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Are You Waiting for Your Mansion in the Sky?

Two popular old gospel songs contain the words: “There’s a mansion now empty, just waiting for me” and “I’ve got a mansion just over the hilltop.” These lyrics are based on the words of Jesus:

“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 12:2, NKJV).

This verse is also a funeral favorite as it is believed to be a promise that Jesus is preparing a reward for God’s people in heaven only after death. But is this what Jesus meant? One mistake we can make is to attempt to apply directly to our lives every word Jesus said without considering his audience and purpose.

On the night before his death, Jesus and his disciples were together in what was traditionally known as the upper room. The disciples were shocked at what they saw and heard. Jesus washed their feet, announced there was a traitor among them and declared that Peter was going to deny him—not once but three times.

Can you imagine their response? “This can’t be the Messiah. He’s talking about suffering, betrayal and death. We thought he was going to install a new kingdom and we would rule with him!” Confusion. Despair. Fear. Emotions that we are very familiar with. Shattered expectations. Into all of this Jesus speaks. “Don’t worry. Trust me.” He wanted to strengthen them against complete collapse in the looming tragedy. He continued: *“In my Father’s house are many mansions.”*

What would the disciples have understood when they heard these words?

The expression “Father’s house” as used in the gospels always refers to the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:49, John 2:16). The temple had replaced the tabernacle which was the portable tent used by the Israelites to worship God. Within the tabernacle and separated by a thick curtain was a room called the Holy of Holies. This was God’s dwelling place (“tabernacle” means “residence” or “dwelling place” in Hebrew) in the midst of his people. Once a year the high priest alone was allowed to enter this room and come into the very presence of God.

Furthermore, the word “mansion” or “room” means a place where one lives and was “regularly used in ancient Greek not for a final resting place but for a temporary halt on a journey that will take you somewhere else in the long run.”¹ This would be something different from being in heaven with God after death as heaven is often seen as a final resting place.

Then Jesus said he was going to prepare a place for his disciples. Where was he going? He wasn’t going to heaven to build mansions but he was going from the upper room to the cross. In his death and resurrection he would prepare a place for them in his Father’s house (John 14:2). It was as if Jesus was saying; “Everything is under control. What is going to happen looks terrifying but it is all part of the plan.” Then he promised, *“I will come again.”* In the context this doesn’t seem to be a reference to his second coming (although we look forward to his glorious coming) but we do know that Jesus went to the cross and returned three days later by rising from the dead. He also came again in the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

“I will come back” Jesus said, *“and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am”* (John 14:3, TNIV). Let’s focus for a moment on the word “with” used here. It is the same word used in John 1:1 where we learn that the Son (the Word) was *with* God. “The word ‘with’ is taken from the word *pros*. By using this word to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is telling us that theirs is an *intimate* relationship. One translator has translated the verse, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *face to face* with God....’² Sadly, many people picture God as a solitary figure somewhere in the sky, detached and remotely watching us from a distance. But this seemingly insignificant word “with” reveals something completely different about the nature of God. This is about sharing and intimacy. This is about a face to face relationship. This is profound and deep! But what does this have to do with you and me today? Before I answer that, let’s return briefly to the temple.

When Jesus died, the curtain in the temple was torn in half. This symbolised a new way had been opened into the presence of God. The temple wasn’t his home anymore. A totally new relationship with God was now available, and it is available to everyone! The Message Bible translates verse 2: *“There’s plenty of room for you in my Father’s home.”* In the Holy of Holies there was only room for one person, but now a radical change had taken place. God has actually made room for everyone in himself – in his house! This has been made possible because the Son became flesh, rescued us from the death and destruction of sin, returned to the Father and took all humanity with him (John 12:32)—into the very presence of God! On that same evening Jesus said, *“Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them”* (John 14:23, TNIV). The word “home” in this verse is the same as the word “mansions” in verse one. Do you see what this means?

What thoughts come to mind when you think of a good home? How about: peace, rest, joy, protection, instruction, forgiveness, provision, unconditional love, acceptance and hope, to name a few? Not only did Jesus come to give himself to us he also came to share all these things with us so that we can experience the life he lives with his Father in the fellowship of the Spirit. The astonishing, unique, intimate relationship that Jesus himself had enjoyed with the Father is now open to us! *“You can live where I live”* Jesus says (verse 3 MSG). And where does Jesus “live”? *“At the very heart of the Father”* (John 1:18) or as some translations have it: *“in the bosom of the Father.”* One scholar writes: *“To be in or on the bosom of someone means to be in his embrace, to be cherished by him as the object of intimate care and dearest affection, or as we say in English, to be a bosom friend.”*³ That is where Jesus is. And where are we now? Seated with Jesus in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6)!

Are you experiencing difficult, discouraging and depressing circumstances? Jesus’ words of comfort are for you. Just as Jesus wanted to strengthen, encourage and assure his disciples then, he is saying the same to you now: “Don’t worry. Trust me.” Don’t let your worries weigh you down; instead, focus on Jesus and contemplate on what he says—and doesn’t say. He doesn’t say you must be brave and everything will work out. He doesn’t give you four steps to happiness and prosperity. He doesn’t say he is building a mansion in heaven for you which you will only inherit when you die, so it’s worth all the suffering. But he does say that he went to the cross to take all our sins on his shoulders and nailed them to the cross along with himself, so that everything that separates us from

God and life in his house can be put to an end.

But that's not all. You have been drawn in love into the very Trinitarian life of God to participate in the intimate, face to face fellowship of the Father, Son and Spirit—in God's very life. He wants to share himself and all he is and has with you now. God is saying to you: "I created you for life in my house!"

~ Gordon Green

Prayer

Father of all, we give you thanks and praise that when we were still far off you met us in your Son, and brought us home. Dying and living, he declared your love, gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory. May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights, give light to the world. Keep us firm in the hope you have set before us, so we and all your children shall be free, and the whole earth live to praise your name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.⁴

¹ NT Wright, *Surprised By Hope*; p150

² Rick Renner, *Dressed to Kill*; p445

³ Edward Robinson, *A Greek and English Lexicon of the NT*; p452

⁴ A post-communion prayer from the eucharistic liturgy of the Scottish Episcopal Church as quoted in *Invitation to Theology* by Michael Jenkins; p137.