

# THE WONDER OF HEAVEN

RON RHODES



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## THE WONDER OF HEAVEN

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# THE WONDER OF HEAVEN

In the Shakespearean play *Hamlet*, death—and what lies beyond death’s door—is metaphorically described as “the undiscovered country.”<sup>1</sup> It seems an appropriate way of describing something that human beings know so very little about.

The Scriptures use the word “country” of the blissful, eternal realm of heaven. Indeed, the splendorous abode where saints will one day dwell is described as a heavenly country (Hebrews 11:16)—and the saints will dwell there for *all eternity*.

Eternity is a big concept. We read in the pages of Holy Writ that God has “set eternity in the hearts of men” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). This inspiring verse led one commentator to reflect, “Though living in a world of time, man has intimations of eternity. Instinctively he thinks of ‘forever,’ and though he cannot understand the concept, he realizes that beyond this life there is the possibility of a shoreless ocean of time.”<sup>2</sup> It is wondrous to even think about it. It is in view of this sense of eternity in the human heart that one

Christian suggested that “we’re heaven-bent,” that “our hearts have an inner tilt upward,” and that “the grain of our souls leans heavenward.”<sup>3</sup> I think he is right!

From the first book in the Bible to the last, we read of great men and women of God who gave evidence that eternity permeated their hearts. We read of people like Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and David—each yearning to live with God in eternity. David, in particular, put it this way: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. *When can I go and meet with God?*” (Psalm 42:1-2, emphasis added). He rejoiced, saying, “I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Psalm 23:6).

Speaking of the blessed saints Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham, Scripture reveals the following:

They admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a *better* country—a *heavenly* one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for *he has prepared a city for them* (Hebrews 11:13-16, emphasis added).

These saints realized that this world was not their final home. “They were content to be strangers and pilgrims, refusing the urge to nestle to make themselves comfortable. Their desire was to pass through the world without taking any of its character upon themselves. Their hearts were set on pilgrimage.”<sup>4</sup> Refusing to be distracted, these saints “saw the promised realities from a distance and persisted in their pilgrim character, looking for a country of their own and refusing to return to the land they had left.”<sup>5</sup>

In much the same way, Christians throughout church history have longed for heaven's joys, considering themselves to be only loosely tied to this earth.<sup>6</sup> No wonder the great J.C. Ryle (A.D. 1816–1900) suggested that “believers are in a strange land...in the life to come they will be at home.”<sup>7</sup> At the moment of death, you and I as Christians literally depart the land of the dying to go to the land of the truly living.

### **The Near Universal Belief in an Afterlife**

All throughout human history, people of different cultures and religions have given evidence that they possessed a sense of eternity in their hearts. As Randy Alcorn puts it in his book *Heaven*, “Anthropological evidence suggests that every culture has a God-given, innate sense of the eternal—that this world is not all there is.”<sup>8</sup> Because of this innate sense of eternity, Barry Morrow suggests that “from earliest times humanity has tenaciously believed in an afterlife.”<sup>9</sup> We see this even in false religions.<sup>10</sup> Islam, for example, speaks of a sensual paradise, while Native American religions speak of eternal hunting grounds. In Confucianism, when a parent dies, the children must perform all necessary rituals so that the parent can enjoy a trouble-free afterlife. Children thus burn a paper house, car, money, and other such items in order to transfer them to their deceased loved one in the afterlife. Modern psychics have built an entire religion on belief in an afterlife. Though such false religions have grossly distorted the truth about the afterlife, it is nevertheless highly revealing that belief in some form of an afterlife is near-universal.

This near-universal belief is surely the reason, as Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy point out, that “throughout the centuries, heaven has been depicted by artists and poets, authors and preachers. Augustine, Dante, John Milton, John Bunyan, C.S. Lewis, and scores of others have written on heaven and its glories.” Indeed,

Ice and Demy note, heaven is “sung about in hymns, spirituals, classical music, and country and western music. It is spoken of in jokes and in sermons, in hospitals and in classrooms.”<sup>11</sup>

This great interest in the mystery of the afterlife continues today. Christian pastor Mark Hitchcock notes that the Discovery Channel featured a program about the ten great mysteries of the world. “The mysteries included the lost city of Atlantis, UFOs, Bigfoot, Stonehenge, and the Loch Ness Monster. But the overwhelming number one mystery was life after death.”<sup>12</sup>

How is it with you, my Christian friend? Are you interested in heaven and the afterlife? Do you long for a “better country,” a *heavenly* country? Do you ever spend time pondering what heaven might be like? If so, you’re my kind of person, and this book is for you!

