

Got your Passport?

By John Ulrich, Lead Pastor

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My missionary friends, Doug and Nancy Everswick and their daughters Shannon, Julianne, and their youngest Rachelle, were at the airport in Harare, Zimbabwe. They were very excited about their home assignment in America. They had thought about their trip to America. I'm sure Doug and Nancy and the girls were dreaming of the wonderful places they would visit. They had talked about their trip to America. We had discussed with them some of the people they would visit in the States. They had acted just like all the other people who were going to America! They had driven to the airport, dropped off the car and lined up to check their baggage with the airline just like everyone else. They did all the things that a person who was going to America would do.

There was just one problem: Rachelle's passport. Nancy had forgotten and somehow the airline had missed the fact that Rachelle was a child and her American passport had to be renewed every five years and not every ten. Because of that, Rachelle's passport had expired between the time that they booked the flight and the date of their departure. Rachelle's passport was not valid. They found that out as they went to check in.

They tried to convince the agent at the counter. They tried to negotiate with the airline. They called the US Embassy, but in this post 9/11 world there was nothing that could be done. The rest of the family flew to America while Nancy and Rachelle stayed behind. She forgot about the passport, so they missed the destination.

Over the last several weeks, we have been in a sermon series called "I'll Fly Away," where we have been talking about the destination of Heaven. We've talked about the intermediate celestial Heaven where our believing loved ones wait for us, where they are in the peace and joy of God's presence. We've talked about the eternal Heaven which is going to be amazing, a time when God dwells with man again and we live, and work, and play on a renewed earth. We've talked about the meaningful rewards we can gain for our life in Heaven.

Like my friends, the Everswicks, we've talked about our destination Heaven a lot. Hopefully like my friends, you have been thinking about Heaven a lot. Hopefully, you're even acting like a person that is going to go to that wonderful destination of Heaven. We're talking, thinking, and acting like we're headed for Heaven. So it would be a huge tragedy for some of us to miss out, because we lack the qualification, the requirement, the credentials that, like that passport, authorize us to go to heaven.

We've had lots of messages in this series: "Flight Plan" where we've talked about the importance of Heaven, "The Layover" where we talked about intermediate Heaven, "Destination Paradise" where we talked about eternal Heaven, and last week, "Marriot or Motel 6," where we talked about eternal rewards. Now today's message is simply entitled "Got Your Passport?"

Today we are going to see what the Bible says about how to be sure that we have the qualification to go to Heaven. (1) We'll talk about why we need to be sure we're going to Heaven. (2) We'll talk about how to be sure you're going to Heaven. And (3) we'll talk about what to do if you struggle with assurance struggle to know for sure that you are going to Heaven. That's what we are going to talk about today. Got your Passport?

I want to start today by talking about why it's so important that we have assurance that we are going to Heaven, so my first point today is just this:

1. Why we need to be sure: Because there's another destination.

The main reason that we need to be absolutely sure that we have our passports, if you will, and are going to Heaven is that not everyone is going to go to Heaven. There is another possible destination. Just like my friends ended up not in America, we could, if we lack the proper qualification, end up not in Heaven. There's another destination, and I'm talking here about Hell.

Now Hell is not something that I enjoy talking about. It's not something that any Christian should really take pleasure in, but we believe in Hell here at Perry Creek. We believe in it not because we enjoy it, but because the Bible is very clear in its teaching about Hell and the final Judgment. It would be irresponsible of me as a Pastor to do a series on Heaven and talk about how wonderful it is and act as if we're all going there without warning you about the other destination. So let me talk to you for a few minutes about Hell and the Final Judgment. The Bible is very clear about this. This final judgment is mentioned in the Old Testament:

Multitudes who sleep in the dust shall awake, some to everlasting life, and others to shame, and everlasting contempt.

- *Daniel 12:2*

Hell is mentioned in the Old Testament, but it's mentioned a lot more in the New Testament. That may be surprising, because many of us might think of Judgment as a kind of Old Testament concept, but the New Testament talks about it far more than the Old Testament does. In fact, every single writer in the New Testament (not every book, but every single writer) talks about eternal judgment. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, Jude (the writer of Hebrews), they all talk about it.

