

Welcome

I grew up in an Evangelical youth group in the 90s, which meant there was a song that was unavoidable. No, not Jesus Freak (that came later). I'm talking about 1993's "Big House" by Audio Adrenaline.

It was an evangelism song about coming to Heaven with the band, so we could all live in God's house together. God's house, apparently, has a 'big, big yard' where we can play football, among other things.

"Big House" was a smash hit in large part because it turned an old Evangelical idea into pop rock music. That idea? 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.

How many songs do we have about it? Take "My Jesus I Love Thee," a hymn that's 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 gospel song, "A Mansion Over the Hilltop", recorded by no less than the King himself, Elvis Presley:

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, beloved image of Heaven. But, apologies to the King, I want to suggest we've got it wrong. God is concerned more with what today looks like than what you do tomorrow. And so too, we ought to understand that our destiny is not a place we go. It's a person we become. Jesus didn't build us mansions; he was working on something better.

Message

We're in the wake of Easter, the celebration of Jesus' resurrection. Here at Catalyst, we celebrate the resurrection not as a cool thing that happened that one time, but as an ongoing reality in which we all get to participate. Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of a new creation, a new reality that is coming into being all around us. We can learn to see this new reality breaking through the old through Jesus himself. By giving us the Holy Spirit to live within and among us, Jesus enables us to see and participate in God's new world.

That's why our series is called DECODER RING. Jesus enables us to discern what would otherwise be hidden to us. We kicked off at Easter by celebrating how Jesus invites us into God's new work. Then we spent a couple of weeks learning how to spot Jesus at work in the world around us. Last week, we saw how to know what sorts of leaders to trust to help us along this journey.

Today, we're getting to a meaty question that probably a lot of us feel is hidden in a secret code: what's God's will for my life? In that, we ask the same question people have been asking since forever. 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.

Turn with us to John 14.

This is Jesus' final conversation with his disciples before he goes to be crucified. This is one of the major passages that has shaped our understanding 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

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

'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'. So 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.

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?

“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!”

Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.”

Jesus replied, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don’t know who I am? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! -- John 14:1-9 NLT

Jesus was deeply uninterested in what happens *after* we die. Jesus was much more concerned with God’s kingdom coming here and now, on Earth the same way it is in Heaven. And by going away - by which he meant going to the cross - he opened up his body (literally and figuratively) to make room for us in God’s kingdom.

You want to know what God’s will for your life is? It’s not a secret. It’s not something you have to decode. It’s Jesus himself. “I am the way, the truth and the life.” The way to God looks like me. The truth sounds like me. Life looks like me.

Our destiny is not a place, it’s a person. We’re not going somewhere, we’re becoming someone. How? By dwelling in the dwelling place Jesus created for us. 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.

SONG

This changes significantly how we interact with our world. If Heaven is just a place we go when we die, then there’s no reason to work for justice in the here and now. Suffer in silence so you can enjoy Heaven one day.

But that isn’t how Jesus lived.

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.”

We pay lip-service to caring about the poor and downcast, but we aren’t becoming people who care about injustice. Who bear the fruit of Jesus. Like the landlord, we just go through the motions.

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's Kingdom now, too.

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

We can be a people 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.

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 our destiny is not a place, but a person?

Examine + Communion

Jesus made a way. Will we sit with him?

When in the last week have I looked most like Jesus?

What has kept me from staying with Jesus?

What might keep me from staying with Jesus?

How is Jesus calling me to imitate him this week?