



THE REAL HEAVEN

What the Bible Actually Says

CHIP INGRAM

WITH LANCE WITT



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INTRODUCTION

So why another book on Heaven? That’s a fair question. And is it even possible to know anything about Heaven? After all, we don’t have any video footage of Heaven. We don’t have any astronauts who have landed there. We do have a number of people who claim to have been there. But who can we trust?

Just recently Alex Malarkey recanted his story about a Heaven encounter. His story, published by Tyndale House, was called *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven*. The book allegedly described what happened while Alex was in a coma after a car accident with his dad, Kevin. He was six years old at the time, and his story of miracles, angels, and life beyond this world became very popular. Alex, now a teenager, wrote a brief open letter in which he states, “I did not die. I did not go to Heaven. . . . I said I went to Heaven because I thought it would get me attention.”¹

Yet in spite of all the questions and unknowns and retractions, we are still intrigued with Heaven. In the last couple of decades there has been a surge of interest in the afterlife. Historically, when life gets hard and uncertain and dangerous, people tend to give more thought to life beyond this life. When life is hard “down here,” we tend to wonder what’s “up there.” Unless your head is buried in the sand, you can’t possibly believe we are living in utopian conditions.

No one is any longer living with the illusion that science or medicine or education or Google or Apple is going to solve the problems that plague our planet. In spite of all our advances, every day we see and hear about people who are killed by disease, weather, terror, accidents, crime, and natural disaster. Every single day we are confronted with our mortality. And so, we wonder. We wonder what happens to us after we die. Do we just cease to exist? Or, somehow, do we actually live on past the grave?

In the past few years, all kinds of videos, interviews, articles, and movies have been released that seek to give us some insight into the afterlife. But more information doesn’t always lead to greater clarity. More words do not always translate into more understanding. The truth is, the glut of content on this subject has led to a lot of confusion and uncertainty.

Many people’s views about Heaven have been shaped by Hollywood and movies about the afterlife. And while these movies might be interesting and entertaining, what is the basis for their portrayal of Heaven? In the last decade we have been deluged with scores of books about the afterlife. Yet even a casual

analysis reveals huge discrepancies in their views and perspective about Heaven—what it is like and who goes there—so we have to ask the same question. What is the basis for their portrayal of Heaven?

In addition to all the movies and books and articles, there has even been a flood of people who claim to have experienced death and then were brought back to life. Their testimonials of the afterlife have captured our attention. But their experiences and descriptions can be wildly different. How do we know who to believe? Whose opinion should we trust? Did they really die or was it a dream? Do people simply psychologically “fill in” their near-death experiences (NDEs) with their previous worldview? Why do some see tunnels of light and others tunnels of darkness? To put it bluntly, on what authority do all these people speak? How do we know who is credible and who is not? For years, many people believed Alex Malarkey. And how do you reconcile experiences that contradict one another?

It is easy to see why there is so much confusion about Heaven.

Unlike math or science, there is no empirical evidence about Heaven. There is no equation that proves its existence. You can't put it in a test tube or place it under a microscope. So how do we know what's true? Is there anybody we can go to who is a reliable authority on the topic? Or are we just left with vague speculation and conjecture?

Behind any discussion about Heaven is the core issue of “authority.” Upon what do we place our beliefs and hopes and declarations about Heaven? As followers of Jesus, we unashamedly

anchor all of our beliefs and hopes in the unchanging and eternal Word of God. And by the way, our belief in the Bible as true and authoritative is not just wishful thinking. There is credible evidence that the Bible is what it claims to be: God-inspired and God-breathed.

If you haven't yet settled your own view of Scripture, I want to encourage you to explore it for yourself. It has stood the test of time and the scrutiny of critics. (For more on this, see Appendix A: "Why I Believe the Bible.")

This book is based on the foundational premise that the one person who has authority to speak about Heaven is the One who created it.

After Alex Malarkey recanted his story of going to Heaven, here was his insightful comment: "When I made the claims that I did, I had never read the Bible. People have profited from lies, and continue to. They should read the Bible, which is enough. The Bible is the only source of truth. Anything written by man cannot be infallible."²

So in these chapters we are going to systematically cut through all of the clutter, white noise, and conjecture about Heaven. And I will attempt to answer the question, What does the Bible say about the place called Heaven?

