

AHEAVEN@
Evangelist Johnnie Lavender
Jn. 14:1-6

If it were possible for us to focus the searchlight of inquiry upon the soul of each of us here this evening, I'm sure the one question which would find itself engraved upon the hearts of us all would be: "What next?" This is a day of enormous uncertainty. A time of Titanic turmoil and testing. Everywhere we turn, we seem to be directly in the path of the 20th-century version of the four horsemen of the apocalypse: fear, frustration, frenzy and futility. As a result, more than any other day in history, the people of the world are raising questions about the future: "And now tomorrow?" "What comes next?" "Where do we go from here?"

There isn't one of us who hasn't joined the poet in his prayer:

"Oh tell me, secret heart,
Is there no resting place
Is there no happy spot
Where griefs may find a balm,
And weariness a rest?

Faith, hope and love **C** best boons to mortals given **C**

Wave their bright wings and whisper:

"Yes, in heaven!"

Thanks be to God for that glorious and eternal hope: To know that this world is not our home. That death is not the end. That the sorrow and suffering, sickness and strife, which so often cloud our view will someday be brushed aside by the hand of God and we shall gaze upon the Hills of Beulah in the fullness of all their glory.

Oh, I know there are some who say there is no heaven. Hardly a day passes but what someone expresses the view that there isn't any other heaven but the one we know on earth. But if this world is heaven, it is a very strange one. And I pity, from the bottom of my heart, the man or woman who holds that view. As D. L. Moody put it, "This world that some people think is Heaven, is the home of sin, a hospital of sorrow, a place that has nothing in it to satisfy their soul. Men go all over it and then want to get out of it. The more men see of it, the less they think of it. People soon grow tired of the best pleasures this world has to offer."

Someone else has suggested this world is a stormy sea, whose every wave is strewn with the wreckage of the mortals that perish in it. Every time we breathe, someone is dying. And sooner or later we, too, must face the relentless pursuit of death. It seems only reasonable then that we should study God's word, to find out where we're going when we die and who is going to be there.

They say that young preachers don't preach about heaven. If that's the case, then I guess I am an exception for I love to preach about heaven. I love to think about heaven . . . talk about heaven . . . find out all I can about heaven . . . for you see, I plan to live there for all eternity.

If you were moving to another city and were going to make that city your home, you'd try to find out all about it. You'd ask questions about the climate, the neighborhood, the people. You'd want to find out all about it.

Well, those of us who are born-again Christians will someday move to another city. A city that is far away. We're going to spend eternity in another world. A grand and glorious world where God reigns. Isn't it natural then that we should stop and look and

listen, and try to find out what it's going to be like . . . who is already there . . . and the path we should follow to make certain of getting there ourselves? So here is my outline.

We're going to consider Heaven. Its certainty.

Its society. And the Savior through whom we gain it.

ITS CERTAINTY

Jesus made it perfectly clear that when he talked about Heaven, he was dealing with reality.

"In my Father's house are many room's . . . I go to prepare a place for you." To be sure, he (and the new Testament writers) used symbolic and figurative language in describing the final abode of those who place their trust in Christ. But, "symbols are the flung shadows of reality." And whatever Heaven is like, we know that it is real and that it is far beyond our wildest dreams.

A little girl was walking with her father one night. As she looked up at the starry sky, she said, "Daddy, if the wrong side of heaven is so beautiful, what will the right side be?"

This is our conviction, too. For we know that the home which Christ is preparing for his own, is more wonderful and glorious than all of the adjectives and superlatives in the combined vocabularies of the world can describe. Someone has said --

Think of a city without a cemetery **C** for they have no dying there.

Think of a city without tears **C** for God shall wipe away all tears up yonder

Think of a city without pain, a city without sorrow, without sickness, without death **C** for the former things are passed away.

Think of a city without darkness **C** "for the Lamb shall be the light thereof."

Think of a city without sun or moon **C** for Christ shall shine unveiled in all his glory there.

Think of a city without temptation **C** for nothing that defiles shall ever enter Heaven.

Think of a city where we shall be free from sin, where pollution cannot enter, where righteousness shall reign forever.

Think of a city not built with hands **C** a city which knows no census save the Book of Life.

Think of a city where no hearses shall creep slowly with their sad burdens to the silent city of the dead.

