

# Heaven

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**Part I**  
**A Theology of Heaven**

SECTION ONE

REALIZING OUR DESTINY

# Chapter 1

## Are You Looking Forward to Heaven?

The man who is about to sail for Australia or New Zealand as a settler, is naturally anxious to know something about his future home, its climate, its employments, its inhabitants, its ways, its customs. All these are subjects of deep interest to him. 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 for ever 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.

*J. C. Ryle*

Jonathan Edwards, the great Puritan preacher, often spoke of Heaven. He said, “It becomes us to spend this life only as a journey toward heaven . . . to which we should subordinate all other concerns of life. Why should we labor for or set our hearts on anything else, but that which is our proper end and true happiness?”<sup>11</sup>

In his early twenties, Edwards composed a set of life resolutions. One read, “Resolved, to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness, in the other world, as I possibly can.”<sup>12</sup>

Some may think it odd and inappropriate that Edwards was so committed to pursuing happiness for himself in Heaven. But Pascal was right when he said, “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end.”<sup>13</sup> And if we all seek happiness, why not do as Edwards did and seek it where it can actually be found—in the person of Jesus and the place called Heaven?

Tragically, however, most people do not find their joy in Christ and Heaven. In fact, many people find no joy at all when they think about Heaven.

A pastor once confessed to me, “Whenever I think about Heaven, it makes me depressed. I’d rather just cease to exist when I die.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I can’t stand the thought of that endless tedium. To float around in the clouds with nothing to do but strum a harp . . . it’s all so terribly boring. Heaven doesn’t sound much better than Hell. I’d rather be annihilated than spend eternity in a place like that.”

Where did this Bible-believing, seminary-educated pastor get such a view of Heaven? Certainly not from Scripture, where Paul said to depart and be with Christ was *far better* than staying on a sin-cursed Earth (Philippians 1:23). My friend was more honest about it than most, yet I’ve found that many Christians share the same misconceptions about Heaven.

After reading my novel *Deadline*, which portrays Heaven as a real and exciting place, a woman wrote me, “I’ve been a Christian since I was five. I’m married to a youth pastor. When I was seven, a teacher at my Christian school told me that when I got to Heaven, I wouldn’t know anyone or anything from earth. I was terrified of dying. I was

never told any different by anyone. . . . It's been really hard for me to advance in my Christian walk because of this fear of Heaven and eternal life."

Let those words sink in: "This *fear* of heaven and eternal life." Referring to her recently transformed perspective, she said, "You don't know the weight that's been lifted off of me. . . . Now I can't wait to get to Heaven."

## Our Unbiblical View of Heaven

When an English vicar was asked by a colleague what he expected after death, he replied, "Well, if it comes to that, I suppose I shall enter into eternal bliss, but I really wish you wouldn't bring up such depressing subjects."<sup>14</sup>

Over the past fifteen years, I've received thousands of letters and have had hundreds of conversations concerning Heaven. I've spoken about Heaven at churches and conferences. I've written about Heaven and taught a seminary course titled "A Theology of Heaven." There's a great deal I don't know, but one thing I *do* know is what people think about Heaven. And frankly, I'm alarmed.

I agree with this statement by John Eldredge in *The Journey of Desire*: "Nearly every Christian I have spoken with has some idea that eternity is an unending church service. . . . We have settled on an image of the never-ending sing-along in the sky, one great hymn after another, forever and ever, amen. And our heart sinks. *Forever and ever? That's it? That's the good news?* And then we sigh and feel guilty that we are not more 'spiritual.' We lose heart, and we turn once more to the present to find what life we can."<sup>15</sup>

Gary Larson captured a common misperception of Heaven in one of his *Far Side* cartoons. In it a man with angel wings and a halo sits on a cloud, doing nothing, with no one nearby. He has the expression of someone marooned on a desert island with absolutely nothing to do. A caption shows his inner thoughts: "Wish I'd brought a magazine."

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain portrays a similar view of Heaven. The Christian spinster Miss Watson takes a dim view of Huck's fun-loving spirit. According to Huck, "She went on and told me all about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever. So I didn't think much of it. . . . I asked her if she reckoned Tom Sawyer would go there, and she said, not by a considerable sight. I was glad about that, because I wanted him and me to be together."<sup>16</sup>

The pious Miss Watson had nothing to say about Heaven that appealed to Huck. (And nothing, if we're honest, that appeals to *us*.) What would have attracted him was a place where he could do meaningful and pleasurable things with enjoyable people. In fact, that's a far more accurate depiction of what Heaven will actually be like. If Miss Watson had told Huck what the Bible says about living in a resurrected body and being with people we love on a resurrected Earth with gardens and rivers and mountains and untold adventures—now *that* would have gotten his attention!

