

## **In Him is Life** *The Gospel of John*

### **Sharing in the Triune Life of God** *John 14:15 – 23*

#### **Introduction: With the Family**

I want to begin our reflection on ‘heaven’ with a reflection on the Christian God, which is called ‘the Trinity’: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I do this because the Christian concept of heaven revolves around the Christian concept of God. Let me tell you a story of how I started to understand the Trinity. The summer after my freshman year, I went home for the summer. My friend Erica and I wanted to record a song that we had written. I wrote the poem; she added the music. Because her family was a very musical family, she had some basic recording equipment at her house. During one of the times that we were there, her parents ordered pizza and I sat down with the whole family. It was Erica’s mom and dad and two sisters. Now they are a Chinese American family. One of the things I noticed was that her mom and dad held hands. I had never seen Asian parents who held hands! I had to stop myself from staring. Then the conversation was really fun. They made jokes about each other. They shared about their day, and their lives. They invited me to share about myself. They asked me more questions. It was the best family conversation I had ever seen. It fed my soul. And the whole time, out of the corner of my eye, I was just amazed that the mom and dad held hands. After dinner, when everyone did their own thing, the mom and dad went over to the couch, and talked, and they still held hands! My own parents’ marriage had never looked like that, and they were arguing about getting a divorce. So I was inspired. I wanted to ask, ‘Can you adopt me?’ Don’t we all want to be part of a family like that? Where love is directed at you, yes – of course we want to be loved. But also, where love is not directed just at you. You’re not at the center. Instead the love overflows from a relationship that exists before you, which is larger than you, and sets the tone for you. So when you encounter that love, it’s like a river flowing from a huge spring. It has a shape and direction that calls you to drink from it and go with its flow.

#### **Relevance:**

The Christian concept of heaven starts with the Christian concept of God. I want to address four questions throughout our time. First, what are some mistakes we make in thinking about heaven and talking about it? Second, who is the Christian God? Third, why is Jesus necessary for God to bring us to heaven? Fourth, how does this help us understand our experience now in the present?

#### **First: Mistakes We Make**

Let me first talk about mistakes we make in thinking and talking about heaven. The first mistake we often make is that *we start with ourselves*. We ask, ‘What do I like?’ I like ice cream. Well then, heaven must be a place where I can eat all the ice cream I want and not get fat! You see what that’s doing? That’s starting with yourself. It’s asking yourself what you like and just extrapolating that to the nth degree as if all that’s important in heaven is your appetite. And then it seems like God is just dangling a carrot in front of your face – or if not a carrot, ice cream, or whatever you like. If that were true, then God is the ultimate trickster, making you accept Him by offering you goodies.

It’s logically necessary that when you want to talk about heaven in the Christian sense, that you first talk about who the Christian God is. That is where you start. If you’ve wondered, ‘Why is Jesus necessary? For heaven? Or for this life? Can’t I just be good enough on my own?’ The question, ‘Am I good enough?’ Good enough for what? If the question is, ‘Good enough to be nicer than Adolf Hitler’, then the answer is, ‘Yes, you can do that on your own.’ If the question is, ‘Good enough, loving enough, other-centered enough to share in the very Being of the Christian God called the Trinity,’ then let me describe this Trinity God, the FSSp God, and then, you can form your opinion.

#### **Second: Who is God?**

Who is God? The Christian understanding of heaven actually begins with our understanding of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here is one place Jesus talks about that: <sup>John 14:15</sup> ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> I will ask the **Father**, and He will give you another Helper, that he may be with you forever; <sup>17</sup> that is the **Spirit** of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see him or know him, but you know him because he abides with you and will be in you. <sup>18</sup> I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. <sup>19</sup> After a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. <sup>20</sup> In that day you

will know that I am in my **Father**, and you in me, and I in you...<sup>23</sup> If anyone loves me, he will keep my word; and my **Father** will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him.' (John 14:15 – 23) This is the Christian concept of the Trinity. But what significance does that have? It makes a big difference.

As an exercise, let's draw two columns. On one side is: God as Singularity. On the other side is: God as Trinity. What can we say about these 'gods' before each 'god' creates anything?

- God as singularity: Can we say that this 'god' is loving before he creates anything? No. Can we say that this 'god' is relational? Or good? No. We can only say that this 'god' exists. That's it.
- God as trinity: Can we say that this FSSp God is loving before He creates anything. Yes! We can. This God is loving in Himself. God is *relational*, at the core. The one Name of God is FSSp. The names of the Persons are Father, Son, and Spirit. But those are relational names. As soon as you say 'Father,' you have to ask, 'Father' of who? The Son. As soon as you say 'Son,' you have to ask, 'Son' of who? The Father. As soon as you say 'Spirit' you have you ask, 'Spirit' of who? The Father and the Son. There are three relations in God, and the Father, Son, and Spirit are all interdependent on each other. They are only known in relation to each other. God is family, friendship, unity, community, and goodness. He is the source of all this.

