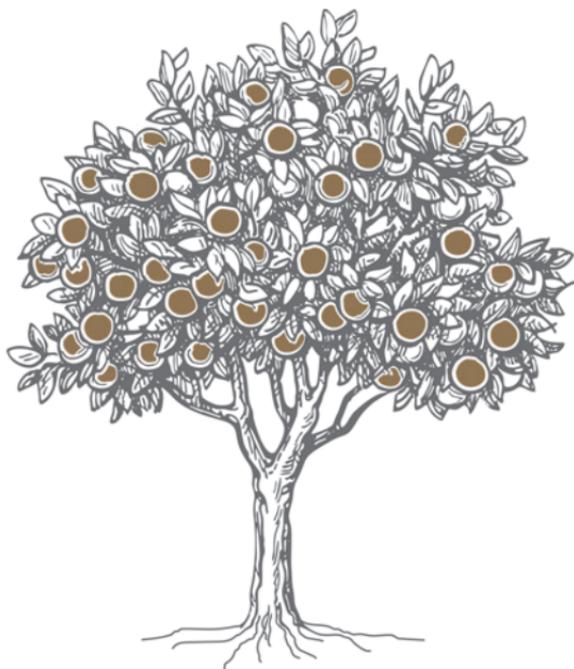




50 DAYS OF  
HEAVEN

*Reflections That Bring Eternity to Light*

RANDY  
ALCORN



— 50 DAYS OF —  
**HEAVEN**

RANDY ALCORN

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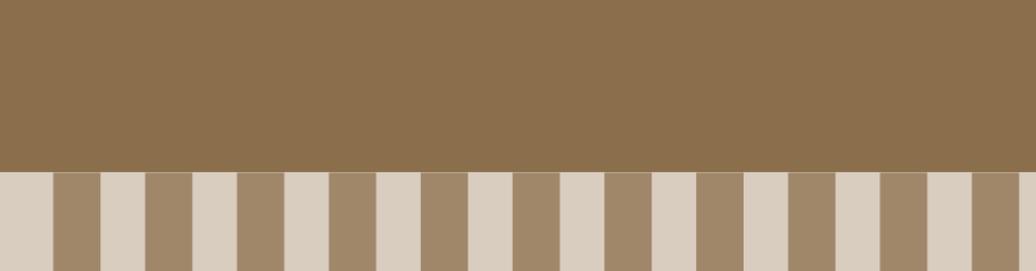
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## PREFACE

### *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*.

### **Eternal Perspective Ministries Contact Information:**

Web site: [www.epm.org](http://www.epm.org)

E-mail: [info@epm.org](mailto:info@epm.org)

Phone: 503-668-5200

Mail: 39085 Pioneer Blvd., Suite 206, Sandy, OR 97055

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## 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.<sup>1</sup>* — 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.”<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup>

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?<sup>4</sup>*

— JONATHAN EDWARDS

**L**ife 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."<sup>5</sup>

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.*

## HEAVENLY MINDED AND OF EARTHLY GOOD

Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

— COLOSSIANS 3:1-2



*It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.<sup>6</sup>*

— C. S. LEWIS

Over the years, a number of people have told me, “We shouldn’t think about Heaven. We should just think about Jesus.”

This viewpoint sounds spiritual, doesn’t it? But it is based on wrong assumptions, and it is clearly contradicted by Scripture.

Colossians 3:1-2 is a direct command to set our hearts and minds on Heaven. We set our minds on Heaven because we love Jesus Christ, and Heaven is where he now resides. To long for Heaven is to long for Christ. To long for Christ is to long for

Heaven, for that is where we will be with him. That's why God's people are "longing for a better country" (Hebrews 11:16).

In Colossians 3:1, the Greek word translated "set your hearts on" is *zeteo*, which "denotes man's general philosophical search or quest."<sup>7</sup> The same word is used in the Gospels to describe how "the Son of Man came to *seek* and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10, emphasis added). *Zeteo* is also used to describe how a shepherd looks for his lost sheep (Matthew 18:12), a woman searches for a lost coin (Luke 15:8), and a merchant searches for fine pearls (Matthew 13:45). It is a diligent, active, single-minded pursuit. Thus, we can understand Paul's admonition in Colossians 3:1 as follows: "Diligently, actively, single-mindedly pursue the things above"—in a word, *Heaven*.

The verb *zeteo* is in the present tense, suggesting an ongoing process. "Keep seeking Heaven." Don't just have a conversation, read a book, or listen to a sermon and feel as if you've fulfilled the command. If you're going to spend the next lifetime living in Heaven, why not spend this lifetime seeking Heaven so you can eagerly anticipate and prepare for it?

The command, and its restatement, implies there is nothing automatic about setting our minds on Heaven. In fact, most commands assume a resistance to obeying them, which sets up the necessity for the command. We are told to avoid sexual immorality because it is our tendency. We are not told to avoid jumping off buildings because normally we don't battle such a temptation. Every day, the command to think about Heaven is under attack in a hundred different ways. Everything militates against thinking about Heaven. Our minds are set so resolutely on Earth that we are unaccustomed to heavenly thinking. So we must work at it.

What have you been doing daily to set your mind on things above, to *seek* Heaven? What should you do differently?

Perhaps you're afraid of becoming "so heavenly minded that you're of no earthly good." Relax—you have nothing to worry about! On the contrary, many of us are so earthly minded we are of no heavenly *or* earthly good. As C. S. Lewis observed,

If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth "thrown in": aim at earth and you will get neither.<sup>8</sup>

We need a generation of heavenly minded people who see human beings and the earth itself not simply as they are, but as God intends them to be. Such people will pass on a heritage to their children far more valuable than any inheritance.

We must begin by reasoning from God's revealed truth. But such reasoning will require us to use our Scripture-enhanced imaginations. As a nonfiction writer and Bible teacher, I start by seeing what Scripture actually says. As a novelist, I take that revelation and add to it the vital ingredient of imagination.

In the words of Francis Schaeffer, "The Christian is the really

free man—he is free to have imagination. This too is our heritage. The Christian is the one whose imagination should fly beyond the stars.”<sup>9</sup>

Schaeffer always started with God’s revealed truth. But he exhorted us to let that truth fuel our imagination. Imagination should not fly *away* from the truth but *upon* it.

You may be dealing with great pain and loss, yet Jesus says, “Be of good cheer” (John 16:33, NKJV). Why? Because the new house is nearly ready for you. Moving day is coming. The dark winter is about to be magically transformed into spring. One day soon you will be home—for the first time.

Until then, I encourage you to find joy and hope as you meditate on the truth about Heaven revealed in the Bible.

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### **Why not ask God to make your imagination soar and your heart rejoice?**

---

☞ *Thank you, God, for the gift of imagination. In a world where ideas are so often grounded in quicksand and are contrary to sound doctrine, help us to be firmly based in your Word. Help us to be saturated in its teaching. Thank you for promising us “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine”<sup>10</sup> in your eternal Kingdom.*

## SEEING GOD'S FACE

[God's servants] will see his face. — REVELATION 22:4



*I shall rise from the dead. . . . I shall see the Son of God, the Sun of Glory, and shine myself as that sun shines. I shall be united to the Ancient of Days, to God Himself, who had no morning, never began. . . . No man ever saw God and lived. And yet, I shall not live till I see God; and when I have seen him, I shall never die.*<sup>11</sup>

— JOHN DONNE

**O**ur longing for Heaven is a longing for God—a longing that involves not only our inner selves but our bodies as well. Being with God is the heart and soul of Heaven. Every other heavenly pleasure will derive from and be secondary to his holy presence. God's greatest gift to us is, and always will be, *himself*. His presence brings satisfaction. His absence brings thirst and longing.

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Psalm 42:1-2).

“O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (Psalm 63:1).

Ancient theologians often spoke of the “beatific vision.” The term comes from three Latin words that together mean “a happy-making sight.” The sight they spoke of was God. To see God’s face is the loftiest of all aspirations. It’s sad, then, that for most of us, it’s not at the top of our list of desires.

When Moses said to God, “Show me your glory,” God responded, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you. . . . [But] you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live. . . . When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen” (Exodus 33:18-23).

Moses saw God, but not God’s face. The New Testament says that God “lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (1 Timothy 6:16). Thus, when we’re told in Revelation 22:4 that we’ll see God’s face, it should astound us.

“Without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). The obstacles to seeing God are daunting. It’s only because we’ll be fully righteous in Christ and completely sinless that we’ll be able to see God and live. To see God will be our greatest joy, the joy by which all other joys will be measured.

David says, “One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple” (Psalm 27:4). David was preoccupied with God’s person, and also

with God's place. He longed to be where God was and to gaze on his beauty. To see God's face is to behold his beauty.

When Jesus Christ came to Earth as one of us (John 1:14), God, who is transcendent, became immanent. Thus, one of the names given to Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Because God the Father and God the Son are one (John 10:30), whenever we see Jesus in Heaven, we will see *God*. Because Jesus Christ is a permanent manifestation of God, he could say to his disciple Philip, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Certainly, then, a primary way that we will see God the Father on the New Earth is through his Son, Jesus.

Jesus also says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8). In Revelation 22:4, when it says "they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads," it appears to be referring to seeing the face of God the Father.

Does God, who is not inherently physical, have a face in any sense but a figurative one? I'm not certain. And I don't pretend to understand how we will see his face. But I rejoice in the anticipation that we will!

Scripture is full of great promises about what awaits us in Heaven. However, none is greater than the promise that we, as resurrected human beings, will actually *see* God.

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**If you're a follower of Jesus, what would you like to say now to the God whom you will one day see?**

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☞ *Father, fill us with the wonder of being able to see you face-to-face, to walk beside your Son and behold his eternally human and divine face. What a delight to gaze*

*at you, the source of all good, all beauty, all mystery. And what an incomparable experience to not only imagine but one day actually see your face—you who spun the galaxies into existence, who wove together the earth with its animals and oceans and forests and flowers, who created us in your glorious image. May we never lose sight of our highest destiny, to see you. And may we pass on that vision to those around us, including our children and grandchildren.*

## GOD: OUR PRIMARY PLEASURE

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes.

— JOB 19:25-27



*The redeemed will indeed enjoy other things. . . . But that which they shall enjoy in the angels, or each other, or in anything else whatsoever, that will yield them delight and happiness, will be what will be seen of God in them.<sup>12</sup>*

— JONATHAN EDWARDS

**T**he anticipation of seeing God face-to-face is heartfelt and ancient. In the oldest recorded book of Scripture—most likely written before Moses wrote Genesis—Job, in the midst of bone-crushing anguish, cried out in a vision of striking clarity that his Redeemer would one day come to Earth. And even though Job's body would be destroyed through physical death, he knew that he would in his own flesh see God. It's hard to imagine a clearer reference to the coming resurrection.

In what form will we be when we see God? Will we be ghostly

spirits, floating about? No, we will be resurrected human beings, standing and kneeling, walking and talking, praying and worshipping and laughing, eating and drinking *in our new bodies*. As Job cried out, “After my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.”

When Job imagined seeing his Redeemer with his own eyes, it flooded his troubled soul with a transcendent sense of victory and comfort. As you anticipate seeing God face-to-face, what images come to mind? What effect do those images have on you?

Will the Christ we worship in Heaven as God also be human? Yes. According to Hebrews 13:8, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday [when he lived on Earth] and today [when he lives in the present Heaven] and forever [when he will live on the New Earth, in the eternal Heaven].”

Jesus didn’t put on a body and then shed it again as if it were a coat. He doesn’t comprise two separable components, man and God, to be switched on and off. He was and is and always will be God *and* a man. The Incarnation is permanent.

We need not wait until the New Earth to catch glimpses of God. We’re told his “invisible qualities” can be “clearly seen” in “what has been made” (Romans 1:20). Yes, we live amid devastation, and we know the corruption of our own hearts. Yes, our vision is hampered by the curse that affects all of creation. Eden has been trampled, torched, and savaged. Nevertheless, the stars in the sky declare God’s glory (Psalm 19:1); in our own bodies we can see the intricacy of God’s craftsmanship; and in flowers and rain and art and music we see vestiges of God’s beauty and creativity. And one day the Curse will be reversed. One day, both we and the universe will be forever set free. In that day, *we will see God*.

In Heaven, the barriers between redeemed human beings and God will be removed forever. We will look into God's eyes and see what we've always longed to see: the person who made us for his own good pleasure. Seeing God will be like seeing everything else for the first time. Why? Because not only will we see God, he will be the lens through which we see everything else—other people, ourselves, and the events of our earthly lives.

Jonathan Edwards said, "The redeemed will indeed enjoy other things. . . . But that which they shall enjoy in the angels, or each other, or in anything else whatsoever, that will yield them delight and happiness, will be what will be seen of God in them."<sup>13</sup>

In Psalm 73:25, Asaph says, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you." This may seem an overstatement—there's *nothing* on Earth this man desires but God? But Asaph is affirming that the central desire of our hearts is for God. Yes, we desire many other things—but in desiring them, it is really *God* we desire.

Augustine called God "the end of our desires." He prayed, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."<sup>14</sup>

God is the Fountainhead, the Source of all lesser streams of our desire. When we desire food, friendship, work, play, music, drama, or art, we are ultimately *desiring God*.

Consider this analogy: When you're sick and your friend brings you a meal, what meets your needs—the meal or the friend? *Both*. Without your friend, there would be no meal; but even without the meal, you would still treasure your friendship. Thus, your friend is both your higher pleasure *and* the source of your secondary pleasure (the meal). Likewise, God is the source of all

lesser goods, so that when they satisfy us, it is God himself who is satisfying us.

Perhaps you're thinking, *But our eyes should be on the giver, not the gift* and, thus, *We ought to focus on God, not on Heaven*. But this perspective erroneously divorces our experience of God from life, relationships, and the world—all of which God graciously gives us to draw us closer to him. It also sees the material realm and other people as God's competitors rather than as instruments that communicate his love and character. It fails to recognize that because God is the ultimate source of joy, and all secondary joys derive from him, to love secondary joys on this earth *can be*—and in Heaven *always will be*—to love God, their source.

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**Do you want to ask God to help you learn to see him as the source of every good thing and thus as the one you most desire?**

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✚ *Father, given the current darkness around us, and the spiritual battles within us, we need your help to avoid making idols of your provisions. Help us realize that once you have forever freed us from sin, once we live in your presence and see your face, we'll never have to worry about putting people or things above you. That would be unthinkable. And if we were thinking clearly now, it would be unthinkable to us already. So empower us to think clearly, Lord. May we see you as you are, so we may always enjoy but never idolize the magnificent lesser desires and joys you have graciously granted to us. Use the things that delight us to draw us closer to you.*

## ENJOYING GOD IN SECONDARY PLEASURES

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?  
— ROMANS 8:32



*God himself, who is the Author of virtue, shall be our reward. As there is nothing greater or better than God himself, God has promised us himself. God shall be the end of all our desires, who will be seen without end, loved without cloy, and praised without weariness.*<sup>15</sup>  
— AUGUSTINE

**D**o you think God is pleased when we enjoy a good meal, a football game, laughter with friends, a cozy fire, or a good book? Your answer to that question not only demonstrates your view of God but also indicates the degree to which you are able to enjoy life. And it will determine how much you will look forward to the resurrection and what the Bible calls the New Earth.

Scripture says, “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides

us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Timothy 6:17). God, not wealth, should be the object of our hope. But God is also the one who richly grants us his provisions, which are intended for our *enjoyment*.

Failure to understand the goodness of God’s creation has blinded countless people from seeing Heaven as a place of great pleasure and enjoyment. Instead, they think that for Heaven to be “spiritual,” it must somehow be drab, unappealing, and bereft of “earthly” things, which they consider unspiritual.

God’s first commandment is that we should put no created thing before him. We should never make what he has created into a God substitute. But sometimes we wrongly conclude that people and things and pleasures are therefore bad, forgetting that it was God himself who made them.

God is not up in Heaven frowning at us and saying, “Stop it—you should find joy only in me.” This would be as foreign to our heavenly Father’s nature as it would be to mine as an earthly father if I gave my daughters a Christmas gift and then pouted because they enjoyed it too much. No, I gave the gift to bring joy to them and to me. I am *delighted* when they enjoy the gifts I’ve given them. If they didn’t, I’d be disappointed. Their pleasure in my gift to them draws them closer to me.

Though preoccupation with a God-given gift can turn into idolatry, enjoying that same gift with a grateful heart can draw us closer to God. In Heaven, we’ll have no capacity to turn people or things into idols. When we find joy in God’s gifts, we’ll find our joy in him. Enjoying God’s gifts to us should never move us away from him; it should always draw us closer.

All secondary joys are *derivative* in nature. They cannot be sep-

arated from our primary joy, which is God. Flowers are beautiful because God is beautiful. Rainbows are stunning because God is stunning. Puppies are delightful because God is delightful. Sports are fun because God is fun. Study is rewarding because God is rewarding. Work is fulfilling because God is fulfilling.

Ironically, sometimes people who are the most determined to avoid the sacrilege of putting things before God miss a thousand daily opportunities to thank him, praise him, and draw near to him because they imagine they shouldn't enjoy the very things that God has made to help us know him and love him.

God is a lavish giver. "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). The God who gave us his Son delights to graciously give us "all things." These "things" are in addition to Christ, but they are never *instead* of him—they come "along with him." If we didn't have Christ, we would have nothing. But because we have Christ, we have everything. Hence, we can enjoy the people and things that God has made, and in the process we enjoy the God who designed and provided them for his own pleasure and ours.

God welcomes prayers of thanksgiving for meals, warm fires, games, books, hobbies, sex, and every other good thing. When we fail to acknowledge God as the source of all good things, we fail to give him the recognition and glory he deserves. We separate God from joy, which is like trying to separate heat from fire or wetness from rain.

The movie *Babette's Feast* depicts a conservative Christian sect that renounces "worldly" distractions—until Babette prepares an unforgettable dinner that opens their eyes to the richness of

God's provision. When we partake in heartfelt gratitude to God, these things draw us *closer* to God, not away from him. That's precisely what all things and all beings in Heaven will do—draw us to God.

In our lives on Earth, we should see God everywhere in his creation: in the food we eat, the friendships we enjoy, and the pleasures of family, work, and hobbies. But we should never let these secondary pleasures eclipse our love for God (and thus we, in fact, must sometimes forgo them). We should thank him for all of life's joys, large and small, and allow them to draw us closer to him.

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### **That's exactly what we'll do in Heaven. Why not start now?**

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☞ *Father, many of us have lost sight of the fact that you created the earth and that you are the inventor of pleasure. You created our bodies with nerve endings and taste buds and senses that allow us to find pleasure. But as a result of the Fall, we've misused your gracious provisions and turned them into idols. We've made substitute gods out of sex and money and food and a thousand other good things. Lord, only when we understand how you have richly provided the material world for our enjoyment can we then embrace your plan to reclaim what has been lost. Help us to see that pleasure is not unspiritual, that it is from your hand and for our enjoyment within the bounds of your commandments, which are designed to keep us from destruction. Help us to pursue you as the Great Pleasure from which every lesser pleasure flows.*