

REVIEWS

Concerning Heaven

The Glory of Heaven: The Truth about Heaven, Angels and Eternal Life, by John F. MacArthur. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1996.

John F. MacArthur has recently written a book entitled *The Glory of Heaven: The Truth about Heaven, Angels and Eternal Life*. The book seeks to warn people about many patently unbiblical ideas being promoted about life after death and to present the biblical teaching about heaven. In the first chapter, "The Modern Romance with Heaven," MacArthur surveys some of the current popular literature on the subject, in particular Betty J. Eadie's book *Embraced by the Light*. He continues with chapters on "No Earthly Idea about Heaven," "What Heaven Will Be Like," "New Jerusalem," and "What We Will Be Like in Heaven," and closes his writing with a chapter on angels called "The Heavenly Host." The remaining half of the book contains four appendices with sermons on heaven. This review will be limited to MacArthur's writing.

The book has a number of worthy features. The first chapter does an excellent job of showing the unbiblical nature of much of the current media craze about life after death and angelic beings. In particular, MacArthur delineates the Mormon and New Age philosophy underlying Eadie's book, warning believers who might be tempted to consider Eadie's account as "a reliable and true account of what Christians can expect after death" (19). MacArthur's note that "a surprising number of evangelical Christians" need such a warning is a sad commentary on the lack of biblical knowledge and discernment among today's evangelicals (19). The second chapter critiques the "fantastic stories of heavenly excursions" with which "Christian television is fairly crawling" (43). It exposes the materialism and carnality of much of America's evangelical subculture and seeks to direct believers to set their "mind on the things which are above" (Col. 3:2). The chapter "What Heaven Will Be Like" exposes the erroneous concepts of soul sleep and purgatory and covers some of the major prophetic descriptions of heaven from Ezekiel and the book of Revelation.

The chapter on the New Jerusalem evidences a good understanding of the events at the end of the age, and it has some very good utterance about the dissolving of the old universe and the bringing in of the new heaven and earth. A number of the salient features of the coming holy city are also covered, albeit superficially. The chapter "What We Will Be

Like in Heaven" is the most significant in the book and contains the best insight. In it, MacArthur points out that God's salvation is a process whereby "God is changing us from the inside out," having "planted the incorruptible seed of eternal life deep in the believer's soul" (122). He has a good discussion concerning Christ's resurrected body and the fact that Christ still possesses His humanity in His glorified state. He also helps correct some popular misconceptions about our eternal state—for example, he clearly shows that marriage is only in this life. His final chapter on "The Heavenly Host" contains some prudent warnings against "Angelmania" and gives a good summary of the biblical data concerning the heavenly host. Finally, MacArthur's overall tone is sober, he seeks to focus our attention on God, and he bases his comments on the Bible.

Unfortunately, the book is unable to penetrate to the depths of the biblical revelation concerning the ultimate destiny of the believer. It suffers from what we might term "the leaven of heaven." This bias colors the book's discussion of many of the biblical texts that, in themselves, say nothing about "heaven" but which, due to the influence of traditional concepts, have been viewed as supposedly applying to heaven. Indeed its very title, *The Glory of Heaven*, leads one to believe that glory is an attribute of heaven, and it serves to focus one's attention on heaven, as though heaven is the final and glorious destiny of a believer. However, the phrase *the glory of heaven* does not occur in the Bible. MacArthur clearly realizes that glory is an attribute of God, and he continually points the believer to the fact that the "consummate blessings of the eternal state" are related to "our intimacy, communion, and fellowship with the Lord" (116). However, the overall tenor of the book directs the believer's attention to heaven as his supposed "future home for all of eternity" rather than focusing him on the Triune God Himself as his real dwelling place (12).

