

TRUTH TO REMEMBER

Kingdom Christians' treasures are in heaven.

TREASURES IN HEAVEN

BY JON JOHNSTON

Most of us take extreme measures to avoid pain and enhance pleasure. We cringe when hearing chalk screeching on chalkboards, eject bitter-tasting fruit, close our nose when encountering foul-smelling odors.

Conversely, we pay big bucks to hear favorite musical artists, treat ourselves to exotic coffees, and generously scent ourselves with fragrant perfumes. Indeed, we have a powerful natural inclination to embrace things that please our senses, but soundly reject that which yields the opposite.

Early Church martyrs undoubtedly desired fleshly comfort; but when it became “crunch time,” they intentionally relinquished it for the higher good. Not because they were masochists. Rather, they shared a clear vision of heaven’s glory and permanence, as well as our earthly sojourn’s brevity. This is so clearly revealed in their final triumphant and inspiring words.

One saint, with arms and legs bound tightly with chains, victoriously proclaimed: “These aren’t chains but ornaments. My feet may be fettered, but my soul still treads the path to heaven.” As animal scrapers were being used to furrow the face of a young woman believer, she gazed heavenward and declared: “Lord, they are writing that Thou art mine.” Another summed up his plight with this proclamation:

The world took my *citizenship*, but my (true) citizenship is (inscribed) in the Book of Life. The world (seized) my *possessions*, but I have treasures in heaven where no rust corrodes nor thieves steal. The world threatens to take my *life*; but if I am in the flesh, He is in me, and if I am out of the flesh, I'm with Him!¹

These, along with scores of their ilk through the centuries, shared a “this world is not my home” perspective. Like Abraham, they truly saw themselves as vagabonds here on earth, en route to a city having eternal foundations “whose builder and maker is God” (Hebrews 11:10, KJV). Bound for the Promised Land!

Contrast this with the 60ish woman I know, who faithfully devotes five hours each day in front of mirrors, taking drastic measures to enhance her appearance. Or the fellow who puts in enough work overtime, in attempting to guarantee his financial security, to qualify as both absentee husband and father.

Question: Which of these perspectives do we more tightly embrace? Is ours a holy, biblical, heavenly focus—with a loose attachment to mammon? Or, is our central focus on personal, sensual fulfillment and accumulation of resources in the here and now? As one poet poignantly asks: “Is this world too much with us?”

Is our gaze on, and obsession with, illusionary treasures on earth? Are we so thoroughly entangled in the “dense thicket” of the immediate and worldly to the neglect of the future and heavenly?

OUR VISE-GRIP ON THE TEMPORAL

To be candid, today there is a striking disinterest in heaven—certainly among unbelievers, but even among affluent North American Christians. In contrast to persons from more destitute places and times, most today have it so good

that they rarely think about—much less yearn for—that “pearly white city” (Arthur F. Ingler, 1902).

God has showered the majority of people in our society with an abundance of earthly comforts—probably more than any prior generation. Furthermore, most know little of life-threatening persecution that has existed (and still exists) elsewhere.

Result: Few feel like strangers, pilgrims, or aliens in this world. More likely, many feel much like managers or stockholders. In lingo of the Old West, more like settlers than drifters. Roots are sunk deeply. Investments in the here and now are considerable.

Quite possibly, many would consider a summons to be with Jesus—at the indescribable home He has prepared—as a rather unwelcome intrusion into their busy schedule. A resented interruption of “important” appointments and “crucial” career goals.

With this in mind, it’s little wonder so few write songs about “those golden shores” these days. The few hymns we sing about heaven are, mostly, spirituals or other oldies (e.g., “This World Is Not My Home,” “When They Ring Those Golden Bells,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “The Pearly White City”). Likewise, triumphant sermons on “glory land”—so plentiful in the past—seem very scarce today.

To many, indulging in excessive (or even minimal) “heaven-think” implies escapism, detachment with the present, being uselessly visionary.

TIME FOR A REALITY CHECK

Nevertheless, even today in our affluent, rushed, noisy lives, we who are twice-born must continuously remind ourselves that our truest homeland lies in the “land that is fairer than day, and by faith we can see it afar.”² Heaven is spoken of no less than 582 times in 505 verses in God’s Word. Our

hearts should melt, and our hopes soar with inspiration and gratitude, when we read triumphant words like:

Our citizenship *is* in heaven. And we *eagerly await* a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:20-21, emphasis added).

To lack this as our *dominant* focus is to ignore the obvious: In the grand scheme of things, life is extremely short. And compared to heaven, inconsequential—a brief and fleeting moment in time, in a place that is a “preparation zone” for our eternal home.

Concerning life’s brevity, I recall gazing at the Great Wall of China as well as the Egyptian pyramids—both of which have stood in splendor for 3,000 long years—and thinking how brief my biblically allotted “fourscore and ten” years are by comparison.

Indeed, James hit the bull’s-eye with these cryptic words: “What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (4:14). Many today accept that life is brief, but delude themselves into thinking they can be clever enough to slow down the hands of time.

In her book on heaven, Joni Eareckson Tada notes that the slogan, “Slow down and live,” appears on everything from highway signs to health books. But time has a mind of its own, and we are helpless in attempting to decrease its velocity. Applying wrinkle cream, pumping brain and brawn with vitamins E and A, and even freezing the body in an iced hydrogen chamber (as did the late Walt Disney) won’t do it. Steadily and consistently, time proceeds ahead, pulling us in tow.³ As someone remarked: These hearts of ours beat like muffled drums—in steady cadence—as we march to our graves.

With this in mind, our attention must be fixed on life’s “end game”—that which awaits us, our destination at the end of life’s pathway. We must give primacy, as did the mar-

tyrs, to the eternal over the rapidly vanishing transitional and temporal. It only makes sense—especially for believers who possess an intense hope⁴ and eager anticipation. Not only is this wise, it promises a multiplicity of bonus dividends in our earthly sojourn.

RESULTS OF AN AUTHENTIC HEAVEN-PERSPECTIVE

Granted, some have become so excessively heaven-focused that they're of little earthly good. Some mystics, for example, have intentionally isolated themselves from all semblances of earthly influences—as well as others' needs. Their goal? To deprive their flesh and, thereby, better contemplate the hereafter. Saint Simeon in the Middle Ages, for example, sat on a pole for 63 years, until his hair grew to the ground (and his back felt tortuous!). Few today share his mind-set. And that's probably not all bad.

But to repeat, today we're far more likely to err on the side of completely crowding out heaven from our conscious mind. And we do that to our detriment. Late scholar and admired friend, Bertha Munro, once drew a vivid contrast employing the ancient Greek myth of "Antaeus the Giant."

According to this legend, every time the big fellow was felled, he rose with new strength. Why? Because he had touched, and absorbed, vast amounts of energy from his mother—earth. But for us, the opposite holds true: contact with heaven, rather than earth, pours fresh strength into our spiritual veins.⁵

What are two very significant benefits resulting from an authentic heaven-focus dominating our perspective?

First, we clearly see how earth's treasures are deficient and, ultimately, unsatisfying—unworthy of our highest priorities.

Things, rather than God or people, can easily assume preeminence in our lives. The Bible refers to *mammon*, a Hebrew word for "material possessions." Originally it referred to

entrustment to another for safekeeping, but it gradually came to imply “that in which a person puts his trust” (a god or God-substitute). No wonder Matthew 6:24 (KJV) proclaims that we “cannot serve God and mammon” simultaneously.

Grabbing, grasping, and putting trust in things is a favorite pastime today. Why? Affluence and advertising. The first provides means; the second supplies motivation related to defining our self-worth. Result: Throngs continually respond to their insatiable urge to satisfy fleshly desires. And gratification is rarely delayed! We combine our high maintenance with a very low threshold of patience.

Credit cards enable us to instantly own what we can't afford, go where we wouldn't be able to go, and do what would otherwise be impossible for us to do. Only later do we begin paying—for many only a minimum monthly total which mostly goes toward an exorbitant interest rate. Result? Endless debt. (Recently, I heard that the credit card debt owed by the average American family is \$7,000—while, in contrast, the average savings account total is a paltry \$3,000!)

Furthermore, the more we acquire, the more we desire—and desire to acquire. A deep-seated, insatiable urge seizes us, so that the very *act* of getting can actually become our most precious treasure. Little wonder that an increasing number of 12-step groups target shoppers' addictions.

In very graphic, no-nonsense language, our Lord tells us three reasons why such earthly treasures aren't worthy of our primary focus (see Matthew 6:19-21):

1. *Some are vulnerable to moth-consumption, hence, destruction.* The primary reference here is to clothes, no matter how costly or beautiful. The kind that Gehazi, Elisha's servant, connived to obtain from Naaman after his master had cured him (2 Kings 5:22). The kind that tempted Achan to sin when he set his affections on “a beautiful robe from Babylonia” (Joshua 7:21). At some point, all clothes hit the closet, and that's where little critters begin their feast.

2. *Many are prone to another kind of “eating away”* (Greek *broxis*) Only here in God’s Word is it translated “rust.” More likely, the reference is to rats, mice, worms, and other vermin invading granaries to consuming grain. So, to our clothes we can add this constant threat to our food supply.
3. *Finally, all valued earthly treasures are subject to being stolen by thieves who “dig through”* (Greek *diorussein*). In Palestine, walls of many houses were made of baked clay. Burglars easily dug through walls and seized all they desired.⁶ Today, in spite of the highest-tech alarm systems, and the most vicious of guard dogs, thieves somehow succeed in invading our homes and departing with great quantities of “loot.”

Second, when we possess a “heaven-focus,” our minds anticipate the incredible, completely satisfying, eternal treasures that await us.

When Jesus enters our hearts, our affections change. Our attention is redirected away from degradable earthly treasures, and toward incorruptible, incomparable heavenly treasures, ones that never fade away. Some of these are:

1. *First and most important, our Father awaits there to welcome us.* Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father which art in heaven” (Matthew 6:9, KJV). Furthermore, our blessed Savior is at His right hand, where He intercedes on our behalf (see Hebrews 7:25) and oversees the building of our palatial heavenly home (see John 14:2).
2. *Scores of our brothers and sisters in Christ are there* (see Hebrews 12:23). Joyce Landorf once referred to them as our “balcony people,” who cheer us on to the finish line. Martyrs, biblical heroes, departed family, and friends will someday join us at the glorious, unending celebration that will make the one following the Super Bowl look like a child’s tea party!
3. *Our names are indelibly inscribed there in the Lamb’s*

Book of Life. Jesus once instructed His disciples, “re-
joice [because] your names are written in heaven”
(Luke 10:20). Why? Because that means we official-
ly belong there.⁷

In addition to these, there are angels and unimaginable surroundings: mansions for everyone, a crystal sea, gates of pearl, walls of precious gems, and gold so plentiful that it’s used to pave roads! Beauty much too awesome to describe.

Furthermore, as Joni likes to say, “It’s the land of the ‘no-mores.’” They’re listed in Revelation 21:4. No more sorrow, crying, pain, curse, and—praise be to God—no more death. On earth, the sum of human misery vastly outweighs that of human happiness. Job declared: “Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble” (14:1). David says: “Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest— . . . far from the tempest and storm” (Psalm 55:6, 8).

Bottom line: Heaven will be “an undoing of all the bad things we know as God wipes away every tear and closes the curtain on pain and disappointment.”⁸

It all comes down to what Jesus proclaims: Everything we love everlastingly, everything we rightly value, everything of eternal worth is in heaven—pure and simple. That’s why it is worthy of our innermost thoughts and most exalted dreams. Meanwhile, as the hymn aptly puts it, “The things of earth will grow strangely dim”—as our hearts become galvanized on our glorious, eternal treasures (see Matthew 6:21).⁹

MORE MAGNETISM THAN MYSTERY

Since many associate heaven with the distant beyond, our thoughts concerning it often lack intimacy. Result: Many of us have little mental and psychological bonding with it, as well as the idea of spending eternity there. But even though it may seem far away and alien to our everyday existence, it need not be dreaded nor relegated to a level of secondary

importance. To avoid this pitfall, we need only consider a couple of very important facts.

First, although many details about the great, mysterious beyond are unknown, some hints of its splendor are proclaimed in God's Word. We read of rainbow thrones, a 1,400-mile length and width, 200-foot walls made of jasper, mansions everywhere. But when all is said, the most important fact is that our Lord prepared it all. And His lavish love has never cut corners. With this in mind, C. S. Lewis summarizes:

All the things that have ever deeply possessed your soul have been but hints of [heaven]—tantalizing glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear.¹⁰

They once asked NFL's Hollywood Henderson (Dallas Cowboys) on the eve of a Super Bowl whether he considered his upcoming experience to be the "absolute ultimate." He nonchalantly remarked, "Not really. You see, there's another one next year." By contrast, by all standards available to humankind, heaven will definitely be the absolute ultimate!

Second, although it may seem spatially and temporally distant, heaven is much closer than we think. Many religions maintain that after death, persons must travel distances, fight animals, endure great suffering, etc., before arriving in paradise. Egyptian belief, for example, posited that any departed Pharaoh must cross a river while waging battle with crocodiles. Not so with our faith. We know that our transition to heaven is an eye blink. It's just around life's corner, momentarily awaiting our earthly departure. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (see 2 Corinthians 5:6-8).

And it is near. No land to trek, oceans to swim, nor mountains to climb. It is right then and there, just after our last breath is taken.

As Christians, although our intellect may accept these facts, there is often still a part of us that holds back—hoping that our earthly sojourn can, somehow, be extended. Much

like what an unborn baby might say to his mother, while still in the womb. Imagine this *conversation*:

Mother: “Do you realize that you are about to be born into a great big world full of mountains, rivers, and a sun and a moon?”

Unborn: “No way. My best world is the one surrounding me—soft, warm, dark. I’ll never be convinced that just a few hairbreadths outside this uterus exists this place you describe.”¹¹

There he is, safe in his little world, ignorant of the fact that a much more glorious world awaits him. A world for which he was created and is being fashioned. But only when he is actually birthed into it will he fully comprehend the truth.

Heaven has been pictured as an incredible party that begins for us the second we arrive. As our waiting time gets shorter, can we hear its increasing crescendo? The louder it gets in our hearts, the more willing we should be to relinquish our grasp on earthly life and its treasures.

Notes:

1. Taken from class notes in History of the Christian Church, taught by Mendel Taylor, 1964, Nazarene Theological Seminary.
2. Sanford F. Bennett, lyrics, and Joseph P. Webster, music, “Sweet By-and-By,” *Worship in Song* (Kansas City: Lillenas Publishing Company, 1972), 255.
3. Joni Eareckson Tada, *Heaven: Your Real Home* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishers, 1995), 100.
4. The biblical term for “hope” (Greek *elpis*) implies a solid expectation (e.g., our “hope” is in Christ, rather than some distant, vague notion that we might possibly anticipate—e.g., our “hope” that we receive a new sweater for Christmas).
5. Bertha Munro, *Truth for Today* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, n.d.), 326.
6. William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958), 240-42.
7. John F. MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven: The Truth About Heaven, Angels and Eternal Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1996), 47ff.
8. Tada, *Heaven: Your Real Home*, 28-29.

9. Helen Howarth Lemmel, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus," *Worship in Song* (Kansas City: Lillenas Publishing Company, 1995), 207.
10. C. S. Lewis quoted in article by Randy Becton, *Upreach*, vol. 10, No. 2, 7.
11. Tada, *Heaven: Your Real Home*, 80-81.

Scripture Cited: Joshua 7:21; 2 Kings 5:22; Job 14:1; Psalm 55:6, 8; Matthew 6:9, 19-21, 24; Luke 10:20; Philippians 3:20-21; Hebrews 11:10; James 4:14; Revelation 21:4

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