The person who talks about judgment and Hell more than anyone is Jesus. He talks about it in the beginning of his ministry in the Sermon on the Mount. He talks about it at the end of his ministry in his final discourse. Jesus called Hell a place of eternal torment, a place of unquenchable fire, a place from which there is no return. He called it "outer darkness." Again and again in his ministry, this concept of evaluation, this time of eternal reward and eternal punishment comes up.

There are far too many passages to quote, but we mentioned one last week where Jesus says:

For the Son of Man will come with his angels in glory, and he will repay every person according to his deeds.

- Matthew 16:27

Jesus talked about Hell a LOT! You need to know that, according to the Bible, Jesus is the one who judges. He's the one who assigns people to an eternal Heaven or to an eternal Hell. Jesus said:

"The Father has given him authority to judge the dead because he is the Son of Man."

- John 5:27

So a moment of eternal judgment, a moment where we are assigned to spend eternity, either in Heaven or in Hell, is coming. Maybe you wrestle with the idea of Hell. Maybe you struggle with the idea that a moment is coming where the ability to choose is completely taken away. Maybe you struggle with the eternality and suffering of Hell. Maybe you wrestle with the justice of it. I know that in some ways I do.

If that's you, let me show you a passage that helped me get my head around this notion of eternal judgment and helped me really understand that, although the consequences are huge God's judgment is going to be absolutely fair. The passage is found in Matthew 11:20-24. This is in the middle of Jesus' ministry. He's talking to the Israelites people, who were God's chosen nation but people who had refused to believe in him when Matthew tells us this happened:

Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon (which were Gentile, pagan, sinful cities), they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, (the city where Jesus did most of his miracles) will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

- Matthew 11:20-24

Jesus there is talking about the eternal judgment that is going to fall on these cities and the condemnation that some of the people in those cities are going to face. I want you to notice some things about the fairness the justice of this eternal judgment from this passage:

Everyone is judged. Notice the people in the obviously bad cities (like Sodom and Gomorrah, and Tyre and Sidon, which were condemned in the Old Testament for their arrogance) are going to be evaluated. But the people from the seemingly good cities (cities of Israel, like Korazin and Bethsaida and cities like Capernaum, which was Jesus' center of ministry) are also

going to be evaluated. Everyone is going to be judged. Last week we quoted Romans 14 which says "As surely as I live says the Lord, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess to God. So then, each of us must give an account of himself to God." Everyone will be judged.

There are levels of reward and punishment. Last week, we talked about how there are levels of reward for Christians in Heaven. Here, Jesus is focusing on those who refuse to repent, so he's talking about punishment but notice what he says "The judgment will be more bearable, more tolerable, easier for Tyre and Sidon and even for Sodom than it will be for Capernaum." In other words, there are going to be more bearable and less bearable punishments in this judgment. So not everything is the same. Let me just be clear here: Just as there are different levels of reward in heaven, which we pointed out last week, different roles, and recognition, and riches, just as there are different levels of reward in heaven, there are different levels of punishment in Hell. Hell is a place where justice is served, where people are judged for their deeds, their words, and their motives, taking their circumstances into account. So if you're wondering if Hell is worse for someone who has truly, consistently, defiantly done evil someone, like an Adolf Hitler, the answer is "absolutely it is!" As the passage says, it will be more tolerable for some than others. So (1) Everyone is judged, and (2) There are levels of reward and punishment.

Jesus' judgment takes everything into account. If we think closely about this passage, we will see that when Jesus judges, it will be absolutely fair, because he will take absolutely everything into account. Your basic choice to accept or reject Jesus determines your eternal destiny. That's the point of this passage, and we'll talk about that in a minute. But notice all the things that are taken into account by Jesus when he judges. The judgment will take into account every deed that we've done.

Romans 2:6 says "God will give to each person according to what he has done." So he looks at every deed we've done both openly and in secret. This judgment takes into account our motives. 1 Corinthians 4:5 says of the judgment that Christ "will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts." It's going to take our motives into account. It will take into account what we know. That's the underlying premise of this passage. Capernaum and Bethsaida will be judged more harshly, because they have been exposed to more of God's truth.

