

A PLACE CALLED HEAVEN

10 Surprising Truths about Your
Eternal Home

DR. ROBERT
JEFFRESS



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To Randy and Kathie King

Thank you for your vision
for our Pathway to Victory ministry
as we share with the world
the message of Jesus Christ—the only Way
to that “place called heaven.”

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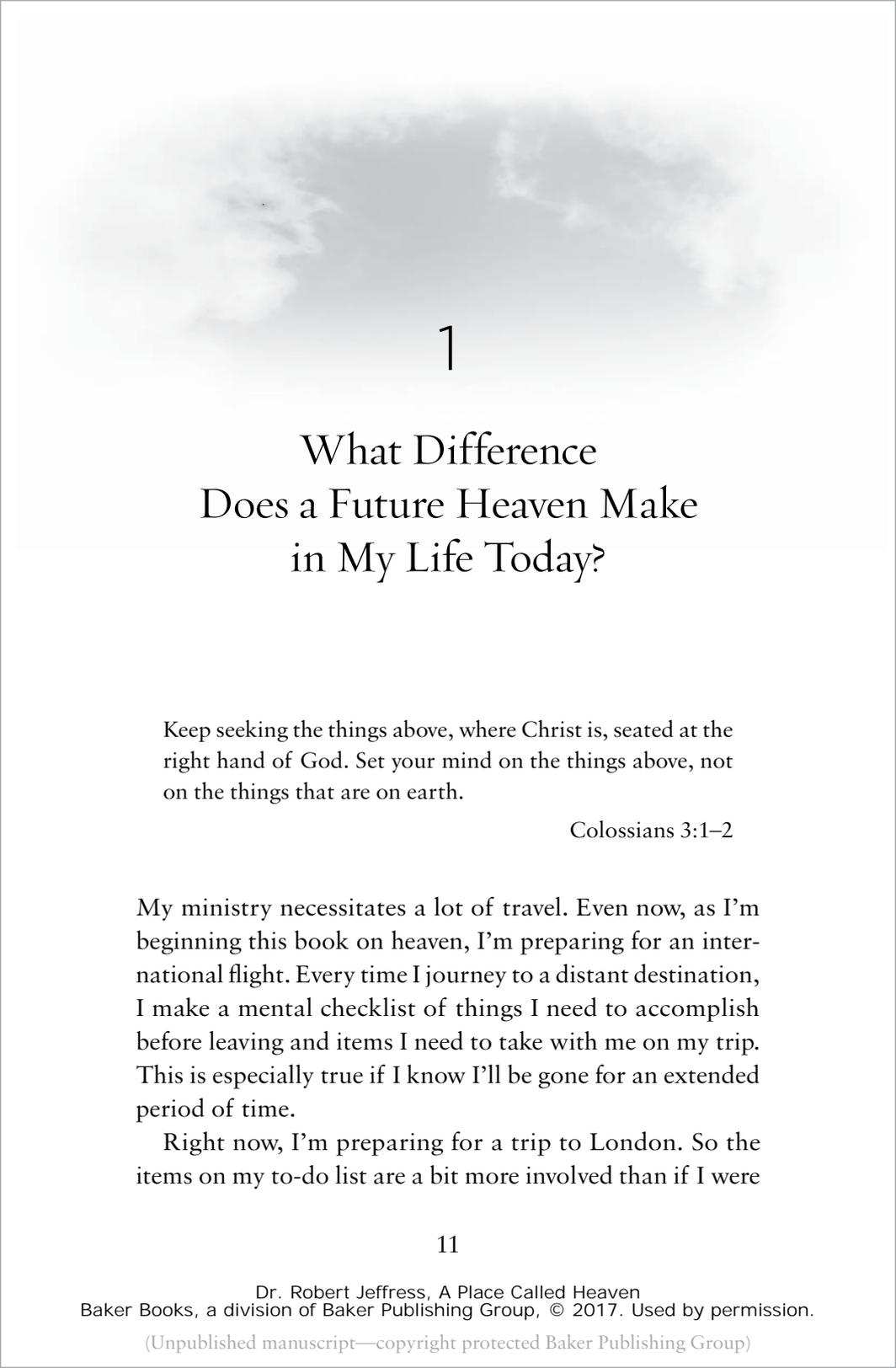
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1

What Difference Does a Future Heaven Make in My Life Today?

Keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.

