

Sunday, December 31, 2023 am

CLOSER TO GOD (63) The Ultimate Goal

With our lesson today, we bring 2023 to its conclusion, as well as our theme for the past 2 years, “Drawing Closer to God.” We have covered much ground, much of it in subthemes. We began this study in 2022 by addressing:

- Who God is and our need to know Him.
- We then devoted a few lessons to addressing the subject of sin which separates us from God.
- We addressed the grace of God
- Then we discussed the subject of holiness – both the holiness of God and our pursuit of holiness. Holiness is about separation. We are living “separate” from the ways of the world, and “set apart” for God.
- We engaged in a brief study of the spiritual man – where we addressed that we ought to be “spiritual” in our lives, as opposed to living for carnal pursuits.
- Following this, we engaged in a detailed study of fellowship – nothing whom we have fellowship with is important. We emphasized whom we should NOT have fellowship with, those: 1) Practicing error; 2) Teaching error; 3) Tolerating to practicing or teaching error.
- Our study of fellowship included a brief study about compromise and its dangers.
- We then began a study of discipleship – what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. In this we noted several areas of life with which we can make spiritual application – e.g., athletics, soldiering, clay in the potter’s hand, members of a body, being servants and fishers of men.
- Our final block of lessons addressed some challenges and dangers to our pursuit to closeness with God. Included in this study we addressed worldliness, materialism, busyness, discouragement and doubts. We concluded this section by addressing Satan and noting that he is at the foundation of such problems (so do not blame God).

Today, as we conclude our study, we want to address the goal behind our quest to draw closer to God.

I. The ultimate goal

- a. Why are we striving to live this life so that we draw as close to God as possible as we live on earth?
The idea of closeness to God is about relationship with Him. We live our lives so that He is our priority. Why do we make sacrifices in life and possibly endure hardships and even persecutions?
Because we want to go to heaven when this life is over. That is really what it is about. So as I conclude this 2 year theme, I want to talk about the eternal reward of those who striving to draw close to God – I want to talk about the subject of heaven.
- b. What is heaven?
 - i. The word normally translated “heaven” in our New Testaments is, οὐρανός (ouranos). It is found 282 times in the NKJV.
 - ii. The word actually has 3 different spheres:
 1. The atmosphere – the skies – James 5:18 which speaks of the heavens giving rain. Matthew 13:32 speaks of the birds flying in the midst of heaven, as well as a number of OT passages that addresses where they fly – cf. Genesis 1:20).
 2. The celestial heavens – where stars and heavenly bodies are found. 1 Corinthians 15:40 speaks of celestial bodies (a derivative of our word for heaven), Again, the Old Testament bears greater examples of this – cf. Psalm 19:1)