But beyond that, notice this this judgment is so fair, so thorough, that it will take into account what people would have done if circumstances had been equal. Did you catch that? Look at the passage again and notice the underlined words: "Because they would have repented, it will be more bearable in the judgment." Think about that. That's mind-blowing! Jesus is saying that judgment will actually be easier for Tyre and Sidon because, if they had seen his miracles, they would have repented. In other words, Jesus knows what everybody's response would be (yours, mine, Tyre's, Sidon's, Chorazin, Bethsaida). He knows what everyone's response would be, if our circumstances were all equal and he's going to judge us accordingly. He knows the difference between our circumstances and our choices. He knows how much of what we do is because of the environment and how much of what we do is because of our heart. He's going to take that into account when he judges.

So what I'm saying is this: Hell is real. Not everyone is going to heaven. There's another destination for those who reject Christ. It's a destination of eternal separation from God and eternal punishment. It will be terrible, but Christ's judgment will be absolutely fair. He will take every factor into account.

So point 1 is just this: We need to be sure we are going to heaven, because there is actually another destination. Now my second point is about how we can be sure, and it's this:

2. How to be sure: Place your trust in Christ.

The way to be sure that you are going to heaven is to place your trust in Christ. Now when I say that, it might sound a little bit confusing in light of my last point. Because in my last point, I said that the different levels of reward and punishment that we experience in Heaven and Hell are determined by our deeds and words and motives, taking our circumstances into account." Remember that? So our words and deeds and motives determine our level of reward or punishment. So when you hear me say that if you don't know me, if you've never heard me preach, you might expect that I would say that the best way to be sure of Heaven is to pay close attention to your words, and deeds and motives and make sure they are as good as they can possibly be. Like live a good life, say nice things and think the best of people and you're sure to get into heaven.

You might think that's what I would say. But it's not! Not by a long shot! I know that's the punchline of every joke about the Pearly Gates. It's always Peter standing there, trying to decide whether someone has been good enough to go to heaven, so sorry to wreck all those jokes. That is not remotely what the Bible teaches! Our works determine how hot Hell is, and in a sense, they determine how wonderful Heaven is. We talked about that last week. The Bible is very clear that our works are not the thing that determines our basic destination. Our basic destination, whether we are headed for Heaven or Hell, is determined by one thing and one thing only: What we choose to do with Jesus Christ. John 3:36 states it as simply as you possibly can. Look at what Jesus says there:

"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

- John 3:36

Jesus is very clear here. Notice there are only two categories of people in this verse. Every person in this room falls into one of those two categories. You either have eternal life and are bound for Heaven or you are under God's wrath and you're bound for Hell. Notice the thing that determines which category you are in is not how good you are (it's not your words, deeds, and motives) rather it's what you choose to do with Jesus.

Now isn't that mind-blowing? It sounds shocking, even as I say it. The specific rewards you experience in Heaven and the specific punishments you experience in Hell are determined by

your words, deeds, and motives. But whether you go to Heaven or Hell isn't. Whether you go to Heaven or Hell is determined by whether you accept or reject Jesus.

Maybe you say "That seems unfair. Why can't it be based on our goodness?" Simple: Because we could never be good enough to go to heaven. Another passage that states things very simply says this:

for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God.

- Romans 3:23

What that passage is telling us is that we have two problems. First, we have sinned. All the good deeds in the world can't erase the sins that we've already done. Someone has to pay for those sins. Second, we fall, or it's better translated "We are falling. We continue to fall," short of the glory that God made us to have. God made us to be sinless (like Adam and Eve were in the garden). He made us to have perfect fellowship with him and with each other (like Adam and Eve did in the garden). He made us to rule creation wisely (like Adam and Eve were told to do).

That's what God created us to be. But we fell and continue to fall short of that. No matter how good, we are we're not what God made us to be. Not even close! We don't have sinless obedience. We don't have perfect fellowship. We don't exercise perfectly wise stewardship. Nobody does that, no matter how good they are. Not even Mother Teresa! But listen, that's what Heaven is: a place without sin, a place of perfect fellowship, a place where we rule creation wisely. That's what Heaven is all about.

