



HEAVEN, HELL, AND PURGATORY

RETHINKING THE THINGS THAT MATTER MOST

JERRY L. WALLS



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To Beatrice

“She, with a smile that left my faculties
Quite vanquished, said to me:
‘Turn and give heed;
Not in my eyes alone is Paradise.’”

—Dante

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INTRODUCTION

The immortality of the soul is something of such vital importance to us, affecting us so deeply, that one must have lost all feeling not to care about knowing the facts of the matter. All our actions and thoughts must follow such different paths according to whether there is hope of eternal blessings or not, that the only possible way of acting with sense and judgment is to decide our course in light of this point, which ought to be our ultimate objective.

—Pascal¹

This book deals with the most important questions you will ever think about, questions that every sane person must care about. You can deny that heaven and hell are real, but you cannot rationally be indifferent about the matter. Given what is at stake, the only sensible attitude is to care, and to care deeply.

The Christian doctrines of the afterlife have undoubtedly had an enormous impact on Western culture and have inspired everything from classic art and literature to the everyday hopes and fears of countless people. However, these doctrines have been under attack to one degree or another ever since the onset of the modern period, when a number of influential thinkers began to call them into question as part of a more general rejection of traditional religious belief.

Hell Disappeared; Heaven Too?

In more recent times, many intellectuals, even theologians, have suggested that heaven is nothing more than a fading memory and that the flames of hell have flickered out. Just a few decades ago, in 1985, the noted religious historian Martin E. Marty published an article entitled “Hell Disappeared. No One Noticed. A Civic Argument.”² One of the telling claims of his article was that he did a bibliographical search for recent material about hell but could find almost nothing. No one, it seemed, still believed in hell or thought much about it anymore. A few years later, in 1989, in an article in *Newsweek*, Harvard theologian Gordon Kaufman, citing what he saw as “irreversible changes,” declared, “I don’t think there can be any future for heaven and hell.”³

Just two years later, however, *US News and World Report* did a cover story entitled “Hell’s Sober Comeback” in which it reported a revival of belief in the doctrine, even among theologians. At the time, I had just written a dissertation defending the doctrine of hell for my PhD in philosophy at Notre Dame; that dissertation was published in 1992. The next year, two more books on hell were published by major university presses.⁴ Anyone who has been paying attention knows that hell has moved back to the front burner in the past few decades, and if Marty were doing a bibliographical search today, he would have no problem finding ample material.

Indeed, the doctrine of hell is a matter of intense debate at the current time, especially in evangelical Protestant circles. Some are defending traditional views of literal physical punishment, others are interpreting the torment of hell more metaphorically, and still others are arguing that the wicked will be annihilated rather than punished forever. More recently still, a number of theologians and philosophers have been arguing for universal salvation and denying that any are lost forever.⁵

A good measure of contemporary interest in these issues was the heated controversy that erupted over heaven and hell when Rob Bell's 2011 book *Love Wins* was the subject of acrimonious internet warfare before it was even published.⁶ Rumor had it that Bell was advocating universalism, denying hell, and the like. So volatile was the controversy that the cover of *Time* magazine posed the question, "What If There's No Hell?"⁷ Underneath the word "Hell" in large red letters, the cover read: "A popular pastor's best-selling book has stirred fierce debate about sin, salvation, and judgment."

Contrary to Marty's claim, interest in hell never disappeared after all, and indeed, it appears to be back with a vengeance.

Nor has interest in heaven waned, contrary to Kaufman's pronouncement in *Newsweek*. Indeed, Lisa Miller, for several years the religion editor of that magazine, published a book in 2010 with a title that takes on a certain ironic twist in light of Kaufman's prediction, namely, *Heaven: Our Enduring Fascination with the Afterlife*. Miller notes that belief in the afterlife has been on the rise lately, with a 2007 Gallup poll indicating that 81 percent of Americans claimed to believe in heaven, up from 72 percent in 1997.⁸

Contemporary interest in the afterlife is also apparent in the extraordinary success of books about heaven written by people who have "died" or had near-death experiences in which they claimed to visit the heavenly realm. An enormously popular example is *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back*,⁹ which was also made into a movie that was a box-office hit in 2014. As I write these lines, the most recent such bestseller is *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife*.¹⁰ Such books have the additional appeal of grounding the hope of the afterlife in empirical or scientific data. What they undeniably demonstrate, however, is our ongoing fascination with the glimpses (and in some cases extended visions) of the afterlife that they purport to provide.

More Than Fascination

But I want to emphasize that there is far more involved here than mere fascination. Indeed, fascination can be nothing more than curiosity at the unusual or the entertaining, the mysterious, and even the bizarre. Certainly, much that is written about heaven and hell is sensational and appeals to these tendencies. Moreover, popular writing about the afterlife is often sentimental, simplistic, and emotionally manipulative.

There is no doubt that some—perhaps much—of the continuing fascination with the afterlife is of the sensational and sentimental variety. It is the same sort of fascination some have with UFOs, ghost stories, and vampire romance novels.

But there is a much deeper reason we cannot look away, and that is simply because we have an enormous personal stake in these issues. Again, as I said at the outset, you cannot rationally be indifferent to heaven and hell. Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century philosopher, mathematician, and all-around genius, made this point with characteristically pointed passion in a number of passages, such as the one I quoted at the beginning of this introduction.¹¹ As Pascal notes, there are vast and far-reaching consequences for both our thoughts and our actions, depending on whether our lives will end after several decades or go on forever. Simply put, the Christian doctrines of the afterlife involve a set of profoundly substantive truth claims with explosive implications.

I have been thinking about these extraordinary truth claims and their explosive implications throughout my academic career and, indeed, for several years before I ever went to graduate school to study philosophy. I was raised in a small, rural church in southern Ohio where the Christian version of the cosmic drama, complete with resurrection, final judgment, and heaven and hell, was passionately communicated in the preaching and teaching. Listening to the sermons at Bethel Chapel, one knew

that matters of life and death and eternal happiness or misery were at stake in how one responded to the gospel.

All of this was called into question for me, however, when I went to Princeton Seminary to study theology. Not everyone I encountered there believed in the afterlife, let alone the traditional Christian account of it, and I particularly recall that the doctrine of hell was sharply challenged not only by some of the professors but by students as well. The clash between my religious upbringing and formation and my academic theological training was an existentially riveting one for me, and it forced me to think more deeply about these issues than I ever had before.

