

Flight Plan

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Matthew 13:44-46

I want to talk to you today about the topic of Heaven! Actually, this week we are starting a new sermon series on Heaven that is titled after the first song we sang this morning: "I'll Fly Away." It's an old gospel song about Heaven. Here at Perry Creek Church, we are going to spend the next seven weeks studying what the Bible actually says about Heaven. It will be very interesting and let me say the Bible has a LOT to say about Heaven and (here's a spoiler) almost none of it is what we think! As I've studied, I've found that heaven is not going to be like what I thought it would be like. I'm not going to be doing what I thought I was going to be doing. In fact, it's not even located where I thought it would be located! But other than that, it's just what we would expect! But seriously, we're going to study that here at Perry Creek over the next few weeks when we meet here at our regular 10:30 meeting time. I thought I'd start the series today with the simple step of just encouraging us to think more about Heaven.

As I was thinking about that this week, I thought about our time in Africa. Kelley and I lived in Zimbabwe Africa for nearly ten years. Once we knew we were headed for Zimbabwe, once we realized we were going to be moving there, we thought about Zimbabwe a lot! TEAM, the agency we went with, sent us a 70 page orientation manual on life in Zimbabwe, and I guarantee you we read every single page of it!

We wanted to know everything we could about the place we were going! We wanted to know what diseases do we need to watch out for? Will there be elephants in our yard? We wanted to know which snakes are bad and which snakes are good? Some of you are going "I can help you there! No such thing as a good snake!" You know what they say - there are two kinds of snakes: Those that hurt you, and those that make you hurt yourself" but we wanted to know. And we wanted to know about the good stuff. What new foods will we try? What are people like? What kind of adventures can we have there! We started working on learning the Shona language. We wanted to know everything we possibly could about the place we were headed. that's what any of us would do if we knew we were going to move to a different place, right? We would find out everything we possibly could.

It's occurred to me as I've studied for this series over the last few weeks that that's not what we do when it comes to heaven. Hopefully, most of us are planning on going there when we die. We'd certainly rather go there than the other place. But we have very little understanding of what Heaven is actually like, right? When I say "we," I mean all of us, myself included!

We don't know much about it. We have a lot of unanswered questions, right? What will our bodies be like? We're not sure. Will we know each other in heaven? Will we remember our past? Will there be animals in heaven, or is it just people? What will we do in heaven? We know there will be Kansas City Chiefs football and UNC basketball. We know the Patriots won't be there, but what else?

Just kidding, but we have unanswered questions, don't we? If you're like me, you may also have some thoughts about heaven that are actually kind of contradictory to one another. On the one hand, I've always been told that Heaven is a city with a street of gold and pearly gates. But I've also heard heaven has mountains and animals, etc. Which is it? I've heard that Heaven is up there. I've also heard it's on earth. On the one hand, I've heard that when we reach Heaven we'll be perfect, like everybody's the same. We all have the same circumstances, and there's nothing really to learn or do or achieve, because we're in this perfected state. Everybody is rich, everybody knows everything, everyone is the same. On the other hand, I've heard we will have jobs and rewards. Contradictory thoughts: Moms there are probably times when you think "Heaven won't be heaven unless my kids are right there." Then there are other times, times when you think "Heaven can't be heaven if my kids are right there. Heaven is a giant bubble bath with nobody clamoring for my attention."

But seriously, our ideas about Heaven are really pretty fuzzy. There's a lot of unanswered questions, even some contradictory thoughts. But you know what? Even though most of us plan to go to heaven, even though we have all these unanswered questions, we still don't think or talk about it much, right? I went to seminary for four years. I didn't have a single class on heaven. I've been in church ever since I was born. I've only ever heard one preacher really preach on heaven. And in about 30 years of ministry, I've never actually taught on heaven. We don't talk about it much.

Why is that? Well, there's probably lots of reasons, but as I studied this week I thought of three big ones, three Reasons we don't think much about Heaven. The first is:

1. What we have heard about Heaven doesn't excite us.

Maybe what you've heard about heaven doesn't sound very exciting to you. Let me say if that's you, you're not alone! To be honest, the common view of heaven with clouds and harps and singing doesn't sound very exciting to me either! I was talking to one of our church members the other day about heaven, and she said "When I was a little girl, my mom used to try to get me excited about heaven by saying 'It'll be great! It's going to be like an eternal church service.'"

I gotta say: I'm a Pastor. I like church as much as the next guy, but Yuck! I feel about that the way my Son Calvin felt about weddings when he was five. We had a wedding coming up, and he said "Weddings are the worst!" We said "Why?" He said "It's like a church service with kissing!"