A Summary of the Biblical Data on "Going to Heaven"

It may be useful to take a brief look at some of the biblical data related to the concept of "going to heaven" so that the reader can understand this reviewer's reservations about the views presented in this book. First, it may surprise many believers to discover that the phrase *go to heaven* does not occur in the Bible. While there are over six hundred verses that speak about "heaven" or the "heavens," there are only a handful that touch the matter of a person going to heaven. There are nine main portions of Scripture that deal with a person going to (as opposed to having a vision of) heaven:

Genesis 11:4, Deuteronomy 30:12 with Romans 10:6, 2 Kings 2:3-11, Psalm 139:8, Mark 16:19 with Luke 24:51 and Acts 1:11, 2 Corinthians 12:2, Revelation 11:3-12 and 12:5, and Revelation 14:1-4. A careful examination of these ten instances will show that there is no clear indication that a believer will go to heaven *after* his death but *before* his bodily resurrection. Elijah is a special case in that he bypassed death and entered into heaven bodily, and the cases in Revelation are of those who are either resurrected or raptured alive at the time of the Lord's return.

Furthermore, there are no verses clearly indicating that those who have died are now in heaven. For example, there is a dwelling, referring to our transfigured body, waiting for us in the heavens (2 Cor. 5:1-4; 1 Cor. 15:35-44). Ephesians 2:6 says we have been raised up with Christ and seated with Him in the heavenlies, but this does not mean that we go to and will be in heaven after we die. Paul is not speaking primarily of a place but of a condition. We are in a heavenly sphere and condition versus an earthly, dead, and sinful one. We are in this condition now. Third, the Bible clearly tells us where a believer goes after death, and it is not heaven. Furthermore, while the believers who have died will eventually be glorified and raptured to the heavens *after* their bodily resurrection at the Lord's second coming (1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thes. 4:16-17; Rev. 12:5; 14:14-16), heaven will not be our eternal home. Revelation 3:12, 21:2, and 21:10 make it clear that the New Jerusalem, the habitation of God with His people for eternity, is *coming down out of heaven* to rest on the new earth (vv. 1, 3-4). For eternity, we will not be in heaven—we will be the New Jerusalem on the new earth. MacArthur's book contains either serious deficiencies or errors in the revelation of the truth related to four major points: (1) the traditional view that believers go to heaven when they die; (2) the reward and punishment of believers after their death or rapture, based on whether or not they were overcomers; (3) the New Jerusalem; and (4) the goal of God's salvation.

A Deficient View concerning the Believer's Immediate Destiny after Death

Concerning the first point, MacArthur says, "If you are a Christian, trusting Christ *alone* for your salvation, Scripture promises that the moment you leave this life you go to heaven" (69). He examines Psalm 16:10-11; 23:6; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Luke 16:22-23; Matthew 17:3; and Luke 23:42-43 as proof-texts that a believer immediately enters heaven after death. While a careful reading of these passages reveals that the believers will enjoy a close and intimate fellowship with the Lord after death, not one passage uses the word *heaven(s)* or alludes to heaven in a direct or unequivocal way! The book's statements about a believer's destination at the point of his death are supported primarily by traditional understandings of heaven, rather than the biblical record.

Probably the clearest verse in the Bible on this subject is Matthew 12:40, where the Lord Jesus directly, explicitly, and unequivocally indicated where He would stay after He died: "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (NASB). After the Lord had completed His redeeming work on the cross, the veil of the temple was split from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38), indicating that there was no longer a barrier between God and man (Heb. 10:19-20). Hence, there was nothing to prevent the Son of Man from entering into the presence of the Father on the throne in the heavens immediately after His death on the cross. Yet it is very striking that the Lord Jesus did not say that He would go to heaven after His death but rather that He would be three days and three nights *in the heart of the earth*. It was not until *after* His bodily resurrection that He ascended into the heavens. In Ephesians 4:9, referring to the Lord Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, Paul says that Christ "descended into the lower parts of the earth."

In Acts 2:27 Peter quotes Psalm 16:10 and applies it in verse 31 as a Messianic prophecy to Christ in His death. Psalm 16:10 uses the Hebrew word *Sheol* to refer to the resting place of the dead, while Acts 2:27 uses the Greek word *Hades*: "Because Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, / Nor allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay" (NASB). Hence, in His death, Christ was in *Sheol/Hades*, though He was not abandoned there. Comparing these verses, we can see that *the heart of the earth*, *the lower parts of the earth*, *Sheol*, and *Hades* all refer to the place where Christ went when He died.