As I explored these matters more carefully, my conviction was confirmed that classical theology affirmed heaven and hell to be real in a way that resonated with my experience in my little country church. Moreover, given what was at stake in these doctrines, as well as their role in orthodox Christian teaching, it was clear to me that we must come to terms with them in one way or another.

Indeed, I think it is especially incumbent on all who profess orthodox Christianity to remain true to these remarkable doctrines and their far-reaching implications. I find it ironic that contemporary theologians sometimes wax eloquent about the radical nature of Christian theology or the truth of the Christian narrative but become mute or tentative when the issue of heaven is broached. The Christian story is extraordinary, to be sure, but it is radically incomplete and ultimately unsatisfying without a robust doctrine of the afterlife, and one simply cannot seriously affirm Trinity, incarnation, atonement, and resurrection without going on to heartily affirm “the life everlasting.”

In my own work as a philosopher of religion, I have been particularly concerned with exploring the rational credentials of these fascinating doctrines and examining the various philosophical issues they involve. I have not only argued that the philosophical challenges they face can be answered but, more

positively, I have also contended that these doctrines are powerful resources for addressing some of the most fundamental issues that drive the philosophical enterprise. In particular, I believe these doctrines are most pertinent to such perennial issues as the problem of evil, the nature of personal identity, the foundations of morality, and, ultimately, the very meaning of life.

I have argued this in some detail in a trilogy beginning with my book on hell. I was not planning to write a trilogy at the time, but later reflection led me to see that just as hell poses a distinctive set of interesting issues, so does heaven. So I followed up *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* several years later with *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy*. One of the issues I considered in that book was purgatory, and I devoted a chapter to that doctrine and thought I was done with it. Again, subsequent reflection led me to see that it too poses distinctive issues that deserve fuller exploration, and I was fortunate to receive a research fellowship in the Center for Philosophy of Religion at Notre Dame in 2009–10, where I wrote *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation*.¹² So by a sort of fitting poetic irony, I finished with purgatory where I had started with hell a couple of decades before.

In addition to this trilogy, I have written numerous essays on the afterlife as well as delivered many lectures and sermons on the subject. The present book is my attempt to distill my central thoughts on these issues in a more popular form than my academic books and essays. These issues matter to a far wider audience than professional philosophers and theologians, and I have aimed to communicate the heart of the issues in a way that will be fully accessible to all thoughtful readers who want to think about them more deeply. For those who want to think more deeply still, I urge you to follow up with my trilogy.

Before we proceed, I should say a word about the doctrine of purgatory, a doctrine that many readers will be surprised to see defended by a Protestant philosopher. At this point, I will only say that I am convinced not only that it makes biblical and

theological sense but also that it helps us understand heaven, and perhaps hell, much better. Readers can judge whether they agree with me when they have finished the book, but I hope they will not judge before that.

Where to Begin?

As we proceed, an interesting question in its own right is where to begin. Dante's famous masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy*, begins of course with hell, proceeds next to purgatory, and then concludes climactically with heaven. That makes perfect literary and dramatic sense. However, when we think about the matter theologically and philosophically, this may not be the best way to go. For some very profound reasons, hell can be best understood only in light of heaven. And the same is true of purgatory.

The point here is similar to what classic theologians have said about the nature of evil in relation to goodness. The essential point is that evil is not something that exists in its own right in the same way that goodness does. The fundamental reason for this is that God is perfectly good, and everything he created was originally good, even Satan.

Evil, then, must be defined in relation to goodness. As many classic theologians have put it, evil is a privation or a loss of the good. So evil things are good things that have become deformed in some way and thereby have gone bad. In other words, evil is a parasite that can only subsist on things that were originally good by way of corrupting them.

In a similar fashion, hell is to heaven as evil is to goodness. Heaven is the fundamental reality, and we cannot really understand hell unless we understand heaven first, just as we cannot grasp the idea of a fallen world unless we start with a world that is originally good.

As just noted, my own trilogy does not follow this order for reasons already given. I also started with hell and ended,

somewhat ironically, with purgatory. But in this book, in which I will deal with all three regions of the afterlife, I shall begin where I think it makes best theological and philosophical sense to begin. When it comes to the things that matter most, heaven is clearly the place to start. So let us now turn our eyes in that direction.



HEAVEN, TRINITY, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

“Have you thought of an ending?”

“Yes, several, and they are all dark and unpleasant,” said Frodo.

“Oh, that won’t do,” said Bilbo. “Books ought to have good endings. How would this do: *and they all settled down and lived together happily ever after?*”

“It will do well if it ever comes to that,” said Frodo.

“Ah!” said Sam. “And where will they live? That’s what I often wonder.”

—J. R. R. Tolkien¹

Any account of the human story that hopes to be credible must be true to the human heart. It must have an honest and realistic grasp of what moves human beings, what drives them to do the things they do. And here, there is a broad consensus among wise observers of the human race. One thing that is absolutely fundamental to human motivation (and apparently

hobbit motivation too) is the desire for happiness, and if you fail to grasp the deep significance of this, you cannot possibly understand human nature or human history.

I stress the “deep significance of this” because, unfortunately, for many people the word “happiness” has become tarnished by superficial associations. Indeed, many think the concern with happiness is merely a product of contemporary self-centered consumerist culture.² And certainly if happiness is reduced to what money can buy, it is a pretty shallow concept. But the point I am making here is that the quest for happiness has a long-standing legacy that is far richer and more profound than its contemporary commercial caricatures.

A classic statement of the human quest for happiness is by Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher, in his book *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle opens his book by making the obvious point that every inquiry or undertaking is carried out in the pursuit of some good. The deeper question, Aristotle notes, is whether there is some good that all human beings seek. Aristotle identifies that good as happiness because it is complete in a way other things are not.³

To see what he meant, consider your typical college student who spends lots of energy and money to get a good education. We can ask him why he wants that education. The conversation might go something like this.

“I need it to get a good job.”

“Why do you want a good job?”

“Because I want to have a family, buy a nice house, drive a fast car, and take vacations in Europe.”

“Why do you want a family, a nice house, a fast car, and vacations in Europe?”

“Because if I had all those things I think I’d be happy.”

“But why do you want to be happy?”

Long pause . . . incredulous stare . . . he shakes his head and walks away.