So maybe we don't find that view of heaven exciting. Let me say that has very little to do with the way the Bible describes Heaven! But maybe what we've heard hasn't excited us. But there's a second reason we might not think about heaven much and maybe this relates more to committed Christians, but maybe:

2. We don't think there's much in the Bible about Heaven.

The Bible is a really big book. There's a lot of stuff in there! Can you think of any verses about what heaven is actually like? Maybe one or two, but if you're like I was when I first started studying for this series, you may just feel like the Bible doesn't have a lot to say about Heaven! That's certainly what I thought!

But I gotta say that is absolutely NOT true! The Bible doesn't answer every single question we may have about Heaven, but it talks about Heaven a LOT! The New Testament mentions Heaven 273 times. There are 27 books in the New Testament Do you know how many of them talk about Heaven? 24! I looked through them last week and all but three - Philemon, 2nd John, and 3rd John - talk about Heaven. There's a lot more than we think!

So (1) maybe we don't think about Heaven because what we've heard isn't exciting. (2) maybe we don't think there's a lot about Heaven in the Bible. Now there's one more reason. Maybe we think:

3. Heaven is (just) supposed to be mysterious.

Maybe we feel like we're not supposed to know everything about heaven. You know what? That's actually true! We're not supposed to know everything. We're going to talk in this series about a man in the Bible who actually saw Heaven, actually saw what the other side is like. But he said, and I quote, "I saw things too sacred for words, things a person is not allowed to talk about." So there is an element of mystery there. The Bible says "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." There is an element of mystery there. We can't know everything about heaven.

So there are lots of reasons that maybe we don't think or talk about Heaven much. Some reasons that are valid and some that are maybe less valid. Today I want to convince you that Heaven is something worth thinking about, worth talking about, something we should all pay more attention to.

I want to do that by focusing on the words of Jesus. You know Jesus talked about Heaven a LOT! He taught that talking about Heaven, and thinking about Heaven, and living for Heaven was very important!

Jesus' most famous sermon was called "The Sermon on the Mount," and wow! Listen to the things that Jesus said about Heaven just in the Sermon on the Mount. In that sermon, he said "Blessed are the poor in spirit and blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, because the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them." In that sermon, he said we should rejoice and be glad when people mistreat us on account of him, because if they do that we will have a great reward in heaven. He said that when we give money to God, when we pray to God, when we do good works for God, we should do those things quietly, in secret because if we do those things quietly, we will have a great reward not on earth, but in Heaven. He said in that sermon that we should not store up treasure on earth where moths and rust corrupt them, and

where thieves steal them, but we should store up things in Heaven. He said we should pray regularly for God's Kingdom, for Heaven to come. And he said that anyone who lives their life this way (for Heaven) is building their life on a solid foundation while anyone who lives just for the here and now, is like a person who builds their house on shifty unstable sand; it will only end in collapse. And that's just from one sermon. Jesus talked and thought a lot about heaven.

But there's one place where Jesus talked about Heaven that really sums up what I'm trying to say today about the importance of Heaven. It's a couple of parables (which are like word pictures) that Jesus told about Heaven. They are very short parables. In fact, the two of them only take up three verses in Matthew's gospel, but they make an important point about Heaven. I just want to close with these parables today. Listen to what Jesus said:

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

- Matthew 13:44-46

In the first parable, Jesus tells a story about a man who is working in a field and finds buried treasure. That may sound far-fetched to us, but it was much more likely in Jesus' day. In Jesus' day, most people didn't keep their wealth in banks. They kept it with themselves. If a person wanted to hide or protect their wealth, especially in a time of crisis, they normally wouldn't keep it in the house. That's the very first place thieves or invaders would look. Rather, they would select a secret spot in a field somewhere and bury it there.

In this parable, someone had buried a great deal of treasure in a field and now was no longer alive to claim it. Maybe the invaders took his life. We don't know. But some time later, while a hired hand was working in the field, maybe plowing it, or digging a ditch, this hired hand came across the treasure. As he opened the box, he recognized its incredible value and knew that if there was any way he could obtain it he would be rich beyond his wildest dreams.

Now he knew that he couldn't just take the treasure, because the field didn't belong to him. That would be like stealing. So the man does the one thing that makes most sense. He re-buries the treasure in the field, rushes home and sells all of his stuff and then trying to hide the giant grin on his face, the man buys the field so that he can legitimately own the vast treasure it contained.

