



## Heaven – A perfect state

It must be part of the perfection of heaven that all its inhabitants will entirely and absolutely acquiesce in the sovereign will and good pleasure of God. That is not something which is at all common in this life. No unbelievers do that; and few Christians do it for very long. It is the hallmark of entire holiness fully to delight and to acquiesce in the will of God. No Old or New Testament saint attained to that level whilst in this life. The Bible makes that quite clear. Only the Lord Jesus Christ did this perfectly and absolutely. We get glimpses of this in the Gospels. When, for instance, every nerve of his pure humanity shrank from the cursed death of the Cross, he was able to say: *'Not my will but thine be done.'* Still more to the point, perhaps, when many who saw his miracles and heard his preaching continued in unbelief, he rejoiced in spirit and said:

*'I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them unto babes; even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight.'*

(Luke 10:21)

This passage is a very important clue to the resolving of the problem we are now confronting. It shows us that when a perfectly holy person stands face to face with the phenomenon of God's rejection of multitudes, there can be worship, praise and adoration — even rejoicing.

The reason for such a spirit needs to be looked at very carefully. It cannot possibly be rejoicing over the loss of immortal souls. Christ wept to behold sinners ripening for judgment (Luke 19:41). But what may afford us deep sorrow from one point of view may give us real occasion for rejoicing from another. There can be little doubt that Jesus *'rejoiced'* in Luke 10:21, not because of any pleasure he took in the condemnation of the lost, but because he acquiesced totally in the purpose of God by which some men are elected to salvation and glory and some are not. There are very good reasons in the immediate context of that passage which would confirm us in this understanding of the 'rejoicing' here of Jesus.

We must believe that what is possible for Jesus Christ in this world, perfect as he was, will be also possible for all his people in the world to come when they, too, will be perfect. They will so delight in the good pleasure of God that they will not be made unhappy in the least degree by the realisation that not all are saved and not all are in heaven.

This is the same as saying that in heaven the redeemed will be consumed with unqualified love for God. We have some intimation of this in the Book of Revelation. For one thing, the angels rejoice to obey the will of God even though at times it requires them to blow trumpets of judgment against mankind and to empty out vials of wrath upon the world.

But more clearly still, we read that when the blood of God's servants is finally avenged and when the smoke of the eternal burning rises up, the cry is heard of *'much people in heaven saying, Alleluia! Salvation and glory and honour and power unto the Lord our God: for true and righteous are his judgments'* (Revelation 19:1-3). And as if to show us how right, fitting and holy all such rejoicing is going to be, the voice from the throne itself, cries out: *'Praise our God, all ye his servants, and ye that fear him, both small and great!'* Further still, we cannot altogether deny that an element of sanctified vengeance is present in such rejoicing because the doom of this world is to be celebrated by exclamations of satisfaction that God has avenged the blood of his people at last, something which the souls under the altar long yearned for (Revelation 6:9).

The cry of pleasure will therefore one day finally go up from the mouths of God's people when they see Babylon cast down like a mill-stone. And this shout of triumph is something which God himself will require his people then to utter:

*'Rejoice over her, thou heaven and ye holy apostles and prophets; for God hath avenged you on her.'*

(Revelation 18:20)

From such considerations as these then we may conclude that it will be possible in Heaven for God's people to remain calm and untroubled as the realisation that some of their close friends and family are lost in hell. Further still, it will be even possible for them to rejoice that all God's enemies (though once perhaps closely related to them while they lived upon earth) are to suffer eternal banishment from the presence of God and of all his people.

Such a spirit of rejoicing, needless to say, will be wholly free from malice of any sort. But we have materials enough in the Word of God to help us to appreciate in some degree how it will be that the blessedness of God's redeemed will not be clouded in heaven by sorrow for the lost. We might add, too, that it would not be right of us in this life to attempt to cultivate indifference towards lost sinners. So long as the day of grace is with us we must yearn over the lost souls of men and seek to pluck them as *'brands from the burning'* (Zechariah 3:2), though we must never become so unbalanced as to begin to quarrel with God if he does not give grace to all men. This is what the Arminian really does and it is his weakness to do so. There will be no such thoughts in heaven.

