

LESSON 1

HEAVEN: OUR FINAL DESTINATION

BACKGROUND READING



When we begin a journey or a trip somewhere, we must first decide where we are going. Otherwise how will we get there, or even know if we are on the right road? In the same way, in order to begin the journey of our life in Christ, we must first reflect on our destination. Keeping the end goal of our lives foremost in mind will have a powerful impact on the way we lead our lives.

Beatitude: The Kingdom of God

Every human person is called by God to choose the path that leads to Him. Our feet are set at the start of this path. But where will it take us and what is our destination? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us the destination of all human beings is to live forever in the blessedness of God, or to live in God's beatitude. While often the word "beatitude" is used to describe the list of eight promises that Jesus made to His disciples in His Sermon on the Mount, the word "beatitude" itself means blessedness, and refers to the blessedness to which those who follow Christ are called: "The Beatitudes reveal the goal of human existence, the ultimate end of human acts: God calls us to his own beatitude" (CCC 1719).

So we know our destiny or destination is beatitude. But what does that mean? The New Testament describes in various ways the beatitude to which God calls us:

- ▶ The coming of the Kingdom of God (see Matthew 4:17)
- ▶ The vision of God: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8)
- ▶ Entering into the joy of the Lord (see Matthew 25:21-23)
- ▶ Entering into God's rest (see Hebrews 4:7-11)

Another way of thinking of beatitude is as St. Augustine, a famous theologian of the early Church, describes it in his simple and beautiful way: "There we shall rest and see, we shall see and love, we shall love and praise. Behold what will be at the end without end. For what other end do we have, if not to reach the kingdom which has no end?" (CCC 1720). This Kingdom, which has no end, where we will see God and enter into His joy and rest, is often called Heaven or paradise. This blessedness of God is none other than a share in the divine life of God Himself. But to share in the divine life of God is far beyond

the ability of man without the gift of grace, as the *Catechism* tells us: “Such beatitude ... comes from an entirely free gift of God” (CCC 1722). Thus we can see that the ultimate destination of every human person is Heaven, but we cannot get there on our own. This is why Christ came down from Heaven – so that He could walk the path to Heaven for us and show us the way.

Signs along the Way: The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes

We are called to journey along the path of Life in Christ toward our final destination of Heaven. But how do we know that we have chosen the path that leads there? The *Catechism* tells us that “The Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount, and the apostolic catechesis describe for us the paths that lead to the Kingdom of heaven. Sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we tread them, step by step, by everyday acts” (CCC 1724). The Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes given in the Sermon on the Mount, and the teaching of the Apostles act as signs and directions that lead us to the eternal Kingdom of God. We will take an in-depth look at the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes later this year and see how they act as signposts for the moral life.

The Ten Commandments are also known as the Decalogue. The word “Decalogue” is derived from Latin and means literally “ten words.” God gave the Israelites these Commandments after He had liberated them from slavery in Egypt, as told in the book of Exodus. God spoke these “Ten Words” to His people as He revealed Himself to them. The Israelites committed themselves to following

these laws as their response to God’s revelation of Himself and His loving care for them. As the *Catechism* explains, “The commandments ... express the implications of belonging to God through the establishment of the covenant. Moral existence is a response to the Lord’s loving initiative. It is the acknowledgment and homage given to God and a worship of thanksgiving. It is cooperation with the plan God pursues in history” (CCC 2062).

Even though the Ten Commandments are given in the Old Testament, which is the story of how God prepared His people for a Savior – Jesus Christ – they still apply to Christians. Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place” (Matthew 5:17-18). He did not do away with the Old Law. Instead, He perfected it and showed the power of the Spirit at work in it.

With the Beatitudes, Jesus fulfills all that was promised in the Old Law of the Ten Commandments. The *Catechism* says, “The Beatitudes are at the heart of Jesus’ preaching” (CCC 1716). They show us the face of Christ and His love. They shed light on the attitudes and actions of the Christian life. While the promises of the Beatitudes are strange and even paradoxical to the world’s way of thinking, they give hope when we are undergoing trials and difficulties. They tell us of the blessings and promises that already belong to the disciples of Christ. By living out the Beatitudes, the Christian disciple is already living out the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth.