Colossians 3:1–2

My ministry necessitates a lot of travel. Even now, as I'm beginning this book on heaven, I'm preparing for an international flight. Every time I journey to a distant destination, I make a mental checklist of things I need to accomplish before leaving and items I need to take with me on my trip. This is especially true if I know I'll be gone for an extended period of time.

Right now, I'm preparing for a trip to London. So the items on my to-do list are a bit more involved than if I were

flying to New York for a day or two. For example, I need to contact the post office and the newspaper to have my deliveries stopped. I need to contact my credit card company and notify them of where I'll be so they don't think my card or identity has been stolen and freeze my account. I need to call the cell phone company to have my phone enabled for international service. I also need to check the exchange rate of dollars to pounds, see what the weather is going to be like so I can pack appropriately, and most important of all . . . make sure I have my ticket and passport. Without a ticket I can't board the plane; without a passport I can't enter the country.

Wise travelers go through a routine to prepare for leaving home—even if it's just for a weekend getaway. Yet very few people ever take time to prepare for the ultimate journey to a distant land everyone will take. My trip to London will only be for a couple of weeks, but the journey I'm referring to is a one-way trip that will last for eternity: it's the journey every Christian will embark upon to that "place called heaven."

Admittedly, many Christians do not consciously spend a lot of time thinking about heaven—perhaps you haven't either. That's understandable. The overwhelming responsibilities of living in this world eclipse much thought about living in the next world. Additionally, the fact that we know so little about our home in heaven makes it seem both remote and irrelevant to our existence.

Yet we all inwardly yearn for a better world—especially when we experience the unexpected bad report from the doctor, the betrayal of a friend, the breakup of an intimate relationship, or the death of a loved one. At those times we want to believe—we have to believe—that there is a better

place in which to live. Gifted author Philip Yancey captures that reality when he writes:

The Bible never belittles human disappointment . . . but it does add one key word: temporary. What we feel now, we will not always feel. Our disappointment is itself a sign, an aching, a hunger for something better. And faith is, in the end, a kind of homesickness—for a home we have never visited but have never once stopped longing for.¹

This book is about that future home . . . heaven. Heaven is not some fanciful, imaginary destination created by well-intentioned individuals to keep you from being overwhelmed and crushed by the harsh realities of life. Jesus Christ—the One whom Christians are banking on for their eternal destiny—assures us that heaven is a real place:

In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:2–3)

As we will see in the pages ahead, Jesus is in heaven right now overseeing the greatest construction project in history—our heavenly home. And if He goes to the trouble of creating such an elaborate home for us, we can be sure He will return to gather us up and escort us into that indescribable new destination He is preparing for us.

There are many reasons we should be thinking more about our future home in that “place called heaven,” but the most

obvious reason is this: our departure for our future home is both certain and relatively soon.

The Inevitability of Death

“The statistics on death are very impressive,” one keen observer noted. “One out of every one dies.”² And when death comes, it comes suddenly—and often unexpectedly.

“Man does not know his time,” Solomon wrote. “Like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them” (Eccles. 9:12). The Old Testament patriarch Isaac didn’t know the time of his passing. In the twilight of his life, he confessed, “I am old and I do not know the day of my death” (Gen. 27:2).

Soldiers on the battlefield face the prospect of death daily. So do cancer patients who have been told their case is terminal. But have you come to grips with the fact that you are going to die—and that this event could be just around the corner? If it’s true that God has ordained every day of your life—including the day of your death—every second that passes moves you closer to the grave. That’s a great reason to start thinking seriously about your eternal home.

Jesus once told a story of a farmer content with the abundance of his possessions. Tearing down his old barns to build bigger barns to store his grain, the foolish farmer said to himself: “You have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry” (Luke 12:19). But God had other plans: “You fool! This very night your soul is required of you” (v. 20). The word translated “required” refers to a loan that has come due. Our lives are

simply on loan from God. He can “call in” the loan anytime He chooses!

Yet few of us—unless we’re of advanced age or suffering with a terminal illness—actually live in light of death. We view death as a distant possibility. And heaven? Well, that’s a subject for another time—or so we think.

But our departure from this life is certain. No one gets out of this world alive. “A person’s days are determined,” Job said. God “decreed the number of his months and . . . set limits he cannot exceed” (Job 14:5 NIV). Run all the miles you can and eat all the bran muffins you want; you’re not going to live on earth one second longer than God has predetermined.