Think of a city without sickness or sorrow, marriages or mournings, births or burials, a city which "glories in having Jesus as its King, angels as its guards, and whose citizens are saints."

Oh, the earth is the place of blood and sweat and tears . . . this is the battlefield. But Heaven is the place of victory and triumph. The place of joy and life. And oh what a thrill will break through the hearts of the blessed when their conquests are complete. When death itself is vanquished and they shall stand forever in the beautiful presence of the eternal Christ.

Yet, in the face of such a reality is this, we find people who, when they are asked if they are Christians, limply respond, "I hope so." "I guess so" or "I think so." Listen! I know that on October 9, 1923 I was born into this world. (Now that makes me 24 years old. Don't try to figure it out. I want you to listen to my sermon.) I can't explain it. I don't remember any feeling. But I know it happened, for here's the evidence!

And likewise, I know that 15 years ago, about nine o'clock at night, in the Melrose Baptist Church at 47th Avenue and Bonds street in Oakland, California, the Spirit of God came into my heart and I was born into the newness of everlasting life. And all of the skeptics, all of the agnostics, all of the doubters in the world could not convince me otherwise.

If someone were to run up the stairs of this church right now . . . dash down the center aisle and say, "Stop! Have you seen the headlines? Have you heard the news? God's dead!" I'd have to answer, "You lie! For God lives within my heart . . . and if God had

died I'd have known it long before this . . . for I would have died also."

As one writer has said so pointedly, "A man may have his name written on the highest chronicles down here, but the record may be lost; he may have it carved in marble and still it may perish. Some great institution may bear his name, and yet he may soon be forgotten. But his name will never be erased from the scrolls that are kept above. Seeking to perpetuate one's name on earth is like writing on the shifting sands of the seashore." To be everlasting, it must be written in the directory of heaven . . . The Lamb's Book of Life. And when it is there, we can have the assurance of Paul and can say, "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."

For when our name is inscribed on the scroll that is kept above, we have the certainty of being one of the society of heaven.

ITS SOCIETY

The society of heaven is select for it is a prepared place for a prepared people. Here on earth we have many ways of judging people. The clothes they wear. The car they drive. The neighborhood in which they live. But these things will be of no importance in eternity. The most unassuming believer down here are will be a Somebody up there, for "the aristocracy of heaven will be the aristocracy of holiness."

Now, Jesus made it perfectly clear that everybody is not going to be in heaven. "Not everyone that calleth me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom," he said (Matt. 7:21.) As the old Negro spiritual puts it, "Everybody talkin' 'bout heaven ain't goin' there."

There are a lot of folks who tell us it doesn't matter what a person believes or does. That the good, the bad and the indifferent are all going to have a place in heaven. But, according to Jesus, that isn't so.

You say, "But, preacher, don't you believe in the mercy of God?" Certainly I do. "Don't you believe in the love of God?" Certainly I do. "Don't you believe in the grace of God?" Certainly I do. But I also believe in the justice of God. And I believe that heaven would be a thousand times worse than this old wicked world if unrenewed people were allowed to become a part of it.

Think of the history of this world. Think of some of the people who have lived in this world. Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Judas, Dillinger, Capone. Suppose they should live forever. Suppose they should never die. Why, life would be intolerable. It would be like hell itself.

Do you think God is going to take these people who have rejected his son . . . who have spurned his love . . . who have refused his great salvation . . . who have trampled his law under their feet . . . do you think God is going to take them into heaven and let them make hell out of it? Do you think God is going to take them into his Kingdom and let them live forever? Never in a million years. "Be not deceived . . . God is not mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." Thank God, the society of heaven is select, for it is a prepared place for a prepared people.

I remember hearing a preacher say that the way to heaven in short, comprising only three steps: Out of self. Into Christ. Into glory. But bless your hearts, it is even shorter than that. Out of self. Into Christ. And you're there.

I cannot agree with some people who believe that Christians who have died are

sleeping in the grave. I cannot believe that those dear saints who loved the Master and served him so faithfully are separated from him in an unconscious state. For when a person receives Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord he or she also receives eternal life right then and there!

John 3:36 says: "He that hath the Son hath . . . h-a-t-h . . . hath everlasting life." It doesn't say they receive it in the by and by. It doesn't even promise it on the great Resurrection Morn. It is present tense. And it will be yours right now, if you only receive it.

