

# REVIEWS

## The History of Heaven

*Heaven: A History*, by Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

*A History of Heaven*, by Jeffrey Burton Russell. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

*Encyclopedia of Heaven*, by Miriam Van Scott. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998.

What makes humans distinctly human? What separates man from beast? These questions have been debated for years without a satisfactory answer. The Bible says, “[God] has put eternity in their [men’s] heart, yet so that man does not find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Eccl. 3:11). This eternity in human hearts is an aspiration for God. Of all the living things on earth, only humans build altars and worship God. Only humans bury their dead with ceremonies and an expectation that death is a bridge to eternity. The sense of eternity in the human heart transcends time, place, and level of civilization. It has caused man to create religions, myths, and stories about his place in eternity. Since the beginning of time God’s plan for eternity has been hidden, but the New Testament reveals “the economy of the mystery...which throughout the ages has been hidden in God” (Eph. 3:9). Thus, the New Testament revelation becomes the key to evaluating notions of eternity; for apart from revelation, people worship things which by nature are not gods (Acts 17:23-31) and create concepts of eternity entirely foreign to God’s view. Commendable research on human conceptions of eternity, typically expressed as heaven, is found in Colleen McDannell’s and Bernhard Lang’s *Heaven: A History* (hereafter *Heaven*), Jeffrey Burton Russell’s *A History of Heaven* (hereafter *History*), and Miriam Van Scott’s *Encyclopedia of Heaven* (hereafter *Encyclopedia*). While their research shows that the notion of heaven is a constant in all human cultures, it also reveals that many of the recognized stalwarts of the Christian faith have held a very different view of eternity from the majority of the human race and indeed many Christians in the modern era.

## Non-Christian Notions of Heaven

*Encyclopedia* catalogs human ideas of heaven regardless of their religious origin. The reader is left with an impression

that every human society holds some concept of heaven or life after death. Van Scott even details the views on heaven held in many primitive and ancient societies. Most of these notions include the idea of a journey made by the soul after death to an idealized country where the dead enjoy an abundance of food, a beautiful land, and a life free of care and pain. A common traditional African belief is that upon death a person crosses a rainbow bridge to the City in the Sky, where life continues much as it did on earth. The American Plains Indians believed in the Happy Hunting Grounds, a beautiful place with plenty of game, where the souls of the deceased dwell in peace, harmony, and joy. Eastern Polynesians believe in Hawaiki, a land of reward for the dead that can be reached only by a long, perilous journey after death. The ancient Egyptians believed that the souls of the dead must journey to the Hall of Osiris to be judged. Those whose hearts tipped up toward good when balanced against the “feather of truth” were admitted to a blessed realm where life continued much as it had on earth, except that no one suffered any longer.

The major non-biblically based religions of the world, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, also teach their followers how to enter eternal bliss. Buddhism teaches reincarnation, yet the goal of every Buddhist is to “gain ‘enlightenment’ and ‘freedom from self’ in this world, assuring a pleasant eternity” (*Encyclopedia* 35). This state of eternal bliss is called Nirvana and is the deep peace souls find when they reach “final ‘enlightenment’...[and] unite with the eternal force” (198). Hinduism preaches a similar concept of eternity called Moksha, a “liberation from... the continuing cycle of reincarnation” (185). In Moksha the spirit loses its individual entity, dissolves into the collective cosmic essence, and spends eternity in a state of perfect bliss (185). Islamic paradise is called Djanna, the garden of Allah. There “the faithful enjoy delicious food, fruit in abundance, and freedom from all pain and sorrow. In Djanna virtuous souls indulge in all the pleasures forbidden them during life” (89).

Greco-Roman notions of heaven are especially important because they exerted considerable syncretistic influence on Christianity. One crucial motif is that of the Elysian Fields or Elysium. Elysium was thought to be a beautiful garden or pastoral landscape where pure souls enjoyed music, dancing, feasting, flowers, fountains, and freedom from disease and suffering. Russell notes that it was sometimes equated with the Garden of Venus and was “located either

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on earth, or in the sphere of the moon, or among the stars” (21). Aristotle’s physics reinforced the idea that heaven was above the sky. He postulated that the earth was a sphere nested in a set of concentric spheres. As one left the earth and ascended, the spheres became “purer, less material and more spiritual:…Past the outermost sphere, the primum mobile, is the empyrean, the place of pure fire (Greek *pyre*). The soul’s true home, like that of light and fire, is in the empyrean with God” (23). Plato’s concept of the soul loving the divine, separating itself from the material world, ascending to the perfect realm, and uniting itself with divinity affected later Christian thought, especially through the influence of Neoplatonism. The Roman writer Cicero contributed the idea that civic virtue in this life would affect a person’s reward or punishment in the next. These ideas became mixed with biblical concepts to produce views of eternity embraced by many Christians in later eras; however, they are fundamentally different from New Testament teachings.

McDannell and Lang describe the development of the Jewish notion of the afterlife in great detail. In the earliest days, the Hebrews embraced the Semitic notion of Sheol, a place under the earth where the dead existed as shades who needed worship and sacrifice from the living. Later, this view was superseded by the idea that the kingdom of God was on earth right then among Israel. The Ten Commandments forbade ancestor worship, and the emphasis on the present moment did not encourage any new teachings about life after death. The Babylonian captivity saw the ascendancy of the concept of bodily resurrection into the restored kingdom of God at the end of time. Eventually, the dead were relegated again to Sheol: the evil to torment, the righteous to a pleasant place called Abraham’s bosom to await resurrection. Due to the Christian assimilation of Hebrew Scriptures, Jewish thought had an important influence on Christian concepts of eternity.

### Development of Christian Views of Heaven

A study of the history of Christian concepts of heaven rightly begins with the New Testament. Both *Heaven and History* argue that heaven as it later came to be understood by Christians was not in the concept of the New Testament writers. McDannell and Lang assert,

The New Testament view [of heaven is] characterized by a clear, uncompromising, “charismatic” fixation on God. As a charismatic leader, Jesus called his followers out of their kin and family relationships and sought to focus their minds on God…Heavenly liturgies, spiritualized bodies, and angelic, non-married lifestyles comprise eternal life. (353-354)

Russell summarizes his view of the New Testament concept of salvation and eternal life:

No single view of heaven exists in the New Testament,…The Epistles and Gospels say little about a celestial paradise, because the earliest Christian writers were expecting the imminent return of Christ and the end of the world. The end of the world would be the consummation of the salvation history inaugurated by the original Covenant with Israel. At the endtime, Christ would unite Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised, in the realized Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven.

The Christian notion of salvation derived directly and fully from the view expressed in the Hebrew Bible and the Mishnah. Christianity continued to emphasize the salvation of the community and broadened it immensely by transforming the qehel, the saving remnant of Israel, into the ecclesia, the community of all believers in Christ, both Jews and Gentiles. The ecclesia, or church, does not mean what later came to be called the hierarchy, or even the entire organization of those professing to believe in Christ; it means the communion of saints, the community of all those saved throughout time past, present, and future. The word “saint” is used…to mean one who is a member of Christ’s eternal body. The body of Christ…represents, and in the deepest sense it is, the earthly body of Jesus, the glorified body of Jesus, the consecrated Eucharist, and the ecclesia (church), the community of those who love God.

The salvation of the community does not mean that the individual is submerged…Rather, one joins with God and with the ecclesia in the communion of saints without losing one’s identity. Individuality remains as an incandescence amidst a great glow of light.

The early Christians believed that the union of the community in God will occur at the end of time, which they thought was at hand. It also occurs right now…for the reason that Christ has come and brought the kingdom of heaven to earth. Heaven comes down and transforms the earth rather than hovering above the earth, waiting for the saved to arrive. Heaven is also now because Christ’s saving action is eternal and extends to past, present, and future…The ecclesia is a community that exists eternally with God, embracing all ages from the beginning to the end of time. The kingdom has already come: heaven is now. More fully, it is both now and also not yet. The kingdom has come; the kingdom is here; the kingdom will come in fullness. Christ has died; Christ has risen; Christ will come again. (40-42)

**R**ussell then identifies several themes in the New Testament which are important to understanding its message about man’s place in eternity. The first is the concept of man’s fall, Christ’s redemption, and creation’s restoration to a new and better state—the new creation—through the

process of transformation. The second is the New Jerusalem which “points toward the union of the community with Christ” (43). The citizens of the New Jerusalem see, understand, and love God in what is now called “beatific vision” (43). Second Peter 1:4 is the basis for a concept which became very important in Eastern Orthodox thought, that of *theosis* or divinization—man’s partaking of the divine nature and becoming divine through God’s grace. Another important concept is the believers’ bodily resurrection and the transfiguration of their old flesh into new, spiritual bodies. A corollary of the resurrection is the concept of an interim state in which the deceased believers are unclothed of their bodies and sleep in the bosom of Abraham, enjoying spiritual communion with God while awaiting the last judgment and the resurrection with the spiritual bodies it bestows.

The early church fathers followed the New Testament view that a Christian’s portion in eternity is the bliss of perfect union with God and His saints, a vision and understanding of Him, a relationship of mutual love, and the privilege of expressing God’s radiant image in a glorified, resurrected body. The full consummation comes at the endtime when He renews the old creation. Russell chooses Irenaeus as a representative of his time and gives the following summary:

Irenaeus summed up the tradition as it was in his time. All the blessed in heaven will see Christ, the glory of the communion of saints, and the renovation of the world. They will dwell in their true home, where with Christ they enjoy eternal peace and comfort. Paradise, the heavenly city, the celestial abode, and the reign of God come together at the endtime, when the Word of God restores the cosmos to himself. We were originally created in Eden in God’s image and likeness, and the grace of the Holy Spirit will restore and further perfect that blessed state. The image (*imago*) is the natural image of God intrinsic in every human soul; the likeness (*similitudo*) is the potential, through grace, of becoming like him in eternal life...The Holy Spirit grafts eternal and immutable life onto our earthly bodies, changing them into spiritual bodies. As Christ descended into the shadow of death until the third day, so the souls of the just will pass into an invisible place God has designed for them and there await the resurrection. When at last we rise in our bodies, we will see God and be taken into him, for “those who see God are within God sharing His glory” (*Against Heresies*, 4.20.5). (55-56)

The church fathers after the second century continued to develop these themes. Cyprian taught that “heaven is to

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be with Christ, forever, in our common homeland, amidst our friends and relations and all the lovers of God. In this life of eternal light, glowing with divine radiance, we are happy with an inconceivable joy that we know will go on forever” (65). Clement “defined heaven as the place or state

where the elect receive the vision of God” (69). He also developed the notion of theosis or divinization. Origen taught that God loves the cosmos and draws it back to Himself by sparking love within the creation. “In theosis the blessed are glorified and become one with God. In heaven the image of God, which since the fall of Adam and Eve has been deformed, becomes a perfect realization of the divine likeness” (71).