The realization that our time on earth is finite should certainly motivate us to use our time wisely. Moses prayed, “Teach us to number our days and recognize how few they are; help us to spend them as we should” (Ps. 90:12 TLB). Every time I read that verse I think about one of the godliest men I have ever known, Harold Warren. Years ago, Harold served as the chairman of the search committee that called me to become the pastor of First Baptist Church in Wichita Falls, Texas. In his office, Harold had a small blackboard filled with chalk marks. One day I asked him what those marks represented. “Each mark indicates how many days I have left until I reach my seventieth birthday,” he said. “Every day I erase one to remind me how little time I have left and to encourage me to make the most of my remaining days.” Harold lived a few years past his seventieth birthday. On the day after that milestone birthday, he began *adding* a mark, reminding himself that he was living on “borrowed time.” Harold understood what it meant to “number our days.”

Recognizing how limited our time on earth is should cause us to think about what awaits us in eternity. Christian author Joni Eareckson Tada, who became a quadriplegic in a diving accident in 1967, has thought a lot about heaven since that time: “Heaven may be as near as next year, or next week; so it makes good sense to spend some time here on earth thinking candid thoughts about that marvelous future reserved for us.”³

In light of the certainty of heaven for Christians, Joni encourages believers to invest in relationships; to seek purity; to be honest; to give generously of time, talent, and treasure; and to share the gospel of Christ. Why? Because such choices carry eternal consequences and rewards, as we will see in future chapters.⁴

Perspectives from the Past

Joni Eareckson Tada isn't the only person who has thought about heaven. Writers, philosophers, and prophets throughout history have all given serious attention to what Shakespeare called “the undiscover'd country.”⁵ And most, if not all, have concluded that those who make the greatest impact on this life are those who think the most about the next life.

We've all heard the old cliché about being so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good. Some people use this idea to justify focusing their efforts and affections solely on this world—deluding themselves into thinking such a limited perspective is actually a virtue. Like the foolish farmer who acted as if he would live forever, these people fail to realize the brevity of this life and the length of eternity.

As C. S. Lewis observed, the problem with most Christians is not that they think about heaven *too much* but that they think about heaven *too little*.

If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get Earth “thrown in”: aim at Earth and you will get neither.⁶

Here is the great irony: the more we think about the next world, the more effective we become in this world. I’ve seen that principle illustrated in my life every time I’ve been in the process of transitioning to a new church. Whenever a new church has called me as its pastor, there has always been an intermediate time of about a month during which I’m wrapping up my work at my former church while at the same time thinking about my new church. Usually, those four weeks are the most productive of my entire tenure at the former church. Why? I know my time is limited, I’m motivated to leave my work in good shape, and I am free to make what I believe are the best decisions for the church—after all, they can’t fire me since I’m already on the way out! What a liberating feeling.

The realization that we are headed to a new location called “heaven” should be great motivation for us to spend our

limited time on earth productively. No need to be concerned about piling up a large amount of money—we'll leave it all behind when we depart. No reason to be fixated on what other people do to us or think about us—our calling to our new location is assured. Instead, grasping the reality of that “place called heaven” that awaits us should liberate us to invest our few remaining years on earth as wisely as possible.

As you review the lives of the men and women in the Old Testament who made the most profound impact on this world—such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Sarah—you discover one common denominator: they were captivated by the hope of the next world.

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that *they were strangers and exiles on the earth*. For those who say such things make it clear that *they are seeking a country of their own*. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a *better country*, that is, a *heavenly one*. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for *He has prepared a city for them*. (Heb. 11:13–16)

David also yearned for that “better country.” In Psalm 42 he wrote:

As the deer pants for the water brooks,
So my soul pants for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God;
When shall I come and appear before God?
(Ps. 42:1–2)

In the New Testament, Paul struggled with two desires: to depart for heaven as soon as possible and to remain on earth to fulfill his ministry.

Knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord . . . [I] prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. (2 Cor. 5:6, 8)

Paul realized that every minute spent alive on earth was a minute away from the home Jesus had prepared for him in heaven. That's an interesting perspective of life few people consider. I'm thinking about that reality as I write these words. Shortly after I return from London, I will have to spend three days in Detroit, Michigan, fulfilling a speaking commitment. Now, I have nothing against Detroit, but Detroit isn't my home. I'd rather spend those three days in my comfortable and familiar home, enjoying my family. I was made for Dallas, not Detroit. Paul was made for heaven, not earth. He didn't want to spend one more minute here than absolutely necessary.