It is a gift of God. And, as Moody pointed out, "You cannot bury a gift of God. You cannot bury eternal life. Why, all of the grave diggers in the world could not dig a grave long enough, wide enough, or deep enough to hold eternal life. All of the coffin makers in the world could not make a coffin large enough or strong enough to hold eternal life." And its mine, PTL, it's mine!

I believe that when Paul said, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord," he meant exactly what he said. A great many people are living continually in the fear and bondage of death. But I have eternal life and death cannot touch that. Oh, it may touch the house I live in. It may change my countenance . . . my outward appearance. It may send my body to the grave. But it cannot touch my new life. And to me it is a sin and blasphemy against God, that any Christian should look upon death with a sense of fear. It is not death at all; it is life.

A minister walked into a hospital room to bring a word of comfort to a dying saint. Not really knowing what to say, he began, "Well, I see you're in the land of the living yet." And that child of God, reflecting her faith, replied, "No! I'm in the land of the dying.

But I'll soon be in the land of the living where they live and never die."

Oh, beloved, this is the land of tears and death. But over there is the land of unceasing joy and never-ending life.

Whenever I give thought to the society of heaven, there is one verse of scripture which always is an inspiration to me. Hebrews 12:1-- "Wherefore, seeing we are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses . . . let us to run with patience the race that is set before us." I love to think of that great cloud of witnesses up yonder. I often picture them sitting in the grandstand of heaven watching me as I run this great race of life.

There are some great old saints up there. Peter. Paul. John. Moody. Luther. Wesley. People who have experienced the same fears and failures, doubts and despair, I'm going through. And it seems that sometimes I can hear them calling, "Keep going, son, keep going. It's only a little farther."

When I was in high school, I met a young man whom I came to love as my own brother. His name was Willis Duffield, but all of his friends called him Willie. Willie was the typical fat man. Full of fun. Always thinking up some cute prank to play on one of his friends. But there was nothing insincere about Willie's happiness for it was deeply rooted in a heart that was full of joy because of the knowledge of sin forgiven. As you remember, in 1941 the second world war struck. For several reasons, one being his tremendous size (for he was a very large man), Willie was not taken into the Army. He secured a job as a pile driver in one of the Richmond, California, shipyards. One day, just at closing time, Willie was taking the chain off the last pile. Apparently, it was used to guide the thing. I don't know. But anyway, he couldn't quite reach it and he put his right hand on the top of the pile to get a better grip so he could reach farther

down. Just as he did, the operator of the machine inadvertently pushed the wrong lever and that great 2000 pound hammer fell and completely crushed Willie's right hand.

They took him to the hospital and tried to save it, but it was battered beyond recognition so they amputated just below the elbow. I used to visit him in the hospital to try to cheer him up . . . but somehow it was always I who came away the happier. For even in the face of another physical disability, Willie was undaunted in his Christian joy. He used to joke about it and say the thing that griped him the most was that he had just bought a new pair of work gloves and now he can only use one of them.

After a while he regained his strength, was released from the hospital, and several months later secured a job as a pest exterminator. By this time he had a false hand, and in his new work it was not a serious disability. One day after he had finished his work and was getting ready to go home, his boss came into the dispatching office and asked him to go on a special rush job in one of the downtown stores in Oakland, California. Well, Willie went on that special job, just as he was always willing to do a little extra to help others out. About 10:00 p.m. the night watchman came through the basement, saw him working there, chatted with him for a few moments, laughed with him as only Willie could make people laugh and went on about his check. On his next trip to the basement, a little less than an hour later, he saw Willie again. But this time he was slumped over . . . dead.

Willie had been working with cyanide gas, a dreadful poison, and back in the corner of the basement where the ventilation was poor, he had been overcome by it. That old wooden stump was jammed into his stomach, held there by his good hand, almost doubling him up, showing he must have undergone inhuman, excruciating pain before

he died.

I believe if I ever doubted the love of God, I doubted it then. I couldn't understand why God would allow one young man to go through so much. And I remember crying out through my tears, "Why, God? Why? Why did it have to be Willie, a young man with so much of life ahead of him?" And finally God gave me the answer.

You see, Willie's mother and father were not Christians. And I remember how very often in one of our youth meetings Willie would pray, "Oh, God, you can do anything with me, but please save mom and dad." Willie never lived to see his prayer answered, but thank God, it was!