When it came to Heaven and Hell, Mark Twain never quite got it. Under the weight of age, he said in his autobiography, "The burden of pain, care, misery grows heavier year by year. At length ambition is dead, pride is dead, vanity is dead, longing for release is in their place. It comes at last—the only unpoisoned gift earth ever had for them—and

they vanish from a world where they were of no consequence; where they achieved nothing; where they were a mistake and a failure and a foolishness.”<sup>17</sup>

What a contrast to the perspective that Charles Spurgeon, his contemporary, had on death: “To come to Thee is to come home from exile, to come to land out of the raging storm, to come to rest after long labour, to come to the goal of my desires and the summit of my wishes.”<sup>18</sup>

We do not desire to eat gravel. Why? Because God did not design us to eat gravel. Trying to develop an appetite for a disembodied existence in a non-physical Heaven is like trying to develop an appetite for gravel. No matter how sincere we are, and no matter how hard we try, it’s not going to work. Nor should it.

What God made us to desire, and therefore what we *do* desire if we admit it, is exactly what he promises to those who follow Jesus Christ: a resurrected life in a resurrected body, with the resurrected Christ on a resurrected Earth. Our desires correspond precisely to God’s plans. It’s not that we want something, so we engage in wishful thinking that what we want exists. It’s the opposite—the reason we want it is precisely because God has planned for it to exist. As we’ll see, resurrected people living in a resurrected universe isn’t our idea—it’s *God’s*.

Nineteenth-century British theologian J. C. Ryle said, “I pity the man who never thinks about heaven.”<sup>19</sup> We could also say, “I pity the man who never thinks *accurately* about Heaven.” It’s our inaccurate thinking, I believe, that causes us to choose to think so little about Heaven.

## Theological Neglect of Heaven

John Calvin, the great expositor, never wrote a commentary on Revelation and never dealt with the eternal state at any length. Though he encourages meditation on Heaven in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, his theology of Heaven seems strikingly weak compared to his theology of God, Christ, salvation, Scripture, and the church. This is understandable in light of the pressing theological issues of his day, but surprisingly few theologians in the centuries since Calvin have attempted to fill in the gaps. A great deal has been written about eschatology—the study of the end times—but comparatively little about Heaven. (Only a small number of the books on Heaven I’ve collected are still in print.)

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote an in-depth two-volume set titled *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Remarkably, he had nothing to say about Heaven.<sup>20</sup>

William Shedd’s three-volume *Dogmatic Theology* contains eighty-seven pages on eternal punishment, but only two on Heaven.<sup>21</sup>

In his nine-hundred-page theology, *Great Doctrines of the Bible*, Martyn Lloyd-Jones devotes less than two pages to the eternal state and the New Earth.<sup>22</sup>

Louis Berkhof’s classic *Systematic Theology* devotes thirty-eight pages to creation, forty pages to baptism and communion, and fifteen pages to the intermediate state. Yet it contains only two pages on Hell and one page on the eternal state.

When all that’s said about the eternal Heaven is limited to page 737 of a 737-page systematic theology like Berkhof’s, it raises a question: Does Scripture really have so little to say? Are there so few theological implications to this subject? The biblical answer, I believe, is an emphatic *no!*

In *The Eclipse of Heaven*, theology professor A. J. Conyers writes, “Even to one without religious commitment and theological convictions, it should be an unsettling thought that this world is attempting to chart its way through some of the most perilous waters in history, having now decided to ignore what was for nearly two millennia its fixed point of reference—its North Star. The certainty of judgment, the longing for heaven, the dread of hell: these are not prominent considerations in our modern discourse about the important matters of life. But they once were.”<sup>23</sup>

Conyers argues that until recently the doctrine of Heaven was enormously important to the church.<sup>24</sup> Belief in Heaven was not just a nice auxiliary sentiment. It was a central, life-sustaining conviction.

Sadly, even for countless Christians, that is no longer true.

