

## Introduction

"Father, we need wisdom... so I pray that You would give that to us... to have discerning spirits. Father, we also need clarity. God, I pray that Your Holy Spirit would baptize us in this place today, and God that anyone who is far from You would be drawn in. God, I pray that we would not be afraid but that we seek truth which is the truth that is from You. And Lord, I pray that Your truth would be lifted high today. I ask this in the Name of Jesus Christ. Amen."

If you have a Bible, and I hope that you do, I want to invite you at this time to open it with me to the Book of Revelation, chapter 20. Whenever you watch a video like that, if you're like me, your initial reaction is, "What in the world do I do with that?" You just kind of say, "How does that fit into my understanding of what I've read in the Bible; how does that fit in my understanding of what I even believe life to be?" I want to begin by saying, "We don't build our theology off of stories that other people tell." I also want to be very careful to say that there certainly are people who are charlatans and frauds and phonies... they've attempted to trick people. You've probably even seen stories recently in the news about people who say they visited heaven, got a book deal, and then later came back and recanted on that. So with all of those disclaimers out there, as Tracy so graciously and articulately put it, there are so many experiences that are so wide and varied across the human spectrum that you begin, though, eventually to go, "This can't all simply be made up; it can't simply be the result of anesthesia... What do I do with that? What am I supposed to do with those kinds of experiences?" What I want to do today, as we go into week three in our series of "Heaven Matters," is for us to actually take just a few minutes today and to think, "What is it that God is doing?"

### 1. Begins With The Lord's Draw

The last couple of weeks we've talked about the beauty of heaven... the glory of heaven. I want us to talk today about how you get there. How do you go to heaven? You know, it's actually more than just passing away. There's another step that's involved. One of the things that we've done as we've talked about this series is we've had cards that say on one side of them, "What happens when we die?" That's what I want to talk about today, about the fact that God truly does indeed have a plan, but that plan may not look exactly the way that you would think. I think one of the things that Tracy said that really resonated with me and really helped me begin to understand, lots of different experiences that I've heard about over the years, is that God is continually drawing people to Himself. The Scripture is very clear. You may or may not know this but actually, apart from the Holy Spirit, you and I have no ability to discover God on our own. We don't have that ability. We need the Holy Spirit to draw us into His presence. We need Him to show us who God is. So, any time that someone has discovered the way to heaven, it has always begun with the very draw of God. It begins with God drawing them. When I say "drawing" I mean kind of like a wooing or a pulling in. God has begun this activity of making Himself aware, through different varied forms of revelation. He is putting down the metaphysical breadcrumbs, saying, "I am here and I want you to know that I am right here." Right now, if you're in this room, this is what I want you to hear: God is drawing you to Himself right now. You may or may not know that, but that is what is happening today. In John 12:32, Jesus said, *"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself."* 2 Peter 3:9, *"The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."* God doesn't want any of you to perish. He wants you to know repentance. He wants you to know the gift of heaven. That's why He draws people in. John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world..."* (the entire world) *"...that He gave His Son."* He wants you to know that He loves the entire world, even your corner of the world. 1 John 2:2, *"He is the propitiation for our*

*sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*" God has done enough in Jesus Christ to give salvation to anyone who would receive it.

So God speaks things very specifically through His Word; but at the same time, God also works in very general ways. We've talked over the last couple of weeks that sometimes we have things like sunsets or mountain peaks and that sort of thing... that reflection of God back in creation... that begins to make it aware to us there really is a God. That's pretty incredible. You see, theologians call that "general revelation". It's the idea that even apart from the very specific revelation given us in the Word of God, that there are things that give us clues to His presence. The Bible talks about this in Romans chapter 1 where it says, *"For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse."* In other words, God is making Himself apparent to everyone. There's no one that hasn't seen a reflection of God in some way... through creation, through loving relationships... that have sensed Him being with them, had those moments of transcendence. So whenever I see these sorts of stories like the ones that Tracy was talking about, instead of me immediately questioning, "Did that really happen? Is this person trying to fake me out?" I think the first question that I need to actually ask is this: could this be God trying to draw someone to Himself? ...And what would be my role in that conversation?