There is a practical aspect to the above discussion which we cannot afford to miss. It often happens that a married person who is confronted with the gospel hesitates to give himself or herself to God out of a fear that they will be separated from their partner. Indeed in a rather famous episode in Church history, a certain Gothic King once refused to go to heaven when all his unbelieving ancestors were in Hell. But all such hesitation to believe and be saved by Christ is misguided and ill-considered. It is countered by Christ's own words:

*'He that loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me', and again, 'If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children and brethren and sister, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.'*

(Matthew 10:37 and Luke 14:26)

If an unbelieving relative or friend ever attempts to lead us away from Christ out of human love and affection, we must say to them: 'Come to heaven with me, I beg you. But if not, I will certainly not go to hell with you'.

## **Hell in sight of heaven**

We are at present looking at what we may call 'the dark side of heaven'. We must now look at the 'darkest' aspect of all. It is the teaching, which we believe to be scriptural, that hell and heaven will be in sight of one another.

The evidence from the Bible for this is found in the following way. First in respect of the period from death till judgment we have the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:20). Here we are evidently informed by Christ that the souls of the wicked and of the righteous are within sight of one another. The blessed are visible to the damned and yet they are separated from them by a *'great gulf'* (Luke 16:26). Since the condition of this Rich Man is also known to Abraham in glory it would appear that the damned are visible to the blessed, though they are separated from them by such a great divide. It is possible for someone to argue that this is only a parable and that we are not warranted to draw any firm conclusions from it. In answer to that it must be said that Christ would not teach us something misleading and, in any case, we are not told that this was a parable. It may be a statement of fact relating to two real persons who died. But in any case our expectations that heaven and hell are in sight of one another are confirmed by further evidence which points in the same direction.

In the great final passage of Isaiah we read these words:

*'For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the Lord, so shall your seed and your name remain. And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the Lord. And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of*

*the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.'*

(Isaiah 66:22-24)

There is no escaping the conclusion that this passage refers to the state of things in eternity and after the full course of human history in this world is over. Our reasons for believing this are suggested by the terms of Isaiah's prophecy itself and by the use made of them by New Testament writers. Peter's Second Epistle contains a reference to this passage in Isaiah where the Apostle speaks of '*new heavens and new earth*' (2 Peter 3:13). This term is not referred by Peter to the present gospel-age or to some millennial period during the history of mankind. It is most definitely related to the renewal of the universe after the Second Coming of Christ. Further, Christ himself refers to the above verses of Isaiah where he draws a picture of what it will be like in hell: '*where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched*' (Mark 9:48). Both these New Testament references make it clear that Isaiah is speaking about a state of affairs in eternity and after the end of the world.

We are now in a position to appreciate the significance of the last verse of Isaiah's prophecy:

*'And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me; for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched: and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.'*

(Isaiah 66:24)

Isaiah's words are surely meaningless if they do not teach that in heaven the redeemed will be able to see the damned in their torments. The redeemed shall see them, Isaiah declares, and there will be reaction in the redeemed in that they will 'abhor' the wicked who are so suffering.

### **Robert M. M'Cheyne's sermon**

It cannot be denied that the doctrine we have just spoken of is very awesome and dreadful. But we must not on that account dismiss it as 'unchristian' or 'shocking'. It is our duty and our wisdom to examine the Scriptures carefully to see if these are things which God has revealed to us. If we become persuaded that they are, then we have no option but to believe them and to seek grace to acquiesce in them. There is no sense in either shutting our eyes to these things or in falling out with God because we do not like what he has told us.

No preacher was ever more sweet in his gospel presentation than the saintly Robert Murray M'Cheyne of St Peter's in Dundee. Yet M'Cheyne did not hesitate to preach this very doctrine to his people.<sup>1</sup> M'Cheyne was preaching on Revelation 19:3 ('*And again they said Alleluia. And her smoke rose up for ever*'). He entitled the sermon, *The Eternal Torment of the Wicked Matter of Eternal Song to the Redeemed*. In the course of his remarks, M'Cheyne argues that hell is in sight of heaven, a point he admits may be new to his hearers and which he proceeds to prove in this way:

1. From Luke 13:28 where we read: '*There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out.*'
2. From Luke 16:22: '*The rich man also died and was buried and in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.*'
3. From Isaiah 66:24, the verse we earlier quoted and examined.
4. From Revelation 14:10: '*The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture, into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the Lamb.*'

The excellent young preacher goes on to say that the righteous will have no sadness over the wicked in hell, whom they shall see from heaven. On the contrary, he argues, they '*will rejoice over*' them (Revelation 18:20). He then proceeds to explain that this rejoicing of the redeemed will not be because they love to see human pain or because they will see the destruction of their enemies with

devilish glee. Rather, it is because the redeemed will have no mind but God's. They will have no joy but what the Lord has. This is M'Cheyne's explanation of how the righteous can be perfectly happy in glory and yet see the torments of the lost who are in hell.

