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Heaven

by Randy Alcorn

Chapter 9

Why Is Earth's Redemption Essential to God's Plan?

It is quite striking that virtually all of the basic words describing salvation in the Bible imply a return to an originally good state or situation. Redemption is a good example. To redeem is to “buy free,” literally to “buy back.” . . . The point of redemption is to free the prisoner from bondage, to give back the freedom he or she once enjoyed.

Albert Wolters

The entire physical universe was created for God's glory. But humanity rebelled, and the universe fell under the weight of our sin. Yet the serpent's seduction of Adam and Eve did not catch God by surprise. He had in place a plan by which he would redeem mankind—and all of creation—from sin, corruption, and death. Just as he promises to make men and women new, he promises to renew the earth itself.

Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. (Isaiah 65:17)

“As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,” declares the Lord, “so will your name and descendants endure.” (Isaiah 66:22)

In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. (2 Peter 3:13)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. (Revelation 21:1)

Many other passages allude to the new heavens and New Earth without using those terms. God's redemptive plan climaxes not at the return of Christ, nor in the millennial kingdom, but on the New Earth. Only then will all wrongs be made right. Only then will there be no more death, crying, or pain (Revelation 21:1-4).

Consider this: If God's plan was merely to take mankind to the present, intermediate Heaven, or to a Heaven that was the dwelling place of spirit beings, there would be no need for new heavens and a New Earth. Why refashion the stars of the heavens and the continents of the earth? God could just destroy his original creation and put it all behind him. But he won't do that. Upon creating the heavens and the earth, he called them “very good.” Never once has he renounced his claim on what he made. He isn't going to abandon his creation. He's going to restore it. We won't go to Heaven and leave Earth

behind. Rather, God will bring Heaven and Earth together into the same dimension, with no wall of separation, no armed angels to guard Heaven's perfection from sinful mankind (Genesis 3:24). God's perfect plan is "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Ephesians 1:10).

God's redemptive goals are far less modest than we imagine. He surrenders no territory to the enemy. C. S. Lewis said of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "Reading [it] makes us feel what it is like to live in a universe where every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by God."⁶⁷

Christ died not merely to make the best of a bad situation. He died so that mankind, Earth, and the universe itself would be renewed to forever proclaim his glory.

God's Earthly Renewal Plan

God has never given up on his original creation. Yet somehow we've managed to overlook an entire biblical vocabulary that makes this point clear. *Reconcile. Redeem. Restore. Recover. Return. Renew. Regenerate. Resurrect.* Each of these biblical words begins with the *re-* prefix, suggesting a return to an original condition that was ruined or lost. (Many are translations of Greek words with an *ana* prefix, which has the same meaning as the English *re-*.) For example, *redemption* means to buy back what was formerly owned. Similarly, *reconciliation* means the restoration or reestablishment of a prior friendship or unity. *Renewal* means to make new again, restoring to an original state. *Resurrection* means becoming physically alive again, after death.

These words emphasize that God always sees us in light of what he intended us to be, and he always seeks to *restore us* to that design. Likewise, he sees the earth in terms of what he intended it to be, and he seeks to restore it to its original design.

Religion professor Albert Wolters, in *Creation Regained*, writes, "[God] hangs on to his fallen original creation and salvages it. He refuses to abandon the work of his hands—in fact, he sacrifices his own Son to save his original project. Humankind, which has botched its original mandate and the whole creation along with it, is given another chance in Christ; we are reinstated as God's managers on earth. The original good creation is to be restored."⁶⁸

If God had wanted to consign us to Hell and start over, he could have. He could have made a new Adam and Eve and sent the old ones to Hell. But he didn't. Instead, he chose to redeem what he started with—the heavens, Earth, and mankind—to bring them back to his original purpose. God is the ultimate salvage artist. He loves to restore things to their original condition—and make them even better. God's purpose in our salvation is reflected in a phrase from the hymn "Hallelujah, What a Savior!": "ruined sinners to reclaim."⁶⁹ *Reclaim* is another *re-* word. It recognizes that God had a prior claim on humanity that was temporarily lost but is fully restored and taken to a new level in Christ. "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). God has never surrendered his title deed to the earth. He owns it—and he will not relinquish it to his enemies.