In the Bible *Sheol/Hades* refers to the place where *all* the dead go. In commenting on the word pair *Sheol/Hades*, Herman Cremer notes in his *Biblico-Theological Lexicon of New Testament Greek*: "*Sheol* receives *all* the dead, Gen. xxxvii. 35, xlii. 38, 1 Sam. ii. 6, xxviii. 19, 1 Kings ii. 6, 9, Psa. lxxxix. 48, Hab. ii. 5;...*Hades*, accordingly, is the *realm of the dead*, in which are concentrated all the dead, and all that death brings with it" (68). Hence, as all other human beings, the Lord Jesus in His death went, not to heaven, but to *Sheol/Hades*. However, Psalm 16:10 and Acts 2:31 show that He was not abandoned there but, as the Firstborn from the dead (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5), He was resurrected from Hades with a glorified body. *Sheol/Hades* eventually will yield up all its dead at the judgment of the great white throne (Rev. 20:11-13) and will itself be cast into the lake of fire (v. 14). It is thus not an eternal but a temporary place to which *all* human beings—believers and unbelievers alike—go after their physical death.

However, we also know that at His crucifixion the Lord Jesus promised the repentant thief that he would be with Him in Paradise that very day (Luke 23:43). Since it is clear by the Lord's direct word in Matthew 12:40 that He went

to the heart of the earth on the day of His crucifixion, and it is clear from Acts 2:27 and 31 that this is equivalent to Hades, both the Lord and the thief must have gone into the heart of the earth, for He promised the thief he would be with Him “today,” the day of His crucifixion. Therefore, the Paradise spoken of in Luke 23:43 must be in Hades in the heart of the earth. The account in Luke 16:19-31 elaborates on this. In Luke 16:22 the phrase *Abraham’s bosom* is a rabbinical phrase that is equivalent to being with Abraham in Paradise. As the noted Greek scholar A. T. Robertson comments concerning Luke 16:22-31 in his *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, “To be in Abraham’s bosom is to the Jew to be in Paradise.... Lazarus was in Hades also for both Paradise (Abraham’s bosom) and Gehenna are in the unseen world beyond the grave.... The Jews believed that Gehenna and Paradise were close together” (Vol. II, 222-223). In speaking of Hades as the realm of the dead, we can see that there are two sections to Hades, as illustrated in Luke 16:22-26: the pleasant section, where Abraham, Lazarus, and all the saved saints are (v. 22), and the section of torment, where the rich man and all the perished sinners are (vv. 23a, 28).

Furthermore, Paradise—the pleasant section of Hades to which the dead saints go while waiting for the resurrection—is *not* in heaven. Paradise is in Hades, and Hades is clearly referred to as being in “the heart of the earth” and in “the lower parts of the earth” where Christ went in His death, in contrast to “far above all the heavens” (Eph. 4:10) as the place to which Christ ascended after His resurrection. Contrary to the assertion that “Paradise is a synonym for heaven” (MacArthur 78), a careful reading of 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 reveals that the third heaven in verse 2 and Paradise in verse 4 are two different places. The third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12:2 no doubt refers to what many commonly call “heaven,” where the Lord Jesus and God the Father dwell today (Matt. 6:9; Eph. 4:10; Heb. 1:3). Paul in verse 2 says he was caught away to the third heaven. The Greek verb here and in verse 4 is ἀρπάζω, meaning “to snatch out or away... used of divine power transferring a person marvellously and swiftly from one place to another, to snatch or catch away” (Thayer 74-75). It does not necessarily mean to catch up but rather away. Hence, while living on the earth, Paul was mysteriously transferred to the third heaven. Then he begins verse 3 with the important conjunction *and*—καί in Greek—rather than with the other possible particle τέ, which is used to join a matter “having an inner connection with what precedes” (Thayer 616). Καί indicates that what is covered in verses 3 and 4 is a different matter than that covered in verse 2. Hence, Paul was firstly caught away from the earth to the third heaven in verse 2; then the word *καί* at the start of verse 3 indicates he was caught away to a different place—to Paradise, the pleasant section of Hades which is under the earth. Such an interpretation of 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 corresponds to the biblical view of the universe as consisting mainly of three sections:

the heavens, the earth, and under the earth (Phil. 2:10; Rev. 5:3, 13). If we understand Paradise in 2 Corinthians 12:4 as a different place than the third heaven in verse 2, then Paul would have visited all three sections of the universe, not just the first two. This strongly implies that Paul received a full revelation of the mystery of the universe from the standpoint of God’s eternal purpose (Eph. 3:3-11, 18-19).