The point here obviously is that when we have reached this answer, the question can no longer be sensibly asked. It makes no sense to ask, “Why do you want to be happy?” It is self-evident to any rational person with normal human emotions and feelings.

Aristotle, of course, was a pagan philosopher who lived centuries before Christ was born. But it is worth emphasizing that Aristotle’s analysis is one that is widely shared not only by classic philosophers but also by Christian thinkers. A notable example is Pascal, the brilliant mathematician and religious thinker of the seventeenth century whom I cited in the introduction. His writings are full of astute observations about the human quest for happiness and the fact that many people seem to be failing badly in that quest. Here is one such example.

Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things. Despite these afflictions man wants to be happy, only wants to be happy, and cannot help wanting to be happy. But how shall he go about it? The best thing would be to make himself immortal, but as he cannot do that, he has decided to stop himself thinking about it.⁴

And now, let’s consider a similar observation from John Wesley, the great eighteenth-century theologian and evangelist. Listen to how he addressed the restless seekers of his day: “Do you not still wander to and fro, seeking rest, but finding none? Pursuing happiness, but never overtaking it? And who can blame you for pursuing it? It is the very end of your being. The great Creator made nothing to be miserable, but every creature to be happy in its kind.”⁵

Okay, so it is widely agreed that everyone wants to be happy. Indeed, most people don’t need a philosophical analysis or an expert’s opinion to know this. All they need is even a small dose of self-awareness, and they will see and feel this truth with vivid, and sometimes painful, clarity.

But here is where the broad agreement ends. After this consensus, the questions come charging in. For a start, there is much disagreement on what it takes to make us happy, or what the essential ingredients of happiness are. As Aristotle noted, there are lots of answers to this question. Is it pleasure? Is it power? Is it personal peace of mind? Is it excellence of character? Is it some combination of these, or what?

Is Happiness Even Possible?

These are interesting and important questions, but for now I want to move on to note that there are other questions about happiness that are more unsettling. Perhaps most unnerving of all is this question: Is happiness even achievable? Perhaps none of the answers suggested above, or any other answer, is the correct one. Maybe happiness is some sort of illusion or elusive ideal that no one can really experience. Perhaps at the end of the day it is just a tantalizing temptation, an alluring invitation that we can never actually realize.

Several years ago, a movie came out with the ironic title *Happiness*.⁶ I say ironic, because none of the characters were really happy. There were characters chasing happiness in various ways. There were characters pretending to be happy, smiling pleasantly and putting on a good show. There were others trying to convince themselves that they were happy. But the message that came through sharply and disconcertingly was that no one is really happy. Happiness is at best a short-term illusion that will be shattered by hard reality.

Or is it the case that partial happiness is possible, but nothing more? Perhaps we can achieve moments of happiness or approximations of happiness, but that's about it. Perhaps the best "happiness" available consists in the ironic understanding that we can never close the gap between our ideals and the "real world."

And these questions raise other closely related ones. Why do we have such a deeply rooted and pervasive desire for happiness anyway? And is this a blessing or a curse? Recall Pascal's words above, which make it clear that we have no choice in the matter. Not only is it the case that we all want to be happy, but we "cannot help wanting to be happy."

We have a built-in hard drive to desire happiness, but what if that hard drive is a guarantee of frustration, a mechanism that ironically assures our unhappiness because it can never be fully realized? Are we, through no fault of our own, born with an "addiction" for happiness in a universe where it can never be satisfied?

That Elusive Happiness . . . and Love . . .

Now let me venture another observation. Not only do we naturally and perpetually seek happiness; we also seek love. It is perhaps not as self-evident as our desire for happiness, but it is nearly as obvious that normal human beings have a deep yearning to love and to be loved. The countless love songs that pervade our culture, as well as the love poems and songs from centuries past, are eloquent testimony to the human longing for love.

Indeed, we can take this a step further and point out that there is a deep connection between our yearning for love and our desire for happiness. Only if we love and are loved can we be truly and deeply happy. For many people, the essential key to happiness is to find their soul mate, the perfect relationship that they believe will fulfill them and at last provide the happiness they crave.

Unfortunately, this observation only makes the questions about happiness we noted above even more acute. For love seems no less elusive than happiness; perhaps it is even more so. Everyone seems to want it, but lots of people seem to be missing out. Along with all the songs that celebrate love, there are also lots of songs, stories, and movies about broken hearts,

frustrated love, unrequited love, looking for love in all the wrong places, and even cynicism about whether real love even exists.

So the question remains whether there is any good reason to think that the happiness gap can or ever will be filled. Are we just stuck with deep and persistent desires for love and happiness that we will take to our graves, but that will never be fully satisfied? And is that the end of the story? If so, the story is a sad one; indeed, it is a tragedy in the classic sense of a story with a painful ending.

Heaven and the Ultimate Romantic Comedy

One of the greatest books ever written is a poetic trilogy about heaven, hell, and purgatory. I refer, of course, to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The third volume of the trilogy, *Paradiso*, is about heaven, as I noted in the introduction. Accordingly, the book ends on a gloriously happy note, as a comedy in the classic sense must. But the point here is not merely a literary one but also a theological one. Heaven is the end not just of a literary masterpiece but of the entire human drama.

Let us explore this in more detail by turning to the most famous vision of heaven in the Bible, namely, the final three chapters of the book of Revelation. I want to identify seven truths about heaven from these chapters, beginning with this very point that heaven holds out the promise that the human story is destined to come to a wonderful end.

This is suggested with poetic and dramatic force in Revelation 21:6, where we read, "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End." Notice immediately that our hopes for the end of the story will be deeply shaped by our view of how the story began. Our view of the Alpha will determine our view of the Omega. This is what gives us hope that the Omega point of human history is one to be eagerly anticipated, not dreaded.

The words “it is done” signal that the human drama spelled out in the pages of Scripture has achieved its proper end. Now the word *end* is a fascinating one that has a double meaning. The common meaning, of course, refers to the conclusion of something, as in the end of a movie. When “The End” appears on the screen, we know the movie is over, the story has been told, and it’s time to leave.

But the word *end* also has another meaning that is less common but loaded with deeper significance. The “end” of something in this sense refers to its purpose, its goal, its intended target or outcome. And this is the sense in which God identifies himself as the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.