While the theologians of the first three centuries held an esoteric, mystical view of eternity derived from the New Testament, popular opinion tended to cling to the more materialistic notions common in ancient Greece and Rome. In early Christian pictorial art, heaven was seen as a paradise of trees, lawns, flowers, and fountains containing birds, bountiful harvests, rich clothing, and crowns of roses or laurels for the soul’s enjoyment. Vision literature like the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the *Passion of Perpetua* was written to encourage suffering Christians with the blessings awaiting them in a heaven reminiscent of Greco-Roman views. “The visions are markedly similar: a judge on a holy mountain, pastoral scenes, meadows, fields, trees, fruit, flowers, fragrance, bright and kindly light” (58). Most clergy and theologians warned against the lack of true revelation in these works, but they were still popularly accepted as genuine visions of heaven.

As the latest and most prolific of the Western church fathers, Augustine’s writings influenced theology for over one thousand years. In his early writings, such as the *Confessions*, Augustine expressed a Neoplatonic view of the afterlife. His mature views, found in the *City of God*, were closer to those of the other church fathers. Augustine’s approach to God was through loving union with Him.

Heaven is Christ himself, and to be fully with Christ is to be fully in heaven. When we die, God will be our place. And that place is eternity...Augustine insisted that the paradise at the end of time is a *reformatio in melius*: it will restore, yet be superior to, that at the beginning of time. (85)

Medieval theology saw certain changes in the Christian doctrine of heaven. The greatest changes were the acceptance of vision literature into serious theology by Gregory the Great and the acceptance of Aristotelian physics into theology by Thomas Aquinas and other scholastics. Prior

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to the Middle Ages, heaven was seen as a spiritual state in almost paradoxical conjunction with the resurrection of the body and the renewal of all creation. The influence of Aristotle's physics was to place heaven above the sky as a corporal place in the empyrean. Popular vision literature, formerly considered by theologians to be extra-canonical and suspect, gradually gained new favor because heaven itself was seen more as a place than a state. Only the monastic mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux continued to adhere to the view that a Christian's eternal portion is the bliss of perfect, loving union with God. It was also during the Middle Ages that Pope Benedict XII declared that "the blessed dead, even before the resumption of their bodies and the Last Judgment, have been, are, and will be in heaven" (139).

**A**lthough the Middle Ages saw the incorporation of several non-Christian elements into the theology of heaven, the focus was still on God as the center of man's eternal enjoyment. Beatific vision was considered man's greatest blessing and enjoyment for eternity. With the Renaissance, however, began the deliberate introduction of pagan themes and motifs to humanize heaven. Artists and poets who wanted to work with classical imagery were the principal sources of this change. The Renaissance concept of heaven focused on man's enjoyment of lush gardens, fountains, naked human bodies, love, and other material pleasures. God was frequently absent or relegated to some small corner of the scene. Humanism was the watchword of the day, and heaven was centered on common human pleasures.

During the Reformation, the pendulum swung back to a focus on God and the renewed earth.

Protestant reformers, Catholic counter-reformers, and the new ascetics created their own distinctive images of eternal life. These images, however, shared one essential feature: the focus on the divine. Once God was placed at the center of Christian life, it was only reasonable to assume that a righteous life must culminate in an eternity with the divine. (*Heaven* 146)

The Protestant reformers "saw eternal life primarily as the individual's unsurpassed communion with God" (148). Luther taught that in eternity we would have nothing to do but be with God, which would be sufficient. Calvin emphasized beatific vision as the supreme enjoyment of the elect in eternity. The Catholic counter-reformer Francis de Sales taught that in eternity God reveals all divine mysteries. "By bringing the blessed to comprehend 'the incomparable work of the incarnation in which God made himself human, and the human was made divine,' God permits them to participate in the sacred mystery" (165).

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a dramatic

shift in teachings about eternal life. One important catalyst to this change was the work of Emanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg's writings described in minute detail a thoroughly anthropocentric heaven. Although his theology on salvation and the Trinity was not orthodox, his writings were so popular that many of his concepts seeped into the sermons of that time because the laity demanded them. McDannell and Lang identify four characteristics of Swedenborg's "modern" heaven: First, it is separated from this world by only a thin veil, and the dead go there immediately without passing through an interim state; second, it is a continuation and fulfillment of our earthly material existence; third, people in heaven are very busy and continue to make spiritual progress; and fourth, the focus is on human love in the family and community rather than on the divine love experienced in the beatific vision (183). The modern notion of heaven was very popular until the middle of the twentieth century. It corresponded to the humanist philosophy of the Enlightenment, Romantic views on the primacy of familial love, and the Victorian work ethic. Scientific and technological progress during this period also gave Western society a materialistic mindset to which the modern view of heaven particularly appealed. There is, however, no scriptural basis to support this model of heaven. Swedenborg himself claimed to have gotten his visions from a series of out-of-body trances.

Contemporary society has entered what many call the "post-Christian" era. The modern heaven holds little appeal today, and Christianity has splintered into several groups, each holding a different view of eternal life. Liberal theologians like Niebuhr, Tillich, and Bultmann hold a symbolist interpretation of heaven, through which they attempt to "break" ancient symbols and find intrinsic meanings. Their reinterpretations of these symbols are usually abstract and abstruse. A large group of contemporary Christians still adheres to a physical view of heaven because it is better than abstraction. There have been some attempts to return to purely scriptural teachings. An early fundamentalist, Cyrus Scofield, editor of the Scofield Reference Bible, taught that heaven is not clearly defined in the Bible. He "had no patience with the speculations of ministers and novelists who imagined a perfected earthly world in heaven" (*Heaven* 338).

Although Christian theologians today seem unsure about eternity, contemporary society abounds with popular art, movies, and literature depicting secular views of the afterlife. *Encyclopedia* includes numerous entries of contemporary secular works on heaven. In today's movies even our pets can enter heaven. Cartoons and comic books are rife with pictures of materialistic paradises for all kinds of people. Even rock music spreads the message that anyone can go to heaven. The world has come full cycle, and the spark of eternity in human hearts that produced ancient, primitive notions of heaven is now

motivating a profusion of secular teachings about life after death.

Speculation about eternity lies at the core of our humanity, and these books provide a good summary of the history of the attempt to define the destination of this impulse to the eternal—heaven. As Christians, however, we must ensure that our considerations are founded on divine revelation, not on merely human notions. Pagan, secular, and syncretistic Christian views tend toward the anthropocentric model utilized by McDannell and Lang, in which man eternally enjoys a perfected version of this life. In contrast, the definers and important defenders of the Christian faith professed a theocentric view in which man's ultimate destiny is perfect union with God. Most of the great Christian teachers of the past, including the writers of the New Testament, held a spiritual notion of eternity, distinct from the materialistic influences of pagan, humanist, or secular sources. It is indeed unfortunate that anthropocentric and materialist conceptions of heaven dominate the popular perceptions of heaven, even among genuine believers, in stark contrast to the view that is presented in the Bible itself.

by Teresa Liu

### Popularizing Heaven

*What's Heaven?* by Maria Shriver. New York: Golden Books, 1999.

*Heaven: Your Real Home*, by Joni Eareckson Tada. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995.

*Heaven and Hell: Biblical Images of the Afterlife*. Video-cassette. Questar, 1999.

As cultures interact with ideas that have been collectively selected and embraced, popular literature plays a strong role in either reinforcing these commonly held beliefs or in presenting new cultural possibilities. The former role is inherently conservative, while the latter can be perceived at one extreme to be daring and innovative or simply ludicrous at the other. Perhaps because we are in an era of millennial expectations, the idea of going to heaven—a physical place of joy, reunion, and satiation—has received an abundance of popular reinforcement in books that are targeted to a wide range of groups, including children, Christians, and even unbelievers.

In this category, two books stand out, both because of their content and because of the prominent position that the authors hold in eyes of the public. *What's Heaven?*

(hereafter *Heaven*), written by Maria Shriver, a member of the Kennedy family and a public broadcast personality, following the death of her grandmother, attempts to present the idea of heaven in a format that is understandable for children. *Heaven: Your Real Home* (hereafter *Home*) by Joni Eareckson Tada, a respected Christian author whose fight to overcome a crippling injury has inspired many, presents her reflective observations about heaven. It attempts to arouse within believers a greater appreciation of heaven as our destiny, our real home. In addition to these two books, *Heaven and Hell*, a recently released video, draws much of its content from Eareckson Tada's book and purports to present biblical images of the afterlife to perhaps serve as an evangelistic tool in the service of the gospel. All three products do little more than reinforce popular notions, and although the Christian orientation of all three authors is beyond dispute, there is little in the books that is firmly rooted in Scripture. The deviation from Scripture occurs at several levels, from mere misinterpretation to the blatant misrepresentation of fundamental truths.