Yet Paul realized it was necessary to spend *some* time here on earth to fulfill the mission God had entrusted to him of guiding other people to heaven. To the Philippian Christians, Paul confessed:

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. . . . But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. (Phil. 1:21, 23–24)

It wasn't just Paul who was torn between his duty in this world and his desire for the next world. Other early Christians

also sensed the pull toward “a country of their own.” Last year I visited the ancient catacombs underneath the city of Rome, which are painted with heavenly scenes of beautiful landscapes, children playing, and feasting. The tombs of Christian martyrs buried there bear heavenly minded inscriptions:

- “In Christ, Alexander is not dead, but lives—his body is resting in the grave.”
- “He went to live with Christ.”
- “He was taken up into his eternal home.”⁷

Third-century church father Cyprian encouraged his congregation to “greet the day which assigns each of us to his own home, which snatches us hence, and sets us free from the snares of the world, and restores us to paradise and the [heavenly] kingdom.” He then asked, “Who that has been placed in foreign lands would not hasten to return to his own country?” The answer was obvious: no one, because “we regard paradise as our country.”⁸

But having their eyes set on that far country didn’t mean these early believers were oblivious to what was taking place around them. In AD 125, an Athenian philosopher named Aristides wrote to the Roman Emperor Hadrian about the activities of Christians. After recounting a long list of their righteous acts benefiting believers and nonbelievers alike, Aristides told the emperor: “If any righteous person of their number passes away from the world they rejoice and give thanks to God, and they follow his body, as if he were moving from one place to another.”⁹

A Glimpse of Heaven

For the follower of Jesus Christ, death *is* “moving from one place to another”—like moving from the frozen tundra of the arctic circle to the sun-kissed beaches of Hawaii. Paul described a Christian’s change of location at death: being “absent from the body” means being “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8).

If heaven is our future forever home, why wouldn’t we want to know all we could about it? Imagine your employer tells you that you are going to be permanently transferred to a city you have never visited before: San Diego, California. You’ve seen a few pictures of San Diego and remember you had a cousin who used to live there, but for the most part you know nothing about the city. Don’t you imagine you would try to discover the options for housing, the best schools for your children, something about the cost of living, the climate, and a hundred other things about your new location? Only a fool would say, “I’m too busy with work and family responsibilities now to invest any effort in finding out about my future home.” Theologian J. C. Ryle wrote that every Christian will one day experience a similar—but eternal—“transfer”:

You are leaving the land of your nativity, you are going to spend the rest of your life in a new hemisphere. It would be strange indeed if you did not desire information about your new abode. Now surely, if we hope to dwell forever in that “better country, even a heavenly one,” we ought to seek all the knowledge we can get about it. Before we go to our eternal home we should try to become acquainted with it.¹⁰

However, as we begin to search the Scriptures for information about this “place called heaven,” we soon discover that

the Bible doesn't tell us everything we want to know about our future home. What the Bible reveals is true but it's not exhaustive. Instead, God has given us a pencil sketch or line drawing of our future home.

For example, the apostle Paul received a personal tour of heaven when he was “caught up to the third heaven . . . into Paradise” (2 Cor. 12:2, 4).¹¹ Yet, this man who wrote most of the New Testament never jotted down a pen stroke of what he heard or saw in heaven! Why? Because what he heard were “inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak” (v. 4).

And though the apostle John was given the most extensive vision of the future any Christian has ever received—recorded in the Book of Revelation—there were some aspects that John was commanded to “seal up . . . and do not write them” (Rev. 10:4). So why doesn't God tell us everything there is to know about heaven?

First, God knows that our minds are incapable of fully comprehending the complete magnificence of heaven. For example, how could you ever adequately describe the beauty of a sunset to a blind person who has never seen anything? What words would you sign to a deaf person to capture the all-encompassing majesty of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony? Our minds are designed to comprehend the experiences of this world but are incapable of processing the realities of the next world.

Additionally, if we knew everything about heaven we would never be able to concentrate on our God-given responsibilities here on earth. I realize this sounds like a contradiction to my earlier claim that being more heavenly minded makes us more earthly good, but it's not. Let me explain.

Suppose a child sits down at the dinner table and his mother places in front of him a plate of lima beans, which he normally wouldn't mind eating. But then his mother places a bowl of vanilla ice cream smothered in chocolate syrup and whipped cream on the table. What do you think the child will want to eat? The same thing you'd want to eat—the sundae! However, if the boy sits there with his plate of lima beans and his mother *promises* him an ice cream sundae after he eats his vegetables, then he'll dive into his lima beans with gusto, knowing something better is yet to come!