What this means is that God is the Creator of everything, and the ultimate purpose or reason for which everything exists is to be rightly related to God. The implications of this are staggering, to say the least. It means that history is going somewhere and that the human story has an Author and Director who far exceeds what any finite person or group of persons can conceive, plan, or orchestrate. Moreover, he has the power and the wisdom to bring the story to the glorious end for which he created it.

But to truly appreciate why the Author of the human story can bring it to a comic end, we need to understand that there is more to his nature than power and wisdom. Indeed, if we go to the very last line of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, we find a famous description of God that aptly captures what I am talking about. In the final canto of *Paradiso*, Dante has a striking vision of the Trinity, and this moves him to wonder about the mystery of the incarnation, how the divine and human natures were united in Christ. As he ponders these mysteries, his mind is illumined by divine light, and he realizes that his will is completely in tune with love, “the love that moves the sun and the other stars.”⁷⁷

Notice that description of God’s love. It is “the love that moves the sun and the other stars.” This is a striking picture of God as Alpha, the source of all that exists. The ultimate, original

reality is not the big bang, it is not matter and energy, nor is it the laws of nature. Behind and before all of these is eternal love.

One of the most extraordinary passages of Scripture is John 17, often referred to as Jesus's "High Priestly Prayer." Here we see the Second Person of the Trinity, the incarnate Son of God, speaking intimately to his Father, the First Person of the Trinity, shortly before he is arrested and offers his life for the salvation of the world. At this crucial moment, we are privileged to listen in as the Eternal Son offers up his prayers for his disciples. And as he anticipates his death, it is amazing to realize that he recalls memories that go all the way back to eternity, before the world was even created. One of the most stunning of these is in verse 24, where he prays that his disciples will be with him to see his glory, which, he says, "you [the Father] have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world" (NRSV).

Before there was a world or angels or any other created beings over which God ruled as King or Sovereign Lord, God was a Father who had a Son. And the Father and Son and Holy Spirit existed before all worlds in a relationship of perfect love and joyful delight in each other. God did not need a world to love in order for it to be true that "God is love" (1 John 4:16). Rather, the fact that "God is love" is an eternal, fundamental reality.

The church fathers described this eternal relationship of delighted love by using aesthetic images of music and dancing. No doubt C. S. Lewis had these church fathers in mind when he noted "that in Christianity, God is not a static thing—not even a person—but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a drama. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance."⁸

When we let this sink in, we can see why the human drama is a comedy, indeed, a musical comedy that features lots of dancing. Its Author has deep comic sympathies that go all the way back to eternity. Here is another description of God that captures this point, this time from John Wesley. Now keep in

mind Wesley's point that we were made for happiness and invariably find ourselves pursuing it. It is no mere coincidence, nor is it an unfortunate curse, that we are constituted this way, for God is "the fountain of happiness, sufficient for all the souls he has made."⁹

The Alpha who created us for happiness is the Omega who is the fountain of happiness. This is the foundational truth that holds out the delicious prospect that the human story is destined for a glorious end that will surpass our wildest imagination.¹⁰

The Answer to Our Deepest Longings: Three Images

This brings us to a second truth about heaven, namely, that it will answer our deepest longings for happiness and satisfaction. Notice that heaven is described in three images that represent some of our most vivid and familiar desires *and* their fulfillment. Almost everyone knows what it is like to be parched with thirst, to have sharp pangs of hunger, and to feel the powerful yearning of sexual desire. These desires are part of our common experience as human beings, and all of us relish the feeling of having them satisfied.

It is most appealing, then, to read these words of promise from God himself immediately after he identifies himself as the Alpha and the Omega: "To him who is thirsty, I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life" (Rev. 21:6). And in the last chapter of the book the invitation is reiterated: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Rev. 22:17). Heaven, then, will answer the first of these deeply felt human desires by quenching our thirst for life with the free gift of the water of life. No wonder Wesley described God as "the fountain of happiness, sufficient for all the souls he has made." God's supply of the water of life is infinitely plentiful!

A second image of heaven that depicts it as satisfying our quest for happiness and satisfaction is that of a wedding feast. In an earlier chapter, we read, “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:9). Weddings in biblical times were highly festive occasions with ample food and plenty of drinks available. Recall that Jesus’s first miracle was turning water into wine at a wedding (John 2). So imagine the joy of sitting down at such a feast when you have not had a meal for a while, and the hunger pangs are dominating your thoughts and feelings.

There is a third picture here—namely, heaven as a wedding—and it is more central to the portrait of heaven than the first two. Indeed, the bridegroom in this wedding is God himself. “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Rev. 21:2; see also 21:9–11). To appreciate this image, think of an engaged couple deeply in love when they finally embrace in marital pleasure on their wedding night.

Now when I say heaven is the satisfaction of our deepest longings and desires for happiness and satisfaction, I do not mean to suggest that those desires will be quenched in the sense that they will be eliminated and we will never feel them again. Rather, our best desires will be ongoing but will not be frustrated as they often are in this life. Rather, they will be fulfilled in an ongoing dynamic fashion, like the newlywed couple on their honeymoon.

Incidentally, a question that is often asked is whether there will be sex in heaven. That’s a good question and an altogether natural one to raise, since heaven is a place of perfect happiness, and sex certainly represents one of the deepest and most exciting pleasures of this life. While it is arguable that Scripture does not definitively settle this question, Jesus seems to clearly imply that there will be no sex in heaven when he teaches that there will be no marriage in heaven (Matt. 22:23–32). What we *can* be sure of, however, is that sex is a foretaste of even greater

delights in the world to come. The great Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga puts the point beautifully as follows.

Sexual eros with its longing and yearning is a sign and foreshadowing of the yearning for God that will characterize us in our healed and renewed state in heaven; and sexual satisfaction and union, with its transports of ecstasy, is a sign and foreshadowing of the deeper reality of union with God—a union that is at present for the most part obscure to us.¹¹

So if sex is in fact absent from heaven, that will not in any way detract from the reality that the fulfillment we experience there will be in every case a step up, not a step down, from the joys and pleasures of this life.¹²

A New Heaven *and* a New Earth

This brings us to a third truth about heaven that further shows why it is the perfect comedic end to the human story. Immediately preceding the verse I quoted above about the Holy City coming down out of heaven, we read this: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea” (Rev. 21:1). Notice, the Holy City comes down out of heaven to a newly made earth (see again Rev. 21:2, 9–11). Biblical scholars are divided over whether this means that the earth will be entirely new or that this earth will be cleansed and renewed. But what is clear is that heaven will finally be on earth.