## Off Our Radar Screens

“An overwhelming majority of Americans continue to believe that there is life after death and that heaven and hell exist,” according to a Barna Research Group poll.<sup>25</sup> But what people actually believe about Heaven and Hell varies widely. A Barna spokesman said, “They’re cutting and pasting religious views from a variety of different sources—television, movies, conversations with their friends.”<sup>26</sup> The result is a highly subjective theology of the afterlife, disconnected from the biblical doctrine of Heaven.

I attended a fine Bible college and seminary, but I learned very little about Heaven. I don’t recall a single classroom discussion about the New Earth. In my Hebrews-to-Revelation class, we never made it to Revelation 21–22, the Bible’s most definitive passage on the eternal Heaven. In my eschatology class, we studied various views of the Rapture and the Millennium, but almost no attention at all was given to the New Earth. In fact, I learned more about the strengths and weaknesses of belief in a mid-Tribulation Rapture than about Heaven and the New Earth combined.

Heaven suffers as a subject precisely because it comes last, not only in theological works but in seminary and Bible college classrooms. Teachers often get behind in their eschatology classes, enmeshed in the different views of Hell, Israel and the church, the Tribulation, and the Millennium. No time is left for discussing the new heavens and New Earth.

Imagine you’re part of a NASA team preparing for a five-year mission to Mars. After a period of extensive training, the launch date finally arrives. As the rocket lifts off, one of your fellow astronauts says to you, “What do you know about Mars?”

Imagine shrugging your shoulders and saying, “Nothing. We never talked about it. I guess we’ll find out when we get there.” It’s unthinkable, isn’t it? It’s inconceivable that your training would not have included extensive study of and preparation for your ultimate destination. Yet in seminaries, Bible schools, and churches across the United States and around the world, there is very little teaching about our ultimate destination: the new heavens and New Earth.

Many Christians who’ve gone to church all their adult lives (especially those under fifty) can’t recall having heard a single sermon on Heaven. It’s occasionally mentioned, but rarely emphasized, and *almost never* is it developed as a topic. We’re told how to *get* to Heaven, and that it’s a better destination than Hell, but we’re taught remarkably little about Heaven itself.

Pastors may not think it's important to address the subject of Heaven because their seminary didn't have a required course on it—or even an elective. Similarly, when pastors don't preach on Heaven, their congregations assume that the Bible doesn't say much about it.

In 1937, Scottish theologian John Baillie wrote, “I will not ask how often during the last twenty-five years you and I have listened to an old-style warning against the flames of hell. I will not even ask how many sermons have been preached in our hearing about a future day of reckoning when men shall reap according as they have sown. It will be enough to ask how many preachers, during these years, have dwelt on the joys of heavenly rest with anything like the old ardent love and impatient longing.”<sup>27</sup>

If this was the case then, how much truer is it now? Heaven has fallen off our radar screens. How can we set our hearts on Heaven when we have an impoverished theology of Heaven? How can we expect our children to be excited about Heaven—or to stay excited about it when they grow up? Why do we talk so little about Heaven? And why is the little we have to say so vague and lifeless?

## **Where Do We Get Our Misconceptions?**

I believe there's one central explanation for why so many of God's children have such a vague, negative, and uninspired view of Heaven: the work of Satan.

Jesus said of the devil, “When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Some of Satan's favorite lies are about Heaven. Revelation 13:6 tells us the satanic beast “opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven.” Our enemy slanders three things: God's person, God's people, and God's place—namely, Heaven.<sup>†</sup>

After being forcibly evicted from Heaven (Isaiah 14:12-15), the devil became bitter not only toward God, but toward mankind and toward Heaven itself, the place that was no longer his. It must be maddening for him that we're now entitled to the home he was kicked out of. What better way for the devil and his demons to attack us than to whisper lies about the very place on which God tells us to set our hearts and minds?

Satan need not convince us that Heaven doesn't exist. He need only convince us that Heaven is a place of boring, unearthly existence. If we believe that lie, we'll be robbed of our joy and anticipation, we'll set our minds on this life and not the next, and we won't be motivated to share our faith. Why should we share the “good news” that people can spend eternity in a boring, ghostly place that even *we're* not looking forward to?

In *The Country of the Blind*, H. G. Wells writes of a tribe in a remote valley deep in a towering mountain range. During a terrible epidemic, all the villagers lose their sight. Eventually, entire generations grow up having no awareness of sight or the world they're unable to see. Because of their handicap, they do not know their true condition, nor can they understand what their world looks like. They cannot imagine what realms might lie beyond their valley.