Because of those two problems, our sin and our falling short of what God made us to be, we're not fit for Heaven. A Heaven full of even the best of us, as we are now, wouldn't be Heaven for very long. Our sin would show up. We would mess it up. So there has to be another way.

God made a way through his Son, Jesus. Jesus came to earth and he lived the life that you and I were supposed to live. He had that sinless obedience. He had that perfect fellowship with God, and he treated people exactly as they should be treated. He cared for the downtrodden. He was faithful to his friends, and Jesus ruled creation wisely. Jesus was, in every way what we are supposed to be. He lived the life we were supposed to live. Then he died the death that we were supposed to die. He died the death of a sinner. He was convicted as a guilty man and crucified. On that cross, he faced the full wrath of God for sin even though he had never sinned.

The Bible says it's this simple: If you believe that, if you hear the story of Jesus and believe that it really happened, that Jesus really was the Son of God who died for you and was resurrected for you and is coming back to bring his kingdom, if you put your trust in him and say "Jesus, I believe that that's true. I believe that you paid for my sins on the cross and I want to be a part of your kingdom. I want to follow you. I want you to change me, and live through me," the Bible says if you put your trust in Jesus, if you believe in him, you will have eternal life in Heaven. The Bible says that about 150 times, so I think it wants us to understand that it's really that simple.

Listen, people have been placing their trust in Jesus for centuries. They do it all around the world, and it's been transforming lives the same way for ages. It has the same effect in Zimbabwe as it does in North Carolina, doesn't it? So it's not a sliding scale of good or bad deeds that determines your destination. That's not the passport you need to get into Heaven. Rather, it's trust in God's Son saying "I want you to give me eternal life. I want you to be my Lord and Savior. I want you to transform me I want to be part of your Kingdom." That's how we get to heaven.

So a guy dies, and he approaches the Pearly Gates. Saint Peter tells him that to get in, he has to pass a test with a point system. If he got to 100 points, he could enter. The man tells Peter that he gave to the poor. Peter marked him down for three points. The man thinks again, then says that he tithed. Peter added one point. The man, desperately searching his memory, finally says that he never cussed. Peter adds half a point. By now the man's very frustrated, and says that "Tt this rate, the only way I'll get in is by the grace of God." Peter replied "Come on in!"

OK, try this: Did you hear about the rich Christian who died? He wanted to prove the quote "You can't take it with you" wrong. Before he died, he asked that his gold be buried with him. Sure enough after his death, he found himself in heaven along with his gold. He was so excited that he had actually taken it with him. He went up to Saint Peter to enter the gates and said "Ha ha! Look at this, you can take it with you." Peter looked at the gold in the man's hand and asked "OK, but why would you want to bring pavement with you?"

OK so (1) We need to be sure we're going to heaven, because there is another destination, and (2) The way to be sure is to place your trust in Jesus. OK, but some of you may be saying "I did that, but I still wrestle with assurance of my salvation. I still struggle to be sure that I'm going to Heaven. What do I do?" I've known a lot of genuine Christians (including myself) who have had that struggle. In fact, I think every Christian struggles with assurance of their salvation at some point, so let me just make three suggestions:

3. If you're still not sure, three suggestions.

Talk about it. Don't suffer through these concerns alone! Talk about it! First, talk to God about it. When I was a child, I was very fearful about whether I was going to heaven. I saw a movie called "Thief in the Night," which was about someone who got left behind when Jesus returned. After that movie, I asked Jesus into my heart 150 times. No one is more of a Christian than me! So I did that, but I was still fearful. I remember one time this is the first prayer I remember God answering in my life, but I remember I was playing in my front yard, and I began to be fearful again. I simply asked God to take my doubts away and give me peace, and he did! So talk to God! And talk to others. You were never meant to live the Christian life by yourself. Never. Talk to your Small Group or your Small Group Leader. I can almost guarantee you that there is someone in your Small Group who has wrestled with finding assurance of their salvation. They may be able to help you. At the very least, they can pray with you. Talk to someone about it.