3. But by far, the most frequent usage of the term is the dwelling place of God and future eternal abode of the godly, WITH Him. Matthew 7:21 speaks of the kingdom of heaven made available to the obedient.
 4. An interesting passage is 2 Corinthians 12:1-2 where Paul spoke of “a man” (likely himself) caught up to “the third heaven.” This is likely a reference to this heavenly realm we are talking about. Of note is how Paul acknowledges 3 different realms of the term heaven as above noted.
- c. What is heaven like?
- i. As we deal with this broken world, we need occasional reminders of what we have to look forward to.
 - ii. The first thing to understand is that it is a REAL place – John 14:1-3 – Jesus went to prepare “a place for you.” Hebrews 11:10, 16 – Abraham “waited for a city which has foundations...” 2 Corinthians 5:1 – if our “earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God...”
 - iii. There are many descriptions of heaven that make it quite appealing
 1. Described as Paradise – a garden. Luke 23:43 – Jesus on the cross; 2 Corinthians 12:4 – Paul was caught up to Paradise; Revelation 2:7 notes that the “tree of life” is there. If you enjoy beautiful, natural places, such are but a glimpse into what heaven will be like.
 2. A place of eternal rest – Revelation 14:13, cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:7
 3. a perfect environment with no sorrows, pain, evil, etc. Revelation 21:4, 27, 22:3 – “no more curse”. There are passages of scripture such as Galatians 5:19-21 & 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 that note those who will NOT inherit the kingdom of God. Those whose lives are filled with deceit, wickedness, exploitation, arrogance, etc. NONE of that will be there! Everything that makes this world so broken – it will NOT be there!
 4. A place where we will not face persecutions or even temptations to sin. A place of eternal joy. 2 Peter 3:13 describes it as “*new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.*” Consider this: NO temptation! Satan, the tempter, will have been cast eternally into the lake which burns with fire brimstone with all his followers (Revelation 20:10)
- d. To spend eternity WITH God – of all the descriptions of the wonders of heaven, which one appeals to you most? To me, it would be WHO is in heaven.
- i. In addition to the godly of all ages who “died in the Lord” (Revelation 14:13)
 - ii. Heaven is the dwelling place of God and Jesus and the Spirit. It is clearly taught and ASSUMED based upon scripture.
 1. We pray to “our Father in heaven” – Matthew 6:9.
 2. Matthew 5:16 notes that our goal is glorify our Father in heaven.
 3. Jesus is there – Luke 24:51 notes that as He concluded His earthly sojourn, He was carried to heaven, where He is now seated at the right hand of God – Ephesians 1:20.
 - iii. Considering our theme: You will not get closer to God than that. To me this is the ultimate goal. Psalm 23:6, *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the Lord Forever.* 1 Thessalonians 4:17 notes that *we shall always be with the LORD.*
- II. **Is the journey worth it?**
- a. Heaven is the reward of the faithful – Revelation 2:10, 14:13. 1 Corinthians 2:8 notes, *But as it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.”* More on this in just a moment.

- b. It is no secret that the journey to heaven is challenging. We have been discussing that throughout this study. We have talked about Satan, sin, challenges and obstacles. NEVER have I implied that serving God is going to be easy. It is simple to understand, but HARD to do! In fact, it is the HARDEST of paths to take in this life. Matthew 7:13-14 – the way to heaven is described as narrow and difficult (NKJV). Acts 14:22 finds Paul and Barnabas strengthening converts by noting, “*We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.*”
- c. So is it worth it? Why not just live life however you want now? Why endure being wronged so often while you are doing what is right? Why continue to struggle, sacrifice and do without in this life, while so many around us seem to be prospering in their ungodly lives? Why is it so hard to resist engrained temptations and desires, when it would be so much easier to just give in? IS IT REALLY WORTH IT?
- i. First, consider that if you do NOT make it to heaven, the alternative is an eternity of tormented regrets. Hell is just as real as heaven – Matthew 25:46, 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Revelation 20:15, 21:8, etc. We do not like to deal with the subject of eternal torments, but it is Biblically established and the reward of the majority (Matthew 7:13).
 - ii. The life of a Christian, while difficult at times, is one of integrity and honor. You can live knowing that you honored God, treated others with dignity and respect, and the knowledge that you have done the right thing! Perhaps, you have even made life a little better for others as well.
 - iii. Heaven is a reward that cannot be fully understood with our finite minds. We depend on some of the descriptions we have seen in this lesson that describe it as a place we ought to desire to spend eternity.
 - iv. There are some powerful passages to consider as think about it.
 1. Romans 8:18, *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*
 2. 2 Corinthians 4:16-17, *Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory,*
 3. 1 John 3:2-3, *Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.*
 4. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, *For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.*
 - v. I once heard a preacher summarize his description of heaven by saying, “If you miss heaven, you miss all there is.”

I firmly believe that we will not have been in heaven 5 minutes before we say, “It was worth it all!” And we will have the rest of eternity to enjoy it!

If you were asked, what is your real purpose on this earth, how would you answer? The reality is that we are on this earth to prepare for what awaits us after this life is over. Otherwise, our existence is meaningless in the grand scheme of things.

So with that I commend this lesson and entire study to you. May it give you strength and resolve to live for him, no matter you face in this life. Let your everyday goal be to live in such a way that you are drawing closer to Him each and every day, week, month and year, until finally, your faith and hope are realized in His presence.