It's impossible to understand the ministry of Christ without the larger view of redemption's sweeping salvage plan. "[It] is particularly striking," writes Albert Wolters, "that all of Jesus' miracles (with the one exception of the cursing of the fig tree) are miracles of *restoration*—restoration to health, restoration to life, restoration to freedom from demonic possession. Jesus' miracles provide us with a sample of the

meaning of redemption: a freeing of creation from the shackles of sin and evil and a reinstatement of creaturely living as intended by God.”⁷⁰ God placed mankind on Earth to fill it, rule it, and develop it to God’s glory. But that plan has never been fulfilled. Should we therefore conclude that God’s plan was ill-conceived, thwarted, or abandoned? No. These conclusions do not fit the character of an all-knowing, all-wise, sovereign God.

God determined from the beginning that he will redeem mankind and restore the earth. Why? So his original plan will be fulfilled.

Scripture shows us God’s purpose with remarkable clarity; yet for many years as a Bible student and later as a pastor, I did not think in terms of renewal and restoration. Instead, I believed God was going to destroy the earth, abandon his original design and plan, and start over by implementing a new plan in an unearthly Heaven. Only in the past fifteen years have my eyes been opened to what Scripture has said all along.

What lies behind our notion that God is going to destroy the earth and be done with it? I believe it’s a weak theology of God. Though we’d never say it this way, we see him as a thwarted inventor whose creation failed. Having realized his mistake, he’ll end up trashing most of what he made. His consolation for a failed Earth is that he rescues a few of us from the fire. But this idea is emphatically refuted by Scripture. God has a magnificent plan, and he will *not* surrender Earth to the trash heap.

As Wolters says, “Redemption is not a matter of an addition of a spiritual or supernatural dimension to creaturely life that was lacking before; rather, it is a matter of bringing new life and vitality to what was there all along. . . . The only thing redemption adds that is not included in the creation is the remedy for sin, and that remedy is brought in solely for the purpose of recovering a sinless creation. . . . Grace *restores* nature, making it whole once more.”⁷¹

The New Earth Is the Old Earth Restored

Peter preached that Christ “must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:21). We’re told that a time is coming when God will restore *everything*. This is an inclusive promise. It encompasses far more than God merely restoring disembodied people to fellowship in a spirit realm. (Because living in a spirit realm is not what humans were made for and once enjoyed, it would not qualify as “restoring.”) It is God restoring mankind to what we once were, what he designed us to be—fully embodied, righteous beings. And restoring the entire physical universe to what it once was.

Where will the restoration that Peter preached about be realized? The answer, he tells us, is found in the promises given “long ago through [God’s] holy prophets.” Read the prophets and the answer becomes clear—God will restore everything *on Earth*. The prophets are never concerned about some far-off realm of disembodied spirits. They are concerned about the land, the inheritance, the city of Jerusalem, and the earth they walked on. Messiah will come from Heaven to Earth, not to take us away from Earth to Heaven, but to restore Earth to what he intended so he can live with us here forever.

Will the earth we know come to an end? Yes. To a *final* end? No.

Revelation 21:1 says the old Earth will pass away. But when people pass away, they do not cease to exist. As we will be raised to be new people, so the earth will be raised to be a New Earth.

Did Peter invent the notion of all things being restored? No—he not only learned it from the prophets, he heard it directly from Christ. When Peter, hoping for commendation or reward, pointed out to Jesus that the disciples had left everything to follow him, the Lord didn't rebuke him. Instead, he said, "At the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19:27-28).

Note Christ's word choice. He did not say "after the *destruction* of all things" or "after the *abandonment* of all things" but "at the *renewal* of all things." This is not a small semantic point—it draws a line in the sand between two fundamentally different theologies. Mankind was designed to live on the earth to God's glory. That's exactly what Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection secured—a renewed humanity upon a renewed Earth. Jesus explicitly said "all things" would be renewed. The word *paligenesia*, translated "renewal" in Matthew 19:28, comes from two words which together mean "new genesis" or "coming back from death to life."⁷² When Jesus said that "all things" would be renewed, the disciples would have understood him to mean "all things" that were part of the only lives they knew—those on Earth. Apart from those aspects of our present earthly lives that are inherently sinful or are fulfilled by a greater reality (more on this later), "all things" appears to be comprehensive.

