

Ashes to Fire Part 11

# **The Father's House**

Our lives are full of moments like Graduation that make us pause and step back from the world of the everyday for a minute or two. In these moments, we tend to look at the whole of our lives, what's brought us to this place, and then ask, What next?

Where do we go from here? What does the future hold? What's around the next corner?

It's a good question. A human question - for as long as humans have been worshipping, we've wanted to know what the future holds. What the gods want from us.

The most ancient religions had many tools to divine the will of the gods. Even the ancient Israelites used urim and thummim to figure out what God wanted. The Greeks and Romans consulted oracles. Astrology has been around practically forever, and many people today still place a lot of stock in what their Horoscopes tell them or call a psychic hotline.

Our obsession with the future isn't confined to the mystical. More and more of us are being challenged to develop 'life plans'. And while anxiety over what career we're going to choose is especially common among twenty-somethings, all of us wonder if we're really doing the right thing with our lives.

What's next? What am I supposed to do with my life? What does the future hold? Where is all this going? Am I wasting my time and my life?

These moments pull us out of our ordinary, mundane everyday lives and lead us to ask about the future. To wonder what lies in store.

And in the Church, these questions get wrapped up in one big question: What's God's will for my life?

In that, we ask the same question people have been asking since forever. What does the future hold? And how can I get God to tell me? The right prayer? The right Bible verse? We spend a lot of time and energy trying to figure out the future and learn what God wants...

But what if those aren't the right questions? What if by asking these questions the way we ask them, by stepping out of the present to wonder about the future, we are missing something key?

That's what the Scripture we're going to explore today suggests - that despite what most all of us have been taught, Christianity is *not* a future-oriented religion.

That sounds wrong, doesn't it? Even if you're not a Christian, you know what Christianity is about - that Jesus came and died for your sins so you can go to Heaven when you die. And what is Heaven? Well, it's God's house. It's got golden streets and crystal seas and pearly gates. Everyone gets wings and you spend all your time singing - there may or may not be harps involved. And even if you don't like singing, you get a mansion - Jesus said so himself!

Heaven will be amazing - so great that you don't want to miss out. That's why you should ask for forgiveness and accept Jesus. So that one day you can go to Heaven.

And that's all true (well the bit about Heaven being amazing... the wings and harps not so much). But that's all after you die. That's all in the future. If this sounds anything like your picture of Christianity, then your picture of Christianity is a future-oriented religion.

The good news is that there's way more to it than that. Christianity is mainly about the here-and-now. God is concerned more with what today looks like than what you do tomorrow. God's will for our lives is more about what we do today than what's down the road tomorrow. Our destiny is not a place we go. It's a person we become. (Don't worry - we're unpacking that today).

We're going to be in John 14 today - if you have a Bible with you, you can go ahead and turn there. This is Jesus' final conversation with his disciples before he goes to be crucified. He has just had the Last Supper with them, and washed their feet. Now, he is giving them (and us) some final promises:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going." -- John 14:1-4 NRS

John 14:2 is to funerals what 1 Corinthians 13 is to weddings. This is one of the major verses that has shaped our understanding of Heaven as a place we go when we die, of Christianity as a future-oriented religion. It's not exactly our fault - look how the King James Version renders this verse:

**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. -- John 14:2 KJV

This verse more than most has shaped our view of the afterlife, lending its imagery to the songs the church has sung for hundreds of years. The song, "My Jesus I Love Thee" is over 150 years old. Here're the last two verses:

I'll love Thee in life, I will love Thee in death,  
And praise Thee as long as Thou lendest me breath;  
And say when the death dew lies cold on my brow,  
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

In mansions of glory and endless delight,  
I'll ever adore Thee in heaven so bright;  
I'll sing with the glittering crown on my brow;  
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

Or take this old gospel song, "A Mansion Over the Hilltop", recorded by no less than the King himself, Elvis Presley (Graceland joke):

