

What about Heaven?

Matthew 18:1-5

June 3, 2011

### **Read Matthew 18:1-5**

Jesus said we must become as little children to be a part of the kingdom of heaven. Well a story broke a few months ago about a family in Nebraska. Their little boy named Colton nearly died during his critical illness. The boy had an experience that speaks to the often discussed topic of is heaven real and what is it like? But if you haven't heard of this story take a look at this news clip about Colton.

### **Play Video**

The child's father is a pastor and has now written a book that is a top seller. It's a story that has raised discussion and questions inside and outside of Christian circles. A Lutheran professor of New Testament studies by the name of Dr. Jeffery Gibbs has said, **When someone says they have had a spiritual experience, you never deny that *something* happened. But you always reserve the right to *interpret* it (their experience) in light of Scripture.**

I think Jesus would agree. Matthew 22 tells us of a time when Jesus was once told by some Pharisees/religious teachers what they thought happens when we die. Jesus said to them **“You know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.” v.29** Once again Jesus himself is teaching if we are going to get right the beliefs about God, including heaven, we need to know the scriptures. For those who say the Bible is too difficult to understand, irrelevant for today, or just for preachers to read, we have a clear reminder from Christ himself of the authority God's word is to play in our lives. And even stories like the news clip we saw, while it may comfort some emotionally, it must pass the test of scripture.

## 1. Does the Bible teach we can die or experience heaven and come back again? Philippians 1:20-24

### Does the experience of this boy occur in scripture

So how does the story of this little boy and his experience stack up to scripture? Yes - scripture contains stories of people being given visions of God and heaven or things in the next realm of life without dying. Old Testament heroes like Daniel (Daniel 7) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1) have incredible visions of God. In the New Testament people like the apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 12) had a special vision. John wrote the book of Revelation about the special vision John received.

As I understand this story, this is not a story about a person dying and coming back. The people who clinically die and then claim to be sent back life have one major problem. When we experience resurrection it is a one way ticket to eternity. **The normative typical consistent biblical teaching is resurrection happens when we die and when we do it is not temporary resurrection, then we're sent back to the minor leagues on earth for unfinished business.**

### Read Philippians 1:20-24

See with the words from Paul it was an either or and Paul did not leave the door open about the possibility of being sent back once resurrected.

There are stories of people being restored to life . The gospel of John chapter 11 describes how Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead to life. In the Old Testament, 1 Kings 17 tells of the prophet Elijah raised a young boy back to life. However in stories such as those, the scene is the dead did not move on to eternity and then get recalled to earth.

Or if there are scriptural stories of people who have died but come back in presence of the living in some way to serve God's purposes, they do not come back in the flesh but in spirit like the appearance. Take for instance the story known as the Transfiguration of Jesus. Matthew 17 tells the story where Elijah and Moses appear to Jesus and the three disciples. In those stories the emphasis is not on someone who died and went to heaven and now come back to live but later to die again. This is a witness to the truth that God has power over all of existence and breaks in to this life when God will chooses to break in and reveal himself in some special way. Colton's story could be God breaking in.

**2. Miracles are not an end in themselves; miracles reveal God.  
John 11:41-42**

Secondly, this is a miracle story if we trust the integrity of the witnesses, the parents and the little boy. If we believe they never told their child about his mother having a miscarriage of a child that would have been his older sister, then we could have a miracle on our hands.

If believe their integrity when they say that the boy had never seen a picture of his great grandfather when the grandfather was a younger man and yet when little Colton sees a picture of younger age version of his great grandfather, Colton says hey that's pops, I met him in heaven. Then we could have a miracle on our hands.

If the parents are not lying that there was no way that when Colton was in the operating room, he could not have learned that his mother was on the phone crying at one place in the hospital while his father was in a separate room lashing out to God spare his son. Yet the boy describes where his parents were, and they said they told him nothing, then yes we may have something out of this world to wrestle with.

If we believe his story is similar to scriptural accounts where God has blessed some people with a vision. If we believe what Jesus said that we have to become like little children, and why couldn't it be possible for God to give this vision not just to the child but I see it as a gift to his family who had been through so much challenge the year before.

Remember, the father had been going through some long extended crisis. He severely broken his leg which limited his job as a garage door installer and pastor. Then he had a mastectomy, not his wife but the father had a mastectomy. The dad said he had so much bad luck his minister buddies called him Rev Job. Maybe if nothing else this experience was intended to be a miracle just for the family. After all in the Bible in places like the gospel of Mark 7:36 Jesus often told people he healed for them not to tell anyone and then word got out. Perhaps God never intended for this story to get out.