Despite MacArthur’s protest that we will not be in “some intermediate compartment of Hades” (78), the Bible clearly shows that after a believer “leaves this life” he or she *does go* to Paradise in Hades in “the heart of the earth,” *not* to heaven. This does not contradict the marvelous fact that after death the believer is “at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8) and enjoys a fuller and more intimate degree of fellowship than he now experiences while living in a physical body. The infinite Lord is just as present in Paradise in Hades as He is in the heavens (Psa. 139:8). After death, however, we will no longer be hindered by our sinful flesh and by “the body of our humiliation” (Phil. 3:21) in enjoying the Lord and so will have a richer and more glorious experience of Him while we are waiting for the resurrection. Unfortunately, the book’s presentation of the believer’s destiny after physical death is clouded by the traditional view concerning heaven.

A Deficient View concerning Reward and Punishment

The second deficiency in the book concerns the matter of the reward or punishment of the believer at the judgment seat of Christ. In pages 98 through 102 MacArthur talks about the matter of the overcomers in Revelation and the matter of our eternal inheritance. Using Revelation 21:7 as a basis, he writes:

“He that overcometh” includes *every* redeemed person. There is no partition in heaven between the “overcomers” and the “defeated Christians”—though some have attempted to teach this. One surprisingly popular view, for example, even goes so far as to claim that the “outer darkness” spoken of in Matthew 8:12 (where “there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth”) is a realm of heaven reserved for believers who do *not* overcome!¹ Overcomers, in this view, are “a separate class of Christians who persevere.”² Christians who are non-overcomers are banished to the outer regions of heaven, unable to share in its full blessedness. But that view is patently unbiblical. (99)

Both footnotes above refer to *The Reign of the Servant Kings* by Joseph C. Dillow (Schoettle Publishing Company, 1992), which examines the Calvinist position of eternal security and the Arminian position of conditional security and offers a third view to mediate between the two. Unfortunately, *The Glory of Heaven* does not accurately represent Dillow’s position. MacArthur quotes 1 John 2:13-14; 4:4; and 5:4-5 to speak about the general overcoming of believers: “The

apostle John quite plainly uses the concept of the ‘overcomer’ as a synonym for the believer. By his definition, all Christians are ultimately ‘overcomers’” (99). Based on a view that every believer is an overcomer, MacArthur’s book appears to reject the idea that there will be any differentiation among believers, such as that displayed in Revelation 2—3, based on whether or not one is an “overcomer.” Hence, it goes on to make the unwarranted assumption that this “identification of believers as ‘overcomers’ is also used in Christ’s letters to the churches (cf. Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21)” (100). Significantly, the book provides no grounds for this interpretation of Revelation 2 and 3.

The fact that all Christians in 1 John are overcomers in no way implies that all Christians in Revelation are. The word *nikao* [to overcome] does not imply “true Christian,” only “one who overcomes.” To import the contextually derived sense of “regenerate one” from 1 John into the semantic value of the word and then carry this fuller sense into Revelation is simply an illegitimate identity transfer. The meaning and conditions for becoming an “overcomer” in Revelation are completely different. (Dillow 471)

However, while rejecting any difference between “overcomers” and “run-of-the-mill” believers, MacArthur does go on to note that the Lord Jesus speaks about different levels of reward based on a believer’s faithfulness: “There are, of course, passages of Scripture that indicate there will be differing levels of honor in heaven” (100). He even speaks about 1 Corinthians 3:14-15 concerning the testing of a believer’s works by fire. Of the believer whose works fail the test, he says,

What about the person whose works are burned up? “He shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire” (v. 15). That evokes the notion of someone who is pulled from a burning building alive. He may be unharmed by the fire, but the smell of smoke is all over him—he has barely escaped destruction.