## **Contemplating What Heaven Might Be Like**

Each of us likely already has an idea regarding what heaven might be like. The chances are, though, that our culturally influenced conceptions are woefully inadequate to capture the full glory and splendor of what truly awaits the children of God in the afterlife. One Christian who lived in the 1800s put it this way:

In meditating upon the happiness in store for the children of God, we are very apt to build up a heaven of our own, which naturally takes the shape and color which our sorrows, needs, and sufferings lend thereto. The poor man, for instance, who has suffered much from toil and want, looks upon heaven as a place of rest, abounding with all that can satisfy the cravings of nature. Another, who has often endured the pangs of disease, looks upon it as a place where he shall enjoy perpetual health of body and mind. Again another,

who in the practice of virtue, has had all manner of temptations from the devil, the world, and his own flesh, delights in viewing heaven as a place totally free from temptation, where the danger, or even the possibility, of sin, shall be no more.

All these, and other similar views of heaven, are true, inasmuch as they represent it as a place entirely free from evil and suffering, and, at the same time, as an abode of positive happiness. Nevertheless, they are all imperfect views because not one of them takes in the whole of heavenly bliss, such as God has revealed it to us.<sup>13</sup>

God's revelation about heaven is found in the pages of holy Scripture. And what we find in Scripture is *firsthand, eyewitness* testimony about the divine abode. Jesus Himself came from heaven, and He testified of its existence, saying that it is the place His Father resides (John 1:14; 6:33-42,51,58; 8:42; 16:27-30). The apostle Paul was caught up to heaven to receive special revelation from God (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). Though some of what he saw and heard was apparently so overwhelming and ineffable that he was not permitted by God to reveal it to humans, what he *does* reveal is wondrous indeed (see, for example, Ephesians 1:10; Philippians 2:10; 3:20; Colossians 1:5,16,20; 3:1-2; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 4:16; 2 Thessalonians 1:7). Finally, the apostle John received a vision of heaven that is recorded in substantial detail in the book of Revelation (see, especially, chapters 21 and 22).<sup>14</sup> From such eyewitnesses we not only gain assurance *that* heaven exists, but we are also privileged to learn many fascinating details about what it is like. I will address these details throughout this book. First, however, we must confront the preliminary truth of human mortality.

## The Brevity of Earthly Life

The Bible consistently emphasizes the brevity of earthly life. The years pass so quickly. As I write, I am consciously aware of the sobering reality that more of my life is behind me than ahead of me. We are all aware of our mortality. Dr. Billy Graham, now in his nineties, was asked by an interviewer what surprised him most about life. Without hesitation, he replied, “Its brevity.”<sup>15</sup> Life is short. And it seems that the older we get, the faster the time passes.

Addressing the brevity of life, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments that “the moment you come into this world you are beginning to go out of it.”<sup>16</sup> His point, of course, is that the moment we are born, the inevitable and relentless process toward death begins. None of us is exempt.

It is no wonder that Job, the great Old Testament servant of God, said that “man born of woman is of few days” (Job 14:1). He appealed to God, “Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath” (7:7). Just as a breath of vapor dissipates quickly on a cold day, so our lives seem all too short.

The psalmist thus pondered before God, “You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man’s life is but a breath” (Psalm 39:5). Reflecting back over his life, he said, “My days vanish like smoke” (102:3).

The New Testament continues this emphasis on man’s brevity. In James 4:14 we are told, “You do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.” First Peter 1:24 likewise instructs us that “all men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall.”

*This* is the struggle we must all face and deal with. Life is short. The days relentlessly pass. We grow old so quickly. And then we die.

