

I. Introduction

- A. Once upon a time a family was playing with their new kitten. They decided to bring the kitten outside, and let it experience the back yard.
- B. And when the little kitten started climbing a young tree in the back yard, they thought it was cool.
- C. That is, they thought it was cool until the kitten got way up in the branches, way out of reach, and got its neck stuck in the branches.
- D. They couldn't get the kitten down. And there were too many branches to get a ladder up there. And the branches that were there were too flimsy for anybody to climb the tree.
- E. So the kitten was stuck.
- F. The kids were crying.
- G. The kitten was meowing.
- H. And the dad, who was a bright guy, said, "No problem kids. I have an idea."
- I. Dad ran to his pick up, hopped inside and backed up to the tree. Then he tied a rope to the tree as high as he could reach, and attached it to the back bumper of his pickup truck.
- J. "Kids," he said, "I'll drive my truck slowly, and that will bend down the tree, and then you can pull the kitten out of the branches."
- K. The kids thought the plan was great. The dad felt like a hero.
- L. So he started driving very slowly. And the truck went forward, and the tree bent. And the truck went more forward, and the tree bent more downward. And the truck went more forward, and the tree bent more downward until the kitten was just about in reach of the kids. And so the truck went forward just a little more and the tree bend downward just a little more and...
- M. That's when the rope snapped.

II. Text

- A. *25 And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, 28 he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: 29 "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word; 30 For my eyes have seen Your salvation 31 Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, 32 A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel." 33 And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against" (Luke 2:25-34, NKJV).*

III. God's Story

- A. This story happens shortly after the birth of Jesus. Baby Jesus was 40 days old when he was presented in the Temple according to Jewish law.
- B. An old man named Simeon, had waited all his life to see the Promised Messiah come to earth. Year after year, he prayed in the temple for the Messiah to come.
- C. Generations of Jews waited and waited and waited. Simeon waited and waited and waited.
- D. God promised to send a Savior. God promised to send a Lamb to take away sins once for all. God promised to send a Prophet to end all prophets, a Priest to end all priests, and a King of kings.
- E. And the people waited and waited and waited and waited. It was as if God was bending a tree—pulling, and pulling, and pulling. And just when Simeon started to give up hope and when he felt the rope was about to snap...
- F. In walked a bedraggled Joseph and a worn out Mary, carrying a dust covered little baby.
- G. And the Holy Spirit said HE'S THE ONE.
- H. And Simeon said, "Now I can die in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation."
- I. God knows how to stretch out the tension without snapping the rope. He is the master story teller.
- J. Simeon told Mary and Joseph that Jesus was "destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel."
- K. What did that mean?
- L. It meant that whether or not a person's once upon a time had a happily ever after depended on what that person did with Jesus.
- M. Accept Jesus, you rise. Ignore Jesus, you fall. It's that simple.
- N. On this Sunday after Christmas, I want to talk about God's happily ever after.
- O. I want to talk about heaven because only heaven can bring a happy closure to all the loose ends in your life story. Let me ask and answer five key questions about heaven.

IV. Heaven

- A. Where is heaven?
 - 1. There's a long standing argument over whether heaven is a place or a state.
 - 2. I think Jesus answered this decisively when he told his disciples, "I go to prepare a PLACE for you" (John 14:2-3). I know that really doesn't solve the problem, because once you leave the space-time continuum that astrophysicists can study, words like place, and space, and time, takes on a whole new meaning.
 - 3. It also doesn't help to say that heaven is where God lives, because where doesn't God live? Right? Isn't He omnipresent? Doesn't all of God fill all of space all the time?
 - 4. It's not easy to pinpoint heaven. We do know that when Jesus went home to heaven, what direction did He go?
 - a) *9 Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. 10 And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men*

stood by them in white apparel, 11 who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:9-11, NKJV).