But remember if this is a miracle, then in scripture miracles are not an end in themselves; miracles reveal God so that we are transformed. Before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, John 11:42 states Jesus prayed that the miracle of raising Lazarus would help them see God. Burning bushes, healings, food multiplied to feed thousands, visions = God is involved in this life.

**One New Testament scholar said in effect, that with God there is mystery and the mystery of death and resurrection are something to be probed rather than a problem to be solved. (Wilkins, NIV Matthew Commentary, P.755 )**

### **3. Beliefs and experiences of Heaven should change how we live each day. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10**

The last thing to consider is does the experience of the little boy

preach the gospel? Does it do anything to call us to walk in the ways of Jesus now. The professor I mentioned earlier in the message writes, *This is most certainly true.*” **There is not one crumb, not one word in *Heaven is For Real* that God’s full plan of salvation in Christ means eternal life now, ....**” The professor is basically saying the story and book lacks scriptural integrity to be followers of Jesus.

I don’t think the boy’s story totally misses the mark of inspiring us to live more for Jesus.

He gave assurance of God’s love and care for children when they die.

He said you have to know Jesus to go to heaven, that’s biblical, in these days that is actually a little edgy because some Christian denominations have given that belief up.

Yes he describes seeing the final battle, well the Bible describes and end to all things in Revelation.

We have this reminder from scripture. In 2 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul gives an account of a man who had a vision of heaven and the things of God. Paul said he wasn’t sure if the revelation was in or out of the body. Sounds a bit like Colton’s condition. But Paul when onto say to make sure he didn’t get too elated about the things to come, he was given a thorn or affliction of the flesh so that **“God’s grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness...so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”**

Heavenly visions should change us so that the power of God lives in us today. Our beliefs and experiences of heaven if real should change how we live now. Colton’s story for me focused too much on heaven being something out there.

Remember this, Jesus often talked about the reality of the kingdom of heaven playing a difference now, today.

When Jesus first preached he said, “repent because the kingdom of heaven is near.” Change the impure ways of our lives. Matthew 4:17

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, “those who are persecuted for his righteousness will be a part of heaven.” Matthew 5:10 Meaning the reality of heaven is within us and near so as Christians we don’t give up on God in tough times.

Jesus taught we are to lay up treasures in heaven not on earth: Matthew 6:20 The presence of heaven now should cause us to be generous with our material resources.

Jesus taught heaven is among us now.

RC Owen told me about something that came up in Sunday school class. Someone told of a time when Rose Tillman once was asked about where is heaven. Rose said heaven is not a place. I asked what did Rose tell them? RC said they never did say. It would have been interesting to have known Rose’s answer.

I would agree that Heaven is not just a place; heaven is a dimension of God’s presence in greater and lesser degrees. There is some type of more abundant super natural experience beyond this life, a realm where we are freed from all the cares and evil of this life and every tear will be wiped away.

There is a condition and dimension of life for those who reject God we call Hell. We’ll be preaching about that next week.

But God’s presence is more of a dimension, the concentration of His presence than it is a particular place or location.

So our personal lives in both the principles we hold and what we

practice in our lifestyles, our shared church life, is also to reflect like what Jesus said the power of heaven is in us and is near.

**Illustration:** I think of it like when we talk about home. We talk about our home we mean we have a certain destination or place in mind. But it is possible to be at home even if your aren't in your physical house. You go some where to visit and they tell you make yourself at home, feel at home, act like your act home get in the refrigerator and get a snack enjoy yourself, feel at home. The food the atmosphere remind you of your own home. Your not at your personal house but you can still experience in some dimension the qualities of what it really makes a house, home. I believe heaven is experience in different dimensions.

**Conclusion:**

Our trustees are in the process of activating a new security code for fire, carbon dioxide detection and entering and exiting the building. Those with keys to the church will be issued a four digit code so you can enter without tripping a security alarm. Without the code the alarm will be triggered.

But with God there is no secret code. There is some mystery. No one professor, pastor, or denomination has just the right code of truth about Heaven, Hell, the end of time, ethical issues and any thing else about God. Romans 1:17 says the just live by faith. We are called to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, to study and know scripture. But most of all we are to strive to trust in Jesus who revealed God's truth and grace perfectly including when he laid down his life for us. So as we prepare to celebrate communion come in faith, no code, not perfection, living with the mystery of God by faith in Christ.