*Heaven* is a children's book that is written for parents who face the difficult task of discussing the reality of death, especially the death of loved ones, to young children. Following the death of her grandmother, Shriver was confronted with her daughter's inquisitive questions, and in an effort to make death both understandable and acceptable to her young daughter, the idea of heaven was introduced. And predictably, a question followed, "What's heaven?" *Heaven* recounts the ensuing conversation between mother and daughter. In response to the question from her daughter, the mother replies, "Heaven...is a beautiful place up in the sky, where no one is sick, where no one is mean or unhappy. It's a place beyond the moon, the stars, and the clouds. Heaven is where you go when you die" (2). This response, however, provokes a series of follow-up questions as often is common with children. As the mother attempts to present understandable answers, the description of heaven is expanded:

"Heaven isn't a place that you can see," she explained. "It's somewhere you believe in. I imagine it's a beautiful place where you can sit on soft clouds and talk to other people who are there. At night you can sit next to the stars, which are the brightest of anywhere in the universe. Everyone there is happy to be in such a peaceful place where God will love them forever." (7)

Having described a welcoming environment and a loving God, another logical question is asked, "So everyone gets to go to Heaven?" (8). The answer to this question is disappointing, even for one who does not regard heaven as the goal of Christ's redemption. "Her mom replied, 'I believe that if you're good throughout your life, then you get to go to Heaven. Some people believe in different kinds of

heaven and have different names for it” (8). Even if a Christian parent adamantly holds on to the notion of going to heaven, this response alone is enough to disqualify this book from its intended use. The mother’s response is rooted in an unwillingness to point out humanity’s intrinsically sinful condition and its need of Christ’s redemptive death. It denigrates God’s salvation by implicitly equating it with other religions and by not presenting the simple but clear path to regeneration with God’s life—faith in the crucified and resurrected Christ. Rather than providing an opportunity to present Christ and His salvation, *Heaven* closes this door by focusing instead on good works and religious diversity. Parents who, above all, desire to present God’s saving grace to their children should not be lulled into employing this “tender, thoughtful treatment of a very emotional and difficult subject” (book jacket).

The remainder of the book reinforces many traditional notions of heaven, including that we go to heaven when we die, that heavenly oversight is being exercised by our departed loved ones, and that these loved ones are in God’s presence. As comforting as these may be to those who hold on to a notion of heaven, they are not enough to offset the book’s most glaring weakness—its utter disregard for God’s way of salvation.

Although *Heaven: Your Real Home* does not fall into this error, its treatment of heaven is not a clear presentation of scriptural truth; rather, it is a crude reinforcement of popular perceptions of heaven. As such, the book does damage to the truth, not by misrepresenting God’s salvation, but by trivializing it. *Home* begins and never strays very far from a vantage point that has been shaped by the author’s physical condition—paralysis from the neck down due to a diving accident in her youth. This accident has confined her to a wheelchair and given her ample time to commendably renew her faith and to reflect on heaven. Her inspirational story, however, is not enough to qualify her to expound the truth or to validate her reflections on heaven as a panacea to the troubles that beset us in this life. *Home* asserts,

Everybody wants to go to heaven. We are all curious to know where it is, how it looks, who’s there, and what they wear and do. I’m no exception. I was fascinated to discover that one day I would no longer be paralyzed but have a new glorified body. Immediately I began imagining all the wonderful things I would do with resurrected hands and legs. (17)

In describing heaven, the predominant point of reference is the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21 and 22, even though Eareckson Tada admits that at one time it failed to excite her imagination.

I was also struck that the positive descriptions about what

heaven *is* seem clumsy and ungraceful. Rainbow thrones? Streets of gold? Pearly gates? A glittering city 1,400 miles in length and as wide and high as it is long with walls 200 feet thick and made of jasper? It more closely resembled Minnesota’s monolithic Mall of America. I was embarrassed to admit it, but even the descriptions about everlasting peace and eternal felicity seemed boring. (20)

In her experience Eareckson Tada began to overcome this sense of embarrassment when a friend pointed out that the images of the New Jerusalem are only signs, not descriptions of real things. “They’re the images God gave us—the symbols Scripture invites us to ponder. They’re not deterrents to your faith, they’re incentives....Joni, don’t mistake signs in the Bible for the reality they only represent” (21). Heaven begins to come alive for Eareckson Tada when the consummate sign of our spiritual destiny, the New Jerusalem, is presented to her as a springboard for the imagination. Rather, than seeing the New Jerusalem as a sign of spiritual realities, it becomes a sign of far greater physical realities. “No mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him....’ Your imagination can’t begin to picture all that God has in store” (20).

The remainder of *Home*, for the most part, is an invitation to engage in imaginative speculation about physical realities in heaven that borders on the gross and the crass.

One day no more bulging middles or balding tops. No varicose veins or crow’s-feet. No more cellulite or support hose. Forget the thunder thighs and highway hips. Just a quick leapfrog over the tombstone and it’s the body you’ve always dreamed of. Fit and trim, smooth and sleek. (34)

In speaking of her own heavenly aspirations, Eareckson Tada states,

I will bear the likeness of Jesus, the man from heaven. Like His, mine will be an actual, literal body perfectly suited for earth *and* heaven. Whether flinging a Frisbee or flying past Ursa Major. Scaling walls or walking through them. Speaking with friends or conversing with angels. Whether trout fishing in the Crystal Sea or going for seconds at the Wedding Supper, at all times and in all places we shall be perfectly fitted for our environment, whether it be the new heavens or new earth. (39)

In order to grasp the significance of the details of the New Jerusalem, *Home* speaks of the need for faith, citing Hebrews 11:1 in support: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (NIV). With faith, *Home* contends, “the hieroglyphics of heaven [the symbols in the New Jerusalem] come alive” (22). What *Home* regards as faith, however, is really imagination, for faith becomes whatever one could possibly imagine about heaven only much more.

True, we may enjoy a good charcoal-broiled steak or a night of romance with our husband or wife under a full moon, but faith tells us these things are inklings of better tastes and enraptured delights yet to come. They won't be negated, no; rather, the whisper of what they are on earth will find complete fulfillment in heaven. (26)

*Home* is an invitation, more than anything, to imagine, to dream, to escape from the toils and sufferings of this life by focusing on physical gratification in a physical realm, a realm that is "not a state or a condition, but a place. A place with streets, gates, walls, and rivers" (29)—even though Revelation 21 and 22 speak of only one street and one river.

Given its call to consider heaven through the eyes of faith, *Home* unleashes a dizzying array of imaginative longings, all intensely physical in orientation, including, climbing mountains behind the Rose Bowl, skiing down the Sierras, dancing the *paso doble*, picnicking on the Hungarian plains, having thrilling escapades in the far corners of the universe, getting to know and fellowship with angels, etc. (54, 69, 83).

To be honest, there are references to the Lord and of worship to our Lord. Eareckson Tada's love for the Lord is beyond question, and there is a real longing to be with the Lord, to receive His praise, and even to reign with Him, but even these references are overshadowed by imagination.

In the midst of it all, the glittering capital city of heaven, the New Jerusalem, will be set like a gleaming pearl. Kings and princes will pour into the Holy City from the far corners of the earth to pay homage. The image blows my mind, but it's laid out as clear as crystal glass in Revelation 21....A real reign on a real earth. / And our Savior, our King of Kings, leading the way. / *But watch out, wait till you see what we do out beyond this planet!* (69, 71, emphasis added)

In the final section, "The Journey Home," *Home* speaks of how to get ready for heaven and spends a considerable amount of time discussing the relationship between hardships and heaven, including the point that "suffering moves our heart toward heaven" (182), "suffering prepares us to meet God" (184), and "the greater the suffering, the greater the glory" (190). Accordingly,

suffering makes us want to go there. Broken homes and broken hearts crush our illusions that earth can keep its promises, that is can really satisfy. Only the hope of heaven

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**When attempts  
to depict heaven  
are made with video images  
rather than just words, the result  
is a further trivialization of  
God's ultimate consummation.**

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can truly move our passions off this world—which God knows could never fulfill us anyway—and place them where they will find their glorious fulfillment. (182)

*Home's* perspective on suffering and its purpose is sadly misplaced, influenced no doubt, by the author's own very real sufferings. It is as if suffering is imposed by God to help us take our eyes off of a physical world that cannot keep its promise to a physical world that will satisfy the longings of our heart. This perspective ignores the genuine experience of many believers who turned to the Lord, not after being deprived of earthly pleasures through suffering, but after, metaphorically speaking, receiving all that this world has to offer in terms of glory, wealth, and honor, not wanting for anything. In a limited aspect, such a view of suffering denies the power of grace. Only grace, rather than suffering, can draw us to the Lord and draw us on in our pursuit of the Lord. It is a sad truth that suffering often hardens the hearts of many. There is no softening power inherent in human suffering that can impel us to give up the world to obtain Christ and be found in Him. And only grace, not imaginations of heaven, can sustain us in the midst of trials and sufferings. God's purpose is not to give us suffering so that we can fixate on heaven and thus turn away from the things of this age, but rather to have Christ revealed and formed within us. Sufferings are not a knock on the head to turn our eyes heavenward; rather, they are an opportunity for God's power to be manifested in and through us by grace.

**W**hen attempts to depict heaven are made with video images rather than just words, the result is a further trivialization of God's ultimate consummation. Such a trivialization is clearly evident in Questar's *Heaven and Hell*. Although this video is entitled *Heaven and Hell*, it presents the "biblical images" of hell first, followed by the "biblical images" of heaven. This, no doubt, is intended to convince unbelievers of the horrors of hell and then to entice them with the glories of heaven. While the images of hell, including ample amounts of fire and depictions of hell in Renaissance art, have a certain dramatic impact, the images of heaven, are comical at best. An unbeliever, upon seeing these images, would have little desire to go there. In the video, a theologian comments,

Everything we've ever wanted to do in a righteous dimension we will be able to do. If you've always wanted to sing like a bird or paint like an artist or travel the galaxies like a space person, I think all those things will be available to us to be done to an exponent of x. We have no way to even imagine. In fact the apostle Paul quotes an

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Old Testament prophetic passage which says, “Eye has never seen and ear has never heard, nor has it ever entered into the heart or imagination of man what God has prepared for those who love Him.” So the description of this new world is one that’s so immense and glorious that we couldn’t begin to describe it. We would have no frame of reference from experience, even if our words could technically describe what we were seeing.