In the following pages you will discover a simple, clear, practical, and Biblical view of God's greatest hope and promise for His children . . . HEAVEN.



1

DOES HEAVEN *REALLY* MATTER?

Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Colossians 3:2–4

I'm afraid to die." Those were words I never expected to hear roll off my dad's lips. My father was a rugged, tough Marine who had been in combat in World War II. Although he was not quite seventeen, his mother signed for him to enter the war and help his country. He was strong and athletic and was assigned as a 50-caliber machine gunner in Guam and Iwo Jima. He rarely spoke of the horrors of war, but on two specific occasions, he

shared the guilt he felt of killing thousands of men and the guilt of being wounded in Iwo Jima and being carried out while his fellow Marines died in combat.

He had seen fear in the eyes of other men, and I am sure he had battled it in his own heart. When he came home, the impact of the war manifested itself in subtle but real ways. I can remember him often getting up in the night just to be sure every door in the house was locked. He had been through so much and had witnessed the unspeakable evils of war. His casual beer consumption turned into an adult alcohol addiction that helped him deal with the pain and trauma of his past. It would forever mark his life.

In his later years my dad contracted a rare disease called Shy-Drager syndrome. This unusual disease is like Parkinson's, MS, and ALS all wrapped up into one. Over the previous few years we had watched my dad's physical health deteriorate as he battled this terrible disease. He went from having trouble walking to being confined to a wheelchair to ultimately being unable to get out of bed.

My dad did not come to Christ until he was in his fifties, but when he did, his life was thoroughly changed. And yet, as the reality of death began to sink in, this rugged Marine began to struggle with fear. One day as I was sitting next to his bed, he said, "I am afraid to die. I know I have a relationship with God and I know my sins are forgiven. But when I think about Heaven, it's just a blank." For my dad, Heaven was not a place of hope and comfort but was merely abstract, vague, and ethereal. Although he was confident that Jesus was going to be there and

he knew that the alternative to Heaven wasn't good, there was nothing about the thought of Heaven that brought deep peace or alleviated his fear of dying. Even though my dad was a believer, the idea of Heaven was so elusive and foggy that it didn't bring him any comfort. I suspect that is true for many people.

My dad's experience and fear was a wake-up call for me as a son and as a pastor. I wasn't able in that moment to quickly and clearly articulate what Heaven is like and what people will experience in Heaven. I had studied the Bible and taught many topics, but Heaven wasn't one of them. The truth is, my perspective of Heaven was not too much different than my dad's. I was certainly aware of key passages about Heaven, but I did not have a cohesive and thorough understanding of it. As my mind went back to my seminary days, I realized we never really spent much time learning about Heaven.

And so, not knowing how to comfort my dad, I decided to give him a book about heaven. My dad was very interested in the book, and at first he would read the book for himself. But eventually he got so sick he couldn't sit up and read. So his wife, Evelyn, would sit by his bedside and read to him.

I vividly remember coming back to visit my dad in his final days and observing a dramatic change in his outlook. The book helped Dad get a grasp of what Heaven is really going to be

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like. The truth about Heaven from God's Word turned Dad's fear into positive expectation.

While I was in his hospital room, a nurse came in and was talking to him about what they might need to do to extend his life. She wanted him to know his options, and she wanted to know his wishes about being resuscitated. And without any hesitation, he said, "Lady, no matter what happens, don't use any extreme means to keep me alive. Don't resuscitate me. Here's what I want you to know—I'm going to Heaven and it's going to be great." An unbelievable transformation had taken place. There was no fear and uncertainty. There was no panic or anxiety. There was only confidence and clarity. You see, my dad now had a deep assurance about Heaven. And that brought hope and comfort and made a huge difference in his last days.

That experience in many ways was a catalyst for my own journey of discovering what the Bible actually teaches about Heaven. And to my delight, and the encouragement of countless others, my discovery led to teaching about an amazing and wonderful place that God has prepared for us.

