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HEAVEN

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RANDY
ALCORN

Heaven

by Randy Alcorn

Part I
A Theology of Heaven

SECTION ONE

REALIZING OUR DESTINY

Chapter 2

Is Heaven Beyond Our Imagination?

To speak of “imagining heaven” does not imply or entail that heaven is a fictional notion, constructed by deliberately disregarding the harsher realities of the everyday world. It is to affirm the critical role of the God-given human capacity to construct and enter into mental pictures of divine reality, which are mediated through Scripture and the subsequent tradition of reflection and development. We are able to inhabit the mental images we create, and thence anticipate the delight of finally entering the greater reality to which they correspond.

Alister McGrath

When Marco Polo returned to Italy from the court of Kublai Khan, he described a world his audience had never seen—one that could not be understood without the eyes of imagination. Not that China was an imaginary realm, but it was very different from Italy. Yet as two locations on planet Earth inhabited by human beings, they had much in common. The reference points of Italy allowed a basis for understanding China, and the differences could be spelled out from there.²⁹

The writers of Scripture present Heaven in many ways, including as a garden, a city, and a kingdom. Because gardens, cities, and kingdoms are familiar to us, they afford us a bridge to understanding Heaven. However, many people make the mistake of assuming that these are *merely* analogies with no actual correspondence to the reality of Heaven (which would make them poor analogies). Analogies can be pressed too far, but because Scripture makes it clear that Jesus is preparing a place for us, and God’s Kingdom will come to Earth, and a physical resurrection awaits us, there is no reason to spiritualize or allegorize all earthly descriptions of Heaven. Indeed, some of them may be simple, factual statements. Too often we’ve been taught that Heaven is a non-physical realm, which cannot have real gardens, cities, kingdoms, buildings, banquets, or bodies. So we fail to take seriously what Scripture tells us about Heaven as a familiar, physical, tangible *place*.

As human beings, whom God made to be both physical and spiritual, we are not designed to live in a non-physical realm—indeed, we are incapable of even imagining such a place (or, rather, *non-place*). An incorporeal state is not only unfamiliar to our experience, it is also incompatible with our God-given constitution. We are not, as Plato supposed, merely spiritual beings temporarily encased in bodies. Adam did not become a “living being”—the Hebrew word *nephesh*—until he was both body *and* spirit (Genesis 2:7). We are physical beings as much as we are spiritual beings. That’s why our bodily resurrection is essential to endow us with eternal righteous humanity, setting us free from sin, the Curse, and death.

The Importance of Using Our Imagination

We cannot anticipate or desire what we cannot imagine. That's why, I believe, God has given us glimpses of Heaven in the Bible—to fire up our imagination and kindle a desire for Heaven in our hearts. And that's why Satan will always discourage our imagination—or misdirect it to ethereal notions that violate Scripture. As long as the resurrected universe remains either undesirable or unimaginable, Satan succeeds in sabotaging our love for Heaven.

After reading my novels that portray Heaven, people often tell me, “These pictures of Heaven are exciting. But are they based on Scripture?” The answer, to the best of my understanding, is yes. Scripture provides us with a substantial amount of information, direct and indirect, about the world to come, with enough detail to help us envision it, but not so much as to make us think we can completely wrap our minds around it. I believe that God expects us to use our imagination, even as we recognize its limitations and flaws. If God didn't want us to imagine what Heaven will be like, he wouldn't have told us as much about it as he has.

Rather than ignore our imagination, I believe we should fuel it with Scripture, allowing it to step through the doors that Scripture opens. I did not come to the Bible with the same view of Heaven that I came away with. On the contrary, as a young Christian, and even as a young pastor, I viewed Heaven in the same stereotypical ways I now reject. It was only through years of scriptural study, meditation, and research on the subject that I came to the view of Heaven I now embrace.