Unfortunately, Questar does not heed these words, because it immediately proceeds to describe “heaven” with the aid of computer-generated graphics. It shows a golden cube descending out of the sky, angels flying around it, gold (not jasper) walls, twelve multi-colored foundations, and gates with names on them. If the cube that is depicted is supposed to measure about “1500 miles on each of its edges,” then the angels flying around it must be 200 miles tall because they are quite prominent in the heavenly scene. When speaking of the river of water of life and the throne of God and of the Lamb, a throne is superimposed and cross-dissolved into a video segment of running water. What is supposed to be mysterious and sublime is only trite. The first part of the video may be enough to give an unbeliever pause to consider his eternal destiny, but the second part of the video is probably enough to convince him that heaven is not a very interesting alternative. To sully the gospel with such images is reprehensible. One only wishes that the theologian would have heeded his own words and advised Questar of the folly of attempting to portray the divine realities with the aid of poorly thought-out video images.

These popularizations of heaven serve no real purpose. *Heaven* presents a distorted gospel in a format that will hinder rather than help children know the salvation of the Lord. *Home* encourages believers to engage in imaginative speculation about heaven to distract them from the very sufferings that can help conform them to the image of Christ. And *Heaven and Hell* is a poor presentation of a poor gospel of believing in Jesus so that you can go to heaven and not hell. Despite the good intentions, none of these presentations has any real value.

by John Pester

### Heavenly Excursions

*Heaven: Close Encounters of the God Kind*, by Jesse Duplantis. New Orleans: Harrison House, 1996.

*A Divine Revelation of Heaven*, by Mary K. Baxter. New Kensington: Whitaker House, 1998.

*To Heaven and Back: True Stories of Those Who Have Made the Journey*, by Rita Bennett. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.

Recent years have witnessed the resurgence of interest in heaven, angels, and the afterlife. Given this current fascination with the afterlife, many have been writing books that reinforce a notion of heaven as the final destination of believers. Among the spate of books, the most sensational and spiritually detrimental are those authored by people who claim to have been taken to heaven by God and which purport to describe the details of heaven. Despite the unscriptural and extrascriptural content of these books, they have not been roundly rejected by mainstream Christianity. Instead, some are lauded and recommended by respectable evangelical leaders. When scrutinized under the light of biblical revelation, however, these books bear all the appearance of being chimerical tales produced out of overactive imaginations affected by religious notions of heaven. The contents of these books do not measure up to the content of the Scriptures; rather, they defraud believers of their present experience of the Triune God, replacing Him with a materialistic habitat as the center and goal of the Christian life.

Three such books have been recently published: *Heaven: Close Encounters of the God Kind* by Jesse Duplantis (hereafter, *Heaven*); *A Divine Revelation of Heaven* by Mary K. Baxter (hereafter, *Divine Revelation*); and *To Heaven and Back: True Stories of Those Who Have Made the Journey* by Rita Bennett (hereafter, *To Heaven and Back*). In *Heaven* Duplantis recounts a series of personal encounters with God that led to his salvation and eventually to a trip to heaven where he conversed with David, Abraham, Jesus, and Paul, and visited the house personally prepared for him. *Divine Revelation* is an account of ten visits to heaven, a city with jasper walls, pearl gates, countless mansions, and joyful redeemed souls. *To Heaven and Back* recounts eight stories of people whose near-death experiences brought them to heaven and back and then offers an “in-depth biblical picture” of heaven and the afterlife that corresponds to the personal accounts (25). All of these books aim to “comfort the bereaved and to prepare the dying for the next life” (28).

### Seeing Saints in Heaven

At the outset, it must be noted that the details of heaven recounted in these books utterly contradict the Scriptures. First, all three books assert that the dead Old and New Testament saints are in heaven, supporting their claim that dead believers go to heaven after death. *To Heaven and Back* records that people who had near-death experiences were taken to heaven to see their afterlife. In particular, one of them saw countless “transparent” saints of “all sizes” who were “floating” on “what appeared to

be a crystal mirror or cloud or smoke,” each “holding a crown in his or her hand” (61). According to *Divine Revelation* there are the redeemed souls as “joyful citizens” who “have come from many different ages and countries” in heaven (25). It prophesies that “in heaven” the believers will know “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” and “all the disciples of the New Testament” (115). In *Heaven* Duplantis speaks of meeting Abraham who “seemed of great age” yet looked young and had “no wrinkles in his face” (77). Abraham told him that “Paradise” is his “place and bosom” and served him “cool and refreshing” water dipped from the “pure and clear” river in a gold goblet (77-79). In recounting Duplantis’s conversation with Abraham, the book cites Luke 16 where dead Lazarus is shown to be with Abraham in Paradise (136). Yet according to the Scriptures, the Paradise to which dead believers such as Lazarus and Abraham go to enjoy comfort is not situated in heaven, but in the heart of the earth. Speaking of the place He would go to after His death, the Lord foretold that He would be “in the heart of the earth three days and three nights” (Matt. 12:40). In Luke 23:43, on the day He was crucified, the Lord said to the thief on the cross, “Today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” Juxtaposing Matthew 12:40 with Luke 23:43 therefore indicates that the Paradise to which the Lord and the thief went after their death is not located in heaven, but in the heart of the earth. Hence, the Paradise to which the Lord and all His saints—including the thief, Abraham, and Lazarus—go after their death is not equivalent to heaven, but the heart of the earth.

**D**uplantis asserts that he met David the king with “reddish hair,” “a red beard,” a shadowless body, beautiful teeth, and an “infectious smile” (93-94, 100). David spoke with him at length regarding things in heaven, taking him to a house prepared for him, to a street with the “beautiful block mansions” of the Old Testament prophets, to the throne of God, and to mountains with “apartments and condominiums” (104, 133). Yet, in contravention of this, Acts 2:34 explicitly declares that though Christ resurrected from Hades and ascended to the heavens, David “did not ascend into the heavens.” According to Duplantis’s account, David was the God-appointed tour guide who took him to various places (94). If *Heaven’s* identification of David as the main tour guide clearly contradicts biblical data, then the credibility of *Heaven’s* excursion with all its details must be called into question.

### Physicalizing the New Jerusalem

Second, these three books grossly err in physicalizing the

**When scrutinized under the light of biblical revelation, some books on heaven bear all the appearance of being chimerical tales produced out of overactive imaginations affected by religious notions of heaven.**

New Jerusalem, either mistaking it for heaven or regarding it as a physical city located in heaven rather than a spiritual symbol signifying a living composition of the processed Triune God mingled with His redeemed elect. In *Divine Revelation* Baxter speaks of being “transported” to heaven and seeing

gates into heaven, each of which was “made of an exquisite pearl, with designs in it” (133). In heaven she saw “walls of jasper” (24) and “many fruit trees that grew beside the River of Life” which “flowed forth from the throne” like “a sea of glass, like a sea of crystal” (123, 126). According to *Heaven*, there is a big “Paradise” surrounding the “Holy City,” crystal-like “transparent” gold, and “trees” lined up “alongside the River of Life” (70-71). Duplantis “walked up to the city” and saw a “huge” jasper wall, “gold streets,” and the “foundations of heaven” which were “pillars” (85-87, 95). Duplantis also claims that as he “felt dehydrated” in heaven, he “was given water from the River of Life at least five times” which “tasted like cold water” and “quenched his thirst” (141). In *To Heaven and Back*, one heavenly traveler says, “I saw that heaven was like a city” with a “street of gold” which she ran down; it had “a wall around it” and a “massive gate” over which were “words written in huge golden letters” (52). In the same book another person speaks of seeing “a transparent wall, shining like pure gold” (85).

**I**n contrast to these books’ inherently physical description and understanding of the New Jerusalem as a material city, the book of Revelation presents the New Jerusalem as an aggregate spiritual sign that symbolizes an organic entity composed of the processed Triune God wrought into His regenerated, transformed, and glorified tripartite elect. The opening sentence of Revelation enunciates the guiding principle of interpreting the book: “He made it known by signs” (1:1). The revelation of this book is made known to us through signs, symbols with spiritual significance. Just as the seven lampstands signify the seven churches (v. 20) and the Lamb signifies Christ the Redeemer (5:12; John 1:29), the New Jerusalem signifies the organic constitution of the Triune God united with and glorified through His regenerated believers. Hence, its golden street, pearl gates, and jasper wall, which these people claim to have seen in heaven, are not the physical components of a material metropolis; they symbolize the Triune God built into His believers as their inner structure—the Father with His divine nature, signified by gold; the Son with His redeeming death and life-dispensing resurrection, signified by pearls; and the Spirit with His transforming work, signified by precious stones.

Duplantis’s emphatic claim in *Heaven* that he drank from

the river of life in the holy city (Rev. 22:1) “five times” due to his dehydration is inherently incompatible with the apostle John’s unequivocal remark in his Gospel, another book of signs (John 2:11), that the “rivers of living water” flowing out of the innermost being of a believer refer to “the Spirit” (7:37-39). According to John’s writing, the river of water of life in the New Jerusalem is anything but physical and external; it is the life-giving Spirit imparted into and coursing through the believers’ inner being to be their eternal satisfaction. To accept the report in *Heaven* as true, one must be willing to deny John’s explication of the imagery of living water in John 7:39 and disassociate it from the presentation of the same imagery in Revelation 22:1.

**M**oreover, all three books mention physical “trees” alongside the river of life. In particular, according to *Heaven*, Duplantis ate “juicy and copper-colored fruit” from “one of those trees,” and it strengthened him to “withstand the glory of God” (76); he also saw other people taking “leaves off those trees” and putting “the leaves up to their faces” to smell them (72). Yet according to Revelation, in the New Jerusalem there is only one tree, the tree of life, signifying Christ as the unique embodiment of all the riches of God for our food (Col. 2:9). This is corroborated by the Lord’s own declarations concerning Himself recorded in John’s Gospel: “I am...the life” (14:6); “I am the true vine” (15:1). Further, far from withstanding the glory of God, the principal function of the tree of life is to dispense God Himself into our being as life for our eternal enjoyment (6:57; Rev. 2:7; 22:14). By reinforcing a physical notion of the New Jerusalem, these books defraud the believers of the present enjoyment of the Triune God, who longs to be dispensed into them as their food and drink.