J. R. R. Tolkien portrays a similar view of renewal in *The Hobbit*, when the dwarf king, Thorin Oakenshield, speaks his last words to Bilbo Baggins, whom he has wronged: "Farewell. . . . I go now to the halls of waiting to sit beside my fathers, until the world is renewed. Since I leave now all gold and silver, and go where it is of little worth, I wish to part in friendship from you, and I would take back my words and deeds at the Gate."⁷³

Tolkien reflects biblical theology in the phrase "until the world is renewed." Thorin says he goes "to the halls of waiting to sit beside my fathers." This would be the intermediate Heaven. But he would wait there "until the world is renewed." This would be the eternal Heaven—not to be lived in a netherworld but in a resurrected world.

The predominant belief that the ultimate Heaven God prepares for us will be unearthly could not be more unbiblical. Earth was made for people to live on, and people were made to live on Earth. According to the prophets, the apostle Peter, and Christ himself, our destiny is to live forever on a restored and renewed Earth.

In the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, when Jesus is headed toward Calvary, on his knees under the weight of the cross, he says to his shocked and grief-torn mother, "Behold, I make all things new." These words are straight from Revelation 21:5, where they are spoken by the risen Jesus concerning the New Earth, where a renewed humanity will live on a renewed Earth, joyful in the presence of their resurrected Savior, who made it all possible by paying a price that was inconceivably great.

Redemption = Return

Redemption buys back God's original design. In the words of one writer, "Adam and Eve (and their children) were to extend the blessings of Paradise throughout the entire world. . . . Salvation, therefore, restores man to his original calling and purpose, and guarantees that man's original mandate—to exercise dominion under God over the whole earth—will be fulfilled."⁷⁴

If, due to the Fall, God would have given up on his original purpose for mankind to fill the earth and rule it (Genesis 1:28), he surely wouldn't have repeated the same

command to Noah after the Flood: “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth” (Genesis 9:1). Still, until sin and the Curse are permanently removed, people would be incapable of exercising proper stewardship of the earth.

Our present purpose is inseparable from God’s stated eternal purpose for us to rule the earth forever as his children and heirs. That is at the core of the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s defining statement: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”⁷⁵ We will glorify God and find joy in him as we do what he has made us to do: serve him as resurrected beings and carry out his plan for developing a Christ-centered, resurrected culture in a resurrected universe.

“For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Corinthians 15:22-25).

Christ’s mission is both to redeem what was lost in the Fall and to destroy all competitors to God’s dominion, authority, and power. When everything is put under his feet, when God rules all and mankind rules the earth under God, at last all will be as he intends.

God’s Glory on God’s Earth

The physical heavens are constantly declaring God’s glory (Psalm 19:1-2). Even now, in reference to an Earth under the Curse, God says, “The glory of the Lord fills the whole earth” (Numbers 14:21). But the universe will behold an even greater display of God’s glory, one that will involve redeemed men and women and redeemed nations on a redeemed earth. It is on Earth, God promises, that “the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it” (Isaiah 40:5). That God will be glorified on Earth is central to innumerable passages, including these two:

Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. (Psalm 85:9)

I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east . . . and the land was radiant with his glory. (Ezekiel 43:2)

In both these passages, the word translated as “land” (*erets*) is the word for “earth.” Ezekiel saw God’s glory at the gates of Jerusalem—manifested not in some immaterial realm but on the earth.

To understand why Peter preached that God promised through the prophets that he would “restore everything” (Acts 3:21), consider this sampling of passages that promise God’s glory will be manifested to all the nations of the earth, particularly in the New Jerusalem:

The nations will fear the name of the Lord, all the kings of the earth will revere your glory. For the Lord will rebuild Zion and appear in his glory. (Psalm 102:15-16)

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the Root of Jesse

will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious. (Isaiah 11:9-10)

“They will proclaim my glory among the nations. And they will bring all your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the Lord—on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels,” says the Lord. (Isaiah 66:19-20)

This is what the Lord Almighty says: “In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,” says the Lord Almighty. (Haggai 2:6-7)

God’s Kingdom and dominion are not about what happens in some remote, unearthly place; instead, they are about what happens on the earth, which God created for his glory. God has tied his glory to the earth and everything connected with it: mankind, animals, trees, rivers, *everything*. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3). The Hebrew here can be translated “the fullness of the earth is his glory.” His glory is manifested in his creation. The earth is not disposable. It is essential to God’s plan. God promises that ultimately the whole Earth will be filled with his glory (Psalm 72:19; Habakkuk 2:14).