What are the implications of this? The FSSp God is radically other-centered.

Illus: There's a recent book called *The Shack* that tries to help us understand what the relationship between Jesus and his Father is like, as well as the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Father and the Son. There's a guy named Mack who is a husband and father of five children. He loses his youngest daughter in a tragic kidnapping and murder in a shack in an Oregon forest. Years later, though the great sadness is still there, one day he gets a letter from God asking him to meet him in that shack. So he goes. And God the Father appears at first like a large black woman. Surprising, but what do you expect? An old white man with a beard? Is that any more true? Jesus is a Middle Eastern man. And the Holy Spirit appears as an Asian woman with blurry edges. Part of the point is that God in His love suffers at the hands of the world like all the oppressed minorities. What Mack is struck by immediately is how the three of them relate to each other, talking and laughing. No one dominates the conversation. They affirm each other. They listen to each other as if they were old friends and yet as if each word was new, appreciating each other as if they were seeing each other truly for the first time. There is a joy within God, between the Father, Son, and Spirit and in the three relationships there. Mack finds it healing just to be in the presence of this web of relationships. And the fact that God is fundamentally a Trinity and not a Singularity means that the Christian God is love, radically other-centered love, in Himself. That is unlike every other concept of God there is.

Illus: A couple of years ago, I met a student at Tufts University who hailed from Afghanistan. He was in his late 20's, and was a sophomore at Tufts. He is a fascinating young man. He had been employed by the United Nations as a translator to bring Afghan warlords to the negotiating table. He was fairly successful at that. He got to know several of the Christians in the fellowship, including my staff colleague Alex and me. One of the highlights of our friendship with him was playing chess and drinking tea and talking. I really valued hearing his perspective on and criticism of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. I also valued hearing his spiritual journey. He had become disenchanted with the Muslim faith he had grown up with. He had a number of questions about it, but one of the most poignant ones that he talked about was, 'Why does Allah command us to worship Him? It seems selfish on His part. Like He wants to be the center of the universe for His own sake.' Is God the ultimate narcissist? Do we just have to live with that? I was struck by the insightfulness of that question. Christians too wonder that about the Christian God. So what did I say?

I shared this understanding of the Trinity. Muslims insist that Allah is a Singularity, so it is impossible to say that Allah is relational or that Allah is loving or that Allah is other-centered. Allah is self-centered. That actually encourages human self-centeredness; that's probably why the Muslim concept of heaven has angelic concubines (hourin) for sexual pleasure whenever you want it. Or heaven is about ice cream, God is the great trickster who withholds what we really want just to get us to choose Him. And then we assume that because we're self-centered, that God is self-centered, but He's not.

The God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit wants to be at the center of our lives because He provides us with other-centeredness. So when the FSSp God says that He wants to be in the center of our lives, it's because He wants to empower us to love others with His own love. It's to make us other-centered like He is. Without Him, we love ourselves first and make the universe revolve around yourself.

### **Third: Why Jesus?**

Which brings us to our third point: Why Jesus? Because God needs a way to transform human nature so that human beings can share in His internal life. What is it like when we try to become part of a family with an ethic – a climate, a life – of love that is higher than yours? Can you just jump in and become a part of it? No. You would experience it as demanding because you would be called to something very high, and sobering because you would have to give up illusions about yourself and what you're really capable of. It would be torment. You might say, 'But wait! God loves to love, and we love to take. What's the problem?' The problem is that we were not designed to be furniture in His house, but living children who take after Him. We were not designed to be merely objects of God's love, but to sharers in God's loving nature. This is challenging for us.

