

Hungry for Heaven

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev A.J.Macdonald

[0 : 00] Now let's turn to the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11, and some words at the beginning of verse 16.

Hebrews 11, verse 16, where we read, Instead they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one.

They were longing for a better country, a heavenly one. The human heart knows many longings of various kinds.

Some are ordinary and immediately fulfilable, like hunger and thirst. Some are deeper and more difficult, longings for beauty, for glory, or for love.

Such longings are deeper because they involve our souls as well as our bodies. They're more difficult because they're not immediately fulfilable.

[1 : 13] In fact, it could be said that they're not completely fulfilable in this life at all. Many of them seem to be extremely elusive.

For instance, let me give you an illustration. Just yesterday we were walking through some woods at the east side, and there were some of these beautiful dark green pine woods.

And as we were passing up one of the road paths through the forest, we looked off to the side, and there was what we might describe as a corridor between two rows of trees.

You could almost say it was a tunnel. It was very dark, almost no light getting into it. But way at the end of this tunnel, there was a lovely bright patch of green, where obviously the light was getting in, and it looked just beautiful.

And it immediately made you want to go and to look at that beautiful place, which we did. And we discovered it was just a clearing in the woods, and to try to get out of it in any other direction, we had to sort of push our way through trees and branches.

[2 : 36] And what I'm saying is, it aroused within you a longing when you looked at it from some distance, but when you got close up, you found that in itself, there wasn't anything very much there.

So really, this longing for beauty wasn't ultimately satisfied in that little experience. And so it is, I believe, in life in general.

All kinds of longing, such as the ones I've described, rise up within us. But we find they're not immediately satisfied, and it seems sometimes to us that they're not even fulfilable.

It seems impossible that they should be satisfied. This is so much so, that I think very often we reduce our longings to fit what seems to be available.

We kind of reduce our longing. We become almost content, for instance, with what is fashionable rather than what is beautiful.

[3 : 50] We become content, almost, with a measure of popularity or fame, rather than glory. We become, perhaps, somewhat satisfied with friendship or sex in place of love.

These are the kind of adjustments or reductions that perhaps we attempt to make to these longings that are within us. But occasionally, we receive a piercing stab of joy or pain, because often the two are not far removed.

This longing for something greater than these things. Our scheme of trying to make our longings adjust to what seems available hasn't worked.

And we're still longing for something beyond. Now, it's the Christian conviction that these longings are pointers to the fact that we've been created by God and that our hearts are restless until they find rest in him, as St. Augustine put it.

And that's what I'd like to think about with you this morning as we consider these words. They were longing for a better country, a heavenly one.

[5 : 18] We, I believe, all of us in one sense or another are longing for a better country. But we see that these of whom these words were spoken, they were longing specifically for a heavenly country.

And their longing was fulfilable. I want to look at this really not so much in any detail in the context in which these words occur here, but thinking about those three kinds of longings that I mentioned at the beginning.

Longing for beauty, longing for glory, longing for love. We all have glimpses of beauty in this world. And that, we firmly believe, is because God has made everything beautiful in its time as the book of Ecclesiastes puts it. There is beauty still in this fallen sinful world.

We can see beauty in human beings. We can see physical beauty, but we can also see something more elusive so that perhaps someone who might not be described as classically beautiful, yet there is something beautiful in their face.

[6 : 34] We see beauty in a child. We see beauty in a young woman. Beauty even in the face of an old man. We see these glimpses of beauty.

We see beauty also in the world around us. The beauty of the country. The beauty of land, sea, and sky.

Different kinds of beauty. As Byron put it, England's beauties were tame and domestic in comparison with the wild beauties of dark loch negar.

All different kinds of beauties in the world that God has made. And we catch glimpses of all these different kinds of beauty. There's beauty too in song or in music.

And sometimes a particular line or a particular series of notes will arise, will cause to rise up within you something of this longing I've been talking about.

[7 : 41] But when you actually sit down, and I don't know if you've ever done this much, I've done it a bit, sit down and you try to understand this song or this piece of music so that you're able, say yourself, to sing that piece of music.