God has his hands on the earth. He will not let go—even when it requires that his hands be pierced by nails. Both his incarnation and those nails secured him to Earth and its eternal future. In a redemptive work far larger than most imagine, Christ bought and paid for our future and the earth’s.

A Vision of the New Earth

Another significant passage that describes the New Earth is Isaiah 60. Although it doesn’t contain the term *New Earth* (as do Isaiah 65 and 66), we can be certain that’s what Isaiah intended because his precise language is used in John’s depiction of the New Earth in Revelation 21–22. Thus, Isaiah 60 serves as the best biblical commentary on Revelation 21–22.

At the beginning of Isaiah’s remarkable prophetic message, God says to his people in Jerusalem, “The Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (vv. 2-3). God’s people will have a glorious future in which the earth’s nations and kings will participate in and benefit from a renewed and glorious Jerusalem. It won’t be only some nations, but all of them: “All assemble and come to you” (v. 4).

This will be a time of unprecedented rejoicing: “Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy” (v. 5). On the renewed Earth, the nations will bring their greatest treasures into this glorified city: “The wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come” (v. 5).

There will be animals on the New Earth, from various nations: “Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah” (v. 6). Redeemed people will travel from far places to the glorified Jerusalem: “And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord” (v. 6).

People who dwell on islands will worship God, and ships will come from “Tarshish, bringing your sons from afar, with their silver and gold, to the honor of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor” (v. 9).

Most of us are unaccustomed to thinking of nations, rulers, civilizations, and culture in Heaven—but Isaiah 60 is one of many passages that demonstrate that the New Earth will in fact be *earthly*.

Isaiah speaks words that John applies directly to the New Jerusalem (in Revelation 21:25-26): “Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that men may bring you the wealth of the nations—their kings led in triumphal procession” (v. 11).

The magnificence of nations will be welcomed into the King’s great city: “The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the pine, the fir and the cypress together” (v. 13). The hearts of the nations will be transformed in their attitudes toward God, his people, and his city: “The sons of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet and will call you the City of the Lord” (v. 14). God promises the New Jerusalem, “I will make you the everlasting pride and the joy of all generations” (v. 15). This is not a temporary period of fleeting prosperity but an “everlasting” condition. It will not be limited to one time period but will be for “all generations.”

The New Jerusalem will be the beneficiary of all people groups and their rulers: “You will drink the milk of nations and be nursed at royal breasts” (v. 16). The fulfillment of all these promises will testify to God’s greatness: “Then you will know that I, the Lord, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob” (v. 16). God promises something that has never yet been true of the earthly Jerusalem: “I will make peace your governor and righteousness your ruler. No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders, but you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise” (vv. 17-18).

Isaiah then tells us what John connects directly to the New Earth (in Revelation 21:23; 22:5): “The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end” (vv. 19-20).

Of the New Jerusalem, we’re told that “nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Revelation 21:27). Isaiah tells us the same, using inclusive language that could not apply to the old Earth under the Curse: “Then will all your people be righteous” (60:21). Isaiah adds, “and they will possess the land [*erets*] forever.” The earth will be theirs, not for a glorious decade or century or millennium, but *forever*.⁷⁶

Though Isaiah’s reference to animal sacrifices and a temple (v. 7) raise questions, it’s clear that the passage as a whole is a prophetic depiction of the future New Earth. There is no interpretive reason to believe that the descriptions in Isaiah 60 of the New Earth will be fulfilled any less literally than those in Isaiah 52–53.[†] Because Isaiah’s words about the Messiah’s first coming were so meticulously fulfilled, down to specific physical details, shouldn’t we assume that his prophecies in subsequent chapters concerning life on the New Earth will likewise be literally and specifically fulfilled?

Christ’s millennial reign may prefigure the fulfillment of God’s promises about Jerusalem’s future. But we will see their ultimate fulfillment only in the New Jerusalem

on the New Earth, when the Curse is gone, death is no more, and God's people will live on the earth forever.

Redemption of Nations and Culture

Both Isaiah and John, using similar language, state that on the New Earth “the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into” the New Jerusalem and “the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it” (Revelation 21:24, 26; cf. Isaiah 60:3, 5).