It is important to emphasize this to correct a mistaken picture of heaven that is pervasive in popular piety. According to that picture, going to heaven is all about “leaving this old body and this sinful world behind” and flying off to be with God far away from the cares and concerns of planet Earth. But true biblical faith is not about *escape from* the body but rather concerns the *resurrection of* the body. The Apostles’ Creed famously expresses

that faith in these words: “I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” The Christian view of the life everlasting is unequivocally life in a resurrected body.

In popular piety, it is commonly held that we go to heaven when we die and immediately experience the fullness of the eternal life God has in store for us. As N. T. Wright has put it, the popular picture is that going to heaven is a “one-stage postmortem journey.”¹³ The biblical account of the journey, however, is a bit more complicated. It is more like a flight with a layover than a direct flight. In traditional terms, there is an intermediate stage between death and God’s final salvation, during which we await and look forward to the resurrection of our bodies. We will examine this in more detail later, but in most traditional theology, it is held that our souls survive in conscious form in this intermediate stage as we await the resurrection (cf. Rev. 6:9–11).

In fairness to popular piety, many pastors as well as theologians have not always been clear in distinguishing this intermediate stage from the fullness of eternal life that we will enjoy when we are resurrected. Wright has underscored this difference by referring to our future resurrection as “life after life after death”!¹⁴ So to apply the metaphor of a flight with a layover, “life after death” is the layover before we reach our final destination. We arrive at our final destination of “life after life after death” not by taking flight from this world and landing in heaven. Rather, our final destination is achieved when heaven comes to this world, when the Holy City, the New Jerusalem comes down to the New Earth.

The main point here is that God’s plan of salvation is much larger and more comprehensive than saving human souls, or even human beings. God is saving and redeeming his entire fallen creation. As Paul tells us in Romans, the “whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Rom. 8:22). And when our redemption is complete,

when we are resurrected, the entire created order will also be liberated from sin and redeemed.

If we take Paul's claim about the "whole creation" seriously, I believe—following John Wesley and C. S. Lewis—that we should expect animals to be in heaven. While some may dismiss this out of hand as mere sentimental piety, I would argue that it is an altogether reasonable conviction for those who believe that our world was created by a God of perfect love who cares so deeply for his entire creation that he notices every sparrow that falls (Matt. 10:29).

Lewis argued in particular that pets will be in heaven on the grounds that they have a degree of personality by virtue of their relationship with their masters, and that this identity can be preserved in heaven. "In other words," he wrote, "the man will know his dog: the dog will know its master and, in knowing him, will be itself."¹⁵ Wesley defended a more expansive view of animal immortality, arguing that all animals, not just pets, will be redeemed. Moreover, he dared to speculate that in the world to come, animals might even be given enhanced powers of understanding that would make them capable of a relationship with God.¹⁶

Perhaps this is part of what is involved in the fulfillment of that extraordinary prophecy of a day to come when the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord, and the wolf will lie down in peace with the lamb (Isa. 11:6–9). It is also worth noting that the account of heavenly worship in Revelation describes four creatures who join in praising God, three of which are like a lion, an ox, and an eagle (Rev. 4:6–8). Immediately after this, we are told that the twenty-four elders sing these words in praise to God: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (Rev. 4:11). The God who created "all things" is fittingly praised, it seems, by all his creatures.¹⁷

To reiterate the main point, we cannot have a good theology of salvation if we do not begin with a good theology of creation. This whole world is God's creation, just as our bodies are his creation that he pronounced to be good. God is not consigning our bodies to the dustbin and saving only our souls. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" is not the last word on our bodies. No! And the fact that he is redeeming our bodies is emblematic of his larger goal of saving his good but fallen creation in its entirety.

That is one reason why it is crucial to emphasize that our salvation was achieved by Jesus taking on a full human nature, living a life of perfect obedience to the Father in this world, and feeling real pain and anguish in a real human body and soul when he died for us. And that is why it is essential that his resurrection was a bodily one that left the tomb empty on Easter morning. The resurrection of Jesus is God's promise to us that we too shall be resurrected and have a body like Jesus's risen body.

Christ's resurrection is the beginning of the new creation. But there is unfinished business. The full impact of Easter is yet to be seen and felt. When our bodies are raised and heaven comes to a renewed earth, God will have finished the work he began when he raised Jesus from the dead. When heaven comes to earth, when the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray—"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"—is fully answered, then the work of Easter will be done.

The Death of Death

This brings us to a fourth truth about heaven that is packed with comic significance, and indeed, it is one of the most poignantly beautiful promises in the Bible. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4). Notice this text recognizes that mourning and tears

are an altogether natural and appropriate part of a world filled with death and pain. And if this were the last word, the human drama would be a tragedy. Christians should not be in denial about the painful realities of our world. There is a time to weep, and indeed, those times come all too often and inevitably in this life. But when heaven comes to earth in all its fullness, the time for weeping will be over. Death, crying, and pain will be no more. They are part of the “old order of things” that will have passed away. Life, laughter, and pleasure will be the last word rather than death, crying, and pain. (We will explore this more fully in a later chapter.)

The Reunion of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness

A fifth truth about heaven is that it will represent the perfect unity of truth, beauty, and goodness. According to the Christian vision of reality, these three great ideals are unified; they are aspects of an integrated whole. By contrast, one of the hallmarks of the modern/postmodern period of history is the shattering and fragmentation of this unity. Indeed, the philosopher Susan Nieman has suggested that the quest to find the unity between these three great ideals is at the heart of the philosophical enterprise. She writes, “The drive to metaphysics is a drive to find a real order behind the apparent one, in which all the things we long for—the good and the true and the beautiful—will be connected and revealed.”¹⁸ Many philosophers have despaired of ever finding this unity and have reconciled themselves to the harsh conclusion that the connection between truth, beauty, and goodness is irreparably broken.

We can also see the fractured remains of this previous unity in much of pop culture. Stories and songs that are “honest” and “real” are often dark and painful. In other words, the unvarnished truth is not beautiful, nor is it good. In this situation, many feel we are faced with the painful choice of embracing a

harsh reality or a beautiful fantasy or illusion. Indeed, a common expression conveys the inevitability of this fragmentation. How often have all of us heard someone say with respect to some wonderful prospect that it is “just too good to be true”?