It is a sobering exercise to ponder that, should the Lord delay His coming, not only I but my beloved wife and two precious children will one day be lowered into the earth in burial. If that were the end of things, then how despondent life would be. But, praise God, we will be reunited and live forever in the heavenly country, the eternal city of our beloved God (Hebrews 11:16). What a precious and glorious hope this is!

### **We Don't Know *When* We Will Die**

Aside from the terminally ill who are at the final stage of their illness, none of us knows when we will die. The Old Testament patriarch Isaac once said, "I am now an old man and don't know the day of my death" (Genesis 27:2).

Some, however, die at a younger age. We read in Ecclesiastes 9:12 that "no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them." In Proverbs 27:1 the wise man therefore urged, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth." Each new day may bring the prospect of death.

For this reason, the wise person maintains a consistent awareness of his mortality so that he makes good use of the time God has graciously given. The psalmist accordingly prayed, "Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life" (Psalm 39:4). Those who maintain such an awareness live with deliberation and with appreciation for each new day. Time is a precious gift!

### **Our Lives Are in God's Hands**

We naturally want to live as long as possible. But the actual timing of our deaths is in the hands of our sovereign God. He has allotted a certain time on earth for each of us. As Job said

to God, “Man’s days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed” (Job 14:5).

The apostle Paul in like manner said that God “himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and *he determined the times set for them* and the exact places where they should live” (Acts 17:25-26, emphasis added). Perhaps Paul was thinking of the words of the psalmist: “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Psalm 139:16).

As Christians, we need not worry about the day death will occur. Our God, who loves us infinitely, is in charge of the timing of our rendezvous with death, and we can trust Him completely. With the psalmist, we can restfully affirm, “My times are in your hands” (Psalm 31:15). We can count on the fact that we are *immortal* up until the time we have accomplished all that God intends for us to accomplish. Once that work is complete, God calls us home!

I recognize that this goes against our common understanding of “untimely” deaths. When a person dies in a car wreck, for example, we say that this person’s death was untimely, and refer to the event as a tragic “accident.” However, there are no accidents in God’s sovereign timing (Isaiah 46:10; Acts 2:23; Ephesians 1:11). We can take comfort in this truth, because when a Christian loved one dies in such an “accident,” we can rest assured that he or she died according to God’s precise sovereign timing.<sup>17</sup> We still mourn (1 Thessalonians 4:13), but our grief is tempered by our awareness of God’s sovereign oversight of all earthly affairs. He is in charge (Psalm 21:1; 22:28; 139:15-16; Jeremiah 1:5; Jonah 1:17; Matthew 6:26; Acts 12:7-11; Romans 13:1)!

## How We Live Matters

Scripture presents us with a bit of a paradox. Though God is portrayed as being completely sovereign over our lives and the timing of death, Scripture also indicates that *how* we live can have something to do with *how long* we live.

On the one hand, it seems clear from Scripture that those who turn from God and perpetually live in sin can cut short their lives. First John 5:16 makes reference to the sin that leads to death. Apparently some Christians in the early church lost their lives as a result of perpetual and unrepentant sin (1 Corinthians 5:5; 11:29-32; Acts 5:1-11). In such cases, death may be viewed as God's ultimate discipline (see Hebrews 12:5-6). While their physical lives were lost, their souls remained saved and went to heaven.\*

On the other hand, Scripture sets forth the general principle (not a promise) that those who honor God live long lives. Proverbs 10:27 tells us, "The fear of the LORD adds length to life, but the years of the wicked are cut short" (see also Deuteronomy 4:40; 2 Kings 20:1-6; Ephesians 6:2-3). The Book of Proverbs is brimming with verses on how yielding to godly wisdom can extend life. Such wisdom "will prolong your life many years" (3:2). Indeed, wisdom is portrayed as a woman, and "long life is in her right hand" (3:16). Follow wisdom, "and the years of your life will be many" (4:10). Through living according to godly wisdom "your days will be many, and years will be added to your life" (9:11). We are exhorted to remember that "the fear of the LORD is a fountain of life, turning a man from the snares of death" (14:27). So—*how we live does indeed matter!*

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\* Though theologians debate the issue, I believe Scripture teaches that all believers—even those who experience the "ultimate discipline"—are secure in salvation (see, for example, John 5:24; 6:35-37,39; 10:28-29).