I'm satisfied with just a cottage below  
A little silver and a little gold  
But in that city where the ransomed will shine  
I want a gold one that's silver lined

I've got a mansion just over the hilltop  
In that bright land where we'll never grow old  
And some day yonder we will never more wander  
But walk on streets that are purest gold

Don't think me poor or deserted or lonely  
I'm not discouraged I'm heaven bound  
I'm but a pilgrim in search of the city  
I want a mansion, a harp and a crown

This is the familiar image of Heaven. And it comes in large part from Jesus' words right here:

**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. -- John 14:2 KJV

The problem is, that's not what Jesus meant at all. We can dig a little bit just by reading a more accurate translation:

My personal favorite, the New Revised Standard, reads this way:

**In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.** If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? -- John 14:2 NRS

Immediately, you can see that the word 'mansions' isn't the best translation of the Greek word there. The Greek word is actually just the noun form of the verb 'to remain' or 'to dwell'. It's not a word that anyone usually used. It literally means "a place someone stays", and would be like referring to a room as "the staying place". John uses it on purpose - he wants it to stand out to you because he uses the verb as one of his buzz words (we'll come back to this in a minute).

But I want to focus on the first part of the verse for now.

**In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.** -- John 14:2a

Think about this question: Why do we assume this passage is talking about Heaven?

The obvious answer is because Jesus talks about God's house. Everyone knows where God lives - in Heaven! Right?

Well, no... not if you were a Jew in the First Century. For any Jewish person in the whole first century world (and even for any Roman or other Gentile), God's house, the place where YHWH, the God of Israel lived was NOT somewhere up above the clouds.

It was the Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, the phrase "House of YHWH" is used over 200 times in the Old Testament, and every time, it refers to the Temple. Never to a place you go after you die, some place that's not here on this Earth.

So Jesus is really saying,

In ~~my Father's house~~ **the Temple** there are many dwelling places. -- John 14:2a

But that only makes everything *more* confusing - there is no Temple today. In fact, Jesus' death and resurrection rendered the Temple obsolete. So what is he trying to say?

We need one more key piece of information to unlock this passage: in John's gospel, Jesus *is* the Temple. Think of it this way: if the Temple was to be the place where God lived, where humans and God could interact, then Jesus - as the person who is fully God and fully human - is the full embodiment of the Temple. He is more and better than a building. He is the very home of God.

That's why Jesus could say this in John 2:

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. -- John 2:19-21 NRS

So now we have this:

In ~~my Father's house~~ **the Temple Jesus** there are many dwelling places. -- John 14:2a

So what can we do with that? What does it mean to dwell in Jesus, and what does that have to do with God's will for our lives?

Just a few verses later, in John 15:1-5, Jesus uses a gardening metaphor to explain himself. I told you we'd come back to that idea of 'dwelling place' - that awkward noun John uses? Here is where it comes up again:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Dwell in me as I dwell in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who dwell in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. -- John 15:1-5 NRS

Remember last week when Jesus used a sheep metaphor to talk about our relationship to him? He's doing something similar here - using another farming image, in this case viticulture - grape and winemaking. And we have the same word being used. Dwelling. Remaining. Staying.

Compare the two verses:

In ~~my Father's house~~ **the Temple Jesus** there are many dwelling places. -- John 14:2a

Those who dwell in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. -- John 15:5 NRS

The image is of a branch that's connected to a vine. It's a strong image, and we don't have to be vinegrowers to get that image. A branch that's cut off from a vine dies. Branches that STAY, that REMAIN on the vine live. They thrive. They bear fruit.

Jesus says much the same thing to us in the Sermon on the Mount. There, he challenges us:

Don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today. -- Matthew 6:31-34 NLT

According to Jesus, we don't spend our time worrying about the future. A relationship with him, following him is not a future-oriented event. Jesus isn't concerned about the future; he's having an entirely different conversation. According to Jesus, we should concern ourselves with the here and now, with staying connected to him today. Because when we stay connected to him, we bear fruit.