### Portraying Heavenly Mansions

Third, perhaps the most prevalent error in the three books is their assertion that heaven is the believers’ eternal home prepared by God. Citing John 14:2, all three books advance an unscriptural claim that in heaven there is an extravagant mansion individualized to one’s personal desires. For instance, *Divine Revelation* claims, “Since our Savior is perfect, omnipotent, and eternal, heaven has to be a perfect place. Because He is preparing us a place there to live with Him for all eternity, our eternal home will be perfect, too” (21). As one who saw “mansions unnumbered” in heaven (24), Baxter assures the readers:

You do not need to fear being crowded into a tiny cubicle in heaven that has been labeled a “mansion.” When the redeemed of the ages are gathered home to glory, there will be sufficient room for all of them to have one of the many mansions, the many dwelling places, which Jesus said He was preparing for us in His Father’s house. (31)

In *Heaven*, Duplantis asserts that when taken into his house in heaven by David, he saw “the prettiest place [he] had ever laid eyes on”—a house with “a water fountain in the front yard,” “manicured grass,” “tall ceilings,” “crown moldings,” “marble,” and “a table in the foyer with golden eagles on it” (101-102).

*To Heaven and Back* posits that in heaven believers will find a place, “tailor-made” for them—a “gorgeous home” with “special treasures” He has prepared (170). Equating the New Jerusalem with a “heavenly home,” the book asserts that “since his ascension...one of Jesus’ primary concerns has been to prepare a heavenly home for his family. I like the word *mansion* simply because anything Jesus would create would be elegant” (103).

Looking forward to being with her deceased husband “in that home prepared” for them, Bennett claims that her heart “is focused on heaven” (199). The book asserts that such a “heaven’s perspective” provides the ill and the broken-hearted with healing, comfort, and hope (197).

Whereas the three books posit the erroneous notion that every believer’s eternal home is a heavenly mansion, the pure divine revelation of the Scriptures shows that our eternal habitation is the Triune God Himself. These books base their teaching regarding heavenly mansions on John 14:2, but this chapter, understood according to its proper context, actually unveils that our dwelling place is the Father embodied in Christ realized as the Spirit (vv. 10, 17). In verse 3, the Lord promises that where He is, the believers also will be. Since He is “going to the Father” (v. 28) and is the way for the believers to come to the Father as the destination (v. 6), an abode in the Father’s house prepared for the believers is not a physical place, but a wonderful person—the Father Himself in Christ as the Spirit. Thus, the comfort that a “heaven’s perspective” in these books purports to offer is deceiving to those who embrace it in this age. The true comfort that John 14 reveals is “the Spirit of reality” as “another Comforter” dwelling in us (vv. 16-17) and us in Him forever (v. 20) to form a mutual abode of God and man (v. 23), the ultimate consummation of which is the New Jerusalem as the tabernacle of God and the temple (Rev. 21:3, 22).

**T**hese books’ presentations of heavenly mansions cater to man’s desires for corporeal gratification. In the main, the heaven portrayed by these books is a heaven they manufactured in the image of man’s materialistic, earthly yearnings. For example, according to *Divine Revelation*, there are “glittering, glistening, exquisite diamonds” that are “as large as blocks of concrete” (26). It goes on to say, “Some of these diamonds seemed to be for the mansions of those who were soulwinners on earth. It seemed that every time someone led a soul to

Christ, heaven provided a diamond for that faithful Christian” (27). A notion is thus presented that spiritual service in the Lord’s work will result in a material reward. This is a pathetic denigration of the meaning, impetus, and goal of Christian service. In short, heaven is “the land of dreams come true” (30) where “all of our prayers will be answered, and all of our deepest desires will be fulfilled” (157). According to *To Heaven and Back*, the believers’ inheritance will be “heavenly real-estate” to which any property one owns on earth “will look mighty small in comparison” (155). Hence, heaven is not only “the storehouse of all God’s good gifts” (147), but also “a healing place where you experience complete fulfillment” (195).

In *Heaven*, Duplantis was delighted to see the kind of furniture he had on the earth in his heavenly house. According to his David,

The Lord knew you would like it, so we put it in your home....All desires are met here. Everything has been thought of—all your desires and some that you could not even think of....[T]he earth is God’s creation. His taste there is His taste here. Every desire you could possibly think of has been met to your specification for your home. (102-103)

David also took him to mountains where he saw people “having picnics” and “little apartments and condominiums” (133). These people, says David, not only have their mansions in the city but also “decided” to have apartments “in the country” which the “great God” has provided (134). Considering mansions and apartments in heaven as God’s blessing upon His people, the book preaches the gospel of prosperity:

I believe that if people could see the treasures that God has stored up for them in heaven, they wouldn’t have such a hard time understanding God’s will to prosper and heal them while they are on earth. There are leaves for healing in heaven, and prosperity is everywhere. Anything that you can think of, anything you could want on earth has already been given to you there. (135)

According to the Scriptures, however, our reward and inheritance are not heavenly mansions with luxurious environs; our “exceedingly great reward” and our unique inheritance is the Triune God Himself in the unsearchably rich Christ as the Spirit without measure wrought into our being (Gen. 15:1; Num. 18:20; Deut. 10:9; Eph. 1:14; Rev. 21:7; John 3:34). While *Heaven* proclaims the gospel of prosperity, Paul announces “the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel” (Eph. 3:8). *Divine Revelation* posits that the reward to a “faithful Christian” who “led a soul to Christ” is “glittering, glistening, exquisite diamonds” (26-27), and Duplantis claims to have seen Paul in a heavenly house with “a beautiful foyer” (95). Yet

Paul in Philippians 3:8 declares that he “suffered the loss of all things and [counts] them as refuse that [he] may gain Christ,” the sole goal of his Christian life. It is an illogical and preposterous thought that God would reward Paul with what he deemed as refuse! Moreover, in Matthew 6:24, the Lord clearly shows a fundamental incompatibility between God and mammon (an Aramaic word signifying wealth, riches): “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” After speaking of earthly wealth as a master that robs His people of their service to Him, would God shower His people with the very thing that He has charged them to forsake? Such a proposition is wholly untenable unless one assumes that with respect to mammon, there will be a drastic change in the mind of God, with whom is no variation or shadow cast by turning (James 1:17).

Since these books contain details of heaven that flagrantly contradict the Scriptures, one cannot help but dispute the veracity of the experiences presented in them. The enormous incongruity between these books’ portrayal of heaven and the divine revelation of the Scriptures leads to this conclusion: either the trips to heaven these books present are false or the Bible is false. There can be no other alternative explanation that reconciles the two. According to the Scriptures their rightful preeminence, we should dismiss the contents of these books at best as self-deluded tales of fanciful imagination leavened by the traditional teaching of heaven. One fundamental error in these books is the attempt to authenticate supernatural experiences with the Scriptures, rather than grounding experience upon the unshakable foundation of the Word of God (Matt. 7:24-27). As these books try to fit “miraculous” experiences into the Word of God, they unwittingly make the Word of God subservient to subjective experiences, thus twisting the Scriptures (2 Pet. 3:16). Instead, we must follow the healthy pattern of the apostle Peter who considered the Scriptures as the prophetic word “more firm” than his authentic experience of witnessing the magnificent glory of the transfigured Jesus (1:16-19).

### Presenting the Extrascriptural

Even more disturbing and ludicrous than the unscriptural contents of these books are their extrascriptural details. According to *Heaven*, there are “lush, gorgeous valleys, lots of mountains,” and flowers in heaven of all colors: “reds, greens, purples, blues, yellows” (71). Duplantis allegedly saw in heaven little babies who “just came out of the breath of God,” singing, flying around God’s throne, and asking God, “Can I be a spirit?” (119). According to *Divine Revelation*, Baxter allegedly saw horses with “golden reins” in their mouths spinning and prancing before the Lord “to magnify and praise and worship God,”

angels wearing glowing garments which “were trimmed with gold and embedded with big rubies and all kinds of immense stones,” “all kinds of birds,” a “very beautiful and tall” angel with triangle-shaped and “rainbow-colored wings,” chariots of God with wheels “studded with diamonds and precious rubies and emeralds,” and “exquisitely designed” tables reminiscent of “Victorian” furniture on earth (127, 129, 114, 80, 99, 145-146). In *To Heaven and Back*, one person supposedly saw “the River of Death” and heard “what seemed like millions of little golden bells ringing, tinkling” (83, 85). In the same book, another person claims to have been taken to heaven where the temperature was perfect and there was “a nice cool breeze” (78). Based on this account, Bennett imagines that heaven will be an ideal “vacation spot” that far surpasses “Hawaii and Jamaica” (80).

**T**hese hedonistic and materialistic details regarding heaven, which bear no resemblance to the Scriptures whatsoever, can only offer momentary relief to the downcast, like a “sedative” (39). Yet, in reality, such a “sedative” is pernicious to the believers, for it is a compound that includes poisonous extrabiblical contents that only “produce questionings” and deceive the readers with “itching ears” (1 Tim. 1:4; 2 Tim. 4:3). Scripture sternly prohibits the inclusion of extrabiblical content into one’s teaching and pronounces anathema on those who commit this sin (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Rev. 22:18). Deuteronomy 29:29 clearly establishes the limit of God’s revelation to man, drawing a line of demarcation between the things hidden from man and those unveiled to man: “The things that are hidden belong to Jehovah our God; but the things that are revealed, to us and our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” In Revelation 22:18, John—the only man in the Bible who was both taken to heaven and directed by the Lord to write concerning the significance of what he saw—records the Lord’s solemn warning: “I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this scroll.” Proverbs 30:6 succinctly affirms the patent falsehood of the extrascriptural contents in these books: “Do not add to His words, / lest He reprove you and you be found a liar.”