As we begin this study on Heaven, I want to ask you a few questions:

- How often do you think about Heaven?
- How many times this last week did Heaven cross your mind?
- When was the last time Heaven actually came up in a conversation?

- When was the last time you heard a sermon on Heaven?
- Do you have a Biblically informed view of Heaven?

While people are intrigued about the afterlife, my suspicion is that most of us really don't give it much thought or serious investigation.

Right now I want you to imagine walking into a hospital room. You can probably picture in your mind what it is like to walk down that hall past the nurses' station. You feel a little uneasy. You don't like hospitals. But on this day you have come to the hospital to visit your adolescent nephew who is dying from leukemia. You sit by his bedside and make small talk for a few minutes. But then, in the middle of your conversation he looks up at you from his hospital bed and asks, "Can you tell me what is going to happen to me after I die? Can you explain to me what Heaven is going to be like?" You are stopped dead in your tracks. In that moment, what would you say? I hope you'd do a better job explaining Heaven than I did with my dad, but my fear is that most of us don't have a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches.

"Can you tell me what is going to happen to me after I die? Can you explain to me what Heaven is going to be like?"

Once we get past the "no more tears, no more sorrow, and Jesus will be there," we are often left with just a few random thoughts about Heaven and struggle to articulate what the Bible actually

teaches about it. Even though we know we are going to die and even though we know it is the place where believers will spend eternity, most of us don't give it much thought. We seem to have more interest in where we are going for lunch than where we are going for eternity. For many of us, much like my dad, Heaven seems like a vague, mystical place that has little impact on our life today. Even though our life "here and now" often drowns out our thoughts about Heaven, I would like to challenge you to go on a journey with me to discover what Heaven is really like. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised at how a clear picture of your tomorrows will transform how you live your todays.

In fact, as archaeologists have studied ancient cultures and civilizations, one of their discoveries is that virtually every culture that has ever existed believes in an afterlife. There is something

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in our DNA that knows that this life is not all there is. In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon says that "[God] has also set eternity in the human heart" (3:11). God has planted inside of us an intuitive knowledge that there is life after death. The question is, what is that life like?

As we begin this journey together to discover what the Bible actually teaches about Heaven, I want to warn you that you are in for some shocking new information—Heaven is NOT what you think, and it is better than you imagined.

The mental picture most of us have of Heaven far more resembles a Hollywood movie scene than it does the teachings of Scripture. In fact, let me just ask you, when you think of Heaven, what comes to mind? What images do you see? If you are like the overwhelming majority of Christians, your ideas have little connection to the Bible's portrayal of Heaven.

So, the question we are going to ask and answer is this: What does the Bible actually say about Heaven? Our focus is not going to be on what other books say or what movies portray or what some person has experienced in a near-death encounter. We are going to laser focus on what God has to say about Heaven.

Before we dig into Scripture to discover what God has to say about Heaven, let's first answer the question, why study Heaven? Let me give you three reasons why this topic is important and relevant for us.

Three Reasons to Study Heaven

1. Our misconceptions are crippling us.

Most of us carry around some distorted views and false thinking about Heaven. We tend to believe we really can't know much about it. Certainly there are things about Heaven we won't know until we get there. But the Bible provides far more information about Heaven than most of us realize. And the Bible's description of Heaven is radically different than our Hollywood-infused images that we carry around in our minds.

Another misconception we carry around is that Heaven is an otherworldly experience, totally disconnected and different than anything we experience here in this life. We picture disembodied spirits that float around and play harps all day. And maybe like Clarence from the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, you think we are going to be earning our wings. Or maybe from some other movie, you think Heaven has no buildings or structures or furniture. Heaven is filled with wispy clouds, and apparently colors aren't allowed there, because everyone is wearing white. And obviously in Heaven there is no fashion because everyone wears a loose-fitting white robe. There are no belts, scarves, earrings, bracelets, vests, sweaters, or pants in Heaven. And Heaven must have a mega fog machine, because as you may have noticed in the movies, you never see anyone's feet in Heaven—the floor of Heaven is always covered with a layer of fog. I think these otherworldly portrayals of Heaven cause us to dismiss any serious consideration of it.