Our destiny is not a place, it's a person. We're not going somewhere, we're becoming someone. By staying connected to Jesus, by pursuing God first and foremost, by directing our energies to *today*, to the relationships we have *today*, to the person we are *right now* - by focusing on today, not tomorrow, we pray the Lord's prayer correctly: Let your kingdom come and your will be done ON EARTH - HERE! NOW! - as it is in Heaven.

This is a vital discussion. Consider the history of our faith – everyone knows Christianity's long, bloody history. Christianity has been responsible for bringing a lot of Hell to Earth – we have a lot of blood on our hands. Much of that is because we forget that Heaven begins now. If Heaven is just a place we go when we die, if all we have to do after we become Christians is sit on our hands and try not to sin until Jesus comes back, then Karl Marx was right about religion.

Marx called religion the opiate of the masses. What he meant was that as he looked at the religion he saw around him (which, by the way, were forms of Christianity), all he saw were a bunch of poor, oppressed peoples whose lives were awful. But they never fought back, they never tried to make their lives any better because they were told over and over just to wait for the next life.

Suffer in silence so you can enjoy Heaven one day. Live in Hell now so you can enjoy Heaven later. Just deal with it.

This is the same rhetoric American slave owners used to maintain control over their slave populations. This is the same rhetoric that gave birth to Negro Spirituals. The life of a slave was so dehumanizing, nearly all they had was a hope for a different world.

They sang songs like

Swing low, sweet chariot  
Coming for to carry me home...

And

The trumpet sound in the other bright land  
My name is called and I must go  
De bell is a-ringin' in the other bright world

And

My mother's gone to glory  
I want t' go there too  
Lord, I want t' live up yonder  
In bright mansions above

I don't want to oversimplify and say the whole reason for all Christianity's ills was because we misunderstood Heaven. But how could Christians endorse slavery? How could Christians wage crusades? How can Christians engage in immoral business practices? How could Christians abuse their spouses?

At least in part because we've been taught this world doesn't matter. We've been taught that Heaven is just a place you go when you die. That this life doesn't matter much, that all you need to do is get in those pearly gates. And we can hear the echoes of that in the songs that have been passed down to us.

What we don't hear often enough in our songs is a concern for justice in this world. A concern for bringing about God's will here on Earth as it is in Heaven. We don't hear a concern for being fruitful here and now.

Peter Rollins tells a story of a preacher who was studying one night when a man came banging at the door. The preacher opened the door to find the man obviously upset. "What is wrong?" the Preacher asked.

The man began to tell the preacher of a family who was down on their luck: "The father is a hardworking man who lost his job a few months ago, and hasn't been able to get a new job yet. The mother stays home taking care not only of their four kids, but of her dying mother. The family is completely out of money and their landlord is going to evict them tomorrow if they can't come up with rent money. Surely the Church can do something for them?"

"Of course, of course," the preacher replies as she turns to start working on the problem. "It's wonderful that you're looking out for them," she continues. "How do you know them?"

"Oh," the man replied, "I'm their landlord."

How many of us are secretly like that landlord? Don't we want our faith to have real-world consequences? To matter as something more than just something we do on Sundays? Don't we want the Kingdom we celebrate here to spill over into the rest of our world?

The late 90s hip-hop group Arrested Development wrote a song called "Fishin 4 Religion" that expressed a lot of anger over religion that doesn't bring about change in this world. Christianity that perpetuates injustice by telling people to wait for Heaven. Speech, the lead vocalist is looking for something else when he decides to try church one more time:

Naively... I give it another go  
Sitting in church hearing legitimate woes  
Pastor tells the lady it'll be alright  
Just pray so you can see the pearly gates so white  
The lady prays and prays and prays and prays  
and prays and prays and prays and prays...it's everlasting  
There's nothing wrong with praying. It's what she's asking  
She's asking the Lord to let her cope  
so one day she can see the golden ropes  
What you pray for God will give  
to be able to cope in this world we live  
The word "cope" and the word "change"  
is directly opposite, not the same  
She should have been praying to change her woes  
but pastor said "Pray to cope with those"

Cope. Just get by. All we hear about is the next world. About how great Heaven is going to be. And that's true. The End will be better than we can imagine.

