

A Special Note from Bill Cleveland, Sojourners Group Leader

Eternal life . . . on Earth?

Pastor Andy's message on June 28 is the third and final one in his series on "Sin and "Forgiveness" and was titled, "Eternal Life." Naturally we think of Heaven when we consider eternal life, and Andy cited the typical stereotypes of Heaven as a place in the clouds with gates of pearl and St. Peter sitting at his desk checking folks in. Then he mentioned when he was a sophomore in High School an 80's pop singer, Belinda Carlisle, recorded a love song, "Heaven is a place on Earth". Her song, as well as lyrics from the final stanza of Charles Wesley's hymn, "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" suggest that earthly love anticipates heaven. Andy elaborated on agape love, the kind of love God has for us, and how our love for God and others during this life brings heaven to us here and now. Loving others even in the midst of their suffering does indeed give a "foretaste of glory divine" as the hymn, Blessed Assurance suggests. Heaven is not just "pie in the sky bye and bye," nor is it an excuse to avoid helping those in need by assuring them that things will be better in the hereafter. But to relegate the promise of heaven and future glory as simply a tool of appeasement for the downtrodden is to miss what Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John. He has prepared a place for us in eternity, a place to live with Him in glory. But what will that be like?

Most Christians have spent some time wondering what happens to us after we die. Look at the account of Lazarus, who was raised from the dead by Jesus. He spent four days in heaven, but the Bible tells us nothing about what he saw, though he must have shared something about his experience with family and friends. Many of us today are familiar with the testimonies of people who have had near-death experiences, but each of these accounts is unique, and can only give us a glimpse of heaven. In fact, the Bible reveals very few concrete details about heaven, and what happens when we die. God must have a good reason for keeping us wondering about these mysteries. I doubt our finite minds could ever comprehend the realities of eternity. For now, we can only imagine.

So obedience to the commandment to love our neighbors does bring a taste of heaven to earth. To share in their suffering does sanctify us as we share in the agony of the cross. But this process of sanctification is only a step to the final goal of being glorified with Christ. The Christmas carol, *Away In A Manger*, concludes with the request that Jesus will "fit us for heaven to live with (Him) there." All our efforts to *make a difference* are a preparation, a 'fitting' us for an eternal life of unimaginable joy. There need be no shame in our hope for eternity, nor in holding it out to those who are suffering as a source of comfort. Charles Spurgeon wrote, *"To come to Thee is to come home from exile, to come to land out of the raging storm, to come to rest after long labour, to come to the goal of my desires and the summit of my wishes."* Randy Alcorn says in his book, *Heaven*, *"What God made us to desire, and therefore what we do desire if we admit it, is exactly what He promises to those who follow Jesus Christ: a resurrected life in a resurrected body, with the resurrected Christ on a resurrected Earth. Our desires correspond precisely to God's plans. It's not that we want something, so we engage in wishful thinking that what we want exists. It's the opposite – the reason we want it is precisely because God has planned for it to exist."* So, in spite of what Ms. Carlisle says, Heaven is not a place on earth. Yes, love is heavenly, and God's loving plan for us is to share eternity with Him there. Our eternal life begins with our second birth, and concludes by reigning in glory with Christ in Heaven.