If God told us *everything* about heaven, we'd find it difficult to focus on the very important assignments God has charged us with during our brief stay here on earth. That is why God has given us just enough information about heaven to whet our appetite for the “sundae” that is yet to come.

Echoes of Eternity

The fact that God gives us only a glimpse of heaven shouldn't discourage us from discovering everything we can about our future home. Life is about much more than the seventy or so years we spend here on earth. Don't misunderstand what I'm saying: your life here on earth is extremely important. The choices you make, the character you form, and the affections you develop now will impact your life on the other side of the grave, as we'll see in chapter 8. As the fictitious Roman general-turned-gladiator Maximus Decimus Meridius told his men, “What we do in life echoes in eternity.”¹²

Nevertheless, our existence beyond death deserves our serious consideration. As the Roman philosopher Seneca

put it, “This life is only a prelude to eternity.”¹³ C. S. Lewis wrote about this in the final book of his Narnia series, *The Last Battle*. The children are involved in a terrible train wreck and are immediately transported to Narnia. They fear they’ll be sent back to earth, but Aslan assures them that they’ve finally come home.

“There *was* a real railway accident,” said Aslan softly. “Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadowlands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.”

And as He spoke, He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.¹⁴

Four Benefits of Being “Heavenly Minded”

Indeed, if our brief time on earth is only the “cover and title page” of our eternal existence, it only makes sense that we would want to know what comes after the title page. Beyond satisfying our natural curiosity about what awaits us beyond the grave, contemplating the next life can result in four tangible benefits in this life.

1. Focusing on Heaven Reminds Us of the Brevity of Our Earthly Life

Life is short. Eternity is long. To illustrate this reality, Randy Alcorn asks people to take a piece of white paper and place a dot in the center, then draw a line from the dot to the edge of the page. It would look something like this:



The dot represents our years on earth, while the line represents eternity. Right now all of us are living inside the dot. Yet very few Christians think beyond the dot to the line—to the eternity that awaits us. How foolish it is to live for the dot that is only a blip on the screen of our eternal existence.¹⁵

Yet the dot and the line *are* connected to one another. As brief as our existence in this life is, it's very much connected to our eternal existence. There is no break between the dot and the line. My friend Bruce Wilkinson says it brilliantly: “Everything you do today matters forever.”¹⁶

One of my closest friends and I both lost our parents when we were in our late twenties and early thirties. That shared experience has caused us both to talk frequently about how brief our time on earth is. When we are at dinner with our wives and something in the conversation touches on that topic, our wives will roll their eyes and say, “Oh no, here we go again with the ‘life is short’ speech!”

However, as much as I miss my parents, I see their “early departure” (at least from my perspective) as a gift from God that continually reminds me of how brief my life is. Their deaths remind me that while I live *in* the dot, I should never

live *for* the dot. I must live for the line with eternity in mind. And that is true for you as well.

The New Testament writer James said it this way: “You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away” (James 4:14). And the apostle Peter observed:

All people are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall.
(1 Pet. 1:24 NIV)

As one preacher in the Deep South said, “Life is like grass: It is sown, it is grown, it is mown, it is blown, and then it is gow-ne!” David not only agreed with this observation but prayed God would continually remind him of how brief his earthly life really was. In a psalm that echoed Moses’s petition for the Lord to “teach us to number our days” (Ps. 90:12), David asked:

LORD, make me to know my end
And what is the extent of my days;
Let me know how transient I am.
Behold, You have made my days as handbreadths,
And my lifetime as nothing in Your sight;
Surely every man at his best is a mere breath.
(39:4–5)

Focusing on the reality and truth of heaven as we are going to do in the pages ahead is one very practical way to continually remind ourselves how fleeting our time on earth really is.

2. Focusing on Heaven Prepares Us for the Certainty of Judgment

“Everybody Is Going to Heaven” may be a popular song but it’s also a horrendous lie. God’s Word reveals that everybody is *not* going to heaven. In fact, very few people are going to heaven if Jesus can be trusted on this subject. The Lord urged people to “enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matt. 7:13–14).