## **Jonathan Edwards**

The eminent Jonathan Edwards had a similar view of this subject. He has a work entitled, *The End of the Wicked Contemplated by the Righteous or the Torment of the Wicked in Hell no Occasion for Grief to the Saints in Heaven*. It is based on the text Revelation 18:20. Edwards expands the theme by showing that *'when the saints in glory shall see the wrath of God executed on ungodly men, it will be no occasion of grief to them, but of rejoicing'*. He then proceeds to show, negatively and positively *'why the sufferings of the wicked will not be a cause of grief to the righteous, but the contrary'*. Among the points Edwards makes are the following. *Negatively* — it is not because the saints in heaven will be indisposed towards the wicked or take any pleasure in the misery of others for its own sake. *Positively* — it is because in heaven the righteous will *'love what God loves, and that only'*. Hence they will realise that the wicked are unworthy of their love and pity because God himself has no love or pity for them any more. Edwards further argues that the saints in glory will rejoice over the punishment of the damned in hell also because in these they will see the justice, power and majesty of God made manifest. Further, they will rejoice because they will have *'the greatest sense of their own happiness, by seeing the contrary misery. This in turn will give them a joyful sense of the grace and love of God to them (i.e., themselves), because hereby they will see how great a benefit they have by it.'*<sup>2</sup> In characteristically thorough fashion, Edwards then proceeds to answer the objections to this teaching and to draw warnings out of it for the unbeliever.

## **Other possible causes of sadness**

Having considered the above solemn questions, it remains here to take some further brief account of one or two other possible causes of sadness to the redeemed in heaven, as it might now appear to us.

### **1. The recollection of past sins**

The memory of our past sins will not cloud our joy in heaven as believers because we shall have a complete sense of assurance that they are pardoned through the death of Christ. This is very clear because we are presented with a very definite revelation of the confidence believers have of a total and eternal pardon. The blessed in glory are thus able to sing to Christ in these verses: *'Thou hast redeemed us to God by thy blood'* (Revelation 5:9). On the contrary, the redeemed in glory will remember their sins as those who will never be condemned by them. Hence they will sing their song of gratitude to Christ all the more and as they do so, their blessedness will be increased, not diminished. So great a Saviour we have!

### **2. Those we did not like on Earth**

There will be some Christians in heaven whom we did not particularly like on earth. There is no doubt that this is true. But in heaven all the imperfections which here make us unlovable and unlovely will be wholly removed. There all the redeemed will be ideal companions and utterly compatible each with the other. They will forget the differences of the past. No John Wesley will ever quarrel with his Toplady there. All denominational wrangles will be laid entirely to rest. They shall all *'see eye to eye'* and be consumed with holy delight in one another's company. The moles in their eyes will be gone, and because they will *'know even as they are known'* (1 Corinthians 13:12), they will be beyond all possibility of further disagreement or disharmony.

### **3. So little done for God**

There appears to us to be a possibility that our poor service to Christ here on earth will be an occasion of sorrow to us in heaven. After all, how little we serve him considering how greatly he has served us and saved us by his blood! But there will be no sorrow on this account either. It will be bliss to hear his *'Well done, good and faithful servant!'* There we shall fully understand that those who laboured more abundantly than we did were moved, not by their own power, but by the

secret impulse of God's Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:10). Consequently, all will be content with their own measure of the gift of Christ, whether that measure be looked at as service, grace or glory.

There is, however, this much to be learned here and now, that every believer would do wisely to stir up himself and herself to serve Christ as fully as possible.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Basket of Fragments*, RM. M'Cheyne, Christian Focus Publications, p. 162f.

<sup>2</sup> Edwards, *Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth edition, p. 207f.