A short time after his death, I heard his father give a testimony. I will never forget it. We were having a fireside singspiration after the Sunday evening service. As he stood there in the half light . . . the shadows of the fire playing across his face . . . he said quite simply, "God had a Son and God's Son died for me, but I wouldn't receive them. I had a son and God had to let my son die before I'd take his Son. The other day when I saw Willie lying in the casket, I promised him I'd meet him over there." And then I knew why Willie had died.

Before his death, Willie and I spent many happy hours in Christian fellowship. Often, after a double date, we'd stop in one of our cars and share with each other what Christ had meant to us that day, quote a few verses of Scripture from memory and pray. There was nothing fanatical or emotional about it. Just two guys who had a common faith and enjoyed sharing it with one another. He used to kid me about the time when I would, and his words, be "a member of the cloth." But with all of his joking, he would always remind me that I must never fail to bring honor and glory to Jesus Christ.

Now when I think of that great cloud of witnesses up under, it means even more to me. For, along with Peter and Paul, Moody and Spurgeon, and all the others, there's Willie. Everything is perfect in heaven, so he's got a new right hand now. And he's using it to cheer me on. As I speak to you about our blessed hope I can almost hear him say, "Keep going, son, and preach 's word, because it's true. It's true. Every word of it is true."

I know there are those of you here this evening who have loved ones over yonder and you are asking, "How can I have the certainty of being one of the society of heaven? How can I be sure I will see them again? You've told us about heaven and we believe it. Not tell us about the Savior through whom we gain it."

THE SAVIOR

Only one name will swing open the gates of heaven and that name is Jesus. There are many passwords that can get us through locked doors down here. But Jesus Christ is the "open sesame" to heaven. There is no other way.

Men have offered their sons to the gods, and women have thrown their babies into the Ganges River, hoping to gain heaven.

Pilgrims have traveled across the burning sands of the desert to bow at some so-called sacred spot, and warriors have spilled their blood upon some god-forsaken battlefield, hoping to gain heaven.

Pious monks have fasted faithfully. Fervent penitents have climbed stones stairs on their bare knees to count their beads again and again, hoping to gain heaven.

People have been baptized, sprinkled and sprayed, hoping to gain heaven.

They have gone through the confessional box. The rites of a lodge. The process of joining a church. The act of giving to the poor. The observance of the Lord's supper and countless other rituals, hoping to gain heaven. But none of these is the way. For Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me."

Jesus himself is the way to heaven. He repeatedly said he was the way of salvation. Matthew 11:28 -- "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." John 7:37 -- "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink." John 6:37 -- "Him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out."

Again and again the Bible drives home the fact that Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven. Romans 10:13 -- "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Revelation 3:20 -- "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man will hear my voice and open the door, I will come."

God has given us salvation. He wants us to have eternal life. He wants heaven to be filled with the redeemed. But there is only one way and that way is through his son. 1 John 5:11-12 "For this is the record, that God has given us eternal life and that life is in his son. He that hath the Son hath life and he that hath not the son, hath not life."

You say, "Preacher, I think I see it, but tell me one last time. How can I have the certainty of being one of the society of heaven?" And I will answer upon the authority of God's word: by receiving the Savior into your heart.

The one way to be sure of heaven is to receive Jesus Christ. Receive him as your personal Savior. Receive him as the one who died for you. And when you do, your heart will be flooded with the assurance of your salvation. Christ will clothe you with his righteousness. He will give you his own Word to help you in this life and to prepare you for the life to come. He will open your eyes so you may behold, at least in part, the beauties of God's eternal paradise.

Then finally, he will present you faultless before your heavenly Father with exceeding great joy. And as you stand there in the presence of the angels and saints, you will hear these words to welcome you into their society: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord."

Then all of the suffering and sorrow, difficulties and despair, burden and bewilderment that have so often veiled your view, will be brushed aside for time and eternity and you will gaze upon the face of Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, in all his glory.

If I were ever required to give account of my call to the ministry I'd be pretty hard put, because I believe God's hand was upon me long before I ever realized it. As I remember, I held my first pastorate at the age of four. We called it the Backyard Presbyterian Church. I was a combination song leader, choir director, press agent, soloist and preacher, a role I'm still in!