This week, I talked to one of the men in our church... he's in his 80s. He told me that whenever he was 43 years old, he didn't believe in Jesus. He went to church. His wife talked to him about the Lord. His daughters talked to him about the Lord, but he didn't believe in God. Do you know he told me? He wasn't saved because he went to church one day and some preacher stood up and really preached an incredible sermon. He became a believer in Jesus Christ because at the age of 43, one night he went to sleep and he had a dream. Jesus appeared to him in a dream and said, "You'd better get your life right or it's over for you." He woke up and he was like, "Whoa..." (Laughter) He got his life right. Now this man, whenever I talk to him... he's in his 80s... I figured he'd been a Christian since he was about 2, because he seems like one of the holiest people I've ever met. He was like, "Nah... I didn't believe any of that stuff." Can God work in those kinds of ways?

We've talked about the fact that in the Muslim world right now, more and more people are coming to faith in Christ before missionaries have ever even set foot in their cities. Many of them give testimony to the fact that the way that they came to know Jesus is not through a missionary or a preacher or someone coming to give them the Scripture but instead through dreams and visions... that God is working through the supernatural to draw people to Himself. As a pastor, I've had conversations with very small children who would swear to the fact that they have heard from God and heard from Him in such a palpable real way that it's almost frightening to them. Now all of this, we can sit here and go, "That can't be real." ...Except we see that sort of thing happen in the pages of Scripture, don't we? God speaks to people through dreams and visions all the time in the pages of Scripture. Samuel, a child, heard from the Lord. We don't discount that because it's here in the Scripture.

This is the thing I want you to hear: God is always drawing people to Himself, and He always acts in accordance with what this Book says. His character does not contradict itself. If what you hear from other people contradicts what the Bible says, then you can know immediately that that is not true. But if people tell you something... an experience, a vision, a dream... something that has taken place and it lines up with the character of God who is revealed in the pages of Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ, then instead of starting with "I believe this is phony..." you might start with, "God, what should I say?" "Holy

Spirit, lead me in this conversation." You see, right now, God is drawing all people. We say things like, "That was a coincidence, or that was just kind of a random thing that happened right there..." or maybe the God of the universe is arranging circumstances so that we might see Him. He might be leading us to a place. Now again, we want to be careful that these experiences and stories never trump Scripture, but at the same time, we also want to recognize that if God is drawing us, He must be drawing us toward something. What is He drawing us toward?

Revelation 20:11: *"Then I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it. From His presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it. Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."*

Lake of fire, huh? "I got up and came to church today, and that's what you're going to talk to me about... the lake of fire?" (Laughter) "...I thought this was the "Heaven" series. According to Gallop, 80% of Americans believe in heaven. Far fewer of us believe in hell. I don't know why. Maybe we just think a loving God wouldn't really send anybody to hell. Maybe we think there's really not such a place. Maybe we think, "Well, I don't know anybody **that** bad." Maybe we think, "If hell does exist, it's something pretty small, reserved for people like Bin Laden or Hitler. It's not for just average people just like us." Maybe it's because we go to Barnes and Noble and we see titles of books like, "I hope They Serve Beer in Hell"... kind of a cavalier attitude. Maybe it's because we've seen the Far Side cartoons... I'm a fan. I don't know if you've seen these cartoons. This is one of my favorites right here.



It shows someone coming into heaven: "Welcome to heaven... here's your harp." "Welcome to hell... here's your accordion." (Laughter) Sorry, accordion players. (Laughter) The other one is also pretty funny. It shows some people standing at an urn getting their coffee. Someone takes a sip and says, "Oh, man... the coffee's cold! They thought of everything!" (Laughter)

I think that sometimes we laugh at the idea of hell because we don't want to have to face it down. This is what I want to ask you today. Why would God so relentlessly pursue people and draw them to Himself? If everybody goes to heaven, why the drawing? You see, if everybody goes to heaven, there's no reason to draw... just live however you want to... live like heaven, live like hell... it doesn't matter because we're all going to the same place. ...Or are we? You see, Scripture ...not Steve, not theologians... Scripture testifies to the existence of a place that is eternal and is called hell. Do you know which biblical character speaks the most about hell, by the way? It's Jesus. I know... the picture you have of Jesus as a kid is He's wearing a really cool sash and He's holding a lamb. (Laughter) But Jesus taught on hell more than any other person. Let me read you some of the verses:

Luke 13:28... *"In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out."*

Matthew 13:42... *"And throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

Matthew 22:13... *"Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"*

Matthew 8:12... *"...while the sons of the Kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

Matthew 24:51... *"...and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

Matthew 25:30... *"And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

Are you getting a theme here? (Laughter)

Matthew 10:28... *"Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."*

What are the pictures we get? Eternal... furnace... torment... weeping... These are the pictures that Scripture gives us about what hell is like.