Another misconception held by many Christians is that Heaven is one really long church service. I'm a pastor, and as much as I enjoy great sermons and great worship music, the thought of Heaven being a really long church service sounds terribly boring. No wonder so many Christians don't seem all that interested in Heaven.

As I've spoken to students about Jesus coming again and the prospects of Heaven, some of them have said to me, "I don't want Jesus to come back until I get married and have sex."

I've also talked with an older couple who were planning a trip to Hawaii who said, "I don't want Jesus to come back until after our Hawaii trip."

We don't really know what Heaven is like, but we are pretty sure it can't be better than marriage, sex, or Hawaii.

When we carry these misconceptions around in our mind, the results are very predictable. We tend to live with a very temporal perspective rather than an eternal one. We unconsciously fix our energy on the here and now. We live for today and focus on the life we've been given here. This is in stark contrast to how most Christians lived in the first 2,000 years of the church's existence. Heaven was a central topic of teaching and discussion. It was also a central theme of Christian songs and worship music. But that has radically shifted in the last hundred years.

As strange as it sounds, one of the barriers we have to maintaining an eternal perspective is that we have it pretty good in this life. As we have gotten more comfortable with life "here" (earth), we have less desire for life "there" (Heaven). We can tend to live as though we believe this life is all there is and that it will go on forever. We know that's not true intellectually, but under the pressures and demands of this world, I find that we lose sight of the next. When my dad died and when my wife won her battle with breast cancer, I was powerfully reminded that everything about this life is fragile, vulnerable, and temporal.

No one knows the future. We could be days away from the next recession, terrorist attack, or natural disaster. The stock

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market could take a great dip or your company could downsize tomorrow. Car accidents, heart attacks, and cancer seem to be no respecter of persons. There is so much in this life that you and I simply can't control.

But when life comes unraveled and I am confronted with my mortality, all of a sudden the topic of Heaven becomes very relevant. When my secure and stable life intersects with crisis and tragedy, it can be a jarring experience. It is a sobering reminder that I am not guaranteed tomorrow. When you meet people who have cancer, or you talk with people who have debilitating diseases, or you travel to third world countries where people live in abject poverty, you discover that they think about Heaven a lot more than we do.

Since life is pretty stable for most of us, our view of Heaven is some version of a vague, mystical, boring place that we don't tend to think about much and have rarely studied. I have never taken a formal survey, but from my thirty years as a pastor, I can tell you that apart from some crisis, most North American Christians in general are not excited about or longing for Heaven. My hope is that this book will spark something deep inside you that turns your thoughts and desires toward Heaven like never before.

You know that feeling you have when you come home after a long trip? You're exhausted from all the travel and from sleeping in hotel beds. Then you pull into your driveway, walk in the front door, drop your suitcase, and think to yourself, *It is so good to be home*. Your body relaxes and you can feel the stress melt away. Coming home brings a sense of relief and joy and relaxation and peace. Like Dorothy says in *The Wizard*

of Oz, “There’s no place like home.”³ Well, multiply that a million times and you begin to get a glimmer of what Heaven will really be like.

Unfortunately, if we don’t understand this and continue to carry around misconceptions about Heaven, we will have little interest in it. The result is tragic. If my ultimate hope is not in Heaven, then I begin to ask this world and the people in it to come through for me in ways that will never happen. Frustration and disappointment with God, marriage, family, friends, and my job are inevitable. That’s why the Scripture commands us to think accurately and clearly about Heaven.

2. We are commanded to think about Heaven.

It’s not just a good suggestion or a nice idea.

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Colossians 3:1–4

Notice that the apostle Paul gives us two different commands in this short passage. We are commanded to set our hearts on “things above” and we are commanded to set our minds on “things above.” God’s commands are always for our benefit, and

when we obey them, we receive grace and experience His peace. A command requires us to willfully choose to do something. For most of us, our minds and hearts are set on the things of this life. The world's pressures and enticements dominate our hearts and minds. As a result, we are preoccupied with things that are temporal.