Tragically, the majority of humanity is on the wrong road that ultimately leads to the wrong destination. From the moment we’re born into this world we are on that road (or “way”) that is heading away from God. It’s the “way” of rebellion against God. As the prophet Isaiah wrote,

All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way. (Isa. 53:6)

No one has to do anything to end up in hell when he or she dies. All a person needs to do is continue traveling in the same direction he or she has been traveling since birth.

By contrast, relatively few people find the road that leads to heaven. In fact, to find that “way” a person must do a spiritual U-turn—which is the meaning of the biblical term *repent*. Repent (*metanoea*) means “to change one’s mind.” A simple definition of repentance is “a change of mind that leads to a change of direction.” Only when a person admits that he or she is on the wrong road can he or she discover

the right road. Jesus was clear that He is the only “Way” that leads to eternal life: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6).

Notice Jesus said that at the end of the road to hell and the road to heaven is a “gate”—one gate opening to eternal damnation and the other gate opening to eternal salvation. In each case, the gate is called “judgment.” The writer to the Hebrews declares a succinct but sobering truth: “It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27).

There is simply no escaping the fact that each one of us—Christians and non-Christians alike—will face God’s judgment when we arrive at the end of our lives on earth.

The “gate” or judgment for non-Christians is often called “the great white throne judgment” and results in eternal death. (We’ll look at this judgment further in chapter 9.) The apostle John provides a sobering description of this judgment of all unbelievers in Revelation 20:

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. . . . And if anyone’s name was

not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (vv. 11–15)

Contrary to what many believe, Christians are *not* exempt from God’s judgment. At the end of every Christian’s life is also a “gate” or judgment—but it’s a different judgment than the one non-Christians will face. This judgment or evaluation is often referred to as “the judgment seat of Christ.” Paul emphatically declared:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2 Cor. 5:10)

This is not a judgment of condemnation leading to hell, like the great white throne judgment. Instead, this is an evaluation leading to commendation by God and rewards that will greatly impact the kind of heaven we’ll experience. (We’ll explore this in detail in chapter 8.)

Reflecting upon the reality of heaven reminds us of the reality of God’s judgment at the end of our lives and serves as an incentive to make certain that we’ll experience the judgment that results in God’s rewards rather than His condemnation.

3. Focusing on Heaven Motivates Us to Live Pure Lives

Most of the television interviews I do for cable news are taped in the late afternoon or are live in the evening. That means I must concentrate on keeping my clothes clean throughout the day. I tuck a napkin into my shirt collar at lunch to prevent stains on my tie. I immediately use a wet

towel to wipe off any dirt on my suit jacket. And right before the camera rolls, someone runs a lint remover over my garment. All of this attention is necessary because the bright lights and high-definition television equipment are unforgiving and will reveal to millions of people any imperfections in my attire.

Similarly, there's a day coming when every Christian's "clothing" or actions will be placed under the glare of God's judgment and will reveal any imperfections. That "day" is the day of Christ's return in which "each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it" (1 Cor. 3:13). As we'll see in chapter 8, the purpose of this judgment is to determine not the believer's eternal destiny but his or her eternal rewards.

The Bible often uses clothing as a metaphor for our spiritual lives. It's helpful to understand that in biblical times people often wore two different types of tunics: an inner tunic (comparable to today's undergarments) that no one saw and an outer tunic that was visible to everyone.

Every Christian also wears two kinds of spiritual garments. Our "inner tunic" is our *judicial* righteousness—meaning our "right standing" with God—that God places on us when we trust in Christ as our Savior. Paul referred to our judicial righteousness when he prayed that on the day he finally met God he might "be found in Him, not having a righteousness of [his] own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ" (Phil. 3:9). Our "inner garment" of God's forgiveness is something we receive from Him. There is nothing we can do to improve it, soil it, or remove it.

But no one wants to walk around wearing only undergarments! That's why, to be properly dressed, we must put on

our “outer tunic.” This “outer tunic” represents a Christian’s *ethical* righteousness, which is how we live after we become a Christian. While judicial righteousness refers to our “right standing” before God, ethical righteousness represents our “right acting” before God after we are saved.

The Bible compares a Christian’s behavior after he or she is saved to these outer garments. Unlike the “one-size-fits-all” inner garment, there are a variety of external garments we can put on, ranging from stylish to hideous and clean to filthy. The apostle John encourages believers to be dressed in our best “clothes” when Christ returns. “It was given to [the church],” John wrote, “to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints” (Rev. 19:8).