You discover in the investigating of it, in the trying of it this way and that, you discover that this beauty so often eludes you. And the thing that really touched you to begin with was this longing that the thing caused.

But when you come to look at the thing itself, again it eludes you. As in all these other cases, if you focus upon the thing itself, you become disappointed or dissatisfied with it.

It's pointing to something beyond. And here in God's word, we're told that there is something beyond. These people, and here, we're being told about the patriarchs, people like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

They were looking for a country. Now you might say, well, yes, God had said that they were going to have Canaan, the promised land, so they were looking for this time when that would happen. But they realized that would not fulfill ultimately what God promised, because we're told they were longing for a better country, a heavenly one.

[9 : 11] So you see, the longing that if you like was built into Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their faith in God, this longing for the land of Canaan, the promised land.

They knew that in itself, this longing for a land, for the physical land of Canaan, would not ultimately satisfy or fulfill people, or their descendants.

They were longing for a heavenly country, a country of which the physical promised land of Canaan was but a type and picture. So God's word here tells us that all such longing for things that are beautiful and good in themselves, they are pointers to us, to point us to God and to the heavenly kingdom.

Now in the Bible, we have some description given to us of the heavenly kingdom, some description given to us of what that heavenly country will be like.

Now, some people delight in speculating as to what exactly it's going to be like, and I don't think we can do that. And one of those people who has perhaps speculated most about it warns us that we should not imagine that heaven is going to be like this or like that.

[10 : 34] I refer to C.S. Lewis, whom I'm going to be referring to once or twice this morning. He helps us perhaps in many ways to think about what that heavenly country is like.

But he warns us not to sort of tie down the reality of heaven to what our imaginations may conceive. For instance, in the book of Revelation, we have a marvellous description given of heaven as it will ultimately be completed, the new universe, the new heavens, the new earth, in Revelation 20 and 21.

But especially at the beginning of chapter 21, we have that marvellous description where it is pictured both as a city and as countryside.

Now, this is, I suppose, one of the things that is beyond our grasp in this world, to bring together both the city and the country.

The city has great advantages in many ways, but it sprawls out over the countryside, swallowing it up and destroying its beauty.

[11:52] And even although you may have parks, within the city, they're still not the same. But in heaven, the city and the country are in beautiful harmony.

There's a river flowing down the middle of the street of the city. There are trees, the tree of life, on each side. Marvellous picture, just a glimpse given to us, but a glimpse is enough to realise that the beauty of this heavenly country will be beyond our wildest imagining.

And that the longings that are stirred up within us now concerning beauty, they will ultimately be fulfilled in that heavenly country. glory. Let me read you a little bit from something C.S.

Lewis said. This is from a sermon that he once preached called The Weight of Glory. And he says, At present we are on the outside of this world, the wrong side of the door.

We discern the freshness and the purity of mourning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendours we see.

[13:10] But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Someday, God willing, we shall get in.

Now he's picturing there something you see of the beauty of heaven. And he's saying it's like the beauty of a new morning, fresh, new, clean.

And we at the moment are not completely new and fresh and clean. But, as he says, the whole of the New Testament, all the pages are rustling with this hope, this promise.

That's when we trust in Christ. We will, in fact, one day get in to that beauty. But, of course, concerning the beauty of heaven, there is something far greater than what we've just been considering.

We don't know exactly what like the conditions of heaven will be. But we do know the central thing about heaven. And that is that there Jesus is.

[14:17] Now, we read in that passage in 2 Corinthians something marvelous about the Lord Jesus and about what God has done.

In verse 6 of chapter 4, we're told, for God who said, let light shine out of darkness, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. I think that in itself is a most beautiful description, although maybe we can't totally understand it. but you see, the face of Jesus Christ is what we will see immediately in heaven.

Here and now we are only given again glimpses of the face of Jesus Christ as he revealed in the scripture. But there we shall see face to face.

There we shall be like him when we see him as he is. These are the descriptions that are given in the New Testament, the most marvelous descriptions of heaven, of seeing, the most beautiful face of all, the face of Jesus Christ.

[15:41] Now the face in the Bible is always an expression that sums up so much more than the physical face, because it is through the face that the person is revealed.