Illus: Let me give you an analogy. My wife and I once invited a young man from our neighborhood to be a part of our family. We have two kids of our own, who were at the time 3 and 1 years old. Nick was 18. By that time, he had already been kicked off his high school basketball team for using drugs, and he had been to juvie lock-up twice. He had also been through a difficult childhood as the oldest of four kids with a single mom who worked all the time. Despite those challenges, he had just finished high school. He wanted a change in life; he wanted to go to Roxbury Community College and play basketball for them; and he asked us if he could live with us because our family was a better environment than his own home. We talked to his mom about this, and we all had expectations for him to be a guest of our family. He couldn't use drugs in our house or bring drugs or weapons inside; that was a basic act of love for our kids. He had to either be a full time student or work a full time job; that was a basic act of love for his own family and his future family, that he would be a man of responsibility. He had to talk with me or any other older man about his spiritual life once a week; that was a basic act of love for himself. He agreed to all that up front. For the first semester, he did well. But his second semester was a struggle. He complained about the basketball coach not giving him enough playing time and that was de-motivating. During the summer, he did not take classes and he did not work very much. Instead, he stayed at home and played video games. He lapsed into some old drug habits. So he was not loving his own family and our family. After weeks and months of me and my wife trying to help him get back in school and write his resume and find jobs, he told me one day that he couldn't take landscaping or restaurant jobs because they made him too tired. I said, 'Too tired? You're a 19 year old young man.' He said, 'Well, I really want to be a pro basketball player play for the NBA, and those jobs make me too tired to practice.' I said, 'Look, I hate to burst your bubble, but I've seen you play and you are not pro basketball material. I know what it looks like to play at that level. I grew up 10 minutes away from Ed O'Bannon, who played for Artesia High School, and helped UCLA win an NCAA title. I heard he went pro but I never heard about him again. So I know what it takes to barely make it. *You* are living an illusion. But if it makes you feel better, then go talk to scouts or someone in the Celtics organization.' He never did. Then I said to Nick, your agreement to be part of our family was to do these things as part of your love and responsibility towards the people in your life. You haven't done them. I'm giving you until the end of this month to make different choices, or you won't be able to stay here; you'll probably have to move back home. And I'm going to ask you every day about it because that is part of my love for you and your family. A few days later, he was involved in a serious crime with some other young people his age. It involved assault and theft. He is now in jail. We've visited him in jail, bringing his mom to visit him too. Over the course of time, he has said, 'I'm sorry. You were right.'

If we jumped into the 'family' that is the very Being of God whose ethic of love is much higher than our own, we would be overwhelmed.

Illus: Here's an example that's probably closer to you. I was talking with a friend a few weeks ago. She was telling me how there's this guy who is interested in her. He makes her feel safe. But she couldn't see herself marrying him. She knows for different reasons that it would never work. But she wants to date him anyway, even though there would be no point to it. I asked, 'So is it loving to this guy as a friend to date him while you know you wouldn't marry him? Is that how you would want someone to treat you?' Her response was, 'I'm so tired of doing things for other people. Right now, I just want to do something for myself.' Hmmm. There it is. There is the self-centeredness in us that makes love and goodness a means to something else. With God, His love and goodness are not a means to something else, like ice cream in heaven. He is the real deal.

Now what if with Nick, I was somehow able to share myself with him to help him adjust to being in our family? Obviously, I can't do that, and it's not like our family is all that stellar in an objective sense. But that is exactly what God does.

Illus: How many of you like the *Twilight* series about vampires? It's a love story between Bella, a human, and Edward, a vampire. I know a 13 year old girl and a 60 year old woman who love the books. The 60 year old woman tells me that her favorite thing about Edward the vampire is that he restrains himself. He fights against the vampire urge he feels to bite Bella and drink her blood. It's quite noble in that sense. He protects her from other vampires and werewolves who do want her blood. All because he loves her. Now, the American public has been captivated by vampire stories for years, and I've played with the idea of writing a vampire story myself! So let me tell a story like *Twilight*, but with a twist: What if all of us are actually vampires but didn't know it. What if we had all become something that we were never meant to be. And the only way to cure us was for the God of love and true life to become a vampire like us. But instead of giving into vampire urges like the rest of us, he fought every single urge and defeated them. He lived a life that was truly *human*, not vampiric. But all the other vampires hated him and killed him, which ironically was his own chosen means of defeating that condition. So he rose from the dead as truly human, cleansed of the vampire virus. Then he called others who were convicted by their own evil to receive a blood transfusion from him, because he had perfected the antidote in his own body.

That is the answer to the question: Why Jesus? Because God, by becoming the human man Jesus, has changed human nature. He became a human being just like us, made a moment by moment decision, all the days of his life, to live in the radical love of God, the radical other-centeredness of God, instead of the self-centered urges of our humanity. Read through the Gospels and tell me if you find anyone else who has lived like Jesus. So by his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus changed the nature of his own humanity. His humanity is now a God-drenched, God-soaked humanity; it is physically different. And now he offers the Spirit of his new God-drenched humanity to us so that we could be one with him and one with God. Look again at the passage: <sup>John 14:15</sup> If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that he may be with you forever; <sup>17</sup> that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see him or know him, but you know him because he abides with you and will be **in you**...<sup>20</sup> In that day you will know that I am **in my Father**, and you **in me**, and I **in you**...<sup>23</sup> If anyone loves me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode **with him**.

