Christian Life Sermon
The Destination of Our Journey

Introduction:

Every journey has a destination, and the destination to a large measure defines the nature of that journey. In the New Testament we are told that the final destination of a Christian's journey is that we will dwell in the presence of God:

"*and thus we shall always be with the Lord*"
I Thessalonians 4:18

But how are we to conceptualize what that means, and how is this knowledge about our ultimate destination meant to impact our lives?

I. What We Have Been Told About Our Destination:

When we as Christians think of where we will go in the afterlife, our first thought is that we will go to Heaven, because we will go to live with God, and we are told in Scripture that Heaven is where God dwells:

"*for One is your Father, He who is in Heaven*"
Matthew 23:9

Despite what the unbelieving world says, we are confident that Heaven is a real place, because the Scriptures describe it as such. It is frequently contrasted as a different sphere of existence in contrast to the earth:

"*Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*"
Matthew 6:10

The emphasis on the reality of Heaven as a place is intensified by Jesus' instruction that we are to invest our time and energies more in what we can have in the future in Heaven, than in what we can have on earth in the present:

"*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.*"
Matthew 6:19-20

Interestingly, the English rendering of these references to Heaven disguise the original Greek wording. Where we read "*Heaven*" in the references above, Matthew actually titled the location as "*the heavens*". The word used is not only in the plural, but it is also the standard word in the Greek language for the skies. Therefore, the word was not meant to literally describe a specific spot, but the general location where God's dwelling place can be found. A fuller idea of how the Hebrews understood the idea of Heaven is seen in something Paul wrote to the Corinthian church. He was writing in the third person about an experience he had where he was taken up into heaven:

"*I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago — whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows — such a one was caught up to the third heaven. And I know such a man — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows — how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter*."
II Corinthians 12:2-4

In this short passage Paul referred to where he went using two different titles, "*the third heaven*" and "*paradise*". The title "*the third heaven*" represented how the Jews understood the nature of God's dwelling place during the intertestamental period, and Paul's use of the title indicates that the Jews were correct in their understanding. They understood that the first heaven referred to the atmospheric heavens, the second heaven referred to the starry heavens, and the third heaven referred to the dwelling place of God that was understood to be some place beyond the stars. The title "*Paradise*" was also used to refer to the dwelling place of God, but mostly in context of it being the destination of the saints who dwell in the presence of God. The title pictures that place as a perfected environment. This terminology indicates that God had never revealed precisely where God's dwelling place would be found, only that it had an other-worldly location and that life there would be ideal. Therefore, when we understand that we will go to Heaven, we are to understand that we are going to a place significantly removed from the earth where God dwells. And elsewhere Paul taught that Heaven is the ultimate home of those who have put their trust in Christ for salvation:

"*For our citizenship is in heaven*"
Philippians 3:20a

"*Set your minds on things above, not on things of the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory*".
Colossians 3:2-4

The New Testament does not give us much specific information about what our experience will be in Heaven, except that it will be glorious and wonderful.

Above I wrote that this is what we as Christians first think about when we consider where we will be when we enter the afterlife. The reason I put it this way is because when Paul said that in the future "*and thus we shall always be with the Lord*" (I Thess.4:18), he was not suggesting that the experience of the afterlife will always involve dwelling in the heavens. As we explore what the New Testament says about what our future life will entail, we find that the location of our eternal dwelling place will change a couple of times.

The first change that will take place is revealed in the vision that Christ gave to John to complete the Scriptures. Under the inspiration of the Spirit John recorded that he saw the following:

"*And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years*."

Revelation 20:4-6

This was a vision of the coming of Christ's millennial reign upon the earth, that will take place shortly after Christ's physical return to earth. In this portion of John's vision, the focus of what was presented to him was on those who were martyred during the tribulation period. However, it would be wrong to conclude that those particular martyred saints will be the only ones sitting on the thrones that John saw. The language John used indicates that those saints and the ones sitting on the thrones are not equivalent to one another. Besides the martyred and resurrected saints of the tribulation, the saints of the entire Church age are also included as those who sit on the thrones (the latter having been resurrected at the rapture). This then would be the fulfillment of Christ's promise to His disciples:

"*And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*"

Luke 22:29-30

The twelve will sit on the thrones mentioned in Revelation 20:4 but specifically ruling over the nation of Israel. Since the apostles were representative of the Church as a whole at that time, the implication is that the rest of the resurrected Church saints will rule over the other nations of the world in glorified bodies. The idea then is that for this period in redemptive history, the saints will dwell at least part time on earth (if not continuously) and not in Heaven, because our Lord will be dwelling on earth.