## **2. Leads To A Decision**

Whenever I was very, very ill with heart failure in 2001, I had to spend an extended stay in Baylor Hospital in downtown Dallas. I was on the heart wing; I was 25 years old. One night in the middle of the night, about 2 o'clock in the morning, whoever was staying in the room next to me died. I don't know who was by their bedside. I know that it was a woman, and I know that she had no understanding of eternal hope. She had no picture of heaven, and she had no understanding of anything that would ever exist beyond this world. I know that because in that moment, she screamed a scream that was so visceral and so guttural and so pain-filled that right now I can still hear it in my mind. That's what hell is going to be like: all alone... you don't see your friends in hell. We have that phrase in pop culture, "I'll see you in hell." No you won't. Not because I'm not going there. You won't see anyone at all because hell is isolation. There's no community in hell. It's just you in the darkness, in the furnace, burning in torment, screaming out for pain, and hearing the screams of other people but no one's coming to rescue. That's hell. Eternally separated

from the grace of God; eternally tormented. Again, these aren't Steve's words. These are the words of Jesus. This is red-letter stuff in the New Testament. Why would God then draw us to that place?

Now here's the funny thing. People... we have plans, right? We have strategies to avoid hell, just in case it's real... (I love this one) **Just be a good person.** I don't know where this came from. It has this reminiscence of an idea that comes from the "Egyptian Book of the Dead." In the "Egyptian Book of the Dead," the idea is that whenever you would die, your heart was taken before the deity, and the deity would then take your heart and would weigh it on a scale. On one side would be your heart and on the other side would be a feather. If your heart was lighter than a feather, then you would be ushered into heaven. Of course, as Americans, we change that up a little bit; what we do, in our mind, is we have all the good stuff you've done on one side of the scale and all the bad stuff you've done on the other side of the scale. As long as the good stuff is just a little bit heavier than the bad stuff, then you're going to be okay. The only problem with that theory is that it's nowhere in the Bible. In fact, it's actually the opposite of what the Bible teaches. You can't be that good of a person because the standard is, "Are you as good as Jesus?" And if the answer to that question is "No"... Lake of fire for you...

Other people have another strategy: **Get Baptized.** "As long as I'm baptized then I'm going to go to heaven." When I was a young man, I was part of a faith tradition that believed that as long as your child was baptized, whenever they were small, then they would be under the covenant of grace, and they would be taken into heaven. You will not find that in the Bible. It is a lie. This is the other thing I want you to know. Sometimes I talk to people here in this church, and they bring me their children. They say, "I want my child to be baptized so that they can go to heaven." I want you to hear me right now. That's not how you go to heaven. Your child being baptized... you being baptized... will not save you from hell. Again, that's not Steve... that's Scripture. You see, we talk about baptism being like a wedding ring. You put the ring on **after** you've made the promise. You get baptized **after** you have said, "I place my faith in Jesus Christ." If you haven't placed your faith in Jesus Christ, your baptism is nothing more than an empty, insignificant symbol. It's fake... It's acting.

Of course, we have other strategies as well. We say, "**I'll just go to church.**" Breaking news alert! Churches across America are filled with people going to hell. Some of you are here right now. Welcome. I want you to know this. Whenever I was a kid, preachers would always say this: "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than sleeping in the garage makes you a car." Did you ever hear that? I don't know if you've ever heard that. (Laughter) Here's the thing... what they were trying to say was this. It doesn't matter if you go to church because you think church is a religious activity that will go on that scale, or something, and weigh that out... no. That's not the way that this thing works.

Then, of course, we have another one: **My dad's a preacher... my uncle's a deacon.** I just want to break this down for you. If you, right now, are a father and you have seven sons and all seven of them become pastors... you will be burning in hell while all seven of them take turns preaching at your funeral if you do not give your life to Christ. That's the way that it works.

This is the thing: We have all of our strategies and our plans. Here's the crazy thing. Not a single one of them is found anywhere in the pages of this Book, and we just think that we'll just show up at the gates of heaven and be like, "Well, you know, I mean... I was alright." No you weren't... No, you weren't. You see, Scripture gives an entirely different solution... and here it is. Are you ready? You get to pick. You get to choose between heaven and hell. I know right now some of you are going, "Well what kind of idiot would

choose hell?" (Laughter) I've met a few. You see, here's the thing. It's that you get to pick... and God leads us to a moment where we get to choose.

