

HEAVEN, MY MINISTRY, AND ME

A Paper

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Introduction

The doctrine of heaven has been one of the most neglected theological subjects in modern church history. Contemporary Christians have suffered from a lack of knowledge concerning their eternal home, not to mention the overwhelming amount of unbiblical clichés, rumors, and misconceptions which have caused Christians and non-Christians alike to categorize views on the afterlife into the realms of mysticism or the unknowable.¹ However, the sudden decline in appropriate treatment of and keen interest in heaven is not attributed to its abandonment in all of world history. In fact, human civilizations have traditionally shared the common belief that man will live forever in a specific location in the afterlife.² This point demonstrates that the doctrine of heaven is not only a major part of Christianity, but also is a universal trait of mankind.

Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, three of the major world religions, all present doctrines of the afterlife as the goal of their follower's earthly existence.³ Yet, Christians have lost their urgency and expectancy for possessing what awaits them in heaven. In the present time, heaven has become a doctrine packed full of subjective theology consisting of parts of other religious views, pop-culture ideals, and personal preferences. Most

¹Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004), xv.

²Ibid., xix.

³Kenneth B. Mulholland, "Eternal Life," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 317-8.

people know more about how to gain entrance into heaven and the various events of eschatology leading up to the new heaven and new earth than they do concerning the actual characteristics and nature of their eternal destination.⁴

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and discuss the doctrine of Heaven in order to present this area of biblical theology in a manner that will correct misconceptions, educate the reader in sound theology, and will encourage the Christian to prepare and wait properly for it in an expectant and joyful mindset. This paper will accomplish these goals in three main ways. First, this paper will reflect on my personal experience and interaction with the doctrine of heaven. Second, biblical and theological support will be provided so that a right view of heaven may be administered and applied. Third, this paper will address the personal, familial, and ministerial implications of this doctrine in a contemporary setting.

Heaven over the Horizon

A personal account of my experience with Heaven seems to be a bit out of place since I have not yet dwelled in the visible presence of the Lord nor has my body been transformed from flesh and blood into what is imperishable and incorruptible (1 Cor 15:50; 1 Pet 1:3-4). However, the doctrine of heaven has been one of the most influential truths with which God continually uses to sanctify me.

As a typical Southern Baptist church member in the rural South, I grew up in Camden, South Carolina under the assumption that what awaited me in heaven was a never-ending church service. Many times our worship leader would arouse the

⁴Alcorn, *Heaven*, 9-10.

congregation after an opening hymn with a firm rebuke stating that we as congregation needed to sing with more power and enthusiasm because this was practice for what we would be partaking in for an eternity in heaven. As a child or even a young teenager, I became very fearful and less inclined to hasten the day of the Lord's return due to the dreariness of perceiving my eternal existence as merely defined by bleak congregational singing which would apparently never cease in the afterlife. In fact, heaven compared to life on earth appeared to be very boring, stagnant, and unentertaining.⁵ Not only did my theology of heaven develop from the misrepresentation of our worship leader, but also the absence of its teaching from the pulpit. Even now as I reflect upon years and years of sermons growing up in church, I cannot recall a single one of them devoted to the subject of heaven. Randy Alcorn says that, "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."⁶

All of the contributions towards my erroneous outlook on the afterlife must not be solely attributed to the work of the church. As an individual, I never took it upon myself to question my beliefs and therefore study the Bible in order to bring clarity and truth to my understanding of heaven. However, my departure from these views on the doctrine of heaven began during my junior year at North Greenville College in Tigerville, S. C. In the Christian Studies program, I developed a passion for the Old Testament which ultimately led me to investigate the New Testament book of Hebrews. As I read

⁵Zaleski states that, "Given eternity, many of us fear that there will not be enough mansions to keep us occupied and fulfilled. Heaven we fear, will be endless church services, a terrifying prospect to any reasonably vigorous child." Carol Zaleski, "Fear of Heaven," *Christian Century* 118, no. 9 (March 14 2001): 24.

devotionally through Hebrews, I made my way to the eleventh chapter not anticipating that in Heb 11:13-16 I would stumble upon a set of verses that would change my life forever.

From Heb 11:13-16 God exposed me to the sojourner mentality of the O. T. patriarchs and prophets. What intrigued me the most about this passage was that these O.T. figures and their faith seemed to be empowered by their hope for heaven. Despite God's promise of the earthly Promised Land, these people still longed for a heavenly Promised Land. The writer of Hebrews also portrays their specific awareness and acknowledgment of themselves as sojourners on the earth. Also, in v. 16 the author teaches the common biblical theme of a city which God himself has created especially for his people (Jn 14:1-3; Heb 11:10, 12:22, 13:4; Rev 21:2).

My study of this passage taught me three specific details with regard to the sojourner mentality and the nature of heaven. First, as a Christian I needed to view life through the lens that I was an exile or a sojourner on earth. Second, the profundity of the O.T patriarchs' perception of the heavenly Promised Land as a "better country" than their earthly Promised Land encouraged me to remove the pessimism of my theology of heaven since the biblical witness demonstrated these O.T. figures dying in their faith based upon the home which awaited them in the afterlife. And third, I dismissed the presupposition of heaven as an eternal church service due to the physical nature of heaven described in v. 16 as a country and a city.⁷

⁶Alcorn, *Heaven*, 10.

⁷Genesis 47:9, And Jacob said to Pharaoh, "The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning." Here, Jacob assumes the identity of a

Another tool apart from Scripture which God used to instill in me the understanding of heaven as a physical place full of glory, splendor, and joy was J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. As I began to study and extend my knowledge of the doctrine of heaven I started to see glimpses of it in art and geography. Tolkien's literary masterpiece delivers illustrations for both of these facets.

On December 17, 2003, a group of friends and I attended *The Return of the King*, the third and final installment of Peter Jackson's cinematic rendition of Tolkien's trilogy. Towards the last half of the movie a certain scene added by the writers shed light on the sojourner mentality of Tolkien's characters, but also the physical nature of heaven. This dialogue took place between Gandalf and Pippin as they were in what looked to be their darkest hour yet. However, these lines originally appeared in *The Return of the King* book and served as a commentary describing Frodo's first experience with heaven as he sailed off from the Grey Havens departing Middle-Earth forever. Tolkien vividly illustrates what is in Frodo's gaze writing, ". . . the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and [Frodo] beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise."⁸ However, this heavenly scene in the movies is placed at a time when Pippin says to Gandalf that he did not expect their journey to end in death during a battle. But, to the hobbit's surprise, Gandalf in his fatherly wisdom replies with this portrayal of the afterlife ensuring that death is not the end and that a "far green

sojourner as a summary of his entire life even though he has dwelled in the Promised Land. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

⁸J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 339.

country” awaits them both.⁹ This fact allows them to face insurmountable odds for the remainder of the film.

Therefore, my personal experience with heaven involved redefining my theological presuppositions infused into my mind by common misconceptions, a lack of teaching, and a personal failure in equipping myself with biblical truth. Once I became aware of how the biblical figures perceived the afterlife, namely heaven, in contrast to the disheartening outlook of my peers and culture, I realized that I needed to retreat to the Bible and let it develop my categories for understanding the home which Jesus promised to go and prepare for his church (Jn 14:1-2). In addition, by standing in awe and amazement of the wonders of creation, even in a fallen state, as well as the imagery in literature and art where others have attempted to portray heaven in various ways, God continues to cultivate, mature, and inform my passion and knowledge for this doctrine.¹⁰

Heaven and Theology

A tragedy today is that too many Christians have configured their beliefs on heaven disconnected from sound theology. Yet, how can one truly understand a purely biblical concept apart from interaction with the Bible? Therefore, systematic and biblical theology is necessary for coming to terms with the details and characteristics of heaven.

⁹This statement appears to be an undeniable allusion by Tolkien to the description of heaven as a “better country” in Heb 11:16.

¹⁰Within the same vein as the sojourner mentality, Christian singer/songwriter Andrew Peterson has devoted an entire record to this mindset called, *The Far Country*. The platform for his album was based upon Heb 11:13-16 along with similar themes which are evidenced heavily in the particular works of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*. If familiar with these literary works, the listener will detect many allusions and references to the content of these classic fiction works in much of the lyrics. Each song on the album revolves around the theme of a sojourner mentality and heaven.

Due to the lack of space available for intricate treatment of this doctrine, this paper will not delve into the deep matters of eschatology. This paper will develop the theology of heaven in three main ways: the intermediate heaven, the new heaven and new earth, and God as the glory and reward of heaven.

First, a fitting theology of heaven ought to begin with a characterization of the intermediate heaven. When Paul says in 2 Cor 5:8, “Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord,” or in Phil 1:23 where he states, “I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better,” one must affirm that Paul anticipated an immediate dwelling with the Lord subsequent to his physical death. However, this place appears to be distinguished from the new heaven and new earth which God establishes after Christ’s second coming. Even the idea of a “new” heaven implies the existence of a preceding one. Still, in light of Pauline theology, the term “heaven” is used doubly to refer to a future dwelling place as well as a present locale from which Jesus will depart to earth for his final return and judgment.¹¹ Therefore, what is the nature of the heaven that exists before Christ returns and God makes the old one new?

The intermediate heaven exists as a real, physical place. The common biblical reference to this temporal dwelling-place of God is the term “paradise”. This word signifies the realm where Jesus on the cross promised to meet the thief after their deaths in Lk 23:43. Also, Paul bore witness that he himself was “caught up into paradise” in 2 Cor 12:3. Therefore, Scripture speaks of the intermediate heaven as a physical place

¹¹Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 571.

inhabited by believers who share in resurrection life.¹²

However, though Christians will participate in the resurrection life made possible by the work of Christ over death (1 Cor 15:55-58), the residents of the present heaven have not received their final resurrection bodies. Still, the dead in Christ are not disembodied souls hovering in a celestial, ethereal environment. The martyrs in Rev 6:11 are in fact covered in white robes.¹³ A few other things may also be noted about life in the intermediate heaven drawn from this particular scene. First, the martyrs have voices and are able to cry out to God. Second, these martyrs still recall their personal history on earth as they affirm their own martyrdom and plead for vindication. Third, because of their awareness and memory, these people appear to have a distinct identity in the present heaven. And fourth, the intermediate heaven is a temporal setting as derived from God's reply to the martyrs that they must wait and rest before the judgment of the Lord is accomplished.¹⁴

In addition, the personal identity of the residents of paradise is seen among the appearances of other biblical figures. The disciples at the Mount of Transfiguration recognized the two men talking with Jesus as Elijah and Moses (Mt 17:3). Here is evidence of an intuitive state that perhaps believers will experience in which they are conscious of the people of God in heaven.¹⁵ Another major example of this fact is that

¹²Donald G. Bloesch, *The Last Things: Resurrection, Judgment, Glory* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 138.

¹³Ibid., 140.

¹⁴Alcorn, *Heaven*, 65-7. In chapter seven, Alcorn submits twenty-one possible conclusions drawn from Rev 6:9-11 that are indicative of life in the intermediate heaven.

¹⁵Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 473.

Saul clearly recognized the prophet Samuel as he appeared from the incantation in 1 Sam 28:13-14. Here, the woman medium described Samuel as an old man who was wearing a robe. Also, Samuel himself demonstrates a distinct personality while audibly speaking to Saul.¹⁶

One final observation that consists more so of conjecture is derived from the present state of Jesus' existence in heaven. Traditional Christianity affirms that Christ now dwells in his resurrected body with God in heaven. As testified to by the N.T. witness, this body was physical and capable of physical activities as well as being identifiable by others. Stephen, as he was stoned, declares that he saw into heaven and beheld Jesus standing at the right hand of God.¹⁷ Therefore, the rational conclusion concerning the state of believers in heaven is that they possess a physical form, though not their final resurrection body since it is doubtful that Christ is the only physical individual residing in heaven.¹⁸

Thus, the intermediate heaven serves as the temporary dwelling place of God and Christians who die on the earth. This heavenly site is the resting place for believers between their earthly life and the final resurrection. The biblical witness points to the fact that this present heaven is a physical place with physical objects and physical inhabitants. The fact that the biblical authors referred to this heaven as "paradise" reveals its kinship to Eden and points forward to what God will accomplish as he restores all of creation at

¹⁶Bloesch, *The Last Things*, 140.

¹⁷Acts 7:55-56, "But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'"

¹⁸Alcorn, *Heaven*, 59.

the Second coming.¹⁹

Second, being that the intermediate heaven is a temporary place, a study of the eternal dwelling-place of God and his people must be considered. To begin this study, it is proper and necessary to begin, so to speak, at the beginning. In Gen 1:31 the author writes, “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.” The Bible begins with God creating a physical world, full of geography, plants, animals, and people, declaring that it was “very good”. In Gen 1:21-30 and 2:7-8, God creates man, places him into the Garden of Eden, and gives him dominion over the earth. From the beginning of creation, God intended the earth to be the proper home and possession of humanity. However, due to the Fall, not only did God curse man, but also he placed a curse upon the earth (Gen 3:14-19).²⁰ Although Adam and Eve’s sin caused God to curse them and the earth, what is implicit in Gen 3:15 ought to be the understanding of the removal of that curse upon both objects which the sin affected. Already in Gen 3:15 there is an eschatological hope for the resurrection of the earth as well as the resurrection of the body.²¹ In the N. T., Paul speaks directly towards this future event as he points out that God subjected the world to futility in hope, namely that he would one day remove the curse of sin from creation (Rom 8:19-21).

¹⁹Alcorn demonstrates that “paradise” refers to an enclosed garden. He mentions that in the Septuagint, the Greek word for paradise was used to refer to the Garden of Eden. This idea initiates the understanding that even the intermediate heaven has physical or nature-like qualities in contrast to the ethereal and immaterial aspect in which it has been portrayed. Alcorn, *Heaven*, 55.

²⁰Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 276-7.

²¹*Ibid.*, 277.

At the Second coming of Christ, which is a time of final judgment and salvation, God will renew all of his creation (2 Pet 3:8-13). The present dwelling-place of God and the dead in Christ will pass away and essentially, heaven and earth will combine into a perfect and restored universe where God and his people will live forever.²² Thus, the citizens of God's eternal kingdom will be the dead in Christ who then experience the resurrection of their bodies. The nature of the believer's resurrection body provides evidence for understanding life on the new earth.

The resurrection body will be physical. These bodies also will be natural in the same sense as the original bodies that were given to man in Gen 1:26-27. This point entails a new earth in that these bodies were intended to inhabit and rule over a physical, earthly place. The resurrection body will be a body renewed and transformed into greater perfection in much the same way that the new earth will still be earth, yet restored and removed from its decay and corruption (Rom 8:30; 2 Cor 5:17).²³ The best example of this new body is the resurrected Christ. Although it is doubtful that the resurrection body of Christ and those of the believers are exact parallels, still many inferences may be drawn from his body as a supreme model. For instance, in the Gospels Jesus was able to travel and communicate with others after his resurrection. In addition, his body was physical in the sense that it was fully tangible (Lk 24:39). In Jn 21:12, Jesus made a fire and cooked fish for his disciples. Also, the Emmaus road disciples ate with Jesus as he taught them the Scriptures (Lk 24:13-35). Hence, the resurrection body of Jesus was not

²²John F. MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven: The Truth about Heaven, Angels, and Eternal Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 89.

²³Alcorn, *Heaven*, 110-4.

simply a ghostly, immaterial form, but was even recognizable as a man. At the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene first addressed him as “sir”, and then at hearing his voice, identified him as Jesus (Jn 20:15-16).²⁴

In 1 Cor 15, Paul delivers the most in-depth analysis of the final resurrection of the dead located in the Scriptures. From vv. 42-44, Paul discusses four main contrasts between the old and new body. By setting up these dichotomies, Paul teaches what the resurrection bodies will not be like rather than describing what will be new in their “heavenly dwelling” (2 Cor 5:2). First, the new body will become imperishable. The resurrection body will longer be submitted to pain, disease, injury, or death. Corruption ceases from being a natural part of bodily existence. Second, resurrected Christians will be raised in glory. These new bodies will resemble the radiance and glory of Christ’s resurrected body.²⁵ Here, Paul seems to be referencing humanity’s restoration back to becoming untainted beings made in the image of God. Third, the resurrection body will be removed from all weaknesses. The common need for rest and sleep will longer be indicative of the inhabitants of the new earth. This point is consistent with the fact that in the new earth there will be no night (Rev 22:5). Human worship and service of the Lord will no longer be hindered by limitations of a mortal body. Fourth, the new body will be a spiritual body. The meaning of “spiritual” in this context refers to a being which is in perfect obedience to the Holy Spirit. The resurrected believer will not be capable of giving in to temptation, disobedience, or any type of sinful action contrary to the holiness

²⁴Alcorn, *Heaven*, 115-6.

²⁵Phil 3:20-21 says, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

of God. The Holy Spirit will have total rule over the new body.²⁶

The new earth similar to the resurrected body will share continuity with what has passed away. In Paul's sermon at the Areopagus in Acts 17:22-34, he immediately noticed their altar to the "unknown god". He understood their innate ability to discern the existence of God from creation; and thus, Paul utilized creation as the foundation of his reasoning with the people in order to identify the "unknown god" as the true Creator God.²⁷

Though creation assists Christians in anticipating the new heavens and new earth where God forever dwells with his people in perfect peace, the restoration of all things will not regress simply back to an exact replica of Eden. For the new earth to be devoid of technology or any hints of civilization appears to be missing the point of the renewal of creation. Formerly, God walked and conversed with man in Eden until sin placed a chasm of separation between the Creator and his creation (Gen 2). In the new earth, God again will dwell with man forever because of the reconciling work of Christ and the removal of the curse from both man and the earth (2 Cor 5:19; Rev 21:3). This truth is the defining factor from which looking backwards to Eden points forwards to the "New Eden". However, the Garden of Eden may also reflect the natural beauty of the new earth. The present earth and its natural wonders are but shadows compared to the undiminished nature and environment of God's eternal kingdom.²⁸

Another major contribution to the new earth is the New Jerusalem. The

²⁶Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 249-50.

²⁷Alister E. McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 113-4.

disciple John describes the city as a place of staggering beauty and amazement (Rev 21-22). Just as God created Eden to be the center of his dwelling-place with man and the point from where humanity would rule over the rest of the earth, so also will be the purpose of the New Jerusalem. This new city will become the eternal home of the Triune God and his redeemed church.²⁹ Whether or not the New Jerusalem's dimensions or gates are to be taken literally is another issue of biblical interpretation, still, what is very clear concerning the nature of this heavenly city is that it is a literal city with the purpose of being the central location and supreme wonder of the new earth, home to all of the redeemed nations united under a single King.³⁰

Life in the new earth and the New Jerusalem will involve the perfection and eternal happiness of any and every activity and characteristic of natural existence. For example, eating will be present in the new earth. Whether or not Christians will be meat-eaters or vegetarians in the new earth the Scriptures are not clear; however, in the renewed creation any type of pleasure will not be dependent upon death as the source due to the fact that God himself will meet all of his church's needs.³¹ In addition, the present form of marriage will no longer exist. Jesus replies to the Sadducees, "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven."

²⁸Alcorn, *Heaven*, 234-7.

²⁹J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1958), 574-6.

³⁰The New Jerusalem as a literal city appears to be the logical interpretation of this text in light of the constant references of an eternal city throughout the Scriptures such as Paul's reference to our "citizenship is in heaven" in Phil 3:20 and the disciples' longing for the "city that is to come" in Heb 13:14.

³¹Bill T. Arnold, "Vegetarians in Paradise: Based on Isaiah 11:6-7 and 65:25, will we be vegetarians in the new heaven and earth as Adam and Eve were before the Fall?" *Christianity Today*, Oct, 2004, 104.

Marriage itself will still be present. However, the marriage of the new earth is the perfect union between the bridegroom Christ and his bride the Church. All of that which marriage intended to point towards and mirror will be perfected in the eternal heaven complete with the fullness of joy, satisfaction, and love.³² Other examples of activities in the new earth revolve around the unleashing of humans creative abilities made available by being made in the image of God. Pastimes such as music, dancing, storytelling, art, entertainment, and books, as part of typical human culture, more than likely will be performed in the new earth with perfection and eternal pleasure.³³

However, the supreme pleasure in the eternal heaven is without a doubt dwelling forever in the presence of God.³⁴ Rev 22:4 speaks of the resurrected believers seeing God face to face. Although there are many different interpretations as to what exactly this statement means, what is certain is that the beatific vision is the foundation for limitless eternal pleasure in relation to the church's fellowship with God, one another, and in every activity performed throughout the divine life.³⁵ Scriptures such as Ps 16:11, Ps 27:4, Ps 73:25, Jn 17:3, and Rev 22:4 allude to the fact that God himself will be the resurrected saints' supreme joy and reward in the new earth. John Piper succinctly summarizes this quality to the eternal heaven as well as what ought to be the disposition

³²Alcorn, *Heaven*, 336-7.

³³*Ibid.*, 403.

³⁴Pentecost says, "In relation to the eternal destiny of the church saints, it is to be observed that their destiny primarily is related to a Person rather than a place. While the place looms with importance (Jn 14:3), the place is overshadowed by the Person into whose presence the believer is taken. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 562.

³⁵Amy Plantinga Pauw, "Heaven is a World of Love: Edwards on Heaven and the Trinity," *Calvin Theological Journal*, no. 30 (November 1995): 399.

of Christians on the present earth when he asks,

“If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ was not there?”³⁶

Heaven and Life

Finally, in light of this brief treatment of the doctrine of heaven, what type of physical and spiritual bearing ought this truth impart upon our present lives? This section will discuss how to apply the doctrine of heaven to our personal, familial, and ministerial lives.

First, when we meditate upon the truths of heaven and the Second coming of Christ our reflection ought to lead us to two eternally necessary aspects of Christianity: salvation and holiness. 2 Pet 3:8-13 provides the Scriptural framework for this conclusion. According to Peter, the time before Christ’s final return is the age of repentance. When Jesus returns final judgment and salvation will be administered to the entire earth; thus, as individuals we ought to continue to “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12). Also, as Christians we ought to be adamant in evangelism and missions since God’s patience is making time for the nations to repent; however, Peter and Paul both assure us that the day of the Lord will surely come, and will be as unexpected as a thief in the night (1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10,15).

With regard to holiness, the author of Hebrews exhorts his readers to, “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Also, Jesus clearly states in Mt 5:8 during the Sermon on the Mount that, “Blessed are the

³⁶John Piper, *God is the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 15.

pure in heart, for they shall see God.” Holiness not only is a pursuit of this present life by which Christians contend for righteousness and a sinless life, but is also the groaning of their souls for which they long to be rejoined with their pre-Fall existence, fully functioning as creatures made in the image of God. In response to his declaration of the assurance of Christ’s coming, the judgment, and the new heaven and new earth, Peter says in 2 Pet 3:11-12,

“Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!”

In addition, the author of Hebrews in Heb 10:24-25 states the operation of the church during this present age as follows, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” Therefore, the truth of heaven compels us as Christians and beings made in the image of God to fulfill our calling to purity in order to return to God’s original intention for our existence (1 Thess 4:7). Salvation and holiness are the two prerequisites for entrance into heaven. Thus, our personal lives ought to be characterized by the living out and the proclamation of the gospel of Christ.

Second, our families must not escape the impact of this great eternal salvation (Heb 2:3). With respect to my own family being devoid of children, marriage is the primary concern. Thus, a theology of heaven impacts my marriage in a dynamic way. Being that marriage will cease in the afterlife, it should be treated as a sacred and holy privilege to partake in during the present life. This fact encourages my wife and I to cherish each other with a special preciousness. Our understanding of the union between

Christ and his church in the new earth teaches us how marriage out to be properly carried out and exhibited in everyday life. Paul's depiction of this future union in Eph 5:22-23 instructs the men and women on how to imitate this heavenly relationship in a right manner in the areas of submission, service, sanctification, purity, faithfulness, nourishment, provision, respect, protection, sacrifice, and love. Just as the Spirit and Bride in Rev 22:17-20 yearn for Jesus to return, so ought spouses to exemplify a like manner of yearning for one another, not satisfied in separation and division.

Third, the doctrine of heaven should empower our ministry with a powerful force and never-ending fire. The certainty of our hope sealed and guaranteed by the Holy Spirit, who will not put us to shame, provides confidence and assurance to our gospel efforts on this earth (Rom 5:5; 2 Cor 1:22, 2:5; Eph 1:14). As ministers of the gospel, we would do well to impart to our congregations the sojourner mentality of the biblical faith.³⁷ This type of imagery sets the Christian's mind upon the things of heaven and evokes their affections for returning to the homeland from where they belong yet have never been (Col 3:2).³⁸ In addition, our liturgy in church services should include constant references and content concerning heaven. Songs of worship, teaching curriculum, prayers, and sermons ought to be consistently educating and stirring up the believer's mind and heart heavenwards with the same anticipation and readiness attested to in the Scriptures. The concept of "waiting" and being "prepared" for the return of the Lord is prominent in relation to the coming of the Lord and should encourage ministers to equip

³⁷McGrath posits, "The image of a journey is perhaps one of the most important ways of stimulating the Christian imagination, and sustaining the hope of heaven." McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven*, 171.

³⁸Ibid., 175.

their congregations and flocks for waiting properly in “holiness and godliness” (1 Thess 3:13, 4:7; Heb 10:24-25; 2 Pet 1:3, 3:11).

The supreme object of affection and worship in the doctrine of heaven is God. Therefore, ministerial work on the present earth should reflect that same purpose through God-centered ministries. Since Christ is the central theme of the gospel, the New Testament, and the entirety of Scripture, then ought he not be the central figure and message of our ministry efforts on earth (Lk 24:44-45; John 17:1-3; Rom 10:4; 2 Cor 5:21; Rev 1:1, 22:16)?³⁹ Heaven will be rightly understood and anticipated if the gospel is rightly presented with God as its goal and reward. Therefore, worship, doctrines, missions, evangelism, and sermons should be saturated with Christ who is God. Ministry in this life must be defined as drawing people into salvation so that they may forever worship and serve the Savior and God of all creation. The apostle Paul accurately demonstrates this theme in 2 Cor 4:3-6 when he writes,

“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

³⁹Konig argues, “If the gospel is about him, so too is its message about the end. If he is the one around whom the whole New Testament revolves, then he is the one, too, around whom God’s plans for the world revolve.” Adrio Konig, *The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology: Toward a Christ-Centered Approach* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 1.

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