The writings of the apostle Paul, a God-appointed teacher in faith and truth (1 Tim. 2:7), stand in stark contrast to books that present and promote self-deluded tales about trips to heaven. Whereas these heavenly excursions are clearly false, Paul had a genuine experience of being “caught away to the third heaven,” which he regarded as “visions and revelations of the Lord” (2 Cor. 12:1-2). Whereas these books glory in such “experiences” and publicize them with no lack of ostentation, Paul boasted in his “weaknesses” (vv. 5, 9), and spoke of his authentic experience in the third person as “a man in Christ” (v. 2),

concealing his experience for fourteen years and refraining from divulging the details of his experience lest others account of him too highly (v. 6). Moreover, right after refraining from disclosing his transcendent vision of heaven, Paul shifts the focus to his earthly travail by revealing how he suffered a thorn in the flesh that buffeted him. After entreating the Lord three times to remove the thorn, he received a divine answer from the Lord—the revelation of Christ as his all-sufficient grace: “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness” (v. 9). With poignant insight, Watchman Nee points out this revelation’s capital importance and its profound impact on the church:

The revelation concerning the third heaven and Paradise might very well have been Paul’s highest revelation. Yet he received more help from the Lord’s subsequent word than from the realization of the third heaven and Paradise. We have never been to Paradise, and no one has ever come back from Paradise to tell us anything. Neither have we been to the third heaven, and we do not know of the things from that place. Yet for two thousand years the church has been receiving help from the Lord’s word to Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you.” The church has received more help from this word than from the revelation of the third heaven and Paradise. (219)

Instead of lauding the contents of his visions of heaven, Paul, a God-appointed pattern to the believers (1 Tim. 1:16), highlighted the revelation and experience of the Triune God in Christ as the all-sufficient grace, thus faithfully carrying out the “stewardship of the grace” entrusted to him for the benefit of all the believers (Eph. 3:2).

Examined in the light of the biblical revelation, trips to heaven, as presented in *Divine Revelation*, *Heaven*, and *To Heaven and Back*, prove to be self-deluded tales of unbridled imaginations. Physicalizing the New Jerusalem, the ultimate goal of the divine economy, and misdirecting believers to pursue a materialistic mansion as their final destination, these books deceive believers by offering false comfort and hope, and arouse in them carnal yearning for material wealth. In so doing, these books ultimately defraud the believers of the present enjoyment and experience of the processed Triune God in Christ as the unique and true food, drink, comfort, abode, wealth, reward, and inheritance.

by David Yoon

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## Flawed Teachings on Heaven

*Heaven*, by W. A. Criswell and Paige Patterson.  
Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1991.

In *Heaven*, Drs. W. A. Criswell and Paige Patterson, two well-known Baptist pastors, attempt to convey to their readers what can be known from the Scriptures regarding heaven. The book has two major sections, authored by Drs. Criswell and Patterson, respectively, followed by a collection of hymns and poems on heaven. In the book the authors portray heaven as the ultimate hope, the final destination, and the eternal dwelling place of the believers in Christ in the coming eternity (4-5, 15, 116). In a typical fashion the book identifies heaven with the Father's house in John 14:2-3 (6, 176). According to Criswell, heaven will be "a renewed world creation" (7), a re-creation of the existing universe to be as it was in the beginning, an Edenic paradise "purged from moral and physical imperfections in order to become the eternal abode of Christ's living saints" (10, 72-73, 90, 93). He then asserts that in heaven the believers, re-created and restored to be as man was before the fall and inhabiting immortalized, glorified bodies (31, 72, 84-85, 183-184), will inherit the universe and live in mansions, the work of Christ's own hands, in the vast and beautiful New Jerusalem (12, 80, 90-91), referred to by Patterson as "the capital of heaven" (187). A brief section, based partly on Revelation 21—22 but mainly on Criswell's imagination, portrays the New Jerusalem as a literal, physical city, a 1500 mile cube with levels rising upward, one mile above the other, connected by "eight million miles of beautiful avenues" and "infinitely capable of holding the vast population who will receive the heavenly inheritance" (13-14, 81). Based on Revelation 21:2 Criswell postulates that the New Jerusalem will come down out of heaven and hang over the earth to serve as the eternal abode from which the believers will rule with Christ over the re-created universe (72, 81).

Criswell describes the life in heaven as the ultimate in human happiness:

Everything that is affirmative for the richness of human life would be a beautiful vocabulary to use to describe heaven—the joy of the soul, the happiness of the heart, the cognizance of the mind, the understanding of our hearts, the infinite praise with which we will worship our Lord, the glories of being in a society without hurt or harm or sin or pain or death or suffering. (96)

On the continuity between life on earth and life in heaven, Criswell asserts that in heaven "we shall be the same persons with our respective faculties, abilities, and personalities" and "shall continue developing and progressing in the world to come" (47). Offering no biblical

support, he speculates that the composer Mozart, the painter Raphael, the astronomer O. M. Mitchell, and all the believers will be the same in the "life beyond" as they were in the earthly life, each continuing his earthly pursuits, each developing his talents, gifts, and abilities throughout the ages, each permitted to finish tasks he had dreamed of doing but had no opportunity, time, strength, or ability to finish on earth (47-50, 90). In heaven, Criswell notes, all the redeemed will reign with Christ over the earth and will serve God by performing tasks assigned "according to how God has made us and endowed us" (44-45, 73, 97). However, in a rather strange notion, Criswell states that if a believer does not love the Lord while on earth, he will surely not love Him in heaven, and if he is indifferent toward God on earth, he will be the same in heaven; i.e., the different conditions among the children of God on earth will be manifested in heaven also. Some in heaven will be ecstatically happy, says Criswell, and others will "just be there and that is all" (91-92). In spite of the differences among the believers' stations in heaven, Criswell asserts that "every person will be happy because of his ability to appreciate and respond and be sensitive to the grace of God" (94).

### Affirmations

In the course of his discussion Criswell affirms several important matters in the Scriptures. First, he affirms that the book of Revelation, from which a great part of his understanding concerning heaven is derived, is a book of signs (1:1), i.e., figures that portray the course of human history and its consummation (27-28). Unfortunately, he fails to apply this principle to his interpretation of the New Jerusalem, the greatest sign in the book of Revelation. Instead of interpreting the holy city as a sign, a symbol with spiritual significance, Criswell interprets it literally, as a physical city.

Second, Criswell repeatedly affirms that when a believer dies he goes to Paradise, to Abraham's bosom in the pleasant section of Hades, to await the Lord's coming and the accompanying resurrection of the body (30-31, 67-68, 82, 93). However, he—and Patterson likewise (185)—makes the common mistake, based on an inaccurate reading of Paul's word in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, of identifying Paradise with heaven (68). To his credit, however, he does indicate that Paradise is not "the fullness of heaven" (31) or "the heaven of heavens" (82) but an intermediate state in which the disembodied believers, being with the Lord, wait for the day of resurrection.

Third, Criswell states, in accord with the truth, that after the Lord's return every believer will stand before the judgment seat (Gk. *bema*) of Christ to give an account of himself in relation to the way he lived his life on earth

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after he was saved (78-79). Unfortunately, Criswell completely overlooks the millennium and says that the rewards issued at the judgment seat of Christ will be given to the believers in heaven. Furthermore, he does not acknowledge the fact that the defeated believers will suffer discipline and punishment during the one thousand years of the kingdom age, concluding instead that the worst thing that could befall an unfaithful believer is a loss of reward (i.e., an absence of reward) in heaven.

**I**n a chapter on the rewards in heaven, Patterson affirms Criswell's concept of the judgment seat of Christ (202-207), concluding, based on 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, that only reward or loss of reward is decided at the *bema* and that, based on Matthew 5:12, the place where one receives his reward is "in heaven" (197-198, 200). Whether a believer is rewarded or not rewarded, he will still be saved and, Patterson claims, will be supremely happy in heaven (207).

### Critiques

Although there are major theological errors in the book, most are thoroughly and adequately dealt with in other articles in this issue. However, Patterson does make three significant associations that deserve further critique in this review: First, he identifies "heaven" as an aspect of the kingdom of the heavens; second, he associates "heaven" with the concept of the Sabbath rest; and third, he, like Criswell (32, 79), makes the claim that "heaven" is the believer's eternal inheritance.

### *Heaven and the Kingdom of the Heavens*

Patterson states that there are three denotations of the kingdom of the heavens (or, the kingdom of heaven) in the New Testament: First, "the acknowledged right and rule of Christ in the human spirit"; second, "the eternal residence of the saints"; and third, "a kingdom age here on the earth in the last days" (i.e., the millennium) (117). The first and third denotations have merit based on the truth of the Scriptures, but the second denotation, associating the kingdom of the heavens with the believers' eternal abode, has no basis in Scripture.

In his discussion of the subject Patterson fails to make a distinction between the kingdom of the heavens and the kingdom of God. He considers them one and the same thing. This is one reason for his inaccurate understanding of the kingdom. Of the four Gospels, Matthew deals thoroughly with the matter of the kingdom of the heavens; the expression *the kingdom of the heavens* is used thirty-two times in Matthew but is not found at all in Mark, Luke, and John. The expression used in these latter three Gospels is *the kingdom of God*. The only other reference to the kingdom of the heavens in the New

Testament is in 2 Timothy 4:18, where the term *heavenly kingdom* is used. A careful study of Matthew shows that the kingdom of the heavens is different from the kingdom of God, although it is a part of the kingdom of God, just as the state of New York is different from the United States, although it is a part of the United States. Thus, it is possible to be in the kingdom of God and not be in the kingdom of the heavens, just as it is possible to be in the United States and not be in the state of New York.

