



MANY MANSIONS

John 14:1-14

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One of the things people yearn to know more about, perhaps more than any other, is the afterlife. Who will I recognize? Will I still be me? What will we do? Who's going to be there? Will there be clothes in heaven? While the Bible gives us surprisingly little on this topic by exploring Jesus' declaration in John, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places" we can actually learn a great deal.

The word translated variously as mansions, dwelling places, rooms, and even tents, comes from the Greek, *μοναὶ* (*monai*), which means "to abide". I think it has been so difficult for translators to settle on a single English word because of the manifold, heavenly implications in this verse.

First, the good news comes to those who have spent their entire lives cramped in like sardines. Imagine the vision of "many rooms" for those children that sleep three to a bed; imagine the vision of mansions for mothers whose space is so cramped one child sleeps in the kitchen. A spacious heaven would indeed seem a glorious and extravagant place.

The word *monai* also indicates a permanent residence rather than a transitory dwelling. This means heaven is filled with homes. For those who sleep under the highway in a cardboard box, this promise is indeed good news, bringing a sense of safety and even wholeness.

"Many dwellings" also implies that there are more than enough rooms. There is space to fit everyone. Heaven will be filled with people and not just a few of them. For those doubting that there is a place for them in heaven, Jesus assures them there is plenty of room.

Some translators suggest that, at least in part, Jesus not only means there are many homes but there are many *types* of homes. Dwellings that

accommodate people of all sorts. A joyous thought to consider that heaven will not be filled only with people who look and think the same, but rather people from every race and nation.

This also implies that we will retain a sense of personal identity. This reassures us that we will be ourselves in heaven. This is different than Buddhism which describes Nirvana as becoming "a single drop of dew, dissolving into an ocean of nothingness, a complete evaporation of whoever I was."

Jesus' words indicate that what we value most in this life will continue in the next. When he says, "In my Father's house..." He is telling us that heaven is a place of family, of deep connections with our fellow humans. A mansion is not a place for a single individual, but a community of people filled with love and care for one another. Those who treasure family and friends in this life and fear losing that in the life to come, need not worry.

For those who grew up in dysfunctional households with parents who created more problems than they solved and who want to be as far from even the idea of family as possible, there is good news for you too. This heavenly realm is ruled not by an absentee or abusive parent but their heavenly Father who is always reliable, always just, always forgiving, always loving.

In this life there is a great deal to be gained from learning to be thrifty and to live simply. It gives us perspective, helping us to treasure those things in life that are of deepest value, such as the gift of mothers whom we celebrate on this day. Living simply also enables us to appreciate something when we do receive it. In our first years of marriage, Wendy and I looked forward to those rare occasions we could dine at a fine restaurant. We would dress up, get a babysitter, and order food

with fancy names prepared with exotic ingredients such as truffle oil and duck confit.

While skimping and saving can build character, eking out an existence for a lifetime can grind down your spirit. And that is why, for some people, Jesus' words offer the promise of something special.

A few years ago, I conducted a funeral for an elegant, stately woman who had requested this passage be read. Furthermore, she wanted it read from the King James. I assumed it was because that was the translation she grew up with but I discovered it was more than that. Listen to the second sentence from the King James, "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you." Perhaps you heard the part she was so excited about.

Her children said their mother loved the idea of having a mansion awaiting her in heaven!

When we combine Jesus' words "many dwelling places", with the heavenly city described in Revelation filled with jewels and shining gold, we can be assured that heaven is not a place of merest simplicity. These "many dwelling places" Jesus describes would be in keeping with the glory of that city in Revelation with every mansion matching the extravagance of the surrounding city.

Heaven will be a place of resplendent glory in which everyone feels like royalty; royal children of the King of Heaven our heavenly father!

At this funeral, I learned this woman had lived a simple life and found an almost excited anticipation as she looked forward to heaven. And, I must say, I gained comfort from her understanding. Each of us have spiritual gifts and gifts of faith. There are some whose faith is so certain and clear that even though they know they will be leaving this life soon, they do so not with a sense of regret or loss but joy; joy that comes from the chance to be with God, to be in that mansion! It is a pure and guileless faith, firmly rooted in the promises of Jesus.

Sometimes, I need their kind of faith and perhaps you do too.

The Bible is a book with varied streams of thought on how we reach God and what happens when we die; and many thinkers I respect see so much of it as metaphor that, at times, I want and need that person who believes the words of Christ mean exactly what they say. If Jesus said "mansions" then he meant "mansions".

It's not that I don't trust Christ's words but God is so far above us it is hard for us to know when it is metaphor or plain speech.

In this case Jesus gives us a clue which one it is when he says, "if it were not so I would have told you!!" He seems to anticipate the exegetes, philosophers, and people like me coming at this passage with metaphor and he says to us "Hold on; I mean what I say; there is a room for you! or maybe even a mansion."

And though the image of a glorious heaven is heartening, it is not the foremost concern of most believers. There is another worry people have regarding heaven that is more pressing than any other.

There are so many different understandings of salvation, the kind of faith we need to have, the good works we must accumulate. Most people are less worried what heaven will be like than they are about getting there in the first place. People have told me, "Tom, I have done bad things in my life." Or "I know I haven't been as thankful in this life as I should", or "There are so many people that are so much better than me, how can I possibly get in?"

To these worries Jesus offers the most comforting words. Specifically, he says, "I will come back and take you to be with me that you may be where I am also." This means we don't have to know the way because Jesus does and he promises to be our escort on that journey. Like a special police escort that drives in front of a panicked father on the way to the hospital, Jesus will make sure we make it.

In these few words, Jesus has given us so much. And he assures me I don't need to work it all out!

To all of us he says, “Look at me and you see the Father; Look at me and you see the way. Look at me, look into my face and you can see that you can trust me. Look to me for the promise of finding that heavenly kingdom, for I am the way, the truth, and the life. And I will carry you all the way to your heavenly home.” Amen.