Nearly every notion of Heaven I present in this book was stimulated and reinforced by biblical texts. Though some of my interpretations and speculations are no doubt mistaken, they are not baseless. Rightly or wrongly, I have drawn most of them from my understanding of the explicit and implicit teachings of Scripture. Discussions of Heaven tend to be either hyperimaginative or utterly unimaginative. Bible believers have tended toward the latter, yet both approaches are inadequate and dangerous. What we need is a biblically inspired imagination.

We should ask God's help to remove the blinders of our preconceived ideas about Heaven so we can understand Scripture. The apostle Paul said, “Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this” (2 Timothy 2:7). I encourage you to pray, “Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (Psalm 119:18).

I've collected more than 150 books on Heaven, many of them very old and out of print, and I've read nearly all of them. One thing I've found is that books about Heaven are notorious for saying we can't know what Heaven is like, but it will be more wonderful than we can imagine. However, the moment we say that we can't imagine Heaven, we dump cold water on all that God has revealed to us about our eternal home. If we can't envision it, we can't look forward to it. If Heaven is unimaginable, why even try?

Everything pleasurable we know about life on Earth we have experienced through our senses. So, when Heaven is portrayed as beyond the reach of our senses, it doesn't invite us; instead, it alienates and even frightens us. Our misguided attempts to make Heaven “sound spiritual” (i.e., non-physical) merely succeed in making Heaven sound unappealing.

Picturing Heaven

By the time you finish reading this book, you will have a biblical basis for envisioning the eternal Heaven. You will understand that in order to get a picture of Heaven—which will one day be centered on the New Earth—you don't need to look up at the clouds; you simply need to look around you and imagine what all this would be like without sin and death and suffering and corruption.

When I anticipate my first glimpse of Heaven, I remember the first time I went snorkeling. I saw countless fish of every shape, size, and color. And just when I thought I'd seen the most beautiful fish, along came another even more striking. Etched in my memory is a certain sound—the sound of a gasp going through my rubber snorkel as my eyes were opened to that breathtaking underwater world.

I imagine our first glimpse of Heaven will cause us to similarly gasp in amazement and delight. That first gasp will likely be followed by many more as we continually encounter new sights in that endlessly wonderful place. And that will be just the beginning, because we will not see our real eternal home—the New Earth—until after the resurrection of the dead. And it will be far better than anything we've seen.

So look out a window. Take a walk. Talk with your friend. Use your God-given skills to paint or draw or build a shed or write a book. But imagine it—all of it—in its original condition. The happy dog with the wagging tail, not the snarling beast, beaten and starved. The flowers unwilted, the grass undying, the blue sky without pollution. People smiling and joyful, not angry, depressed, and empty. If you're not in a particularly beautiful place, close your eyes and envision the most beautiful place you've ever been—complete with palm trees, raging rivers, jagged mountains, waterfalls, or snow drifts.

Think of friends or family members who loved Jesus and are with him now. Picture them with you, walking together in this place. All of you have powerful bodies, stronger than those of an Olympic decathlete. You are laughing, playing, talking, and reminiscing. You reach up to a tree to pick an apple or orange. You take a bite. It's so sweet that it's startling. You've never tasted anything so good. Now you see someone coming toward you. It's Jesus, with a big smile on his face. You fall to your knees in worship. He pulls you up and embraces you.

At last, you're with the person you were made for, in the place you were made to be. Everywhere you go there will be new people and places to enjoy, new things to discover. What's that you smell? A feast. A party's ahead. And you're invited. There's exploration and work to be done—and you can't wait to get started.

I have a biblical basis for all of these statements, and many more. After examining what Scripture says, I hope that next time you hear someone say, "We can't begin to imagine what Heaven will be like," you'll be able to tell them, "*I can.*"

But before we go further, we need to address some frequently raised objections.

If "No Eye Has Seen," How Can We Know?

A pastor visiting my office asked what I was writing. "A big book on Heaven," I said.