That funny language about the Spirit, Jesus, and the Father being 'in you' is important. God is not a Singularity. He is a Trinity. There is a complexity within God that allows Him to embrace us. He can draw us up into Himself. And at the same moment, God is Father – He is infinitely different from us – and God is Son – He becomes one of us – and God is Spirit – in order to become one with us. God wants us to share in His nature. That is heaven. Peter's second letter says that we have become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet.1:4). Wow! Jesus doesn't change God's mind about how God thinks about us. Jesus is God's way of changing us. By offering Jesus and the Spirit to us, God is inviting us into Himself.

That is what heaven is: It is the fulfillment of God's transformation of humanity. That is good news, because it means there is hope for human evil. Humanity has an internal problem. Our problems are not just external to us, as if we could only have perfect laws, perfect circumstances, or perfect schools. That is all helpful and worth shooting for. But our fundamental problem is internal. But God has developed a way to change human nature itself.

### **Our Experience Now**

So here's the fourth and last question: How does this help us understand our experience in the here and now? The basic issue here is that because this relationship with God through Jesus and the Spirit can start now, heaven actually starts now. Let me answer some questions that people who are not Christians usually ask:

If you ask the question, 'Can't I be good enough by myself?' then you also have to ask, 'Good enough for what?' Good enough to jump into the very Being of God as your selfish self? I don't think you can do that. Or, do you think God uses some arbitrary moral standard to judge people in order to let them into heaven? He doesn't. He simply offers Himself through Jesus and his Spirit whereby, if we say yes to Him, He transforms us within Himself and continues to change us during our lives now. That is the only question; it's a relational question first and foremost. Part of the fallacy of the 'good enough' question is that you might also think that heaven is about ice cream, or whatever it is you like. But that view also means that God plays tricks on people. Does God hold out ice cream and make us choose Him in order to get what we really want, which is not Him? Is this God just a means to some other end? This God is an end in Himself. He is the ultimate end. He is not a means to something else.

That means we can only love Him incrementally. If you ask the question, 'What will it be like if I commit to Jesus?' It will be like coming into a new family with new expectations and getting a new identity. By truly saying yes to Jesus, you are fundamentally saying yes to God's transformation of you. From that point on, you'll learn to live with Jesus who will be in you, spiritually. But he will help you live in his family, with his Father. It will probably be challenging. Because we're all used to living mostly for ourselves. This is what everyone – Christians and non-Christians – need to understand. When we begin to experience Jesus changing us, it will feel challenging because we're not used to the kind of love that Jesus has. So he called me to forgive my dad for being an alcoholic, to forgive my mom for being controlling. I experienced that as a challenge, but God experiences it as His love. For me and through me. And He changed me bit by bit. Then Jesus called me to love more people, including the poor that I never knew before, and let go of my own ambitions. So my grades went down a bit as I loved people more with him. I experienced that as a challenge, but God experiences it as His love. For me and through me. And He changed me bit by bit. That is what will happen to you if you commit to Jesus.

But it becomes more and more joyful, because our choices shape our desires. More precisely, Jesus will shape our desires the more we choose him. We will want to choose him. Because we'll see that being joined to him in all things is better than being alone, and the way we treat people with his love is better than the way treated people by ourselves.

Let me move onto another question Christians usually ask: What if I came to Jesus and didn't understand all this? That's fine! At some point in the past, whether you know when or not, you made some kind of decision for Jesus. You saw something in him that was special. I hope this deepens what you see. You may not have understood Jesus and heaven this way. What you heard before was not necessarily wrong, but this is the deepest way to understand it. Yes, in heaven, we will be physical bodies, and therefore individual and distinct and separate, but in a deeper sense, we will be joined to Jesus and drawn up together into God. That's why the Book of Revelation uses this language to describe heaven: <sup>22:1</sup> Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of [Jesus], <sup>2</sup> in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. From the throne of God and Jesus flows a river of healing waters. Why? Because the infinite God of all heaven and earth and the one finite man Jesus share a love out of which flows a love with a shape and direction, that calls us to drink from it and go with its flow. That flow is new humanity, which lives within God.

### **Call to Respond**

For those of you who are not connected to Jesus, but would like to be, I'm asking you to make a public decision. In this case, I would also like to ask that you meet with me once a week for 2 or 3 weeks. The reason I ask this is because Asian culture is motivated by guilt and obligation. Those motivations get imported by some into a life with Jesus, but that distorts him and the reality of his love. I want to meet with you in order to help you sort through those heart issues.