

50 DAYS OF HEAVEN

Reflections That Bring Eternity to Light



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50 Days of Heaven: Reflections That Bring Eternity to Light

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PREFACE

About This Book

Fifty Days of Heaven is drawn from selected portions of my larger book called *Heaven*. I've revised and refashioned segments of that book into fifty short, self-contained meditations suitable for fifty consecutive days of reflection or for reading at any pace or in any order you might choose.

I've received many encouraging responses to *Heaven*, indicating a tremendous interest in this subject matter and a desire to see it addressed in other formats. I hope this devotional will prove useful and enlightening.

This book is intended for two kinds of readers: those who haven't read *Heaven* and are drawn to something shorter than the full-length treatment and in a more devotional format; and those who have read *Heaven* but would like to come back to the subject and reflect on brief segments that are easier to absorb. I think readers of *Heaven* will agree that these shorter pieces have a very different feel and effect.

In developing these meditations, I've integrated some new material. Each day's reading includes its own introduction and conclusion, a selected passage of Scripture, and a great quote

about Heaven that corresponds to the subject of the day. I've completed each meditation with a final question to ponder—often something that asks for a response—and a personal prayer that flows from the reflection.

I have chosen to capitalize the words *Heaven* and *Hell* to underscore the fact that these are real places. In other words, I am treating the names of these eternal destinations as we do any other place, such as Chicago, Nigeria, Europe, or Saturn. I also capitalize *New Earth*, for the same reason we capitalize *New England*. The only exceptions are when I am quoting writers who don't capitalize these words or when I am quoting Scripture, because none of the modern Bible translations capitalize *heaven* or *hell*.

It wasn't easy to select only fifty snapshots of Heaven for these meditations. There's so much more to be said! Nevertheless, I trust that these daily readings will help ignite your passion for Heaven, inspire you to draw closer to God, and whet your appetite to learn more about God's plan for the New Earth. If, when you're done, you want a more detailed exploration of this fascinating subject and the many Bible passages that speak of God's eternal plan, you may wish to consult the larger book, *Heaven*.

INTRODUCTION

Learning to See in the Country of the Blind

[Anna] gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

— LUKE 2:38



The kingdom of God . . . does not mean merely the salvation of certain individuals nor even the salvation of a chosen group of people. It means nothing less than the complete renewal of the entire cosmos, culminating in the new heaven and the new earth.¹

— ANTHONY HOEKEMA

Most cultures believe in an afterlife. At question is not whether people will live forever, but where they will live and in what condition. Most cultures also have a concept of Heaven and Hell. They see some people as having a quality of eternal life that is far more than mere existence and others as existing forever in a state of eternal death rather than life. This view is certainly consistent with what Jesus taught: “Then they [the unrighteous] will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (Matthew 25:46).

Sadly, many who believe in Heaven think of it as a dull and undesirable place. This perspective might best be summarized by the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw, who observed, “Heaven, as conventionally conceived, is a place so inane, so dull, so useless, so miserable, that nobody has ever ventured to describe a whole day in heaven, though plenty of people have described a day at the seashore.” Shaw’s view, however, is in stark contrast to the mind-set of the early Christians, whose anticipation of Heaven we find preserved in the Roman catacombs, where the bodies of many martyred Christians of the first century were buried. These underground caverns are filled with inscriptions such as the following, found on three separate tombs:

In Christ, Alexander is not dead, but lives.

One who lives with God.

He was taken up into his eternal home.

One historian writes, “Pictures on the catacomb walls portray Heaven with beautiful landscapes, children playing, and people feasting at banquets.”²

In AD 125, a Greek named Aristides wrote to a friend about Christianity, explaining why this “new religion” was so successful: “If any righteous man among the Christians passes from this world, they rejoice and offer thanks to God, and they escort his body with songs and thanksgiving as if he were setting out from one place to another nearby.”