Spiritually speaking, we live in the Country of the Blind. The disease of sin has blinded us to God and Heaven, which are real yet unseen. Fortunately, Jesus has come to our valley from Heaven to tell us about his father, the world beyond, and the world to come. If we listen to him—which will require a concerted effort not to listen to the lies of the devil—we will never be the same. Nor will we ever want to be.

Satan hates the New Heaven and the New Earth as much as a deposed dictator hates the new nation and new government that replaces his. Satan cannot stop Christ's redemptive work, but he can keep us from seeing the breadth and depth of redemption that extends to the earth and beyond. He cannot keep Christ from defeating him, but he can persuade us that Christ's victory is only partial, that God will abandon his original plan for mankind and the earth.

Because Satan hates us, he's determined to rob us of the joy we'd have if we believed what God tells us about the magnificent world to come.

## Resisting Naturalism's Spell

C. S. Lewis depicts another source of our misconceptions about Heaven: naturalism, the belief that the world can be understood in scientific terms, without recourse to spiritual or supernatural explanations.

In *The Silver Chair*, Puddleglum, Jill, and Eustace are captured in a sunless underground world by an evil witch who calls herself the queen of the underworld. The witch claims that her prisoners' memories of the overworld, Narnia, are but figments of their imagination. She laughs condescendingly at their child's game of "pretending" that there's a world above and a great ruler of that world.

When they speak of the sun that's visible in the world above, she asks them what a sun is. Groping for words, they compare it to a giant lamp. She replies, "When you try to think out clearly what this *sun* must be, you cannot tell me. You can only tell me it is like the lamp. Your *sun* is a dream; and there is nothing in that dream that was not copied from the lamp."

When they speak of Aslan the lion, king of Narnia, she says they have seen cats and have merely projected those images into the make-believe notion of a giant cat. They begin to waver.

The queen, who hates Aslan and wishes to conquer Narnia, tries to deceive them into thinking that whatever they cannot perceive with their senses must be imaginary—which is the essence of naturalism. The longer they are unable to see the world they remember, the more they lose sight of it.

She says to them, hypnotically, "There never was any world but mine," and they repeat after her, abandoning reason, parroting her deceptions. Then she coos softly, "There is no Narnia, no Overworld, no sky, no sun, no Aslan." This illustrates Satan's power to mold our weak minds as we are trapped in a dark, fallen world. We're prone to deny the great realities of God and Heaven, which we can no longer see because of the Curse.

Finally, when it appears they've succumbed to the queen's lies, Puddleglum breaks the spell and says to the enraged queen, "Suppose we *have* only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that . . . the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours *is* the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow."<sup>28</sup>

The truth is exactly the opposite of naturalism's premise—in fact, the dark world's lamps are copies of the sun, and its cats are copies of Aslan. Heaven isn't an

extrapolation of earthly thinking; Earth is an extension of Heaven, made by the Creator King. The realm Puddleglum and the children believe in, Narnia and its sun and its universe, is real, and the witch's world—which she tempts them to believe is the only real world—is in fact a lesser realm, corrupted and in bondage.

When the queen's lies are exposed, she metamorphoses into the serpent she really is, whereupon Rilian, the human king and Aslan's appointed ruler of Narnia, slays her. The despondent slaves who'd lived in darkness are delivered. Light floods in, and their home below becomes a joyous place again because they realize there is indeed a bright world above and Aslan truly rules the universe. They laugh and celebrate, turning cartwheels and popping firecrackers.

Sometimes we're like Lewis's characters. We succumb to naturalistic assumptions that what we see is real and what we don't see isn't. God can't be real, we conclude, because we can't see him. And Heaven can't be real because we can't see it. But we must recognize our blindness. The blind must take by faith that there are stars in the sky. If they depend on their ability to see, they will conclude there are no stars.

We must work to resist the bewitching spell of naturalism. Sitting here in a dark world, we must remind ourselves what Scripture tells us about Heaven. We will one day be delivered from the blindness that separates us from the real world. We'll realize then the stupefying bewitchment we've lived under. By God's grace, may we stomp out the bewitching fires of naturalism so that we may clearly see the liberating truth about Christ the King and Heaven, his Kingdom.