Over Christmas, my family, we got kind of sucked into binge-watching this TV show on Netflix called "Making a Murderer" I don't know if any of you guys watched that. I don't know if you think that Steve Avery is guilty or innocent... whatever... that kind of stuff. We didn't change out of our pajamas for two days... and just plowed through that thing. (Laughter) I wish it was not true... but we did. We sat there and we watched that thing. I don't know if you think that he's guilty or innocent or whatever... but there's this moment in the case where there is a young man named Brendan Dassey who has an IQ that is right on the line between able to understand and able not. The investigators who were interrogating him go through a very (I don't know how else to put it) unethical way of extracting a confession from him. Was he guilty or not? Again, I don't know but I'm just saying that the way that they went about that... and if you watch it, you go... "Whoa... that is dirty." There's a thing that comes up in my heart when I watch that and I go, "That's injustice." Why does that happen?

I had a dear friend... about 15 years ago, her sister was murdered in cold blood. They caught the killer; he came into a court room, and I was so thankful for our justice system in that moment because the killer was caught. The jury rendered a just verdict, and the judge read it out and justice was meted in that moment. I felt very satisfied. Why is it that injustice will get our blood to boiling, and why is it that justice makes us feel very satisfied. The reason for that is that God has hardwired a need for justice in every one of our hearts. Every one of us wants wrongdoers to be punished. We want that because God has placed it within the human heart. It's not something that we came up with on our own. It's something that has been put within us since before we ever even existed. God hardwired it into us.

Revelation 20:11-15 is God handing out justice. It's God saying, "You get what you deserve, and you don't get what you deserve." You see, that's the reason because there is such a thing as justice. God will one day judge, and Jesus will be there. Hebrews 9:27-28: *"And just as it is appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him."* Jesus has already dealt with sin on the cross. Jesus, the next time He comes, there are no more salvation offers. You see, that's done. In that moment, He's rescuing those who have placed their faith in Him, and He's punishing those who have rejected Him. There will be a judgment. This is the standard: The standard is righteousness. The Greek word for that is "diakasunay." What is righteousness? It is the character of God Himself. The standard for judgment is God's character. Think about your actions... think about your thoughts... think about your words. Not today... your entire life. Have they ever once not matched up with the words, thoughts, or actions of Jesus? If the answer is "Yes..." lake of fire for you... lake of fire for me. P.S... I am under judgment because I have not done those things. Many times... Many times. You see, the standard is a standard of perfection and God, because He is totally just and totally righteous, will one day account for all sin. All sin will be punished. It will be dealt with one day. Eventually all of it will be dealt with, and this picture, Revelation 20, is the picture of when that happens. And if you haven't always lived exactly like Jesus... judgment. How are you feeling about your chances?

America's great theologian, Johnny Cash... (Laughter) ...wrote a song called "When The Man Comes Around" ...about Revelation:

"And the whirlwind is in the thorn tree,  
The virgins are all trimming their wicks,  
The whirlwind is in the thorn tree,

It's hard for thee to kick against the pricks,  
Till Armageddon, no shalam, no shalom,  
Then the father hen will call his chickens home,  
The wise man will bow down before the throne,  
And at His feet they'll cast their golden crown,  
When the Man Comes Around.  
Whoever is unjust, let him be unjust still,  
Whoever is righteous, let him be righteous still,  
Whoever is filthy, let him be filthy still,  
Listen to the words long written down,  
When the man comes around.

Hear the trumpets, hear the pipers,  
One hundred million angels singin',  
Multitudes are marchin' to the big kettledrum.  
Voices callin', voices cryin',  
Some are born and some are dyin'  
It's alpha's and omega's Kingdom come,  
When the man comes around."

You see, as the Man In Black notes, if you believe in justice, then it just can't be for everybody else. "Lord, punish the rapist, punish the murders, that guy who cut me off in traffic, and those people who have been talking bad about me behind my back... Lord, take care of all of them. Justice for everybody... just not for me." You see, that's the heart of most of us. It's that we want truly great justice. But we don't understand how badly God actually hates sin and must reject it and punish it.