In fact, this is what many people think about heaven. I recall a conversation from several years ago with one of my friends and his wife, both of whom are atheists. As we were talking about heaven, she exclaimed, “It is such a beautiful idea, but I just can’t believe it is true.”

As we read the description of heaven in the book of Revelation, we might find our hearts longing for such a place but wondering if it is nothing more than a wonderful fantasy. The physical description of heaven is famous for its depiction of stunning beauty. In addition to streets of gold, it is said that it “shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal” (Rev. 21:11). But even more appealing is the assurance that heaven is perfectly good. Not only are death and mourning eliminated, but “nothing impure will ever enter it” (Rev. 21:27; cf. also 22:14–15).

In view of our fear that it’s just too good to be true, it is noteworthy to read, “He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true’” (Rev. 21:5; cf. 22:6). God himself addresses us from his throne to assure us that perfect beauty and goodness will connect with truth when he makes all things new, never again to be broken apart.

Celebrating the Best of Human Culture

A sixth truth is that heaven will preserve and celebrate the best of human culture. We see this indicated in the following: “The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into [the city]” (Rev. 21:26). Earlier in the book, we learn that heaven will include people “from every nation, tribe, people and language”

(Rev. 7:9; cf. 5:9). This suggests that part of the fascination and delight of heaven will be composed of enjoying the multifaceted products of human creativity represented by every nation, tribe, and language under the sun.

Recall that God gave humans what is called his “cultural mandate” in the very beginning when he commanded them to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). This means we are not only permitted but commanded to explore and develop the potentialities and possibilities that God built into the earth by design when he created it. Indeed, our acts of creativity expand upon and elaborate God’s creation, so when we create, we are in a sense cocreating with him.

Now the human record on this score is obviously mixed. We can point with pride to the music of Bach, the fiction of Tolkien, the architecture of Westminster Abbey, the Pyramids, and the Taj Mahal, but we must recoil in shame at weapons of mass destruction, implements of torture, and the pollution that has marred the beauty of nature.

Since God is renewing and redeeming his creation, and heaven is the climax of that redemption, there is every reason to believe that our cultural mandate will remain in effect in the new creation. Not only will the best of human culture be preserved and celebrated for our ongoing enjoyment, but also new works will be created, including no doubt countless new forms of creativity we have yet to imagine. No doubt the most moving pieces of music, the most beautiful paintings and poems, the most magnificent buildings, the most profound scientific discoveries, the most fascinating novels, plays, movies, and so on have yet to be conceived and produced.

The Climax: At Home with God!

Seventh and finally, heaven is being at home with God. This is not only the climactic truth about heaven; it is also the central

reality that makes heaven the satisfaction of our deepest longings and aspirations. After the account of the Holy City coming down from heaven as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband, we read, “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God’” (Rev. 21:3).

The modest little preposition “with,” which appears three times in this verse, is actually one of the most beautiful and suggestive words in human language. In particular, it often signals the profound truth that one is not alone. Indeed, the word is used to convey everything from mere physical presence to relationships of a deeper sort, including sexual intimacy. And the most wonderful and fulfilling of all relationships is a relationship with God. Notice: “God himself will be with them and be their God.”

And when God is with us, when he lives with us, we will feel at home in this world in a way we never have before. For that was God’s plan from the beginning, as pictured in the garden of Eden. He wanted to live with us in a close, loving relationship, one in which we would feel complete joy and peace in his presence. While even now we can enjoy a personal relationship with God, we must also recognize that we are still living in a fallen world that is “groaning for redemption.” As such, we are not fully at home in this world in the way God originally intended us to be. Heaven is our true home, but we are not there yet, and we should not pretend that we are. This world is still marred by sin, death, and mourning, all of which cause those tears that God promises to wipe away.

We already have, of course, a powerful foreshadowing of what it will be like for God to live with us in the life of Christ when he walked on earth. Recall that one of the names that Isaiah the prophet gave the promised Messiah was Immanuel, which means “God with us” (Isa. 7:14; cf. Matt. 1:23). This extraordinary truth is also conveyed by John, who named Jesus

the Word who was with God in the beginning and who was God (John 1:1). And in one of the most famous descriptions of the incarnation, he went on to say, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). Notice, the Word was “with” God, and he came to dwell among (with) us.

This profound description of the incarnation is echoed in Revelation. Indeed, the same verb that is used in John 1:14 to describe Jesus “dwelling” among us is also used in Revelation 21:3. God will be with us; he himself will live with us and be our God. Only a few people had the extraordinary experience of being with Jesus when he walked this earth, but heaven holds out the promise that all who trust him for salvation will one day live with God on this earth in perfect intimacy.

Indeed, Revelation goes on to tell us something even more astounding, namely, that the inhabitants of the Holy City “will see [God’s] face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (Rev. 22:4). This is astounding, because in the Old Testament, when Moses asked to see God’s glory, God allowed him to see his “back” but said, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Exod. 33:20). So what was denied one of the greatest of Old Testament saints will be the extraordinary privilege of all the redeemed in heaven.

The promise that we shall see the face of God is the basis for one of the most famous ideas about heaven in classical theology, namely, the “beatific vision.” The word *beatific* means “blissfully happy,” so the idea here is that seeing the face of God will elicit supreme happiness and joy from all who see it. Indeed, so wonderful is the beatific vision that some classical theologians suggest that it is not only the very essence of heaven but pretty much the whole of it. In this view, heaven is a sort of timeless bliss that results from being so absorbed in the vision of God that we tend to lose any awareness of anything else. So given this view, the other features of heaven will add little to our joy and happiness. Our resurrected bodies, the new earth, relationships

with other persons, creative and cultural activities, and so on will pale into insignificance in light of the beatific vision.¹⁹

By contrast, New Testament scholar Ben Witherington takes Scripture to suggest that the beatific vision is an experience that will occur in human community. Commenting on Revelation 21:3, he notes that “humanity will finally see God and his glorious presence and live. This has traditionally been called the beatific vision, but it happens in the midst of the people of God, not as an isolated, mystical experience.”²⁰

This is a more natural way to understand the beatific vision from the standpoint of a strong creation theology. Randy Alcorn, who has made the case at length for a fully physical heaven, complete with all the essential features of any good society, contends that it is a grave error to divorce our experience of God from our experience of the things that give us joy in this life.