Though John doesn't elaborate in Revelation, Isaiah is specific about what will be brought to the Holy City. He mentions the cultural products of once-pagan nations: the ships of Tarshish and the trees of Lebanon and the camels of Ephah and the gold and incense of Sheba, which will be brought in by its people “proclaiming the praise of the Lord” (Isaiah 60:6). Treasures that were once linked to idolatry and rebellion will be gathered into the city and put to God-glorifying use. Both Isaiah and Revelation indicate that the products of human culture will play an important role on the New Earth.

In his excellent treatment of Isaiah and the New Jerusalem, *When the Kings Come Marching In*, Richard Mouw points out that the same ships of Tarshish and trees of Lebanon mentioned in Isaiah 60 are regarded in Isaiah 2 as objects of human pride that God promises to bring down (vv. 12-13, 16-18).⁷⁷ Isaiah speaks of a day of judgment in which “men will flee to caves in the rocks and to holes in the ground from dread of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to shake the earth” (2:19). This language is strongly evocative of the depiction of God's end times judgment, in which men try to hide “in caves and among the rocks of the mountains” (Revelation 6:15).

In Isaiah 10:34, the prophet tells us that God “will cut down the forest thickets with an ax; Lebanon will fall before the Mighty One.” Because people put their pride and hope in “their” forests and ships, God will demonstrate his superiority by bringing down the forests and sinking the ships.

Now, if the trees of Lebanon and ships of Tarshish are singled out as being destroyed in God's future judgment, how can they, as Isaiah 60 indicates, turn up again in the Holy City as instruments of service to the Lord?

This is the paradox of Scripture's simultaneous teachings of destruction and renewal. That which is now used for prideful and even idolatrous purposes will be used to the glory of God when the hearts of mankind are transformed and creation itself is renewed.⁷⁸

There is nothing wrong with ships, lumber, gold, or camels. What God will destroy in his judgment is the idolatrous *misuse* of these good things. Then, having destroyed our perversions of his good gifts, he will, in his re-creation of the earth, restore these things as good and useful tools for his glory.

Later, we'll return to the subject of culture on the New Earth. But for now, it will suffice that Isaiah and John help us envision the New Earth as not only a world of natural wonders, but as one that also includes multinational citizens and cultural treasures.

Significantly, the vivid description of the New Earth in Isaiah 60 is immediately followed by the explicitly messianic passage that Jesus used as his inaugural text for his ministry (Luke 4:16-19): “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners” (Isaiah 61:1).

It was the incarnation, atonement, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that brought redemption to mankind, Jerusalem, and the earth. Christ's mission was to reclaim and set free not only the earth's inhabitants, but the earth itself. He came not only to redeem mankind as individuals, but also as nations and cultures, and to redeem not only the work of his own hands (e.g., the forests of Lebanon), but also the works of his *creatures'* hands (e.g., the ships of Tarshish).

Theologian A. A. Hodge says it beautifully:

Heaven, as the eternal home of the divine Man and of all the redeemed members of the human race, must necessarily be thoroughly human in its structure, conditions, and activities. Its joys and activities must all be rational, moral, emotional, voluntary and active. There must be the exercise of all the faculties, the gratification of all tastes, the development of all talent capacities, the realization of all ideals. The reason, the intellectual curiosity, the imagination, the aesthetic instincts, the holy affections, the social affinities, the inexhaustible resources of strength and power native to the human soul must all find in heaven exercise and satisfaction. Then there must always be a goal of endeavor before us, ever future. . . . Heaven will prove the consummate flower and fruit of the whole creation and of all the history of the universe.⁷⁹



eternal perspective ministries
with author Randy Alcorn

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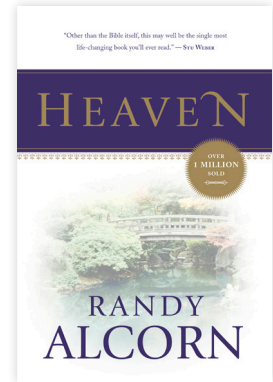
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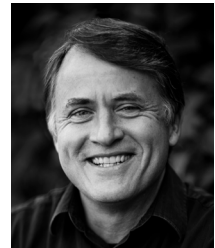
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About Randy Alcorn

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.



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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.

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