"Well," he replied, "since Scripture says 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him,' what will you be talking about? Obviously, we can't know what God has prepared for us in Heaven." (He was referring to 1 Corinthians 2:9.)

I said to him what I always say: “You didn’t complete the sentence. You also have to read verse ten.” Here’s how the complete sentence reads: “‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’—*but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit*” (emphasis added). The context makes it clear that this revelation is God’s Word (v. 13), which tells us what God has prepared for us. After reading a few dozen books about Heaven, I came to instinctively cringe whenever I saw 1 Corinthians 2:9. It’s a wonderful verse; it’s just that it’s nearly always misused. It says *precisely the opposite* of what it’s cited to prove!

What we otherwise could not have known about Heaven, because we’re unable to see it, God says *he has revealed to us through his Spirit*. This means that God has explained to us what Heaven is like. Not exhaustively, but accurately. God tells us about Heaven in his Word, not so we can shrug our shoulders and remain ignorant, but because he wants us to understand and anticipate what awaits us.

Other verses are likewise pulled out to derail discussions about Heaven. For example, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God” (Deuteronomy 29:29). Heaven is regarded as a “secret thing.” But the rest of the verse—again, rarely quoted—completes the thought: “But the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever.”

We should accept that many things about Heaven are secret and that God has countless surprises in store for us. But as for the things God *has* revealed to us about Heaven, these things belong to us and to our children. It’s critically important that we study and understand them. That is *precisely* why God revealed them to us!

Another “silencer” is 2 Corinthians 12:2-4. Paul says that fourteen years earlier he was “caught up to paradise,” where he “heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.” Some people use this verse to say we should not discuss what Heaven will be like. But all it says is that God didn’t permit Paul to talk about his visit to Heaven. In contrast, God *commanded* the apostle John to talk about his prolonged visit to Heaven, which he did in detail in the book of Revelation. Likewise, Isaiah and Ezekiel wrote about what they saw in Heaven.

Although it’s inappropriate for us to speculate on what Paul might have seen in Heaven, it’s certainly appropriate to discuss what John saw, *because God chose to reveal it to us*. If he didn’t intend for us to understand it, why would he bother telling us about it? (When was the last time you wrote someone a letter using words you didn’t expect them to comprehend?) So, we *should* study, teach, and discuss God’s revelation about Heaven given to us in his Word.

Certainly, not everything the Bible says about Heaven is easily envisioned. Consider Ezekiel’s description of the living creatures and their wheels, and the manifestation of God’s glory that leaves the prophet groping for words (Ezekiel 1:4-28). Still, many other passages concerning Heaven are much easier to grasp.

Isaiah 55:9 is another verse often cited in support of a “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach to Heaven: “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” God’s thoughts are indeed higher than ours, but when he reduces his thoughts into words and reveals them in Scripture, he expects us to study them, meditate on them, and understand them—again, not exhaustively, but accurately.

Setting Our Hearts and Minds on Heaven

“Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” (Colossians 3:1). This is a direct command to set our hearts on Heaven. And to make sure we don’t miss the importance of a heaven-centered life, the next verse says, “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” God commands us to set our hearts and minds on Heaven.

To long for Christ is to long for Heaven, for that is where we will be with him. God’s people are “longing for a better country” (Hebrews 11:16). We cannot set our eyes on Christ without setting our eyes on Heaven, and we cannot set our eyes on Heaven without setting our eyes on Christ. Still, it is not only Christ but “things above” we are to set our minds on.

The Greek word translated “set your hearts on” is *zeteo*, which “denotes man’s general philosophical search or quest.”³⁰ The same word is used in the Gospels to describe how “the Son of Man came to *seek* . . . what was lost” (Luke 19:10, emphasis added). It’s also used for how a shepherd looks for his lost sheep (Matthew 18:12), a woman searches for a lost coin (Luke 15:8), and a merchant searches for a fine pearl (Matthew 13:45). It is a diligent, active, single-minded investigation. So we can understand Paul’s admonition in Colossians 3:1 as follows: “Diligently, actively, single-mindedly pursue the things above”—in a word, *Heaven*. (Now you have a clear biblical reason for reading this book!)