A theologian of America, a little bit greater than Johnny Cash... a man by the name of Jonathan Edwards... wrote a sermon called "Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God." This may frighten you but it is accurate... of the picture that God has when sin has not been confessed and handed over to Jesus... the sin that is in you. This is what Jonathan Edwards wrote: "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked. His wrath towards you burns like fire. He looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire. He (the Lord) is of purer eyes than to bear you in His sight. You are ten thousand times as abominable in His eyes as the most hateful, venomous serpent is in ours. God's righteousness cannot abide sin, and He will deal with it swiftly, and He will deal with it completely." When we read Revelation 20:11-15, let me tell you what we are looking at. We are looking at God finally dealing with all sin. According to Scripture, at the end of time, all sin will be dealt with in one of two places:

1. The Lake of Fire.
2. The broken body of Jesus Christ.

And that's the choice. You say, "Who would choose hell over heaven?" Anyone who rejects Jesus has chosen hell. You see, the way that judgment works is this: If you say, "I don't need a Savior... I don't need Someone the rescue me. I can handle my own sin problem," then God will let you... He will let you. Romans 1 says, "*He will give you over to yourself.*" The way that works is this... it's that you don't want Him to rescue you... fine. And at the end of time, your sin will be on your body, and your body will be with your

sin, and it will be eternally punished in the Lake of Fire where final judgment will be meted out. But... Oh Grace... (Clapping)... You see, here's the thing. If you have, by faith, believed on Jesus, then you get grace. That's why Ephesians 2:8-9: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."* Titus 3:5: *"He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit."*

### 3. Culminates In A Decision

If you are here today and you wonder, "Am I going to heaven?" We can answer that question and settle it right now. ...Right now. If you say, "Am I going to heaven? How do I get to heaven?" This is how: You believe...

1. That God did what He said He did... that God became flesh in Jesus. It's not a fairytale... He's not a prophet... He's not a teacher... He's God. You believe... you start there.
2. The next thing that you believe is you believe that you deserve to be punished for your sin, eternally in hell, but you were rescued whenever Jesus Christ took your sin and took it on His body and was punished on the cross. When that happened, you believe that your sin was punished on the broken body of Jesus.
3. You believe that God raised Jesus from the dead to demonstrate, first of all, His power over death but also that He wants you to have eternal relationship with Him.

You see, heaven is a great gift... not just because you don't have to go to hell. But heaven is a great gift because then you get eternal relationship with Jesus. You were created to have a relationship with God...not just to avoid the fires of hell.

So here's the thing. Right now, God is looking and saying, "Who are the people here today that need to no longer reject Me and no longer hold Me at arm's length? Who are the people that right now need to say 'Yes' to Me? And who are the people that believe that they have it all figured out and think that they don't need a Savior, then I will give you over to yourself and at the end of time, we will see where you stand." But ultimately, He draws us... He draws us because everyone does not go to the same place. He draws us to a moment of decision, and He draws us to a place where we get to pick and we get to decide, and we reach that moment where we say, "Will we believe that what this Book says is true about who Jesus is, or do we think it's just something that's a cute cultural tradition?" Let me be very clear. This choice costs you everything.

When I was a kid, sometimes I'd hear people say, "It's a free gift." It is a free gift in the sense that you can't do anything to earn it, but when you receive it, it will change your life. And you say, "Man, I don't know if I want to receive Christ because I'll have to change the way I live." You're right... you are. ...Because He rescued you from hell. And if you don't think that's worth it... Well, I guess that's between you and the Lord. But the truth is that right now you have to choose. Will you say "Yes" to the Lord or not? How do you get to heaven? You get to heaven by placing your faith in Jesus. How do you get to hell? ...By rejecting that. The choice is yours. Heaven is the gift... Hell is what we deserve. Jesus made a way. Let's pray.

Nobody's looking around right now. Everybody's got their head bowed and their eyes closed. This is what I want to do. I just want to ask. If you're right here and you say, "Okay... do you know what? I don't think I ever fully understood this thing. I'm ready right now, in this moment, to give my life to Jesus... to place my faith in Jesus. I've been holding off... I've been resisting." I want to ask you right now... nobody's looking around... If you're ready to give your life to Christ, I want to ask you to raise your hand right now. Would you please raise your hand? Who else? Raise them up high; I want to be able to see them. Raise them up. Who else? Raise those hands up. Good. Are you ready to give your life to Christ for the first time? Just raise them up. Lots of hands are coming up. Keep them up for me for just a second. Who else? If you say, "Do you know what? I've never given my life to Jesus; today's the day." Okay. You can put your hands down.

"Lord Jesus... for these who have just raised their hand... they've said that they're ready. God, I pray that You would give them the courage and the faith to say, 'I want to take that step.' Father, for those of us who maybe have grown cold in our faith, I pray that today we would be reminded of the rescue that has been given us in Jesus. And Lord, for those of us who have been lax in sharing this truth, this good news, I pray that we would never stop telling people. We love You, Lord. We pray Your Holy Spirit would have His way in this place right now. Draw people to You, God... In the Name of Your Son Jesus. Amen."