It [the grave error] sees the material realm and other people as God’s competitors rather than as instruments that communicate his love and character. It fails to recognize that because God is the ultimate source of joy, and all secondary joys emanate from him, to love secondary joys on earth *can be*—and in heaven *always will be*—to love God, their source.²¹

So here is a paradox; indeed, we can call it the love paradox. If we love God most of all, we are thereby inspired to love other things more deeply and truly than we would if we loved them more than we love God.²² To see God’s face in heaven will not mean that our interest in other people and other created things will diminish or even that we will love them less. Rather, it means we will see God clearly in all his good gifts, and we will love and enjoy them *even more* as a result.

Since God’s entire creation reflects his glory, we get some preliminary glimpses of this aspect of heaven even in this life. Consider the joy and beauty that sometimes overwhelm us as we watch the sun set over the ocean or find ourselves entranced as we

view a great work of art or listen to a stirring piece of music. Or consider the profound delight and gratitude we feel as we gaze into the eyes of someone we love, whether a spouse, a child, or a grandchild. In these sorts of experiences, Alvin Plantinga notes, “there is a kind of yearning, something perhaps a little like nostalgia, or perhaps homesickness, a longing for we know not what.”²³

The homesickness is for heaven, the longing we feel is to be fully at home with God, and the nostalgia is for Eden. All these profound yearnings will be fulfilled when we see God with stunning clarity everywhere we look and enjoy the pleasure of his intimate presence with us.

It is worth underscoring in this connection that the description of the Holy City we have been examining prominently includes images of Eden.²⁴ In particular, we are told that the river of the water of life flows down the middle of the main street and that on either side of the river stands the tree of life bearing fruit every month (Rev. 22:1–2). In the early chapters of Genesis, of course, Adam and Eve were barred from eating from the tree of life after sinning against God and breaking fellowship with him. But now that heaven has come to earth, and the curse is no more, there is free access to the tree of life and the promise that its leaves will provide healing for the nations.

This is the life for which we were created, to be fully at home with God in the world he created for us to enjoy and to see his face reflecting his love and glory everywhere we look. With Eden thus restored, the tragic turn taken by the human drama in Genesis has been altogether overcome. Indeed, the human drama comes to the perfect comic end, one of unsurpassable beauty and goodness.

A Misguided Spirituality, an Impoverished View of Heaven

Several years ago a movie came out entitled *Michael*, in which John Travolta plays the starring role of an angel who is permitted

one more visit to earth before he must go to heaven forever.²⁵ The implicit message is that heaven is an ethereal, cold, bloodless, and boring place, whereas earth with its carnal pleasures is where the real joy and vitality are to be found. To be deprived of earth and consigned to heaven thus appears to be more like an eternal death sentence than an eternal reward.

What we have seen from the sketch above is that it is a profound mistake to set heaven over against earth in that way. To aspire to heaven does not require turning our backs on earth with all its pleasures. Rather, it is about longing for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. God's final end is accomplished not by undoing or destroying his originally good creation but by redeeming and renewing it. So the notion that we must choose between heaven and earth is simply a false dilemma. To choose heaven is to choose earth at its best, as God ultimately intends it to be.

Lying at the root of this false dilemma is often a deeply misguided, though often sincere, notion of spirituality. For many Christians, the thought that heaven will be a physical place and that it will include bodily, cultural, and social pleasures seems unworthy of God. Persons who are truly spiritual, it is thought, should be above such concerns.

Here it is important to distinguish two senses of *spiritual* that are easily and often confused. First, that which is spiritual can refer simply to anything that is nonmaterial. Thus souls, angels, and God are examples of things that are spiritual in this sense, whereas bodies, basketballs, and blueberries are not. But second, the word *spiritual* can also mean anything that is in accord with God's will, anything that honors and glorifies him.²⁶

Now this is what is important to see. Not everything that is spiritual in the first sense is spiritual in the second. Demons and fallen angels, for instance, are "spiritual" in the first sense but not the second. Just because something is not material does not make it good or assure that it honors and glorifies God.

Moreover, there are things that are not spiritual in the first sense that are spiritual in the second. Take eating, for instance, an activity that at one level can be viewed as purely physical or biological and one we share with dogs, cows, sharks, and mice. For Christians, however, eating should be a deeply spiritual matter. Recall Paul's words: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). Notice, we are to do it all for the glory of God. In other words, everything about our lives should be spiritual.

I have always been fascinated in this regard by a passage in the Old Testament. In Exodus 24, after the giving of the Ten Commandments, God confirms his covenant with Moses and the Israelites. On this occasion, God calls seventy of the Israelite elders along with Moses, his brother, Aaron, and a couple of other men to worship on Mount Sinai. Here is the passage I find fascinating. "Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself" (Exod. 24:9–10).

This must have been an awesome experience, a spiritual encounter of extraordinary power. And how do you think they reacted? Would you expect that they would be on their faces in awe, perhaps even terror in the presence of the Holy One of Israel? Well, here is the next verse: "But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank." Did you get that? "They saw God, and they ate and drank"! I would guess these men never looked at a meal the same way again!

Now if we are to do all things for the glory of God, does this mean we must do everything with a somber mind-set and never laugh and have fun? Not at all! Indeed, it is just the opposite. To eat to the glory of God is to eat with a sense of gratitude and joy; it is to recognize that our food is a gift of God. Gratitude is by definition a happy state of mind. Recognizing God

as the source of all good things enhances our joy; it does not diminish it.

It is crucial not only for our understanding of heaven but also for our Christian life as a whole that we learn to resist the misguided notion of spirituality that sets the material world in opposition to God. To fall into this misguided notion of spirituality is, in effect, to hand over God's good world to Satan and to give the impression that he invented physical beauty, fun, laughter, pleasure, and so on. And to give Satan the credit for the material world results in a view of spirituality that is thin, shriveled, and fragmented and a view of heaven that is correspondingly impoverished.

Can You Believe It? A Dancing God?

One of the most strident critics of the doctrine of heaven is, not surprisingly, one of the most hostile opponents of Christianity in the history of Western thought. I refer to Friedrich Nietzsche, my favorite atheist. Nietzsche was the son of a pastor. His father died when Nietzsche was just five years old, which left a profound and lasting mark on him.