The second and final change to the dwelling place of the saints will take place following the end of Christ's thousand-year reign on earth. What happens after that is the consummation of God's redemptive work where God's people enter what is theologically titled, the eternal state (meaning how things will remain forever after the completion of God's redemptive work). The eternal state will involve the fulfillment of one more redemptive promise from God:

"*For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind*."

Isaiah 65:17

"*Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells*."
II Peter 3:13

In John's vision he saw the fulfillment of this final redemptive promise:

"*Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also, there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.*"
Revelation 21:1-3

These verses describe that at the end of this age God will first do away with the present heavens and earth and then will create new heavens and a new earth. In using the term "*heaven*", John was not referring to God destroying and then re-creating a new celestial dwelling place for Himself (as if there had been something wrong with the previous one), he was describing the destruction and re-creation of the atmospheric heavens. This is made clear by John saying that after the destruction and re-creation of the physical heavens and earth, a pre-existing city will descend from the heaven that is the dwelling place of God. John tells us that this city is called the New Jerusalem, which will then serve as the eternal dwelling place of the redeemed.

What is important to understand is that our ultimate destination does not involve leaving the earth forever. We will leave for a while as God completes His redemptive work, and then we will return with Christ in glorified bodies to live on a perfected earth that will be glorious beyond comprehension (it is described in Rev.21:9-22:5). God will come to live with His people in a glorified version of the creation that was made specifically to be the home of human beings.

II. <u>What We Can Anticipate When We Get There</u>:

If we are to understand what the Scriptures teach about the afterlife, we must recognize certain subtleties in the revelations that have been given to us. As outlined above, our eternal existence will include participation in different phases within the progressive process of God's redemptive plan. However, at the same time we are meant to recognize that what we experience in Heaven, in the Millennium, and in the Eternal State will be basically the same. Therefore, passages that describe the nature of our experiences in one of those phases, are applicable to the other two. The passages below give us insight into the nature of the life that will be ours in eternity:

"*And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.*"
Revelation 21:4

In the passage above we are told that in eternity we will no longer experience sorrow, loss, or pain. We won't experience those things because the evils of this fallen world will no longer exist.

"*blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh*"
Luke 6:21b

In this beatitude Jesus was contrasting life in this present fallen world with life in the kingdom of God. Though His people suffer sorrow now, when we arrive in eternity we will know only joy.

"*and I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of Heaven*"
Matthew 8:11

In this statement Jesus described participation in God's kingdom with the figure of a lavish feast in the company of the patriarchs of Israel. Though it is likely that there will be literal feasts during the Millennial reign of Christ on earth, this reference seems to be metaphorical, meant to picture life in God's kingdom as something characterized by abundance, congenial fellowship, and celebration.

"*the cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.*"
Isaiah 11:7-9

Many of the visions in Isaish specifically seem to describe in an overlapping fashion, things that will be true both in the Millennium and in the Eternal State. In the verses above, God revealed through Isaiah that in eternity the saints will experience complete peace and safety, for nothing will exist then that is dangerous or destructive. There will be nothing to threaten us or cause us harm.

"*everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die*"
John 11:26

Jesus asserted here that those who are resurrected to eternal life will never die. Thus, not only need we never fear death again, we will also have all our loved ones in Christ with us forever, never to be parted again.

"*They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads*"
Revelation 22:4

Here is the most precious promise, forever we will have the privilege and glorious joy of relating to God face-to-face. He will thoroughly know us, and we will have a profound knowledge of Him in a relationship of complete love and devotion.