**T**he kingdom of God denotes God's general reign over all things, including the affairs of men and the nations on the earth, from eternity to eternity, for the accomplishing of His eternal economy. Daniel 4:3 and 34 affirm that God's kingdom is an eternal kingdom, with a dominion extending from generation to generation. At the beginning of the New Testament, both John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus declared that men should repent, "for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). When they were sent out the first time to preach the gospel, the Lord's disciples declared the same thing (10:7). Thus, at the time of John's, the Lord's, and the disciples' preaching, although the kingdom of God was already among the people of Israel (12:28; 21:43), the kingdom of the heavens had not yet come but had only drawn near. In Matthew 16:19 the Lord told Peter that He would give him "the keys of the kingdom of the heavens." Hence, even at that time the kingdom of the heavens had not begun, because the keys had not yet been given. This is proof that the kingdom of the heavens is different from the kingdom of God. However, in Matthew 19:23 the Lord makes reference to the fact that it is difficult for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of the heavens, whereas in the next verse He says that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. The Lord uses *the kingdom of the heavens* and *the kingdom of God* interchangeably in these two verses because although the kingdom of the heavens had not yet come, the kingdom of God was there already, and the kingdom of the heavens is a part of the kingdom of God.

Since the kingdom of the heavens had not yet come in the four Gospels, we may ask when the kingdom of the heavens did come, and what its duration will be. The answer to the first part of the question is found in the parables concerning the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens in Matthew 13. The first of the seven parables, the parable of the sower (vv. 3-23), portrays the preliminary work of the kingdom in the Lord's sowing the seed of the kingdom (the word of the kingdom) into those who heard His preaching. In this parable no reference is made to the kingdom of the heavens. This confirms the fact that during the Lord's ministry on earth, the kingdom of the heavens had not yet come but had only drawn near. However, the second parable, the parable of the

tares (vv. 24-30), begins with, "The kingdom of the heavens has become like..."—a direct reference to the kingdom of the heavens—and the third through seventh parables begin in like manner. This indicates clearly that the kingdom of the heavens began at the time of the second parable. Since the tares in the second parable signify false believers who were "sown" among the true by Satan after the church began, we can conclude from this parable that the kingdom of the heavens began on the day of Pentecost, when the church was formed. This is confirmed by the Lord's word concerning the giving of the keys of the kingdom of the heavens to Peter in Matthew 16:19. These keys were used by Peter first on the day of Pentecost to open the gate of the kingdom so that the Jewish believers could enter (Acts 2:38-42) and then in the house of Cornelius to open the gate for the Gentile believers (10:34-48).

**T**he answer to the second part of the question, concerning the duration of the kingdom of the heavens, is found in the prophecy of the kingdom spoken by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 24 and 25. These two chapters cover the signs leading to the end, the great tribulation as the consummation of the age, Christ's coming to the earth at the end of the great tribulation, the rapture of the living believers, the resurrection and rapture of the dead believers, the rewarding of the faithful and overcoming believers, the disciplining of the defeated believers, and the judging of the unbelieving nations remaining on the earth after the Lord's coming. Since the age immediately following the Lord's return will not be the coming eternity with the new heaven and the new earth but will be the millennium of one thousand years (Rev. 20:4-6), and since the things included by the Lord in His prophecy of the kingdom in Matthew 24 and 25 extend only as far as the millennium, we can confidently conclude that the kingdom of the heavens will terminate at the end of the millennium and will not continue into the coming eternity. However, the eternal kingdom of God will continue into the new heavens and new earth, as proven by the fact that the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:1).

In his presentation Patterson mistakenly equates entering into the kingdom of the heavens in verses such as Matthew 5:20, 7:21, 18:3, and 19:23 to entering into heaven (119), and he states that the requirements for entering the kingdom of the heavens are repentance (3:2), a child-like faith (18:3), and a humble acceptance of both the Lord's invitation and the wedding garment offered by the Lord (22:1-14). However, since the kingdom of the heavens does not extend beyond the coming millennium,

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entering into the kingdom of the heavens cannot possibly refer to entering into "heaven" as the final and eternal dwelling place of the saints. Rather, entrance into the kingdom of the heavens must be an entrance into the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens in the millennium as a reward to the overcoming believers. Whereas faith and the new birth are sufficient for one to enter into the kingdom of God (John 3:5), one must meet the higher requirements of the kingdom of the heavens, set forth by the Lord principally in Matthew 5—7, in order to be qualified and approved to enter into the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens as a reward in the millennium. To be worthy of the kingdom reward, one must live under the ruling of the heavens after he is regenerated. In such a heaven-ruled living he must be poor in spirit, meek and merciful toward others, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, pure in heart, and persecuted for the sake of righteousness (5:3-10). Furthermore, he must possess a righteousness in his daily living that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees (vv. 20-48); he must not do his righteous deeds, give his alms, or pray before men to be seen by them (6:1-18); he must serve God only and not mammon (vv. 19-24); he must seek first the Father's kingdom and His righteousness and trust in the Father to supply his daily necessities (vv. 25-34); he must not judge others but judge himself instead (7:1-5); he must enter in by the narrow gate and walk the constricted way that leads to life (vv. 13-14); he must bring forth the proper fruits (vv. 15-20); and he must do the will of the Father (vv. 21-23). Such a living on the highest plane can be considered the reality of the kingdom of the heavens in this present age. Although the kingdom of the heavens is not openly manifested in this age, the kingdom nonetheless has its reality today, as portrayed in Matthew 5—7. Those who live in the reality of the kingdom today are overcoming believers. They will afford the Lord a way to return to the earth to bring in the manifestation of the kingdom in the next age, and they will enter into this manifested kingdom and enjoy it as a reward in that age (24:45-47; 25:10, 14-23; Luke 19:12-19; 1 Cor. 3:14). Those who do not live in the kingdom's reality today are defeated believers. They will not only lose their reward in the coming millennial age but will also suffer punishment and discipline in that age (Matt. 24:48-51; 25:11-12, 24-30; Luke 19:20-26; 1 Cor. 3:15) so that they may eventually meet the kingdom's requirements and be qualified to participate in the New Jerusalem in the coming eternity.

The requirements of the kingdom of the heavens, as outlined in Matthew, are higher than any man can fulfill. The created human life simply does not have the capacity to

live up to such a high standard. Add to this the fact that man's created life has become a fallen, sinful life, it is small wonder that few believers live in the reality of the kingdom. There is only one life in the universe that can fulfill the requirements of the kingdom—the eternal, divine life of God, which is in Christ, the Son of God (John 1:1, 4; 1 John 5:11-12), and is even Christ Himself (John 11:25; 14:6; Col. 3:4). Hence, as revealed in Matthew 16:21-27, the unique way for us to enter into the kingdom of the heavens, i.e., to participate in the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens as a reward in the millennium, is to acknowledge the utter corruption and hopelessness of our natural human life, to love Christ supremely, to enjoy Christ as our daily life supply, and to follow Christ on the pathway of the cross by denying our self and losing our soul-life so that we can live in resurrection, i.e., in the Spirit, by the infinitely capable life of God.

### *Heaven and the Sabbath Rest*

Patterson also refers to heaven as “the ultimate Sabbath of rest” (154) and enthusiastically states that “the first eleven verses of Hebrews 4 seize the idea of the Jewish Sabbath and relate it to heaven in a remarkable way” (150). In an analysis of these verses, Patterson concludes that those who hear and “mix faith with the gospel” will enter into the Sabbath of heaven, the ultimate Sabbath rest (159). This implies that heaven, as it is commonly understood, is the goal of the gospel. Although all genuine believers will enjoy the spiritual realities that are signified by the New Jerusalem in the new heavens and the new earth, Hebrews 4:1-11 does not equate the heaven of Patterson's imagination with the Sabbath rest.

**H**ebrews 4:1-11 was addressed to Hebrew believers in Christ, who had already believed the gospel of Christ and had received Christ as their Redeemer and Savior initially. Hence, the mixing of faith with the gospel does not refer to a response to the gospel of salvation that makes one a believer initially. The writer of Hebrews was not urging his readers to believe in Christ and be saved so that they might go to heaven; rather, he was urging those who had experienced salvation to go on by exercising their faith in response to the good news concerning the remaining Sabbath rest. The background of this portion of Scripture is Israel's failure to enter into the good land at Kadesh-barnea because of their “evil heart of unbelief” (Heb. 3:12) and their failure to join themselves to the two overcomers, Joshua and Caleb, who believed in God's readiness and sufficiency to enable Israel to overcome the land's inhabitants and take possession of the land (Num. 13:27—14:10). The children of Israel had already experienced the Passover in Egypt and by crossing the Red Sea had been delivered from the tyranny of Pharaoh. Hence, in type they were already saved.

Nevertheless, God's goal for His Old Testament people was not merely to save them out of Egypt but to bring them into the land of Canaan that they might live in the land, enjoy its riches, establish God's kingdom, and build up the temple to be God's dwelling place on the earth. The land of Canaan, then, was the rest that the children of Israel were to enter into and enjoy. Because of their obstinance and unbelief, however, the entire generation of Israel that had been saved out of Egypt was not allowed to enter the land. They were made to wander in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years, after which their carcasses fell in the wilderness. Only Joshua and Caleb, the two overcomers, were allowed to enter into the land and enjoy it as a rest. A number of students of the Bible have recognized that the good land of Canaan is an all-inclusive type of Christ, who is the rest to His believers in the New Testament age.

Even after taking possession of the land through conquests under David, Hebrews 4:7-9 shows that God continued to call His people to enter into a Sabbath rest. This implies that there is a fuller, spiritual rest for God's people. This fuller rest is Christ, who is rest to His believers in three stages: First, in the church age the heavenly Christ, who rests from His work and sits on the right hand of God in the heavens, is the rest to His believers in their spirit (2 Tim. 4:22; Matt. 11:28-29). Second, in the coming millennium (the manifestation of the kingdom) Christ will be the rest in a fuller way to His overcoming saints, who will be His co-kings (Rev. 20:1-4). Third, in the new heaven and new earth Christ will be the rest in the fullest way to all God's redeemed. Since the background of Hebrews 4 is the defeated experience of the children of Israel and since all the people of God, without exception, ultimately will enjoy Christ as rest in the new heavens and the new earth, the Sabbath rest spoken of in Hebrews 4 refers only to Christ as the rest to God's people in the first two stages. It does not refer to Christ being His people's rest in the third stage. This indicates that believers must be diligent to enter into and enjoy Christ as the reality of the Sabbath rest, after their initial salvation in the church age, lest they repeat the sad history of the children of Israel (v. 11). Those who enjoy Christ as their rest in the church age will be the overcomers who will enter into the fuller enjoyment of Christ as their rest in the millennium, the age of the kingdom. Defeated believers will miss the enjoyment of Christ as their Sabbath rest in both the church age and the kingdom age, but they will participate in the fullest enjoyment of Christ as the rest in the new heaven and new earth, after they pass through a period of punishment and discipline during the millennium in order to be perfected and matured.