Let faith come before feeling. Listen, faith is more important than feeling. You need to know that. JD Greear says it this way: “Don’t feel your way into your beliefs. Believe your way into your feelings.” Let me say it another way: “Feelings are the fruit of faith, not the source of it.”

Let me tell you something: We are saved not because we feel saved, not because we feel like we are in a good place with God, not because we see him active in our lives and answering prayers, the Bible never says that’s what saves us. We’re not saved by our feelings. We are saved, because we believe that Jesus was the Son of God, that he died to pay for our sins, that he rose from the grave, that he’s coming again to bring his Kingdom. We are saved because we are putting our hope, our faith, our trust in him for eternity.

Much of the time, that faith brings obvious transformation and spiritual victory and a feeling of closeness with God into our lives. But you know what? Sometimes it just doesn’t seem that way. Sometimes transformation is hard to see. Sometimes it feels more like spiritual defeat. Sometimes God feels far, far away. That’s the nature the ebb and flow of a relationship with God.

And when we don’t have those warm fuzzy feelings about God, we have to remember that those feelings are the result of faith. They are the fruit of faith. If we hold on to our faith and practice what we believe to be true, those feelings will come or come back. Your feelings may change, but God’s love doesn’t.

I recently had someone come to me and say “I feel really really distant from God. I’ve been busy with life. I’ve not had a lot of time to be at church. I’m concerned, because not only does God feel distant, but I’m concerned because I don’t miss him like I should.” This person said “I feel so distant from God that I almost feel like it would be hypocrisy for me to come to Church. What should I do?”

Man! Let me say two things: First, when you’re at that point, the enemy has you right where he wants you. Remember the enemy’s #1 goal is to take you out of the game. If you’re so discouraged that you are not practicing your faith, you’re right where he wants you to be. Secondly, I would say “Remember you don’t have to have warm feelings to be a Christian.” It’s great when you have them, but that’s not necessary. Sometimes you just won’t have the joy joy joy down in your heart. But you know what? Jesus is still Lord. He still died for you. He’s still risen, and you can still gather to celebrate the objective facts of your religion. You can still gather to celebrate the facts that you believe, even when you struggle to feel them. That’s not hypocrisy. That’s called faithfulness.

So let faith come before feeling. Feelings grow out of faith. They are the fruit of it, no tree bears fruit all the time.

So (1) Talk about it. (2) Let faith come before feeling. Now lastly:

Look to the present, not the past. What I mean by that is simply this: Sometimes when people struggle with assurance of their salvation, we tell them to look to their past. We might ask “Can you remember a time when you placed your faith in Christ, prayed a prayer to receive Jesus, maybe walked down the aisle at church or something?” We tell them to look back to their past to see when they started to believe. For many people, that’s a good question. They can look back and say “Yes, I started to believe at such and such a time I’m sure I belong to Jesus.”

But for many that doesn’t work. Many people don’t know exactly when they started to believe for sure. Maybe they grew up in a Christian home and knew about Jesus their whole life, so they don’t know when they actually believed. Or maybe they just aren’t sure when it really took root in their heart. Sometimes looking back at the past doesn’t work.

So a better question is this: Do you believe in Jesus right now? You know John 3:36 says this:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.

- John 3:36

There’s only two categories of people. Which are you? You may wrestle with assurance, but can I just say that true concern about your salvation is the first sign that there’s probably faith there.

If you believe right now, I can tell you one thing for sure: There definitely was a time when you started believing. Don’t know when it was, but it happened. You know what they say: If you’re trying to figure out whether you’re alive, don’t look for your birth certificate, check your pulse. If you’re alive right now, you may not know your birthday, but I promise you were born sometime!

Look to the present. There’s one question: Do you believe? Listen, that’s the passport. That’s the credential, the qualification that gains us entry into heaven. Not did we do a lot of good works, not do we feel close to God, but do we believe.

We do need to know, because there’s another destination but through our faith in Christ we can be sure that we are headed for eternity with God in Heaven.

Got your Passport?