But don’t be quick to relegate such a person to the confines of outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (101)

This seems to suggest that a genuine believer cannot suffer any judgment from the Lord, such as “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” after his death. Rather, judgment is presented as simply the lack of a positive reward, rather than the kind of punishment spoken of in the parables in Matthew. Hence, when MacArthur refers to Matthew 8:12, he interprets *the children of the kingdom* as referring to unbelieving Israelites, not to Christians (270). By saying those in Matthew 8:12 are not Christians, the book indicates that believers will not ever suffer “weeping and gnashing of teeth” at the Lord’s return. However, in Matthew 13:38 the Lord identifies “the sons of the kingdom” as “the good

seed” which, in contrast to the tares, is gathered by the reapers (i.e., the angels, v. 39) into the Lord’s barn rather than being burned in the fire (v. 30). This would indicate “the sons of the kingdom” in Matthew 8:12 are not unbelievers but saved Jews who do not suffer perdition in the lake of fire.

Furthermore, the matter of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is also referred to in the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30. In this parable all three who receive talents are considered the Lord’s slaves (v. 14). In fact, they are not merely called His slaves in a general sense, but they are specifically called His *own* (Gk. *idios*) slaves, as the sheep in John 10:3 are called His *own* (*idios*) sheep. Hence, the three are very specifically and personally acknowledged as belonging to the Lord. All three receive talents from the Lord (Matt. 25:15), and all three regard the Lord as their “Master” (vv. 20, 22, 24). The Lord likewise considers Himself the Master of all three (vv. 21, 23, 26), and all three come to the Lord to give an account of their work (vv. 19-20, 22, 24). Therefore, all three must be considered believers. The only difference among them, besides the quantity (not quality) of their talents, is that two were good and faithful in their labor (vv. 21, 23) while one was evil and slothful in his labor (v. 26). Yet this slothful but saved slave did not merely suffer the loss of his work (v. 28) but also was “cast out...into the outer darkness” where he suffered “the weeping and the gnashing of teeth” (v. 30). In this case there is no ground in either the context or the plain teaching to call the one-talented slave an “unbelieving Israelite.” Indeed, MacArthur unwittingly acknowledges this himself. On the very same page where he says, “Don’t be quick to relegate such a person to the confines of outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (101), he writes, “Our Lord taught repeatedly that *believers* will receive rewards for their faithfulness—and those rewards vary from person to person (*Matt. 25:21-24*)” (101, emphasis added). MacArthur acknowledges that all those spoken of in Matthew 25:21-24 are “believers,” so, if he logically carried this sentence to its conclusion, he would have to admit that believers do suffer punishment, because the one who is a “believer” in verse 24 (the one-talented slave) is the same one who suffers “the weeping and the gnashing of teeth” in “outer darkness” in verse 30!

Some of the book’s opposition to this point may stem from a misunderstanding of dispensational reward and punishment, particularly as it relates to its duration. The book suggests that advocates of reward and punishment believe this condition will last *for eternity*, rather than only for a period of time during the millennium:

Perhaps not surprisingly, those who think heaven is divided between “overcomers” and mere run-of-the-mill Christians often suggest that only the “overcomers” share

in the inheritance of the kingdom. Those left in “outer darkness” are disinherited, put outside the Father’s house, cast out of the banquet hall, relegated to a secondary existence in the *eternal* realm—and not permitted in God’s immediate presence.⁴ This is a curious and wholly unbiblical idea of heaven! Certainly there is no justification for teaching that some will be kept out of the heavenly banquets and consigned *forever* to the exterior realms of the kingdom. (100, 102, emphasis added. Footnote 4 refers to Dillow’s book.)

This statement, however, misrepresents Dillow’s teaching about the duration of the punishment of “non-overcomers.” While Dillow says that “there will be distinctions in heaven” (564), he also emphasizes that “the Scriptures give us no reason to assume that these unfaithful Christians will spend their eternity in remorse and regret. ...they like the prodigal son will be restored to *eternal fellowship* with their King” (530-531, emphasis added). Hence, Dillow does not teach that “some will be...consigned forever to the exterior realms of the kingdom.”