My congregation consisted of the kids on our block. I can see them now, innocent little tots, some hardly able to talk, sitting there on orange crates, dirty faces, a sucker in a mouth here or there methodically working back and forth as they listened to me tell how the crushing burden of their life of sin could be rolled away. It must have been pretty good, because they kept coming back for more. Sometimes I wish I had a couple of those sermons now!

It's fun to look back and laugh at those experiences, but I'm glad I had them because they are an indicative of the type of home in which I was raised. There were three kids in our family. Doris, my older sister. Alberta, who is six-years younger than she, and myself. And, as long as I can remember, we were *taken*, not sent, to Sunday school.

I've never seen my sister Alberta, but judging from what my mom and dad and sister have told me, she must have been a sweet little girl. Of course she was full of mischief, just like little girls often are.

I remember one incident my dad told me about. The man across the street had just purchased a brand-new model-T Ford. It was the pride and joy of his life. Well, Alberta and several of the kids decided they didn't like the color, and proceeded to doctor it up a bit. You can imagine the shock which greeted my folks when they came home and found their golden haired little girl covered with red paint from head to foot, and the car across the street an absolute mess.

She had a beautiful voice and was always singing. It seemed as though God had planted a little bit of heaven inside her because all she ever sang were church songs and Sunday school hymns. That's all she knew. Her teachers at public school would ask her to sing to the class and she would sing to them of Jesus. Everyone for miles around knew her by her song and loved her.

She was crazy about animals. Every time she went somewhere she managed to pick up an old stray dog and bring it home. Dad would tie it up and let her feed it. But when she let it loose to play, without fail it would high tail it over the hill, leaving her standing there, crying as if her little heart would break.

She had wanted a baby brother and her Mom and Dad promised her one for her sixth birthday. Sure enough, two weeks before she was to be six years old, little J. Allan arrived on the scene.

She was thrilled to death and when Sunday came she could hardly wait to get to Sunday School

so she could tell everyone about her baby brother. She came home that day with a card she had won by memorizing Bible verses. It had three pictures on it. On the right side there was a picture of a fox in a cave. Of the left side there was a picture of a bird in its nest. In the middle was a picture of Jesus.

She asked what it meant and gathering her in her arms mom explained how "foxes have their holes and the birds of the air their nests, but the son of God had no place to lay his head." Alberta thought about it for moment and then said, "Mama, if Jesus should come to our house tonight he could have my pillow."

It just a few days which seems so short now, she went to be with the Jesus she loved so much. It happened three days before her sixth birthday. After she finished her lunch at school, she told her friends she was going across the Boulevard to the store to get some colored paper to help Mom decorate for her party. She reached the store, the lady gave her what she wanted and she started back across the street to school, but she never got there. She was struck by a speeding automobile, her little head was crushed, and she died a few hours later.

That was 21 years ago, and although I've never met her, I love her in a way I love no one else. Do you want to know what death holds for me? I'll tell you. It means a time of rejoicing for it will be that day for which I have longed. It will mean freedom from the bondage of sin and sorrow and death. It will mean I will begin a glorious ascent to Heaven.

That journey may seem like an eternity in itself, but it will happen in the twinkling of an eye. As I sweep past the clouds and draw near the City Foursquare I'll hear the sweet voice of that little girl calling, "He's coming. He's coming!" And the herald angels will pick up that cry and pass it along until it echoes throughout the Eternal City, "He's coming. He's coming!"

And then, as the gates of pearl swing open on their jeweled hinges, I will behold that little child

whom I have never seen but whom I love with all my heart. I'll clasp her to my breast and hold her close and as we sweep along the shining way I'll tell her how much I've loved her.

And then we'll stand together before the very throne of God in the presence of Christ and I hope to hear him say, "Well done thou good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Lord."

To hear those words will be enough, but that will be just beginning. For we'll spend the first one thousand years gazing upon the face of Jesus. And then we'll turn, and together, hand in hand, that curly haired sweetheart and I will stroll the streets of gold in that Celestial City throughout all eternity blending our voices in one grand Hallelujah Chorus of praise and thanksgiving to God for giving us such a wonderful Savior.

Do you share that hope tonight? You can, if you receive Jesus into your heart. Do it right now so you can leave this church filled with the joy of salvation . . . the assurance of sins forgiven . . . and the certainty that, for time and for eternity, you are one of the society of heaven.