The last book he wrote before he went insane was *The Anti-christ*, his most bitter attack on the faith he rejected as an adolescent. In that book he claims that the “most contemptible of all unrealisable promises” generated by the Christian gospel is “the *impudent* doctrine of personal immortality.”²⁷ The notion that ordinary people like first-century fishermen could aspire to immortality was laughable to Nietzsche, and he pulled no punches in pouring out his scorn on the idea.

Before saying where I think Nietzsche got things utterly and profoundly wrong, it is worth noting that some of his criticisms were on target. Indeed, it appears that many of the Christians with whom he was most familiar had a badly deficient creation theology. Many of them seemed to advocate the misguided sort

of spirituality we examined above. They seemed to be people who disdained the body as well as the material world and professed to care only for the life to come.

It was Nietzsche's belief that many people who professed such things did not really feel that way but pretended to do so because they thought it was "spiritual" to do so. The honest person, he contended, valued the body, even when he pretended not to. Nietzsche's "gospel" was a call to forthrightly love the body and the earth and all that they offer us. "A new pride my ego taught me, and this I teach men: no longer to bury one's head in the sand of heavenly beings, but to bear it freely, an earthly head, which creates a meaning for the earth."²⁸

Christians who devalue the body and trivialize this earth had their heads in the sand in his view and were neither honest nor realistic. While they professed values that sounded lofty and high minded, in Nietzsche's view, they were in fact deluded and unhealthy.

Despite his own poor health and other personal struggles, Nietzsche strongly affirmed the goodness of this life. Indeed, one of the things that struck me several years ago in reading through one of his most famous books, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, is how often he praises dancing and expresses his own desire to dance. In one of these passages, he even states the sort of God he would believe in: "I would believe only in a god who could dance. And when I saw my devil I found him serious, thorough, profound, and solemn: it was the spirit of gravity—through him all things fall."²⁹

On these points I must agree with Nietzsche. Christians who despise the body and devalue the world of physical creation distort and diminish their own faith, including the doctrine of heaven. And I wish Nietzsche had understood that Christians of all people have the most reason to dance, because God is the God of the dance. Randy Alcorn sums up the point nicely: "If you believe Satan invented dancing or that dancing is inherently sinful, you give Satan too much credit and God too little."³⁰

And yet Nietzsche went wrong at a more profound level that kept him from seeing a God who could dance. What blinded Nietzsche to the dancing God was that he could not believe that love of the kind Christianity teaches is real. In one of the most revealing passages in all his works, he offers his analysis of what he calls “that most brilliant stroke of Christianity: God’s sacrifice of himself for man.” Here is Nietzsche’s account: “God makes himself the ransom for what could not otherwise be ransomed; God alone has power to absolve us of a debt we can no longer discharge; the creditor offers himself as a sacrifice for his debtor out of sheer love (can you believe it?), out of love for his debtor.”³¹

Of course, Christians themselves have always been staggered by the astounding truth at the heart of the gospel: that God loves us so much that he gave his Son to die for our salvation. Think, for instance, of Isaac Watts’s famous hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” and the amazement he expresses that God could love us so much.

Nietzsche clearly felt what a shocking claim it is that God would die on a cross. Earlier in the same book, he asks, “What could equal in debilitating narcotic power the symbol of the ‘holy cross,’ the ghastly paradox of a crucified god, the unspeakably cruel mystery of God’s self-crucifixion for the benefit of mankind?”³² But while Nietzsche felt the shock, he did not respond with gratitude and worship. Rather, he was simply incredulous. “Can you believe it?” he asks, making clear that for him it is inconceivable that such love could actually exist.

A Tale of Two Lambs

According to the Christian story, such love is an eternal, primordial reality, as we saw above. One of the most beautiful pictures of this love is conveyed in the New Testament image of Jesus as the perfect lamb who was sacrificed for our sins (John 1:35–36;

Rev. 5:6–12). Indeed, there are texts that suggest that Jesus as the Lamb of God was in some sense slain before the world was ever created (Rev. 13:8; 1 Pet. 1:18–21). That is to say, God loves us with an eternal love and was already prepared to pay the price for our salvation before he ever created the world.

Nietzsche had an altogether different view of ultimate, primordial reality. In his vision of things, the bottom-line reality is what he called “the will to power,” which is the natural tendency of the strong to dominate the weak. The powerful automatically exercise their power over the powerless, and as Nietzsche saw it, this is not only natural; it is inevitable. The will to power is the true engine that drives the world, the real dynamic that courses through the world and makes it go as it does. In one of his more memorable expressions of this view, he puts it like this:

There is nothing very odd about lambs disliking birds of prey, but that is no reason for holding it against large birds of prey that they carry off lambs. . . . To expect that strength will not manifest itself as strength, as the desire to overcome, to appropriate, to have enemies, obstacles, and triumphs, is every bit as absurd as to expect that weakness will manifest itself as strength.³³

Indeed, Nietzsche was so skeptical of the idea that a being who was strong might not dominate the weak that he ridiculed as mere superstition the notion that “it is within the discretion of the strong to be weak, of the bird of prey to be a lamb.”³⁴

And yet that is exactly what Christianity says God did when his Son became the lamb who was sacrificed for our sins. The one who holds all power revealed himself most clearly not in domination but in becoming a lamb and submitting to death on the cross before rising again.

Notice, the lamb who was slain is at the center of the throne in the book of Revelation (Rev. 5:6; 7:17). The lamb is not weak by nature but rather is supremely powerful. His “weakness” in dying for our sins was not imposed on him by someone stronger

than him but was, rather, an expression of the power of perfect love. Jesus was very clear that no one had the power to take his life from him but that he laid it down in love to his Father. “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father” (John 10:18).

Nietzsche simply could not conceive of love like this really existing, and this was the deepest reason he found the idea of heaven preposterous. And this, I want to emphasize, is *the* watershed issue. Is Dante right that love moves the stars, or is Nietzsche right that the will to power makes the world go round? Do the strong inevitably dominate the weak like those birds of prey that carry off lambs, or is ultimate truth both more surprising and more beautiful than we could ever have guessed?

Nietzsche’s Alpha was the will to power, so he could not imagine an Omega where perfect love is the order of the day. But if the Trinity is the Alpha and the Omega, then heaven makes perfect sense. If the Trinity is bedrock reality, then love is the very heart of the meaning of life. And when perfect love achieves its ends, we may hope to find the perfect happiness we crave, the perfect comic end of the cosmic drama.