Last week I had breakfast with a forty-three-year-old executive at Google. He's strong and athletic, has a great wife and four kids, and just learned he has stage 3 cancer. I had been sick for two weeks, was behind on my message preparation, working on this book, and had a less-than-positive attitude . . . until I heard that word "cancer." My petty issues and pressures evaporated almost instantly as I stepped into his world and what really matters.

Much of our anxiety and lack of peace and struggle in this life is the result of not having a clear understanding of Heaven and an eternal perspective that comes from our hope in the life to come. Studying Heaven has practical implications for my life here and now. A clear understanding of Heaven results in a longing for Heaven, which empowers me to make wise decisions about my priorities in this life.

The third reason we should study Heaven is the most sobering reason of all.

3. A faulty view of Heaven destines us to a wasted life on Earth.

If that statement is true, then our study of Heaven becomes even more critical.

To help you understand this, I want to take you to the book of John. Jesus is spending His last night with the disciples before He will be betrayed and ultimately crucified. He has spent the last three years preparing these men to take over when He is gone. In John 13 Jesus has now washed the feet of the disciples and they have shared the Lord's Supper together. Judas is now en route to betray Jesus. Jesus is sitting there with eleven ordinary men who will transform the world. So, what would He say to them? If you were Jesus and this was your last chance to address the troops, what would you talk about? Would you share the strategic plan for kingdom impact? Would you talk about the organizational chart for the disciples and who is to be in charge? Would you talk about the church and the priorities the church should have? What would you say if you were Jesus?

He knows what lies ahead for these men. He knows they are going to be rejected and persecuted. He knows every one of them except one would be martyred for their faith. He knows they are going to take the message of Christ into areas that are hostile to the gospel. He knows that it will be hard on their families. In light of that reality, what words would Jesus leave them with?

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We don't have to wonder. We know exactly what Jesus told them in that moment:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. (John 14:1-3)

Jesus knew that a crystal clear view of eternity and of their future home in Heaven would sustain them through the most difficult of times. When life would get hard and when persecution would come, the hope of Heaven would motivate them to persevere. As Hebrews says, they were waiting for a heavenly city that God was building. And it wasn't some ethereal, vague place with a lot of fog and white robes. Their sense of Heaven was clear and real and tangible and attractive.

If Heaven is so important to Jesus and we are commanded to think about Heaven, how did we get so misinformed in the last hundred years?

- The father of lies wants us to get sucked into a world system that he is behind.

John 8:44 says that Satan is a liar and is the father of lies. He is a master of deception. Satan doesn't want you to have a clear picture of all that God has planned for you in eternity. So if he can get you to think that you will be floating around on clouds

and playing a harp in Heaven, there isn't a chance you will take it very seriously. Or if he can get you to think Heaven is a long, boring worship service, he knows there won't be any longing for a place like that. Or if the devil can get you to think that this world is where the good life is, then he knows you won't spend much time thinking about Heaven.

- Our theological training has lacked any serious emphasis and focus on Heaven.

I went back to some of my classic theology books. Most every evangelical pastor would have these on their shelves or at least be familiar with them. In one six-volume systematic theology set, there are two pages on the New Heaven and the New Earth. In the 737 pages of Berkhof's theology book, one page is dedicated to the New Heaven and New Earth. In Baxter's classic and very thick work called *Explore the Book*, there are about four pages dedicated to Heaven and eternity. A well-thought-through doctrine of Heaven is largely absent from some of our greatest theological works.

As a result, pastors like me weren't really taught much about Heaven. We learned about the various views of the end of times (eschatology), but almost nothing about Heaven itself.

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Therefore, there hasn't been much teaching on Heaven to our congregations. Our focus has almost exclusively been on helping people live successfully in this temporal world rather than being prepared for the eternal world.

Add to that a contemporary culture that is all about "now." We want instant everything. We don't like to wait, and delayed gratification has become a foreign concept.

Our distorted view of Heaven has led to a distorted view of this life. I want to suggest that one of the major reasons temptation is so hard to resist and our priorities are so skewed and we are so seduced by the world is because we have no real idea of what Heaven is really like. Understanding Biblical truth about Heaven has very practical implications.

So I want to invite you on a journey to discover what God says about Heaven. It will change your perspective. It will change your desires. It will change your priorities. *IT WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE.*