Leaving the issue of his controversy with Dillow aside, we may note that it is possible that MacArthur’s aversion to the concept of dispensational punishment is the result of a lack of clarity about the role of the millennial kingdom as well as an uncertainty about the distinction between soul and spirit in God’s full salvation. Our eternal salvation is entirely a matter of grace through faith, having nothing whatever to do with works. However, according to such clear passages as 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 12:42-48; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Galatians 6:7-8; Matthew 16:27; and Revelation 22:12, there is another matter of reward. This reward is very distinct from the gift of eternal life, and it is based on a believer’s works, not his faith, after he is saved (1 Cor. 3:8, 14-15). It will be decided at the judgment seat of Christ at His return (Matt. 16:27; Rev. 22:12). If we receive a reward, we will enjoy it in the coming kingdom (Matt. 25:14, 21, 23) when those who were faithful will live and reign with Christ for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4-6). If we are not faithful, we will suffer not only the loss of our works (1 Cor. 3:15) but the weeping and the gnashing of teeth in the outer darkness (Matt. 25:30), being cut asunder and having our portion assigned with the hypocrites (24:51), receiving lashes (Luke 12:48), being hurt [*though not destroyed*] of the second death (Rev. 2:11), and being saved, yet so as through fire (1 Cor. 3:15). While we are not told precisely what these all mean, they indicate something far more serious than merely losing a positive reward.

The goal of all the Lord’s discipline with us is to perfect us that we could partake of His holiness (Heb. 12:5-11). Every believer must eventually be fully “conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29) to be able to be presented “full-grown” in Christ (Col. 1:28; Eph. 4:13). To this end, we pass through many trials to be perfected (1 Pet. 5:10;

James 1:3-4) just as our Captain was perfected (Heb. 2:10; 5:8-9). While many believers, including MacArthur, would say that such trials and discipline are only in this lifetime, there is nothing in the Bible to preclude God from continuing His work on us in the next age. While it is true that our human spirit is regenerated in an instant (John 3:3, 5-6), and that our mortal, corruptible bodies will be changed and glorified “in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:52), there is no verse which says that death will work a miracle on an untransformed soul. When the slothful servant in Matthew 25:26 gave his account at the Lord’s return, he was still called an “evil and slothful slave.” Neither death, resurrection, nor rapture transformed his soul. If we do not cooperate with the Lord in this age to be transformed, then we will have to pass through some dispensational punishment in the next age to be transformed.

MacArthur correctly notes, “All true Christians are *ultimately* ‘overcomers’” (99, emphasis added). However, whereas MacArthur would say this occurs by the end of their physical life, it should be clear from the preceding paragraph that all will “ultimately” be overcomers by the end of the millennium. God’s discipline will conform every single child of His into the image of the firstborn Son of God (Rom. 8:29)—some (the wise overcomers) in this age and the rest (the foolish ones) in the next. When the new heaven and new earth are ushered in, *every* child of God will have been perfected, “prepared” (Rev. 21:2), and will have overcome to enjoy his or her eternal inheritance as a son of God.

A Deficient View concerning the New Jerusalem

The third major point of deficiency in the book relates to the New Jerusalem. The problem lies not so much in its inaccuracies but in its incompleteness and superficiality. Descriptions of the holy city focus on it mainly as a place or realm where we will live *with*, not *in*, the Triune God for eternity. While the book notes that “the temple in heaven is not a building; it is the Lord God Almighty Himself” (86), it is apparent from the tenor of the book that the deep significance of this fact is not grasped. The fact that God is “the ‘temple’ of heaven” means mainly that “we will worship in the very presence of God” (109), not that we will live, move, and have our being in God Himself.

Probably the most profound oversight concerning the New Jerusalem is that it misses the fact that this is not a physical city but the bride (Rev. 21:2), the wife of the Lamb (vv. 9-10). There is a section in the book about the holy city entitled “Prepared as a Bride,” but little is said. For example:

“As a bride adorned for her husband.” This speaks of the glory of this unimaginable city. Just think, when our Lord fashioned the material universe at the beginning of time, He did it in seven days. He has been working on heaven for nearly

two millennia. What a wonder it must be! The surpassing glory of this city is too rich to express in words. (103-104)

The “insight” in the above paragraph is essentially no deeper than that which is conveyed in the popular concept of heaven as a glorious place with pearly gates and golden streets where the Lord has been working for two thousand years to build us mansions! There is no comment in the book about the meaning of the word *bride* or *wife*, indicating a failure to grasp the profound significance of the New Jerusalem. This city is not a place in the sky in the sweet by and by—it is a sign (Rev. 1:1), a symbol of the organic composition of all the redeemed saints from both the Old and New Testament ages who have been transformed to the extent that they match God in His life and nature, thus becoming His counterpart!