5. So, it's up. But up from where? I think that the upness of heaven teaches us that heaven is bigger and better and higher and more mysterious than anything we can imagine on earth.
 6. Here is a good, solid, meaty answer to the question of where is heaven:
 - a) Heaven is the place where God makes His presence specially known and where Jesus now sits enthroned in His glorified human body.
 7. So there is a place called heaven, and Jesus told the thief on the Cross, *"Today you will be with Me in Paradise,"* (Luke 23:43). And Paul said taught that our citizenship is heaven, and we eagerly await our Savior from there (Phil 3:20).
 8. Where is it? Nobody knows; it's probably some kind of alternate dimension of existence that we'll be transported to when our time has come.
 9. There is one very cool statement I want to show you in Hebrews. This verse is talking about you, about any person who believes in Jesus and has received the gospel. At the very instant that you receive Jesus, this verse becomes true of you:
 - a) *22 No, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to thousands of angels in joyful assembly. 23 You have come to the assembly of God's firstborn children, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God Himself, who is the judge of all people. And you have come to the spirits of the redeemed in heaven who have now been made perfect. 24 You have come to Jesus, the One who mediates the new covenant between God and people, and to the sprinkled blood, which graciously forgives instead of crying out for vengeance as the blood of Abel did.* (Hebrews 12:22-24, NLT).
 10. I don't know what all this means, but it does say that heaven is not far away, the angels are not far away, the saints who believed in Jesus in all the ages past are not far away. Jesus is not far away. Heaven is not far away.
- B. What is heaven like?
1. The Bible is full of stuff about heaven, but it's tough to decipher. Not because God is a bad communicator, but because we are bad under-standers. Heaven is so big, and our minds are so small, that God has to dumb it down to help us understand.
 2. So He speaks in metaphors. He speaks in symbols. This is called language of accommodation.
 3. Here are a few facts that are certain about heaven:
 - a) Paradise (Luke 23:43)
 - b) God was the architect, and God was the builder (Heb 11:10).
 - c) The Father's House (John 14:2)
 - d) Where Christ is today in His glorified body (Acts 1:11)
 - e) A better land than anything imagined on earth (Heb 11:16)
 - f) Rest (Heb 4:9)
 - g) Happiness—no more death, sorrow, or crying (Rev 21:4).
 4. The Bible says that heaven's streets are paved with gold and its gates are made of pearls—language of accommodation.
 5. There's a legend of an old man who was dying. He asked God if he could bring something with him to heaven. God told him, you can't take it with you, but the man persisted, so God said, Okay. You can bring one suitcase.
 6. So the man died, and showed up at the pearly gates, with one suitcase.
 7. Peter stopped him and saw that God told him he could bring one suitcase. "Sorry, sir, but I have to inspect that before you come in."
 8. The man opened his suitcase, and it was filled with gold bars.
 9. "What?" said Peter, "You brought paving stones?"
 - a) Here is a place with no crime, no evil, no power outages, no disasters, no heartbreak, no addiction, no calories, no loneliness, no hatred, and no violence.
 - b) No hearing aids, no canes, no crutches, no final exams, no credit crunch, no foreclosures, no unemployment, no lawyers, no taxes, and no politicians.
 10. Sounds good, don't you think?
- C. Who is in heaven right now?
1. I was a high school pastor for many years in Chicago. One of my students, named Laura, went to a local Lutheran high school. Every day, a student led the whole school in a brief devotional over the school p.a. system.
 2. When it was Laura's turn, this is what she said.
 3. "Did you know there will be no Lutherans in heaven?"
 4. Then she waited. I imagine the principal just about had the big one—the grabber.
 5. But after a nice pause, Laura said:
 - a) "And there will be no Catholics, no Baptists, and no Methodists. No Republicans, Democrats, either.
 - b) Just people who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, Jesus."
 6. The Bible says that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor 5:8).
 7. There is no limbo. There is no purgatory. There is no waiting. If you have Jesus, you can never die alone.