You would never think of attending an elaborate, formal wedding in Bermuda shorts or a halter top. You would put on your finest tuxedo or dress for such a special occasion. However, even if you were wearing expensive clothes, no one would notice your finery if your garment had a humongous chocolate syrup stain on the front!

As Christians we should adorn our lives with the finest “garments” or good works we can—not to earn Christ’s forgiveness but to receive His rewards when He returns and consummates the “marriage” between Himself and His church. We should be careful to keep our lives “clean” and not stain those righteous acts with sin.

Of course, that’s easier said than done. We live in a sinful world in which pollution seeps from our culture like toxic waste bubbling up from a garbage heap. Being surrounded on every side with messages and images of immorality, rebellion, and lawlessness makes it hard to keep our character

clean—to keep it from becoming saturated with the stench of sin. And it’s getting more difficult as the days go by.

One of the best detergents for keeping our lives spotless is keeping our eyes focused on the promise of heaven. The writer to the Hebrews said that Moses, the son of royal privilege who was surrounded by the luxuries of Egypt, willingly endured “ill-treatment with the people of God” rather than enjoying “the passing pleasures of sin,” because “he was looking to the reward” he would receive in heaven (Heb. 11:25–27).

Moses understood that the pleasures and the treasures of this world last only for a moment. In due time they will be consumed, along with all creation—just as Peter said.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. (2 Pet. 3:10, 12)

Peter then asked, “Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be” (v. 11)? The answer is simple: we ought to be people of “holy conduct and godliness” (v. 11). Randy Alcorn illustrates why focusing on heaven can be a strong motivation for pursuing purity in this life:

If my wedding date is on the calendar, and I’m thinking of the person I’m going to marry, I shouldn’t be an easy target for seduction. Likewise, when I’ve meditated on Heaven, sin is terribly unappealing. It’s when my mind drifts from Heaven that sin seems attractive. Thinking of Heaven leads

inevitably to pursuing holiness. Our high tolerance for sin testifies of our failure to prepare for Heaven.¹⁷

4. Focusing on Heaven Places Suffering in Perspective

One of the questions I'm asked most frequently as a pastor is "Why did God allow _____ (some horrific experience in their life) to happen?" God never completely answers the "why" question when it comes to suffering. However, He has given us the promise of heaven to put suffering in perspective. The apostle Paul—who was well acquainted with suffering—wrote confidently:

For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:17–18)

Even though Paul had been shipwrecked, imprisoned, and beaten within an inch of his life on five different occasions, he described those horrific experiences as "momentary" and "light." How could Paul say such a thing? Was the apostle suffering from amnesia? No; his suffering could only be considered "momentary" and "light" when compared to the "eternal weight" of the future God had planned for him.

For example, you may be experiencing a difficulty you think will never end. Yet when compared to the length of eternity it is only "momentary." How long is eternity? One writer imagines a bird that comes once every million years to sharpen its beak on the top of Mount Everest. By the time the bird has succeeded in wearing that mighty mountain down

to nothing—eternity will not have even begun! The time of our suffering on earth is “momentary” when compared to the eternality of our home in heaven!

Our afflictions—however unbearable they may seem—are also “light” when compared to the “weight” of heaven. Think of it this way: would you describe a two-thousand-pound block of concrete as “light” or “heavy”? Compared to a feather, it certainly is heavy. But compared to a fully fueled 777 jetliner, that concrete block is light.

Similarly, the most horrendous difficulties you experience in this life are light when compared to the indescribable future God is preparing for you in that place called heaven. Teresa of Avila observed, “In light of heaven, the worst suffering on earth, a life full of the most atrocious tortures on earth, will be seen to be no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel.”¹⁸ Focusing on the hope of heaven doesn’t eliminate suffering in this world but it does help us put our suffering in perspective.

Heaven is the promise that God will eventually make all things right and that He will one day fulfill our deepest longings. Although God’s promise is yet future, it should make a tremendous difference in our lives today. As Alcorn explained, “If we grasp it, [heaven] will shift our center of gravity and radically change our perspective on life.”¹⁹ This is the hope of heaven—that *all* of creation will receive what it has long desired: freedom from the crushing oppression of sin.

For the anxious longing of the creation *waits eagerly* for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from

its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, *waiting eagerly* for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance *we wait eagerly for it*. (Rom. 8:19–25)

How we wait for this “place called heaven”—whether with anticipation or anxiety, whether with focused or unfocused living—matters both now and in the future. For what we do on earth today reverberates in the halls of heaven forever.