This early Christian perspective sounds almost foreign to us today, doesn’t it? But their beliefs were rooted in Scriptures such as Philippians 1:21-23, where the apostle Paul writes, “To me, to

live is Christ and to die is gain. . . . Yet what shall I choose? . . . I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.” Paul also writes, “As long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We . . . would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:6-8).

Throughout the ages, Heaven has played a dominant role in the thoughts and lives of God’s people. Heaven is the North Star by which countless Christians have navigated their lives. But have you noticed? Heaven today has largely fallen off our radar screens. If we are honest, we must admit that we are not daily and consciously looking forward to Heaven, much less to a New Earth. We’ve reduced Heaven to an otherworldly state, and we’ve ignored the clear biblical promise of a redeemed universe over which we will serve as God’s delegated rulers. We’ve become blinded to the truth, and we’ve lost our vocabulary of wonder and our anticipation of the great and glorious plan that God has in store for us. 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.

In his short story “The Country of the Blind,” H. G. Wells writes of a tribe in a remote valley deep in a towering mountain range, cut off from the rest of the world by a massive avalanche that has destroyed the mountain passes. As a result of a terrible epidemic, successive generations of this tribe are all born blind. Eventually, as a culture, they lose the very concept of *vision* and have no awareness of the world they’re unable to see. Because of their handicap, they do not know their true condition. When an outsider, who can see, stumbles into their village, they think he is a newly formed creature, with imperfect senses, and that all

his talk of seeing is craziness. They cannot understand this other dimension called *sight*. Although they have adapted themselves to their circumstances, 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 the truth about God and Heaven, both of which are real, yet unseen. Fortunately, Jesus has come to our valley from Heaven to tell us about his Father and the world beyond. If we will listen to him—which requires a concerted effort to overcome our presuppositions, our ignorance, and the devil’s lies—we will gain a new understanding of our present circumstances and of the world to come. We will no longer be conformed to the pattern of this world but will be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). Consequently, our lives will be forever changed.

When Jesus told his disciples, “In my Father’s house are many rooms. . . . I am going there to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2), he deliberately chose common, physical terms (*house, rooms, place*) to describe where he was going and what he was preparing. He wanted to give his disciples (and us) something tangible to look forward to—an actual place, a *home*, where they (and we) would go to be with him.

The Heaven that Jesus described is not an ethereal realm of disembodied spirits. Such a place could never be home for us, because human beings are not suited for a nonmaterial existence. A *place* is by nature physical, just as human beings are by nature physical as well as spiritual. What we are suited for—what we’ve been specifically designed for—is a place like the one that God

made for us: Earth. We were made *from* the earth and *for* the earth. Earth is our home.

When Anna saw the young Jesus, “she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:36-38).

The people to whom Anna spoke about Jesus the Messiah-King, those “looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem,” were doing exactly what Peter says we should be doing: “looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Peter 3:13). This is the gospel of the Kingdom. Anything less is a narrow and truncated concept of God’s redemptive plan.

God didn’t make a mistake when he formed the first human being from the dust of the earth. He wasn’t speaking merely metaphorically when he said he wanted humanity to live on the earth and rule the earth. And God has not abandoned his original design and plan. One day, he will restore that which has been corrupted by sin, and he will bring Heaven down to a place called the New Earth. That is where he invites each of us to come live with him forever.

If we grasp this remarkable truth, we will realize at last that our most basic problem is not that we want *too much*. On the contrary, it is that we are content with *too little*. C. S. Lewis put it this way: “If we consider the unblushing promises of rewards in the Gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a

slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”³

When it comes to understanding Heaven, have you been content with too little?

IF WE CAN JUST SEE THE SHORE

Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

— LUKE 10:20



It becomes us to spend this life only as a journey toward heaven. . . . Why should we labor for or set our hearts on anything else, but that which is our proper end and true happiness?⁴

— JONATHAN EDWARDS

Life in this world—the way it is now and the way *we* are now—isn't easy, is it?

Perhaps you're burdened, discouraged, depressed, or even traumatized. Perhaps you've lost a loved one. Perhaps your dreams—your family, career, or lifelong ambitions—have crumbled. Perhaps you've become cynical or have lost hope. A biblical understanding of the truth about Heaven can change all that.