III. <u>The Hope Generated by Our Anticipation of the Destination</u>:

The night before His crucifixion, Christ taught His disciples things they needed to know since He was about to depart from them. Prior to this, if His disciples had questions or needed instruction, their master was always near by to correct, inform and encourage them. But after that night, they would be alone in a physical sense and would have to depend on Christ and the Spirit of God by faith rather than by sight and sound. Because of this He gave them an important promise:

"*Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also*."
John 14:1-3

Christ promised that though He would no longer be with them physically, they would not be abandoned. The promise was that during His physical absence, among other things, Christ would be preparing for them an eternal dwelling place, and in that place, they would be reunited with Him. He gave them hope for the future. Regardless of how challenging or unpleasant their experiences would be during the rest of their mortal lives, they could be certain, that afterward they would again be in the company of their Savior, dwelling with God in His house. The detail that there were many "*rooms*" (mistranslated as "*mansions*" in the NKJV) was to assure them that no matter how many others would come into the faith, there would be plenty of space for all of them.

Throughout the rest of the New Testament, the apostles passed on this same message of hope to their converts. To the saints at Rome, Paul wrote:

"*through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us*."
Romans 5:2-5

In these verses Paul explained that the salvation a Christian enjoys allows him or her to be filled with joy in anticipation of entering the glory of God in the afterlife. The expectation of that glorious experience, if genuinely grasped by faith, can enable one to not only endure difficult tribulation, but to do so with genuine joy and peace. What is included in the promise is the understanding that the hardship we endure in life is actually designed to enhance our experience and anticipation of our ultimate destination. And finally, Paul assured His readers that the knowledge they possess of God's love for them would continue to reinforce their hope in Christ.

"*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…For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.*

Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance."

Romans 8:18, 22-25

In this passage Paul was reminding those saints that even the worst things they experienced during their suffering in this life could not compare with the incredibly glorious nature of the life that awaited them in God's presence. Paul went on to write that the expectation of the glorious transformation that believers will experience after death sustains the believer throughout this life. He wrote that persevering through hardship in anticipation of glory is the very definition of a Christian's life in this world. And not only do Christians await with expectation the glory that is to come, in a sense the entire physical universe yearns for it with us.

To the saints in Corinth Paul wrote:

"*Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed — in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory'…thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.*"

I Corinthians 15:51-54, 57-58

In these verses Paul reminded the saints that a time is coming when God will deliver us from death forever, making us immortal. Some after death, and some will experience this transformation without dying (those who are physically alive at the second coming of Christ). This promise of victory over our ultimate enemy is meant to motivate us to invest ourselves enthusiastically in God's work. Finally, we are reminded that our investment in God's work will never be for nothing, it is certain that we will gain the promised reward from our loving heavenly Father when we arrive in our new eternal home with Him.

To his protégé Titus, Paul wrote:

"*teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.*"

Titus 2:12-14

Here Paul wrote that the anticipation of being reunited with Christ should motivate us in our efforts to live the sort of righteous life that pleases God. For living such a life was the ultimate goal that God had in saving us, and therefore we pursue godliness knowing that we are then working toward the same goal as He. And the difficulties of pursuing that objective do not overwhelm us because we are focused on the glorious future that awaits us.

The Apostle Peter gave the same message to those he discipled:

> "*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you…Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ*".
>
> I Peter 1:3-4, 13

In four ways Peter expressed the certainty of the glorious inheritance that awaits us when we arrive in God's presence, and he did this to reassure us of our hope:

- It is incorruptible (it will not deteriorate over time)
- Undefiled (it will not go bad or spoil)
- That does not fade away (it will not disappear)
- Reserved in heaven for you (it is kept safe until we arrive)

Then Peter wrote that in light of this certain hope, we are to discipline ourselves to live holy lives (vs.15-16). The hope gives us the reason, the motivation, and the encouragement we need to follow Christ through whatever circumstances He leads us into.

The idea in all of these verses is that the certain hope of our glorious eternal destinies is not meant to be simply an intellectual matter. It is meant to give us the resolve to persevere in godliness. The reality is that maintaining the right attitudes and making the right choices can be challenging at times. How do we keep ourselves motivated? Paul himself said that it is only the knowledge of our eternal reward that can enable us to persevere in faith and deny our fleshly appetites (I Cor.15:19, 32). Our hope gives us something noble to live for, and something that sustains us through heartache, because it promises us that our present sufferings are not all there is to life, rather something wonderful awaits us if we will continue in faith and obedience.

Conclusion:

Knowing where we are going, and what it will be like emboldens us to make the journey, because it assures us that in the end our journey is taking us exactly where we most want to go. Therefore, since the destination is worth whatever it takes to get there, it gives us the motivation we need to endure the journey.