But that doesn't mean that now we do nothing. If Christians do not live in the now, in the moment, we allow Hell to flourish on Earth.

Thankfully, in some churches, this is changing. Instead of paying lip-service to caring about the poor and downcast, we serve them. Instead of just talking about loving our neighbors and praying for our enemies, we're doing it. We are beginning to bear the fruit of Jesus rather than just looking like the landlord.

We ought to love the promise of Heaven. But - as Jesus taught us to pray - we ought to be busy dragging the future into the present.

Because now, today: this can be better, too. We are called to pursue Jesus, to pursue God and his Kingdom now, too.

We ought to be a people who is always looking in ourselves and out at our world, searching for what does not look like Heaven.

It's said that someone once asked Michelangelo how he carved such beautiful statues. He replied, "I look at a block of marble and cut away what doesn't belong." Could we do that too, in our own hearts and in our own world? Could we not be content to cope with oppression and violence, with abuse and abandoned children, with hatred and bigotry and racism, with division and depression? Could we see those things and say, Those do not belong in the Kingdom of God. We will dedicate ourselves to eradicating them from our hearts and from our lives and from our world. Because Jesus taught us that Heaven starts now.

We can be a people who is pushing back the fires of Hell that threaten to consume our world. We can be a church that stands with the armies of Heaven at our back and says, No to all these wrongs.

I'm sure this is pretty much the only time this will ever be true, but it turns out in this particular instance, 80s pop star Belinda Carlisle wrote a song with better theology than some of our old standbys...

Ooh, baby, do you know what that's worth?  
Ooh heaven is a place on earth  
They say in heaven love comes first  
We'll make heaven a place on earth

Could we imagine that Heaven is less a place we go when we die and more a way of living that became available to us when Jesus died?

That we are the means by which God is bringing healing and restoration?

That our destiny is not a place, but a person?

### **God's Will**

We began this morning by thinking about God's will. I want to close there, too.

*In my Father's house ~~the Temple~~ Jesus there are many dwelling places. -- John 14:2a*

What does the future hold? What's around the corner? What do I do next? What's the way to get to Heaven?

Jesus takes our questions about the future and flips them on their head. He says, "Don't worry about the future. Don't ask questions about tomorrow. Instead, focus on today. You want to know my will? Spend today looking more like me."

God's will for your life is not future-oriented. It's a present reality. God's will isn't about tomorrow. God's will is about today.

Don't ask what tomorrow brings. Ask who you are today.

Your destiny isn't a place. It's a person.

You don't get to Heaven when you die. You get to Heaven when you look like Jesus. And that starts now. Today.

I want to close our time together today with a practice we can take with us. This is something you can do every morning or every evening (or both!)

### **Prayer of Examine**

We're going to hear what God wants from us - what God's will is for us. When the Israelites asked the same thing, the prophet Micah answered them this way:

The LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. -- Micah 6:8 NLT

Get comfortable.

Think back on your last week. What did your life look like from day to day?

When did you do what is right?

When did you show mercy?

When were you humble?

When did you do wrong?

When were you not merciful?

When were you prideful?

Now think about the week ahead. What will your life look like from day to day?

When will you have an opportunity to choose right?

When will you have an opportunity to show mercy to someone?

When will you have an opportunity to be humble?

### **Benediction**

"Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am. And you know the way to where I am going."

"No, we don't know, Lord," Thomas said. "We have no idea where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me. If you had really known me, you would know who my Father is. From now on, you do know him and have seen him!" -- John 14:1-7 NLT