LESSON 2

OUR CHOICE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

BACKGROUND READING



The truth of who we are – human persons made in the image and likeness of God – is at the beginning of our study of our Life in Christ. We need to understand how God made us if we are to understand how we are to live the life that God has planned for us – which is to know, love, and serve Him on earth and be happy with Him forever in Heaven. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that “Endowed with ‘a spiritual and immortal’ soul, the human person is ‘the only creature on earth that God has willed for his own sake.’ From his conception he is destined for eternal beatitude” (CCC 1703). To understand what this means, we must look at the creation of the human person and what it means to be created in the image of God.

Made in His Image

“God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). To be created in the image of God does not mean that we look like Him. Rather, it means that human persons are created with intellect, free will, and the capacity to love. This means that we can:

- ▶ Use our reason to know things
- ▶ Choose between right and wrong
- ▶ Love God and one another

These gifts that we have received from God allow us to enter into communion with other persons and, by grace, to enter into a relationship with God Himself. Of all the creatures on earth, only human beings can share in the divine life of God.

Made with an Immortal Soul

The Church tells us that human beings are “the summit of God’s creation” (CCC 343). When God created Adam He “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7). This breath of God is the gift of God’s very own life given to human persons. It set them apart from all of the rest of creation. This immortal soul, the spiritual part of human beings, is how we are made in the image of God and shows us that the choices we make in this life have great importance.

Our immortal soul – sometimes referred to as our spirit – is like God because:

- ▶ It is immortal – it will live forever.

- › It is where we know, freely choose, and love. These activities are unique to spiritual beings.

Only spiritual beings have souls that will live forever. This uniqueness in God's creation gives humankind a great dignity.

Humanity's Unique Place in Creation

At the beginning of creation, God made humanity in friendship with Him. The immortal souls of our first parents, Adam and Eve, were filled with God's divine life, which we call sanctifying grace. Sanctifying grace is the free and unearned life of God in our soul. It is a habitual state of blessedness, which means the life of God cannot be lost unless we choose to reject God (which Adam and Eve did through their disobedience, and which we do when we commit mortal sin). This sharing in the divine life is necessary if we want to live with God in Heaven.

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God and committed the original sin, Adam and Eve lost their friendship with God along with sanctifying grace. They also lost the harmony they possessed within themselves. Another way to describe this harmony is self-mastery: their intellect was in proper control of their passions and emotions. Because Adam and Eve were our first parents, we inherit their original sin, the sin committed at the origin of humankind. Now we also are born without the gift of sanctifying grace; we have lost the harmony of self-mastery; and we are inclined and attracted to sin.

But out of His great love for us, God sent His only Son to restore His friendship with us so that we can share in His blessedness in Heaven. Through His Passion, Death, and Resurrection, Jesus won our salvation and founded the Church on earth as a way of making His salvation accessible to all people for all time. But even though we once again share in God's divine life, our inclination to sin still remains. The great journey of our moral lives is to restore the harmony of self-mastery within our souls and reach the state of blessedness in Heaven.

Our Choice between Life and Death

And so we live in a dramatic tension. Being made in the image and likeness of God, each human being has free will and the ability to choose between God's will and self-will, between light and darkness, life and death. But now the choice is harder. Because our souls have been weakened by original sin, and because of our own personal sins, we are attracted by sin. The Gospel presents two paths to us: one path "leads to life"; the other "leads to destruction" (Mathew 7:13). It is all too easy for us to choose sin, the path to destruction, and hard for us to choose God's way, the path of life. But each human person was made for Heaven – to live forever with God in glory. Being made in God's image means that inside every one of us is the desire to do what is right and good. The fulfillment of our created nature is to live in the blessedness (beatitude) of God.