Secular optimists are merely wishful thinkers. Having discovered the present payoffs of optimism, they conduct seminars and write books about positive thinking. Sometimes they capitalize on optimism by becoming rich and famous. But then what happens? They eventually get old or sick, and when they die, they are

unprepared to meet God. Their optimism is ultimately an illusion, for it fails to take eternity into account.

The only proper foundation for optimism is the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. If we build our lives on this solid foundation, we should all be optimists. Why? Because even our most painful experiences in life are but temporary setbacks. Our pain and suffering may or may not be relieved in this life, but they will *certainly* be relieved in the life to come. That is Christ's promise—no more pain or death; he will wipe away all our tears. He took our sufferings on himself so that one day he might remove all suffering from the world. That is the biblical foundation for our optimism. Any other foundation is like sand, not rock. It will not bear the weight of our eternity.

No Christian should be pessimistic. We should be true realists—focused on the *reality* that we serve a sovereign and gracious God. Because of the *reality* of Christ's atoning sacrifice and his promises, biblical realism *is* optimism.

By meditating on Heaven and learning to look forward to it, we don't eliminate our pain, but we can alleviate it and put it in perspective. We're reminded that suffering and death are only temporary conditions.

Jesus came to deliver us from the fear of death, "so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15).

In light of the coming resurrection of the dead, the apostle Paul asks, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55).

We should not romanticize death. But those who know Jesus should realize that death is a gateway to never-ending joy.

Grasping what the Bible teaches about Heaven will shift our center of gravity and radically alter our perspective on life. It will give us *hope*, a word that the apostle Paul uses six times in Romans 8:20–25, where he explains that all creation longs for our resurrection and the world's coming redemption.

Don't place your hope in favorable life circumstances—they cannot and will not last. Instead, place your hope in Jesus Christ and his promises. One day he will return, and those who have placed their faith in him will be resurrected to life on the New Earth. They will behold God's face and joyfully serve him forever.

In 1952, Florence Chadwick stepped into the waters of the Pacific Ocean off Catalina Island, California, determined to swim to the mainland. An experienced swimmer, she had already been the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways.

The weather that day was foggy and chilly; Florence could hardly see the boats accompanying her. Still, she swam steadily for fifteen hours. When she begged to be taken out of the water along the way, her mother, in a boat alongside, told her that she was close and that she could make it. Finally, physically and emotionally exhausted, Florence stopped swimming and was pulled out. It wasn't until she was aboard the boat that she discovered the shore was less than half a mile away. At a news conference the next day, she said, "All I could see was the fog. . . . I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it."⁵

As you face discouragement, difficulty, or fatigue, or as you are surrounded by the fog of uncertain circumstances, are you thinking, *If only I could see the shore, I could make it?*

Set your sights on Jesus Christ, the Rock of salvation. He is the one who has promised to prepare a place for those who put their hope in him, a place where they will live with him forever. If we can learn to fix our eyes on Jesus, to see through the fog and picture our eternal home in our mind's eye, it will comfort and energize us, giving us a clear look at the finish line.

When the apostle Paul faced hardship, beatings, and imprisonment, he said, "One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14).

What gave Paul the strength and perspective to "press on toward the goal"? A clear view of Heaven. He wanted to "win the prize" that awaited him in Heaven, and he knew that God had "called [him] heavenward in Christ Jesus."

If you're weary and don't know how you can keep going, I pray this book will give you encouragement, vision, and hope. No matter how tough life becomes, if you can see the shore and draw your strength from Christ, you'll make it.

Are you able to see the shore? Will you ask God now to help you see it?

✠ *O God, Father of all promise and hope, maker of a world that was once perfect and one day will be perfect again, help us to look beyond the fog of this world. Help us to see the shore of the homeland that awaits us—a glorious, eternal Kingdom purchased by the loving sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our Savior and the King of kings.*

AFTERWORD

*Living Now in Light of the
World That Awaits Us*

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

— JOHN 14:1-3



*I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same.*¹¹²

— C. S. LEWIS

Jesus promised that he was going to prepare a place for us, a place where we will live with him forever. The Heaven we go to when we die is part of what he has prepared, but it is not our final destination, just as the airport where we wait for a flight is

part of our trip but not our destination. Where we're really going, the location of our eternal home, is the New Earth.

What kind of place can we expect our Lord to have prepared for us? Because he isn't limited, the possibilities are endless. I'm confident we can expect to find the best accommodations ever made by anyone, for anyone, in the history of the universe. The God who commends hospitality will not be outdone in showing hospitality to his children, whom he delights to comfort and reward.

A good carpenter envisions what he wants to build. He plans and designs. Then he does his work, carefully and skillfully, fashioning it to exact specifications. He takes pride in the work he's done and delights in showing it to others. And when he makes something for his bride or his children, he takes special care and delight.

Jesus is the carpenter from Nazareth. Carpenters know how to make things, and they know how to fix what's been damaged. Jesus has had experience building entire worlds (billions of them, throughout the universe). He's also an expert at *repairing* what has been damaged—whether people or worlds. And he's making a world for us, a remodel of the old Earth on a grand scale.

The Bible portrays life in God's presence, in our resurrected bodies in a resurrected universe, as so exciting and compelling that even the youngest and healthiest among us should look forward to it and daydream about it.

C. S. Lewis paints a beautiful picture of the eternal Heaven in *The Last Battle*, the final book of the Chronicles of Narnia. He concludes the series with what has become my favorite literary paragraph outside of Scripture:

As [Aslan] spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia have only been the cover and the title page. Now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the great Story which no one on earth has read; which goes on for ever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.¹¹³

Think of it: The story isn't over when we die. The story isn't over when Christ returns. And the story isn't over even when God makes the New Earth and places us there to live forever. That's only the beginning.

When Lewis makes use of the standard fairy-tale ending—"they all lived happily ever after"—you might be tempted to say, "But fairy tales aren't true." However, Lewis's *Chronicles* allude to the Bible, which *isn't* a fairy tale. In fact, God's Word is utterly realistic, showing the worst in even its good characters. It is unswerving in its portrayal of sin and suffering. Nowhere in Scripture do we see naive, sentimental, wishful thinking. What we see is our devastating separation from God; our relentless sin; God's persistent faithfulness; the hard, grueling work of Christ's redemption; the tangible nature of his resurrection; and the promise of coming judgment. And, finally, we see the restoration of God's ideal universe, fulfilling his plan of the ages, which will

culminate in resurrected people living with him on a resurrected Earth.

Then, and only then, will we live happily ever after.

By God's grace, I know that what awaits me in his presence, for all eternity, is something so magnificent it takes my breath away even as I write these words. Job declares it: "In my flesh I will see God. . . . I, and not another" (Job 19:26-27). That hope, that promise of redemption and restoration, eclipsed all of Job's heartaches. Surely it can eclipse yours and mine.

Think of it: Jesus, at unfathomable cost to himself, purchased for us a happy ending. A happy "ending" that will never end.

If you believe this, you won't cling desperately to this life. You'll stretch out your arms in anticipation of the greater life to come. Don't rob yourself of joy by letting even a single day go by without anticipating the new world that Christ is preparing for us.

If you don't yet know Jesus, it's not too late. Confess your sins and humbly accept the gift of his atoning sacrifice on your behalf. If you do know him, make your daily decisions in light of your destiny. By God's grace, use the time you have left on the present Earth to store up for yourself treasures on the New Earth, to be laid at Christ's feet for his glory (Revelation 4:10).

Knowing that this present world will end and become new heavens and a New Earth should profoundly affect your behavior. "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God. . . . In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him" (2 Peter 3:11-14).

If we grasp the meaning of “a new heaven and a new earth,” we *will* look forward to it. (And if we’re not looking forward to it, it’s because we simply *do not* comprehend it.) Anticipating our homecoming ought to motivate us to live spotless lives here and now. Anticipating our future on a resurrected Earth can empower us to persevere in a difficult marriage, remain faithful to the hard task of caring for an ailing parent or child, or stick with a demanding job. Moses remained faithful to God because “he was looking ahead to his reward” (Hebrews 11:26).

Jesus tells us that one day his faithful servants will hear their Master say, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:23, *ESV*).

The idea of entering into the Master’s joy is a telling picture of Heaven. It’s not simply that being with the Master produces joy in us, though certainly it will. It’s that our Master himself is joyful. He takes joy in himself, in his children, and in his creation. His joy is contagious. Heaven’s environment is pure joy. Joy will be the very air we breathe. The Lord is inexhaustible—therefore his joy is inexhaustible.

Think about those incredible words: “Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your master.” Memorize those words. They are the words we *long* to hear, the words we were *made* to hear.

What changes do you need to initiate *today* so that you may one day hear those words from God?

Once we’re home in Heaven, none of us will ever die again. Or suffer again. Or stay awake long lonely nights clutching the pillow next to us, wishing a loved one were still there. As a Christian,

the day I die will be the best day I've ever lived. But it won't be the best day I *will* ever live. Resurrection day will be far better. And the first day on the New Earth—that will be one *big* step for mankind, one giant leap for God's glory!

I need to say something to readers who are battling serious depression. The fact that Heaven will be wonderful shouldn't tempt us to take a shortcut to get there. If you're depressed, you may imagine that your life has no purpose. But as long as God keeps you here on Earth, it's *exactly* where he wants you. He's preparing you for another world. He knows precisely what he's doing. Through your suffering, difficulty, and depression, he's expanding your capacity for eternal joy.

Our lives on Earth are a training camp to ready us for Heaven. Don't make a terrible ending to your life's story—finish your God-given course on Earth. When God is done—and not before—he'll take you home in his own time and way. Meanwhile, he has a purpose for you here on Earth. Don't desert your post. (And by all means, go to a Christ-centered, Bible-believing church and find a wise Christian counselor.)

If all this about the present Heaven and the New Earth seems more than you can imagine, I'd encourage you not to reject it on that basis.

Our God, after all, is called the one “who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20). The very next verse gives praise to this God who acts immeasurably beyond our imaginations: “To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!”

That's just what those of us who know Jesus will be doing forever: glorifying God, ruling the New Earth, beholding God's

wonders in the magnificence of his new creation. Seeing God's face, we will spend the coming ages learning more and more of his grace and kindness.

I can hardly wait!

How about you?

WHAT MANY PEOPLE ASSUME ABOUT HEAVEN

Non-Earth

Unfamiliar

Disembodied (Platonic)

Foreign (utterly different from
the home we know)

Leaving behind what we love

No time and space

Static, unchanging

No art, culture, or progress

Neither old (like Eden) nor new
and earthlike; just unknown
and inhuman

Nothing to do but float on clouds
and strum harps; old life and
relationships forgotten

Instant and complete knowledge,
no curiosity; no learning or discovery

Boring

Inhuman; no individuality; desires lost

Absence of the terrible (but the
presence of little we desire)

Story over

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT HEAVEN

New Earth

New, and old improved

Embodied (resurrected)

Home (all the comforts of home, with
many innovations)

Retaining the good;
finding the best ahead

Time and space

Dynamic, developing

Art, culture, and progress

Both old and new,
familiar and innovative;
nostalgia and adventure

God to worship and serve; friends to
enjoy; a universe to rule;
purposeful work to do

An eternity of exciting learning and
discovery of God and his creation

Fascinating

Fully human individuals; desires fulfilled

Presence of the wonderful (everything
we desire and nothing we don't)

Story continuing forever

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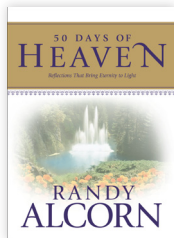
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