Hence, it is unscriptural to associate the Sabbath rest in Hebrews 4 with “heaven” as the ultimate dwelling place

of the believers. As in his understanding of the kingdom of the heavens, Patterson fails to realize that this present age of grace is an opportunity that God affords to His believers to exercise themselves to love Him, to enjoy His grace, to believe His Word, and to follow Him faithfully. The coming kingdom age, the age of the millennium, is a prize to reward the overcomers for their faithfulness. It will also be a time of discipline to perfect His unfaithful people so that ultimately all His redeemed may consummate in the New Jerusalem as His enlargement and expression for eternity.

### *Heaven and the Believers' Eternal Inheritance*

The eternal inheritance given by God to His people is a great matter. In considering this matter, there are significant related portions of the Scriptures. The first mention in the Scriptures of a God-promised inheritance for God's people is seen in the case of Abraham. God called Abraham into the land of Canaan and promised to give the land to him and to his seed as an inheritance (Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8; 26:3-4). However, according to Hebrews 11:9-10 the physical land was not an eternal inheritance to Abraham and his descendants. Rather, Abraham "dwelt as a foreigner in the land of promise as in a foreign land, making his home in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the fellow heirs of the same promise; for he eagerly waited for the city which has the foundations, whose Architect and Builder is God." This, no doubt, refers to the New Jerusalem as God's eternal building and the dwelling place of God and His redeemed for eternity (Rev. 21:2, 14, 19-22). This spiritual city is the eternal inheritance to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to all the believers in Christ, who are the seed, the sons, of Abraham through faith (Gal. 4:7, 29).

In Colossians 1:12 Paul implicitly refers to the allotment of the good land to the children of Israel as their inheritance (Josh. 14:1) when he speaks of the believers in Christ being qualified "for a share of the allotted portion [inheritance] of the saints in the light." Since the good land of Canaan is a type of the all-inclusive and unsearchably rich Christ (Eph. 3:8), the inheritance of the New Testament believers is not physical, it is Christ Himself. He is the allotted portion of the saints as their divine inheritance for their enjoyment.

Another aspect of the believers' inheritance relates to God's promise of a seed to Abraham through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). In Galatians 3:8 the apostle Paul refers to this promise as the gospel. According to

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verse 16, the unique seed, through whom the promised blessing would be realized and to whom it would be given as an inheritance, is Christ (cf. Matt. 1:1), who is typified by Isaac (Gen. 22:2, 12, 16-17). Furthermore, according to Galatians 3:14 the blessing promised by God to Abraham for all the na-

tions is not physical; rather, this promised blessing is the Spirit. According to Acts 3:25-26 this blessing is Christ, who was raised from the dead by God and who, in fulfillment of God's promise made to Abraham, was sent by God to His people as the outpoured Spirit to bless them. By comparing Galatians 3:14 with Acts 3:26, it is evident that the resurrected and ascended Christ and the Spirit are distinctly identified, but not separately identified (cf. 1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17). In Galatians 3:18 the promised blessing is referred to as "the inheritance," and in verse 29 the believers, who, in Christ, are sons of God (v. 26) and Abraham's seed, are the heirs of this inheritance. Hence, the inheritance given by God to His children, the descendants of Abraham in faith, is God Himself in Christ as the Spirit.

**T**his is in accord with Ephesians 1:13-14 and Romans 8:23, where the Spirit is said to be the pledge (foretaste, guarantee, token payment) and the firstfruits of our inheritance. Since the Spirit who indwells us and whom we enjoy today is the pledge, the foretaste, and the firstfruits of our inheritance, it is unreasonable to conclude that the full inheritance is just a physical mansion in a splendid physical city situated in an uncorrupted universe. Rather, the full inheritance to be given to God's people is the Triune God Himself, consummated as the all-inclusive, life-giving Spirit, with all that He is, all that He has, all that He has done, and all that He will do for His redeemed elect. According to the revelation of God's eternal economy in the entire Bible, the Triune God gives Himself to His chosen and redeemed people as their eternal inheritance by dispensing Himself into them, by mingling Himself with them, and by constituting Himself into their very being to be their life and their everything. This inheritance is enjoyed as a foretaste today and will be fully realized in the New Jerusalem. In this holy city, which is the processed and consummated Triune God mingled with His redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified tripartite elect, God and His people will become a mutual inheritance—God's people will inherit God and He will inherit them (Deut. 32:9; Eph. 1:18).

The thought of God Himself being His people's blessing and inheritance is in accord with the Old Testament as well. God gave Himself to the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe, as their unique inheritance (Num. 18:20; Deut.

10:9; 18:2; Josh. 13:33; Ezek. 44:28). Since the tribe of Levi represents all the New Testament believers, who are a corporate priesthood to God (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:5-6; 5:10), this strongly indicates that the eternal portion, the inheritance, of the believers is nothing less than the Triune God Himself. Moreover, in Numbers 6:24-26 God blessed His chosen people Israel with Himself as the Divine Trinity: “Jehovah bless you and keep you” is ascribed to the Father; “Jehovah make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you” is ascribed to the Son; and “Jehovah lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace” is ascribed to the Holy Spirit. This blessing, like that in 2 Corinthians 13:14, is not outward and material; rather, it is the eternal blessing of the Triune God, which comes through His dispensing of Himself in His Divine Trinity into His chosen people for their enjoyment. Ephesians 1 is a record of the three steps of God’s blessing His people in His Divine Trinity—His blessing in the Father (vv. 3-6), in the Son (vv. 7-12), and in the Spirit (vv. 13-14). The issue of such a blessing is the church as the Body of Christ, the fullness of the One who fills all in all (vv. 22-23), and the consummation of this blessing is the very Triune God being mingled with His chosen, redeemed, transformed, and glorified people to be their eternal blessing.

**I**n Hebrews 9:15 Christ is said to be the Mediator of a new covenant that those who have been called by God might receive “the promise of the eternal inheritance.” This eternal inheritance is the entire bequeathed contents of the new covenant as a fully enacted testament given to the believers, who are the heirs of the testament. According to Hebrews 8:10-12, the contents of the new covenant, or the new testament, are the imparting of the inward law of life into the believers’ mind and the inscribing of this living law on their hearts; God being their God and they being His people according to the law of life (in contrast to the law of letters); the inward, subjective knowledge of God according to the inward consciousness of the divine life (cf. John 17:3); and the forgiveness of sins. The most significant bequest of the new covenant is the inward law of life, which is nothing less than the Spirit of life mentioned in Romans 8:2. According to the new covenant, God imparts His law of life, which is His Spirit of life, into our inward parts through regeneration and the subsequent growth of the divine life in us, until our entire being—spirit, soul, and body—is saturated with the life of God (i.e., with God Himself) and we are full-grown in the divine life. This full-growth is the full sonship, the maturity in the divine life, which qualifies us to inherit the Triune God and all that is of Him in full. As revealed in Galatians 4:24-26, the new covenant, symbolized by Abraham’s wife Sarah, is “the Jerusalem above,” i.e., the New Jerusalem, who is our mother. Furthermore, according to Hebrews 12:22-24, to come to the new covenant is to come to the heavenly

Jerusalem, i.e., to the New Jerusalem. Hence, the “eternal inheritance” of the new testament is the New Jerusalem, the reality, substance, and element of which is the Triune God, who mingles Himself with His chosen and redeemed people.

In 1 Peter 1:3-4 the believers’ inheritance is also related to the divine life received through regeneration. These verses tell us that God the Father has regenerated us “unto a living hope...unto an inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled and unfading, kept in the heavens for you.” The use of *living hope* and *inheritance* in apposition indicates that the hope and the inheritance are two aspects of the same thing. The living hope is the expectation of the coming blessing, whereas the inheritance is the fulfillment of our hope in the coming millennium and in eternity. The living hope here, resulting from regeneration, i.e., from the imparting of the divine life into our spirit to make us children of God (John 3:6; Rom. 8:16), is not a hope of objective things but a hope of life, even eternal life, with all the endless blessings and manifestations of the divine life, including our being glorified with God’s eternal glory (vv. 17-30). The inheritance, as the fulfillment of this living hope, is realized through the growth of the divine life in us unto maturity, much as the expectations for the future brought to parents through the birth of a new child are realized through the growth of the child unto adulthood. Since the divine life that vitalizes our hope and brings us into the full enjoyment of our inheritance is Christ Himself (John 14:6), and since Christ is the embodiment of the Triune God (Col. 2:9), once again we must conclude that the believers’ inheritance is not something objective or physical but is the Triune God Himself.

There are many other verses in the New Testament that refer to the believers’ inheritance, including the inheriting of the earth (Matt. 5:5), of eternal life (19:29; Mark 10:17; Luke 10:25; 18:18), of the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10; 15:50; Gal. 5:21), of incorruption (1 Cor. 15:50), of salvation (Heb. 1:14), and of the new heavens and the new earth with the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:7). All these items are related to the Triune God Himself as the believers’ eternal inheritance. Although it is true that the believers in Christ will inherit all things, i.e., the entire universe, together with Christ as the unique appointed Heir (Heb. 1:2; 1 Cor. 3:21-22), apart from God the universe created by God is vanity of vanities (Eccl. 1:2). In the universe God Himself is the unique blessing to His people. As God’s children our hope is not to inherit a utopian existence in an unspoiled universe; rather, it is to inherit the Triune God and all that is of Him.

by Bob Danker