In the second Parable, Jesus tells a story about a merchant who went out on a business trip, looking for fine pearls. In Jesus' time, pearls were of great value. And fine pearls, the most expensive, most desirable, most beautiful pearls, came from far away places, like India and Sri Lanka. Pearls are valuable today. In 2006, a Filipino fisherman, who was fishing off Palawan Island, made an amazing discovery. He found a giant pearl, and I mean a GIANT pearl! It's not round. It's oblong. It is 26" across and weighs, get this, almost 75 pounds! (I know what I want for Mother's Day!) The article I read estimated this pearl's worth at nearly \$100 million.

In the story, the merchant finds just such a pearl. A pearl of such exceeding value that all his other pearls, and all his other treasure, are a mere pittance compared to it. It's a pearl of great price! He realizes that if he sells off his other stock and even some of his basic possessions, he can become the owner of this exceedingly valuable pearl, a pearl that could be used to secure a much greater fortune. If he could obtain this pearl, he, like the man in the field, would be rich beyond his wildest dreams.

So he does the one thing that makes sense. He sells off the rest of his merchandise and even some of his basic possessions. He takes the money to the owner of the pearl, and he walks away a very wealthy man with a big smile on his face!

So those are the two stories or parables that Jesus tells here in Matthew 13. Now when we think about these parables, both of which make the same basic point, we immediately notice three things:

1. (We Notice) the joy of the buyers.

Jesus tells us the man sold all he had "in his joy." That's noteworthy! Kelley and I had to sell everything we had when we moved to Zimbabwe, and I can tell you that selling your stuff is not normally a joyful occasion! It's kind of a pain in the neck! When your favorite shirt, the one that your wife tells you makes you look like Brad Pitt, sells for 25 cents it's a blow to your ego. But this was a joyful occasion for the buyers, because they understand the value the importance of what they stand to gain! So we notice the joy of the buyers.

2. (Notice that) Their behavior doesn't make sense if you don't know about the treasure.

Ordinarily, we would consider it strange to just up and sell everything you have. If your neighbor just started selling off everything they owned with no warning and no explanation, you would probably ask some questions, wouldn't you? Questions like: Where are you going to live? What do you think you're going to eat? Don't you care what people think about you? And can I have the Brad Pitt shirt? It's just not normal to salvage everything you have! It doesn't seem to make sense! But here's the thing and this is Jesus' point about heaven: Point three:

3. Once you know about the treasure, their behavior is the only thing that makes sense!

At first, what they are doing seems ludicrous. No one sells everything they have to buy a field. You save enough to plant a crop and live. At first, their behavior seems ludicrous. But once you have the full picture, everything changes. If you find a multi-million dollar treasure in a field, you buy the field! If you find a fisherman with a 75 pound pearl, you buy the pearl! No matter what it takes! No matter what the cost!

Once you understand the exceeding value of what you stand to gain, you can't let this opportunity pass you by! You do whatever it takes to obtain it. It's really the only course of

action that makes any sense. That's what Jesus is saying here. His point is simple: Heaven is of such great value, it is of such surpassing worth, that to know you can have it and to not live your life in line with that truth is senseless. That's Jesus' point in the Sermon on the Mount. That's why Jesus says those who are persecuted for God, those who are mistreated for God, those who are falsely accused for God are really blessed, because the cost is infinitesimally small compared to treasure in heaven. That's why he says we should give in secret, and pray in secret, and do good deeds in secret, because it's a small price to pay for a reward in heaven. That's why he says we should pray for God's Kingdom to come, because the Kingdom is of surpassing value! It's not to be compared to anything we experience in the here and now. That's why he says we shouldn't store up treasures on earth but seek God's Kingdom first because the cost of seeking God's Kingdom is nothing compared to what we gain by doing it. That's why he says to live your life as if eternity wasn't coming is like building a house on shifting sand.

What Jesus is saying is that, like that hired hand who stumbles on to the treasure, like that merchant who happens upon the pearl of great price, once you find out about heaven the only thing that makes sense is to focus on, to invest in, to live for heaven. If it makes sense to live for it, doesn't it make sense that we should think about it? Doesn't it make sense that we should talk about it? Doesn't it make sense that, like Kelley and I preparing to go to our new home in Africa, we should find out everything we can about Heaven? I promise you the more you find out about it the more you're going to like it! It's more than just a giant church service. It's what you and I were made for!

So over the next week or two, let me encourage you: Think about Heaven! Ask yourself what it will be like. Talk about it with your friends. Look up some Bible verses on line and pray about it. It's the Pearl of Great Price.