way: "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord; but the earth He has given to the sons of men".

At this point I can hear someone say "Well what difference does it make anyway?" Considering the many times in Scripture God is shown to be the God of creation, I would say it makes a great deal of difference. The doctrine that the earth will be destroyed is a doctrine of sensationalism, pessimism, fatalism and fear. Consider the future of the earth from these passages: Num. 15:21 "But indeed as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the lord". Hab. 2:14 and Isa. 11:9 "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea". It is much easier to believe the earth will be destroyed rather than evangelized. It is more exciting to hear about the "rapture" (getting out of the world) than to hear about the great commission (going into the world). It is easier to see Revelation 21 as a city describing where the saints go to heaven rather than describing how the saints are to live on the earth. It is more exciting to listen to doomsayers like Pat Robinson, John Hagee, Jerry Falwell and Jack Van Impe than the Apostles Paul, Peter and John. I am glad "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof".

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways" declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts higher than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8,9). What builder would build a boat on dry land when it had never rained? Would any general in his right mind try to take a city by having his army march around it seven times then shout? Or what commander, when facing an enemy numbering thousands, would reduce his army of 33,000 men to 300? What physician would try to cure a case of leprosy by having his patient dip himself seven times in a muddy river? What modern evangelist would leave a spirit filled revival and go into the desert to preach to one man? What preacher would dare to call prominent religious leaders (to their face) "hypocrites, blind guides, brood of vipers, serpents, fools, and sons of Satan"? These incidents in Scripture simply show us the truth of Isaiah 55. God does not do things the way man would do them. This is not to say that the situations we face today would be met by such unorthodox methods as these, but it does show us God's word gives a different approach to life than what most Christians are accustomed to experiencing. One of the failures of the modern church is it does not apply the principles of the Scriptures to the problems it deals with.

When Israel was threatened with God's judgment of shutting up the heavens so that there was no rain and locust devouring the land and pestilence spreading among them, God gave them His answer to their problems: "If My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." (II Chron. 7:14). Many of the problems facing Christians today could be solved by simply obeying God's word. We underestimate the power of a godly life. It doesn't require but one person to make a difference in the affairs of men. It was one man that converted Egypt (Joseph) and it took one man (Jonah) to convert Assyria, and four men (Daniel and company) to convert Nebuchadnezzar. A small church, if faithful, might make a lot more difference than we can imagine. With our mega-churches being packed weekly how much difference should they make in the world? God makes an astonishing statement in Proverbs 16:7: "If a man's way pleases the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him". Unorthodox, yes, but effective.

Other unorthodox methods of God: His cure for worry and anxiety: Not the worldly psychiatrist's couch, but Philippians 4:6: "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be known to God and the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension shall guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" Dealing with enemies: Matthew 5:44: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you". Dealing with mean people: Matthew 5:12: "Rejoice, and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven". Dealing with financial difficulties: Luke 6:38: "Give and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For whatever measure you deal out to others, it will be dealt to you in return." Try God's unorthodox methods. They work.