So much so that in the Greek language it is the same word that is used for both the face and the person. And that I think is a very perceptive use of language as it must have developed in Greek, because the face reveals the person.

Now when we talk about the face of Jesus Christ, we're talking about the Lord Jesus as he truly is, the person Jesus Christ.

And heaven is being with him and knowing him. And that is the most beautiful thing of all, surely, about heaven. So we have this longing for beauty that the Bible teaches is only ultimately fulfilable in coming to know Jesus Christ and being with him eternally in heaven.

But also there's longing for glory. And in again that passage we read in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, there's that marvellous reference from which C.S.

[17:04] Lewis got the title of that sermon, the eternal weight of glory. In this life we have all kinds of glimpses glory.

Here we're meaning glory in the sense of glory and honour. We know what it's like to bask, maybe just for a moment, in some sort of glory or honour, where we've achieved something and we've

been praised for it, even although it may just be a father or a mother's praise, or our boss's praise, or whatever.

We've achieved a certain kind of glory and honour because of that. Now, sometimes, and I think especially today, we have a tendency maybe to see sin where it isn't necessarily there, because there's such confusion as to what is sin and what is not, what is guilty and what is not guilty. And today, I think, many people will think, oh, there's something wrong with that, because that's to do with pride and selfishness, if you've achieved something. It's not necessarily so. Otherwise, a whole lot of biblical language will be totally out of court, because it does talk about the praise of God. It does talk about, for instance, in the story Jesus told about the faithful servant, he was told, well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord.

[18 : 44] So, when we talk about glory, we are talking about a right kind of honour for something achieved or completed, and it's not necessarily linked to pride and to selfishness.

Now, so often, our glory and honour, though, if it's not contaminated by our sinful pride and selfishness, it's perhaps lowered to something just less than the complete glory that the Bible is talking about.

It's focused on things just like fame and popularity, and it leaves out of the picture, what does God think of me?

Because ultimately the question is not so much what we think of God, but what God thinks of us. And that's the question that again is brought before us as we think through this issue.

A longing for glory, a longing to have someone say, well done, a longing to have that kind of sense of achievement.

[20 : 03] In the Bible, we're told that there will be, for those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, that glory. God will indeed say to his people, well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord.

And again, C.S. Lewis, in that sermon I mentioned, puts it well. He says, in the end, that face which is the delight or the terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us, either with one expression or with the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be cured or disguised.

You see, ultimately that is what the judgment will be, what the face of God will be to us, terror or glory. And for those who trust in Christ, because he is perfect, because he is worth all glory and praise and honor, there will be glory and praise and honor for those who trust in him too. love. Finally, I want to focus upon longing for love. They looked for a better country, a heavenly one. Many of us have a sense of this longing in regard to love. A longing to love and to be loved. A longing to know and to be known.

[21 : 44] A longing to accept and to be accepted. a lot of what's involved in love. Now, of course, here and now, this longing for love is imperfectly achieved.

Although, maybe in many ways, we can perhaps get nearer to it than some of the other things we've been mentioning. Because God has created us with this capacity for human love, and when a family operates properly as God has commanded, when a husband and wife relationship operates as he has instructed, then there is there perhaps more than a glimpse of this heavenly reality. But, even the very best of human relationships, even the very best of human love, is tinged by sin. Even the best of human relationships, they will fail, they will end.

we will be disappointed or let down in one way or another. And so this longing that is stirred up within our hearts, to be totally understood, to be totally accepted, to be totally forgiven, to be totally received, to be totally welcomed, it's not ultimately met here and now in our relationship.

And if you think that it will be, then you will be disappointed. And perhaps, and I say only perhaps, one reason for a lot of the breakup of relationships in our present day is that people think that there is a human lover that can ultimately completely satisfy them and accept them and understand them.

[23 : 36] And it is not so. and God never says in his word that it is so. Because he is the ultimate perfect lover, the one who perfectly understands us, perfectly accepts us.

But we have, here and now, in this world, a foretaste of his love. We have a foretaste of it in the instances I've been mentioning.

