

## “Going to Heaven”—The Great Distraction (2)

In a previous article we argued that the traditional concept of “going to heaven” and spending eternity in a custom-made heavenly mansion distracts the believers in Christ from God and from God’s economy—His plan and arrangement to dispense Himself in Christ into us in order to make us His corporate, living, organic expression as the Body of Christ consummating in the New Jerusalem. In particular, this traditional notion, propagated by “historic Christianity,” distracts the believers from the enjoyment of the Lord and from the truth concerning transformation in life according to the organic aspect of God’s complete salvation. A recent book by Anthony DeStefano—*A Travel Guide to Heaven* (hereafter, *Heaven*)—supports our thesis by its emphasis on fun and self-fulfillment in heaven. While not purporting to be a review of *Heaven*, this article will draw upon it as an illustration of how the fascination and preoccupation with eternal life in heaven replaces the enjoyment of God with the enjoyment of the things created by God and confounds transformation in the divine life with self-development and self-realization.

God requires that we love Him with our entire being, loving Him with the love with which He loves us, the love which is dispensed into us and produces in us a pure love for God. This love, in the words of the Lord Jesus in Revelation 2:4, is the best love, the love that gives Christ the first place, the preeminence, in all things. Since to love the Lord is to enjoy the Lord, to love Him with the best, and first, love implies that we enjoy Him uniquely and supremely. Nothing and no one should replace or interfere with our enjoyment of Him. No person, no material object, and no part of God’s creation, living or nonliving, should be allowed to replace the Lord as the One we love and enjoy.

As we enjoy the Lord by loving Him supremely, we become one with Him in carrying out the divine economy, and we thereby open ourselves fully to receive the

dispensing of the divine life, through which we are saved organically (Rom. 5:10) and are transformed into His image for His expression. This is not self-improvement or self-realization; on the contrary, this is the result of God Himself growing, increasing, within us and making us the same as He is in life and in nature but not in the Godhead. The ultimate issue of our transformation into the image of the resurrected Christ (2 Cor. 3:18) will be the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2-3, 10-11), a corporate person composed of the processed and consummated Triune

God mingled with His chosen, redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified people.

It is an extremely serious matter for believers in Christ to be distracted from the enjoyment of the Lord to and by the enjoyment of persons and things. Likewise, it is a distraction, even a deviation, from God’s purpose of securing His expression in His redeemed people to emphasize self-improvement and being the

master of our own fate. A central thought in the Bible is enjoying the Lord and being transformed to express Him. By contrast, a central thought in *Heaven* is enjoying yourself and developing yourself.

Although *Heaven* speaks of the so-called beatific vision and of supposed levels of enjoyment in heaven, the emphasis of this volume is not on the enjoyment of God but on the enjoyment of things and persons created by God for human pleasure and delight. “God is the king of all travel agents and heaven is his five-star resort” (90). This “resort” will be a hedonist’s delight, a realm of unending fun. “If heaven is anything it all, it’s fun. It’s a place of unlimited pleasure, unlimited happiness, and unlimited joy” (1). Speaking of the unmitigated fun of the place, the book claims that heaven, which is an all-inclusive resort, is “the ultimate playground, created purely for our enjoyment, by someone who knows what enjoyment means, because He invented it. It’s Disney World, Hawaii, Paris, Rome, and New York all rolled up

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into one" (6). "We know," *Heaven* assures us, that heaven is "going to be a place of ultimate joy and pleasure for us" (40). In heaven—God's "super-playground for the human beings he loves so much"—"the main purpose of God's creations will be to give us unbridled joy" (43, 41). Furthermore, in heaven, God, whom *Heaven* calls "a sensualist" (43), is "going to throw a big party for us" (62). "Imagine our all-powerful God throwing a fun-filled bash" (62-63). Part of the fun, the delight, of heaven is that, supposedly, it will be "filled with animals. Every single pet you ever had in your life is going to be there. Every dog, every cat, every parakeet, every bunny, every goldfish, every gerbil" (83). *Heaven* goes on to say that heaven will be "a vast wonderland of activities, comprising all that nature has to offer, with fascinating possibilities for new sights, new sounds, and new sensations" (106). Since the sensual God is the king of travel agents, He will have endless ways "to keep us amused for eternity" (124-125). We will travel: "We'll be able to go on sightseeing excursions to a million different countries, cities, planets, galaxies, and universes" (106-107). Yet we can be home in time for Thanksgiving:

Ten billion years from today, you'll be able to gather around a table together for a Thanksgiving meal with your family, the same way you do now and have done so many times in the past.

The real difference will be that when you have that Thanksgiving dinner in heaven, everyone you remember from your childhood will be there. (76)

Such will be eternal life in heaven—"a pleasure palace, a fairyland, a nature preserve, a 'city, shining on a hill,' a great big family reunion, and a never-ending vacation, all rolled into one. (175)

Although *Heaven* expatiates on various forms of pleasure and delight and in so doing presents a view of the believers' eternal destiny contrary to that which is revealed in the Scriptures, Gene Edward Veith endorses the book. In his view, *Heaven* is "grounded in historic Christianity [that is, religious tradition], bringing up truths that many Christians have all but forgotten, namely, how wonderful heaven is going to be" (29). "This means," Veith observes,

we will enjoy a physical life forever. Mr. DeStefano argues that God will preserve His good creations, so this new world will be continuous with the old in the beauties

of nature, the pleasures of the senses, the love of our family and friends. What we treasure in this world will be magnified in the next, since there will be no sin to get in the way. (29)

In its strong emphasis on sensual pleasure and enjoyment and its notion of heaven as a "fun-filled bash" (63), *Heaven*, in actual effect, replaces the enjoyment of God with the enjoyment of things and persons created by God. One review posted on amazon.com asserted, "By making a spiritual subject immensely physical, the book provides a picture of amazing places to visit, things to do, luxuries to pamper." Another reader, who suffered the loss of a pet golden retriever, was comforted by the hope that, since all dogs go to heaven, she will see her dog, her "best friend," again ("A Travel Guide" 1). For her, heaven is not a matter of preparing to meet God but of preparing to meet a dog. A chocolate lover had this response to *Heaven*: "I look forward to going to heaven—to embrace God, reunite with loved ones (pets and all!), experience

my true potential, travel, and, of course, eat chocolate to my heart's content" (posted on travelguidetoheaven.com 3). On the same website we can ponder the remarks of Robin Leach: "Spectacular sunsets, fabulous beaches, magnificent cities, exotic animals and incredibly exciting people! They're all here in this marvelous new travel guide. Heaven truly is a super playground" (2). Luxuries, golden retrievers, chocolate, sunsets—this is what the typical

reader of *Heaven* appreciates! Who cares about the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—and His eternal economy consummated in the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth? *Heaven* not only distracts its readers from God and from the economy of God—it caters to the pagan enjoyment of material things in place of God and to those who delight in the creation more than in the Creator, who is God blessed forever (Rom. 1:25).

As a self-help book, *Heaven* also distracts its readers from the divine revelation in the New Testament regarding the transformation of the believers' soul—a crucial step in God's organic salvation, salvation in life (Rom. 5:10). *Heaven* does this by replacing biblical transformation with humanistic self-fulfillment and pursuing the development of one's full human potential. *Heaven* claims that in heaven we will be the kind of person we know that we have the power to be, that there we will "live up to our full potential" (27). "The simple point," we are told, "is

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that when you enter heaven, you will enter as your truest self, your *best being*—emotionally, psychologically, intellectually, and physically” (28). In heaven we will be the best that we can be. “When you enter heaven, you will enter with your true identity, as the best man or best woman you can possibly be” (45). Thus, heaven is the realm of self-realization, of self-development, of consummate self-fulfillment. What is merely potential now will be realized in heaven: “When we experience the resurrection, we enter paradise as our best, truest selves—with our potential fully realized” (151-152).

*Heaven* even goes so far as to allege that the Lord’s transfiguration on the mountain, as recorded in the Gospels, is really about our own potential: “What Christ was essentially doing [when He was transfigured] was giving us a practical demonstration of the potential we humans have to lead dazzling, luminous, glorious lives” (157). According to *Heaven*, in heaven there will be a manifestation not of the glorious Christ but of the dazzling, luminous self. This is self-help on a cosmic scale.

Furthermore, our self-realization with its consequent heavenly manifestation will be the issue of our effort. The book thus speaks of a “new conviction you must have about your God-given ability to transform your life” (158). “You have the power to be master of your fate” (159). “You have started down the road to greatness that he has planned for you from all eternity” (161). What is this God-planned greatness? According to *Heaven* it is “life as a superbeing in a superworld” (163). Ultimately, the heaven of *Heaven* is a realm of pleasure and self-fulfillment, a sphere where superbeings, masters of their fate, romp in joyous fulfillment of their innate potential as they lead luminous lives in the Disney World prepared by God for them.

This is contrary to the biblical truth concerning transformation in the divine life received through regeneration. According to the Word of God, we are not transformed by self-effort, and we are not masters of our fate. Rather, under the sovereign mercy of God, we are transformed by the renewing of the mind (Rom. 12:2) and by beholding the resurrected Christ with an unveiled face, receiving the infusion of His element resulting in an organic, metabolic change of our soul (2 Cor. 3:18). The more we experience such a transformation, the more we realize that our greatest joy is the Lord Himself and that our highest delight is to behold Him, to be constituted with Him,

and to express Him as those who are one with Him in the divine life.

Veith thinks that the doctrine in *Heaven* makes Christianity compelling and exciting. “*A Travel Guide to Heaven* reminds us that the way to make Christianity compelling is not to eliminate doctrine, as is so often done; rather, it is precisely the doctrine that can make it most exciting” (29). The doctrine in *Heaven* may make “Christianity” compelling and exciting to some, but it does not exalt Christ or give Him the preeminence that God assigns to Him in His economy. God desires that we know Christ, experience Christ, enjoy Christ, and express Christ. The Bible reveals this, but *Heaven* distracts us from it. Whatever the provenance of the theology in *Heaven* may be, it is not the divine revelation in the Word of God. “Going to heaven” is a distraction, and *Heaven* also is a distraction—a distraction from God, from the economy of God, from the enjoyment of God, and from being transformed for the expression of God. Those who wish to

overcome this distraction, to be faithful to the Lord, and to honor His Word would do well to attend to Hebrews 12:2: “Looking away unto Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down on the right hand of the throne of God.” Genuine, earnest, seeking believers do not need *A Travel Guide to Heaven*—they need to see Jesus “crowned with glory and honor” (2:9). We do not need

Heaven’s emphasis on pets, pleasure, family reunions, and self-fulfillment—we need the all-inclusive Christ, the embodiment of the processed and consummated Triune God, to be our life, our life supply, and our everything for the fulfillment of God’s economy.

by Ron Kangas

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