A Deficient View concerning the Goal of God’s Salvation

The final deficiency in *The Glory of Heaven* lies in its presentation of the goal of God’s salvation. The book views this goal as being largely judicial and objective. MacArthur does have some excellent comments about several of the more organic aspects of salvation, but the book does not present their significance.

Perfection is the goal of God’s sanctifying work in us. He’s not merely making us better than we are; He is conforming us to the image of His Son. As much as glorified humanity can resemble incarnate, exalted deity, we will resemble our Lord. (118)

God is changing us from the inside out. He has planted the incorruptible seed of eternal life deep in the believer’s soul. We have a new desire and a new power to please God. We have a new heart and a whole new love for God. And all those are factors that contribute to our ultimate growth in grace. (122)

When our souls are made anew we will finally be able to glorify God perfectly, and enjoy Him forever, as He intended. Since nothing is better or greater than God, the pure enjoyment of Him must be the very essence of bliss. (127)

So the best picture of what we’ll be like in heaven is the resurrection body of Jesus Christ. We will have a body fit for the full life of God to indwell and express itself forever. (134)

The above portions are the best utterances in the book on God’s salvation for us, and they present a marvelous view. While there are glimpses such as these, the book *in its entirety* does not evidence such a governing vision. Other passages suggest a view of perfection that is more in line with the concept of sinless perfection:

What will the perfected soul be like? The most obvious truth is that it will finally be perfectly free from evil forever....We will be perfectly liberated from our captivity to sin, and finally able to do that which is absolutely righteous, holy, and perfect before God. (125)

MacArthur describes being freed from sin and evil as the thing he most eagerly anticipates in eternity (96, 115, 117-128, 144, 162). God’s judicial redemption and our deliverance from sin are foundational items of His salvation. However, freedom from sin is mainly on the negative side; it is only a part of God’s new covenant blessings (Heb. 8:10-12). The book rarely speaks about enjoying the life of God and partaking of the nature of God, or about God’s indwelling of us and making us members of the Body of Christ. Instead, the book seems to present the highest goal of God’s salvation as being “God’s intimate presence ‘with men’—*among* humanity. The idea is that God Himself will pitch His tent *among* men and dwell *among* them” (143, emphasis added). The book presents a similar view of the goal of the incarnation: “He came to our world to dwell *among* us, and He did it in order to redeem us and take us to heaven, where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will dwell *in our midst* in perfect fellowship” (144, emphasis added). Notice the words *with*, *among*, and *in our midst*. All these describe the experience of the disciples *before* Christ’s resurrection—not *after*! This suggests that our experience in eternity future will be limited to the same kind of fellowship that the disciples had with Christ during His earthly ministry, albeit with the element of sin being removed from us. The book misses the crucial point of the resurrection—that the Lord as the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45) has come to *indwell* us (John 14:17-20; Rom. 8:10; 2 Cor. 13:5) to impart the divine life (John 10:10) and divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4), even the seed of God (1 John 3:9), into us to make us organic members of His living Body (1 Cor. 6:15; 12:12-13) to become His corporate increase (John 3:29-30) to mutually indwell and coinhere (John 17:23) in the Triune God for eternity.

Herein lies the overriding deficiency of this book—it does not penetrate to the depths of the New Testament revelation of God’s purpose for man. While profound terms are used to describe God’s organic salvation, there is no indication that their full significance is grasped. The tenor of the book still points believers to seek an outward and objective relationship with an outward and objective God who is seeking to take them to an outward and objective place called heaven to enjoy an outward and objective fellowship. While MacArthur’s book is superior to many that deal with “heaven, angelic beings, and life after death,” it does not live up to its promise to give “the truth and nothing but” from the Bible. In the end, *The Glory of Heaven* does not hit the mark of God’s New Testament economy.

by John Brooks