In human relationships, God has created that capacity. But we have a foretaste of it in an even greater way. We have the foretaste of it in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We have the foretaste of it, if we accept Jesus as Savior, of having, as Paul put it in that passage in 2 Corinthians that we read, we have the Spirit as a deposit, the Holy Spirit of God as a deposit. What's a deposit? A deposit is the first payment guaranteed the rest. So if you have come to trust in Jesus Christ now, you know the reality of his love towards you, in enlightening your mind by his Holy Spirit, in assuring you of forgiveness of sin, in revealing to you his great love in Christ dying on the cross.

[24 : 58] You have a deposit. And that's a deposit guaranteeing the rest that is to come. That is the fulfillment of that promise in heaven.

But what we know now, the love of God we know now in Christ, is the same love that will be then fulfilled. It will not be something different, totally new. It is the Christ we know now.

It is the Christ who died on the cross. It's the Christ who forgives sinners, who is the Christ of glory. So the love that we know now, although we may not appreciate it properly, our understanding of it may be vitiated in many different ways, yet it is that same love.

There we will understand fully, we'll appreciate fully, we'll receive fully. And so in the picture that the scriptures give of heaven, we have this picture of the marriage supper of the lamb.

The Bible talks, quite unashamedly, about the love of Christ towards his people as that of a bridegroom to his bride. And we have, still using that picture, that symbol, we have heaven described in that way, the marriage supper of the lamb.

[26 : 20] The final completion of that relationship, that love that Christ has had for us in this world, coming, to fulfilment, and going on and on in heaven.

So again, the longings for love that we have in this world, they are pointers towards the great reality of the love of God for his people.

They are pointers towards heaven. And it is only if we grasp that understanding of it, that we will know the fulfilment of those longings.

Otherwise, we will be doomed to search and search and search for love, for understanding, for acceptance, where it will not be forthcoming, and where ultimately we will be disappointed.

But if we set our minds on heavenly things where Christ Jesus is, then not only will we find a measure of fulfilment here and now in that love, but we will meet a perfection of it in heaven.

[27 : 34] Well, you might ask then, what is the relevance of what we've been talking about this morning to the here and now reality? We've been talking about longings, we've been talking about these longings ultimately being fulfilled in heaven, but you say, well, what difference does that make to me here and now?

What difference does it make to the way I live or the way I should live now? Well, again, C.S. Lewis considers that in this sermon I've quoted from.

He considers it in the light of the question how we are to treat other people. And he puts it like this, it's a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.

All day long we are, to some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all love, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations, these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat.

[29 : 21] But it is immortals that we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit. Immortal horrors are everlasting splendor.

And I think we see in those words the practical relevance to these great doctrines we've been thinking about. But if we think about the reality of heaven and also the reality of hell, then we have a right appreciation of the people that we are dealing with day by day.

And finally there's just this. Our text says that they were longing for a better country. Or it could be translated they were looking for a better country.

Are you? Are you longing for that better country? Are you looking for that heavenly kingdom?

Because if you're not, then none of what I've been saying about the glories of heaven can you take to yourself.

You must be looking for it, you must be longing for it, you must be seeking this kingdom, you must be seeking this way that is revealed in scripture. And if you are, if you're longing for that kingdom, that ultimate reality, longing for Christ and his way, then you can take all of these things to yourself, but not unless.

[30 : 49] So, seek, search, knock, and the door will be opened to you. Let us pray.

our gracious and loving heavenly father, we thank you for all that you have shown to us in this world of beauty, of glory, of love, of every single good thing that has awoken within us good desires. O gracious Lord, we know that if we do not follow these pointers, then we are culpable, for you leave none of us with an excuse.

Gracious Lord, we pray that we might follow the pointings of these things to the Lord Jesus himself, and we might come to know that reality of his love to us, which never ends.

Bless your own word to us today, and to the people of God everywhere, and to all those who are invited by your word to come, to see, to taste, and to see that God is good.

[32 : 18] And we pray that you would enable each one of your people who trust in you, to live a life that reflects the realities in which he believes, and pardon us for in so many ways living lives that do not reflect that glory.

We ask this in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen.