

A Theology of Heaven: SYLLABUS

Randy Alcorn, Instructor

THS 564I: May 2005

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“People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one.” (Hebrews 11:13-16)

REQUIRED TEXT

Heaven, Randy Alcorn (Tyndale House, 2004), 476 pages.

RECOMMENDED SUPPLEMENTAL BOOKS (NO REQUIRED READING)

- 1) *The Message of Heaven and Hell*, Bruce Milne (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002).
- 2) *The Last Things*, Paul Helm (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 145 pages.
- 3) *A Brief History of Heaven*, Alister E. McGrath (Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 176 pages.
- 4) *In Light of Eternity*, Randy Alcorn (WaterBrook Publishers, 1999), 166 pages.

NON-REQUIRED HEAVEN RELATED BOOKS BY INSTRUCTOR

Deadline and *Dominion* are novels with murder mystery plots on earth, integrated with secondary storylines in heaven. The books contain dialogue and activity in heaven the author believes is biblically warranted, though imaginatively expressed.

Safely Home, set in the context of Christian persecution in modern China, also depicts conversations and events in heaven. Longing for heaven and the fulfillment of desire in heaven are central themes.

Edge of Eternity is a semi-allegorical journey depicting a man’s emptiness, longing, and search for fulfillment. It portrays his choices in an otherworldly setting with a group of travelers, showing the conflicting voices and paths both calling him to his true home in heaven, and luring him from it.

Money, Possessions and Eternity (Tyndale House). Addresses the short-term desires fostered by materialism’s focus on present earthly treasures, in contrast to setting our desires on treasures in heaven that will count for eternity. This is a full-sized practical theology of money.

The Treasure Principle: Discovering the Secret of Joyful Giving (Multnomah Publishers, 2001). Seeing the big picture and transferring our desires for earthly treasures that won’t last, to heavenly treasures that will. This is essentially a highly distilled version of a central theme in *Money, Possessions and Eternity*.

COURSE SUMMARY

“A Theology of Heaven” will explore biblical indications of what happens at death; the intermediate state, as distinguished from the final state; the resurrection and final judgment; the nature of God’s kingdom plan from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22; the culmination of God’s Kingdom on the New Earth, a Heaven centered on Earth (Rev. 21:3); and reigning with Christ, a central aspect of the doctrine of eternal rewards.

We will address the pervasive myths and misconceptions about Heaven, and the problem of Christoplatonism and how it has derailed our understanding of the resurrection. We will address some of the most frequent questions about heaven, including these:

Is the intermediate state a dwelling place of disembodied spirits, or is there a transitional form between death and the resurrection? Will the New Earth be like Eden? Will there be animals? Will we learn and grow in our understanding? Will space and time still exist? What will our relationship with Christ be like? What will it mean to see God? What will it be like to worship Him? Will worshipping him mean we will not pursue other activities? How will we relate to each other? Do those now in heaven see what’s happening on earth? Do they remember their lives here? Will we recognize each other? Will we still be ourselves, or will we be completely different? Will we eat and drink? What is meant by “resting” and “serving” in heaven? Will there be national or ethnic identities and carry-overs of culture from the present earth? Will there be libraries, art, travel, recreation, entertainment, sports or technology?

Central questions will include 1) Is there a basic continuity or discontinuity between our present life on earth and our future life in heaven? 2) Will heaven ultimately be the dwelling place of God and angels, which men must adjust to, or the dwelling place of men to which God chooses to accommodate through an eternal incarnation? 3) What are some of the central areas in which Satan seeks to deceive us about heaven? 4) What difference does it make whether we set our minds on heaven in general, and the New Earth in particular, while we still live on earth?

Special emphasis will be given to the New Jerusalem as capital city of the New Earth, and the New Earth as capital planet of the new universe, and the far-reaching redemptive implications of Christ’s work culminating in a resurrected universe delivered from the curse.

We will also deal briefly with hell, annihilationism and universalism, as well as purgatory, soul sleep, near death experiences, and the nature and significance of the millennium as it relates to the doctrine of heaven.

The central focus of the class will be the Scriptures dealing with heaven, particularly those chosen by the instructor in the pre-assigned “Inductive Biblical Overview of Heaven.” Special attention will be given to the book of Revelation’s depictions of both the present heaven and the new earth, as well as the interpretive tensions in dealing with apocalyptic and metaphorical language about heaven. (What should we interpret literally, and how can we tell?)

COURSE FORMAT

A large portion of the class will involve a direct study and discussion of numerous biblical texts, to get an accurate sampling and larger perspective on what Scripture says about this crucial but neglected subject. This will produce more of a biblical than a systematic theology of heaven, but as we piece together these passages it should produce some overall systematic perspectives.

The instructor will present central ideas and supplementary insights. He will call on students to draw their own conclusions, with guidance from the instructor and input from other students. Class discussions, coming out of thoughtful biblical study and contemplation of the assigned reading, will be of major importance.

Handouts on heaven will supplement class discussions, including writings from Augustine, Aquinas, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, Richard Baxter, Charles Spurgeon, J. C. Ryle, C. S. Lewis and Peter Kreeft.

COURSE GOALS

Upon completion of this course you will . . .

BE:

1. More confident in your ability to identify and deal with biblical texts on heaven.
2. More mature in your walk with God, as you cultivate your thoughts and anticipation of heaven.
3. Better prepared to face trials, grasping the reality that has always brought hope, sanity and joy to God's people in adversity...that soon we will be where all tears will be wiped away, all hurts will be healed, all justice will be done, and we will at last be free from sin, temptation, death and suffering.

KNOW:

1. The central biblical texts on heaven.
2. The distinctions between the past, present and future heavens.
3. How the truths about heaven should radically affect our deepest longings and daily decisions.

BE ABLE TO:

1. Summarize what Scripture says about heaven.
2. Answer dozens of specific questions that people frequently ask about heaven.
3. Convey to others—in your family, small group, class or congregation—a revolutionary understanding of heaven, one that is true to Scripture, Christ-centered, and motivating to the life of joyful obedience.

INSTRUCTOR CONTACT INFORMATION

Eternal Perspective Ministries, 503-663-6481. My assistants Kathy Norquist or Linda Jeffries are at this number Mondays-Thursdays. When I'm not available (often I'm out of the office), they should be able to help you.

Email: randy@epm.org or kathy@epm.org (Website: www.epm.org); FAX: (503) 663-2292; Address for mailing course summary or inductive overviews unfinished prior to class: EPM, 2229 East Burnside #23, Gresham, OR 97030. These can also be emailed.

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

A. Attendance

Seminar sessions: May 20-21, 2005, all day. Hours on Friday May 20 will be 10:00 a.m. to 4:50 p.m. Hours on Saturday May 21 will be 9:00 a.m. to 3:50 p.m. The different start and end times allow out-of-town travelers to arrive a little later on Friday, and leave a little earlier on Saturday.

We will have short breaks and a longer lunch break. Please clear your schedule so you can attend all sessions, and arrange your commute to be on time. Those who step out and miss one or two sessions may find themselves confused since the class builds logically and progressively. It wouldn't be fair to other class members to go back to answer questions about items someone may have missed.

The class will be conducted in lecture/discussion style, lectures being interactive, two way, with questions and answers. The goal of the discussions will be to cultivate your own biblically sound theology of heaven. We will examine Scripture, the text *Heaven*, and a variety of handouts bringing different perspectives on the subjects.

B. Quality of Work

This is a graduate level seminar. Those taking it for credit will be expected to perform at that level. This means you must discipline yourself to do quality work and do it on time. You will be expected to have interacted carefully with the assigned readings, and to have done your inductive study of Scripture (unless you chose the class late and have requested permission to do it after the classroom sessions are over—not ideal, but acceptable in some cases). From this you'll participate in class discussions to form a learning community.

On your inductive study of Scripture you may hand write your notes IF you can do so legibly. If not, please type them. If it is easier for you to use a Word file of the Scripture passages that allows you to have variable room for your responses, by all means request that from kathy@epm.org.

C. Pre-Class Preparation (Required for credit students; Recommended but not essential for auditors)

1. Complete the inductive biblical overview of Heaven, attached to the syllabus or available at www.epm.org/heavenclass/articles/inductivestudy2.html. These passages are the backbone of the course. Use the spaces provided to write down brief observations or questions concerning each passage.

Credit students should turn in their notes from the study on the first day of class. They will be handed back at the beginning of the second day. You should always have them with you in class. They will be graded on the basis of completion and indications from your written or typed notes that each passage has at least been read, and some have been given more thought.

Time required: 10 hours: 6 minutes average per the 100 asterisked passages. The 75 other passages are for your supplemental or future study. Some of them will be referred to in class. This is intended for overview *not* as an in-depth opportunity for study. Part of the purpose is to experience the breadth of biblical teaching on a subject many believe Scripture doesn't say much about. Credit students should keep track of your hours. If you go through the asterisked passages in less than ten hours, start going through the others until you have given ten hours of time.

Those auditing will profit from as much time in Scripture as possible, of course, but you will still benefit from the class if you have not done preparatory work.

If credit students can't complete this prior to the first class, talk to the instructor to make special arrangements. However, you will benefit greatly if you've at least read biblical texts in advance.

2. Read the text *Heaven*. Credit students should read the text *Heaven* at the Mastery level (averaging about 30 pages per hour). This assumes careful interaction with the ideas, note-taking in book margins and/or in a notebook, and accountability for grasping material in class discussion. Keep track of your hours. If you finish in less time, you can invest it in the inductive study or the personal summary.

Time required: 15 hours.

All students, credit or audit, should bring the book *Heaven* to class. We will look together at some specific paragraphs in the book. Having your own marked copy of the book will be helpful.

D. Post-class Summary (For credit students)

Write a personal summary of the course. Draw from the material covered in class, the *Heaven* book and the inductive Scripture overview. Focus on the concepts that struck you as most important, interesting or useful. Write them out in the form of your choice, whether essay or outline or whatever you find most likely to be helpful to you for future reference as you come back to study, reflect or teach on this subject.

This summary might be done as-you-go, in the reading, the inductive biblical overview and even as you jot down notes in the classroom. Then, you can take what you've done along the way, shape it into a cohesive form and turn it in. (Whether or not you come back to this, and I hope you will, doing this summary will help cement the class material for your future reference.)

Time required: 5 hours. *Please mail your summary* to the instructor by August 1, 2005.

FINAL GRADE

The final grade will be determined on the basis of your completion of the assigned reading, the quality of your inductive study notes and your personal summary of the course. (Classroom participation will be taken into account in the case of a borderline grade.) All assignments must be completed with a passing grade to receive a passing grade for the course. Unless you qualify for an incomplete under provisions listed in the catalog, all assignments must be mailed by August 1, 2005.

READING REPORT
for credit students
THS 564I: A Theology of Heaven
Randy Alcorn, Instructor
May, 2005

_____ I completed reading Alcorn's book Heaven, at the Mastery level, before the class sessions.

_____ I didn't read the following portions before class, but completed them at the Mastery level before August 1, 2005:

_____ I didn't read the following portions at all:

Name