8. For the redeemed child of God, death is converted from condemnation to transportation. You close your eyes on earth, and open your eyes in heaven.
 9. You might have seen the TV interviewer Larry King a few times. He's interviewed a lot of famous guests. I've noticed that when he has famous pastors on, he always asks the same question. He asked this question of Jerry Falwell, Joel Osteen, John MacArthur, and other guys too.
 10. Larry King asks, "So, I'm a good Jew, and according to your teaching, if I don't convert to Christianity, I can't go to heaven, right?"
 11. And different pastors give different answers and usually get in trouble with one side or the other.
 12. Well, I'm a pastor, and here's my answer.
 13. I can only echo what Jesus said, and Jesus said this:
 - a) *13 "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. 14 Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13, 14, NKJV).*
 14. I can only echo what the apostles said, and the apostles said this:
 - a) *11 And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. 12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 JOHN 5:11, 12, NKJV).*
 - b) *12 "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12, NKJV).*
 15. If you've got a problem with that answer, then you've got a problem with the Bible—don't shoot the messenger.
- D. Will we recognize our friends and family in heaven?
1. Yes. You will be you forever. So will your loved ones. Heaven will be the greatest reunion of your life, and you'll look GOOD!
 2. All your imperfections will be gone. We will see you as you really are for the first time ever.
 3. C.S. Lewis wrote:
 - a) "It is a serious thing to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship."
 4. The Bible says that you will be put on display with Jesus Christ and you will share His glory (Col 3:1-4). You will be glorified with Him.
 5. You will not be absorbed into the universe.
 6. You have an eternal soul, and spirit—an everlasting identity. The person you are today, minus your sins, and plus Christ's righteousness, will live forever in the body you have today, minus its corruption, and clothed with immortality.
 7. You will be you, but with all your lost glory added back. That is how God's story ends, but it's an ending without a finish.
 8. Because it stretches as far as the eye can see into a never ending, everlasting, happily ever after.
- E. What will we do in heaven?
1. If you're into country music, you know the name Hoyt Axton. He sang about heaven, and he described it the way a lot of people would:
 - a) I know a man as rich as a king
Still he just won't give his neighbors a thing
He'll go to heaven someday I'll bet
He'll get up to heaven and here's what he'll get.

A rusty old halo, skinny white cloud
Second hand wings full of patches
A rusty old halo, skinny white cloud
Robe that's so wooly and it scratches.
 2. A lot of people think that heaven is about sitting around on clouds, being bored.
 3. No way. Heaven is the ultimate adventure. How would you like to:
 - a) Explore the Milky Way Galaxy?
 - b) Find another planet and fish its lakes?
 - c) Golf on a planet with half of earth's gravity and your drive sails a mile? And nobody cheats?
 - d) How would you like to go to a concert with friends, and hear instruments your mind can't imagine today, and voices so beautiful they'd make you weep if you heard them today?
 - e) How would you like to throw a feast, and enjoy food that tastes a thousand times better than Chicago deep dish pizza, and there are no calories, and nobody is dysfunctional?
 - f) How would you like to put your feet up, and rest, and watch whatever channel you wanted and it brought you nothing but joy?
 - g) If you're into flowers, you'll have the flowers of 10,000 planets to investigate.
 - h) If you're into sports, you'll have competition that you've never imagined, including football, and mixed martial arts, and NASCAR.
 4. Heaven isn't about being boring. No clouds. No scratchy wool robes. No halos to polish. Heaven is an eternity of adventure, and you'll never run out of stuff to do and places to explore, and friends to hang out with. (Luke 19: 11-27).

5. Heaven is the place where the deepest longings of your heart are fulfilled to a measure ten thousand times beyond your wildest dreams.

F. How can I be sure of going to heaven?

1. There's a true story that's been verified by several eyewitnesses about President Ronald Reagan. Don't get lost politically now—I'm making a point.
2. Reagan met with some evangelical leaders including the late D. James Kennedy, a mega-church pastor from Florida.
3. Kennedy asked President Reagan a question: "Mr. President; if you were to die tonight and God asked you why should I let you into heaven, what would you say?"
4. Reagan smiled and gave his answer, but before I tell you his, let me ask you—what would be yours? What would you point to? What reason could you possibly give God that He should allow you into heaven, you with all your blemishes, faults, and sins? If God asked you, why should I let you into heaven, what would you say?
5. President Reagan said, "I would tell him John 3:16: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

V. Conclusion

- A. Can I get personal? We celebrate Christmas because God gave His unique Son. He gave His son for a reason: that whoever believes in Him can have everlasting life.
- B. For you, is heaven a matter of "I hope so?" Or "I know so!"
- C. The Bible says:
 1. *13 These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life... (1 John 5:13, NKJV).*
- D. It's not a matter of keeping your fingers crossed and hoping for the best, it's a matter of knowing for sure.
- E. Jesus causes the rise or the fall of many. Whether you rise or fall is up to you.
- F. Happily ever after is up to you. All your life, this world has been bending the tree, loading the tension.
- G. You are the kitten in the tree.
- H. Only you can choose whether to be rescued, or to wait so long the rope snaps.
- I. Heaven is an opt-in proposition.
- J. Happily ever after is up to you.
- K. Are you ready?