The verb *zeteo* is in the present tense, suggesting an ongoing process. “Keep seeking heaven.” Don’t just have a conversation, read a book, or listen to a sermon and feel as if you’ve fulfilled the command. Since you’ll spend the next lifetime living in Heaven, why not spend this lifetime seeking Heaven, so you can eagerly anticipate and prepare for it?

The command, and its restatement, implies there is nothing automatic about setting our minds on Heaven. In fact, most commands assume a resistance to obeying them, which sets up the necessity for the command. We are told to avoid sexual immorality because it is our tendency. We are not told to avoid jumping off buildings because normally we don’t battle such a temptation. The command to think about Heaven is under attack in a hundred different ways every day. Everything militates against it. Our minds are so much set on Earth that we are unaccustomed to heavenly thinking. So we must work at it.

What have you been doing daily to set your mind on things above, to *seek* Heaven? What should you do differently?

Perhaps you’re afraid of becoming “so heavenly minded you’re of no earthly good.” Relax—you have nothing to worry about! On the contrary, many of us are so earthly minded we are of no heavenly *or* earthly good. C. S. Lewis observed, “If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just 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.”³¹

We need a generation of heavenly minded people who see human beings and the earth itself not simply as they are, but as God intends them to be.

Fueling Our Imagination

We must begin by reasoning from God's revealed truth. But that reasoning will call upon us to use our Scripture-enhanced imagination. As a nonfiction writer and Bible teacher, I begin by seeing what Scripture actually says. As a novelist, I take that revelation and add to it the vital ingredient of imagination. As C. S. Lewis said, "While reason is the natural organ of truth, imagination is the organ of meaning."³² In the words of Francis Schaeffer, "The Christian is the really free man—he is free to have imagination. This too is our heritage. The Christian is the one whose imagination should fly beyond the stars."³³

Schaeffer always started with God's revealed truth. But he exhorted us to *let that truth fuel our imagination*. Imagination should not fly *away* from the truth but fly *upon* the truth.

If you're a Christian suffering with great pains and losses, Jesus says, "Be of good cheer" (John 16:33, NKJV). The new house is nearly ready for you. Moving day is coming. The dark winter is about to be magically transformed into spring. One day soon you will be home—for the first time. Until then, I encourage you to meditate on the Bible's truths about Heaven. May your imagination soar and your heart rejoice.



eternal perspective ministries
with author Randy Alcorn

Learn more about *Heaven*

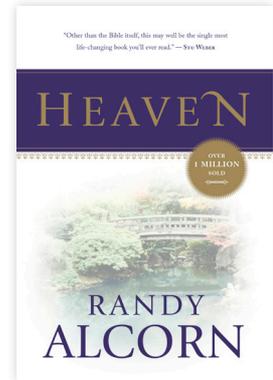
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And the next time you hear someone say, “We can’t begin to imagine what Heaven will be like,” you will be able to tell them, “I can.”

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About Randy Alcorn

Randy is the founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries and the best-selling author of over 50 books (over nine million in print) including *Heaven*, *The Treasure Principle*, and the Gold Medallion winner *Safely Home*.

Randy resides in Gresham, Oregon with his wife, Nanci. They have two married daughters and five grandsons. He enjoys hanging out with his family, biking, tennis, research, and reading.



About Eternal Perspective Ministries

Eternal Perspective Ministries (EPM) is a nonprofit ministry dedicated to teaching principles of God’s Word and assisting the church in ministering to the unreached, unfed, unborn, uneducated, unreconciled, and unsupported people around the world. The common element in all of our writing and teaching ministry is an emphasis on seeing life through the eyes of eternity, and thereby learning to live now to the glory of God.

You can order all of Randy’s books and products through EPM’s online store at www.epm.org.