## Redeeming the Time

Our knowledge of our future in heaven should not be an end in itself. Rather, it should influence the way we live and how we use our time in the present.

I recently heard a speech in which a Christian leader said that the average 70-year-old man has spent a total of 24 years sleeping, 14 years working at a job, 8 years engaged in various amusements, 6 years sitting at the dinner table, 5 years in transportation, 4 years in conversation, 3 years in education, and 2 years in studying and reading. His other four years were spent in miscellaneous pursuits—except for the hour he spent every Sunday at church, as well as about five minutes per weekday engaged in prayer. This amounts to a tremendous total of five months that the average 70-year-old man gives to God over his life span. *Five months!*

A man by the name of Theodore Brennan once wrote a poem entitled “Those Wasted Years.” In it, he portrayed the tragedy of a man who spent the majority of his life apart from a relationship with Christ:

I looked upon a farm one day,  
That once I used to own;  
The barn had fallen to the ground,  
The fields were overgrown.

The house in which my children grew,  
Where we had lived for years—  
I turned to see it broken down,  
And brushed aside the tears.

I looked upon my soul one day,  
To find it too had grown,

With thorns and nettles everywhere,  
The seeds neglect had sown.  
The years had passed while I had cared  
for things of lesser worth;  
The things of Heaven I let go  
When minding things of Earth.  
To Christ I turned with bitter tears,  
And cried, “O Lord, forgive!  
I haven’t much time left for Thee,  
Not many years to live.”  
The wasted years forever gone,  
The days I can’t recall;  
If I could live those days again,  
I’d make Him Lord of all.<sup>18</sup>

Wisdom calls us to redeem the time—*while there is yet time to redeem*. Theologian David Needham was surely right when he said:

Out of all the eternal ages of our existence as God’s children, these tiny years here on earth have a destiny that can never be repeated. The Bible tells us that in the stench of a sick and rotting world we are perfume bottles for the fragrance of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:15). In the gathering darkness we shine as stars (Philippians 2:15). If only we could grasp the awesome implications of these few years!<sup>19</sup>

How about it? When you are 70 years old, will hindsight be kind or cruel to you? Will your life have been wasted because it had no real eternal significance? Will you shake your head as you

look back on the ashes of a wasted life? Or will there be joy in your heart that results from a lifetime of heartfelt commitment to God?

Joni Eareckson Tada, the well-known quadriplegic, has contemplated such hard questions. With a caring heart, she urges, “Heaven may be as near as next year, or next week; so it makes good sense to spend some time here on earth thinking candid thoughts about that marvelous future reserved for us.”<sup>20</sup> She then urges the heavenly minded Christian to make wise changes in life. In her thinking, the heavenly minded Christian invests wisely in relationships; seeks purity and honesty in conversations, goals, and motives; gives generously of time, money, and talent; and speaks the good news of Christ to people—all because such things involve eternal consequences and rewards.<sup>21</sup> I think she is right! We ought to do all these things while there is yet time to do them. After all, *our time will soon be past!*

As you read about the wonder of heaven in this book, may each page motivate you to wholly and unreservedly commit yourself to living for Christ, the divine Architect and Builder of the eternal city (see John 14:1-3). Live for Him daily. Serve Him with joy. Walk with Him in fellowship. Make Him the center of your life. You will find that to walk daily with Christ is to daily experience a little foretaste of heaven. And as you center your attention on heaven, you will be filled with hope during times of suffering. You’ll recognize that this temporal world is not our true home, but rather we are “passing through” as pilgrims en route to a “better country”—a *heavenly* country, where our true treasure is (Philippians 3:20; see also Matthew 6:19-21).

## ENTERING DEATH'S DOOR

The famed philosopher Diogenes was looking intently at a large collection of human bones piled one upon another. Alexander the Great stood nearby and became curious about what Diogenes was doing. When he asked the old man what he was doing, the reply was, “I am searching for the bones of your father, but I cannot seem to distinguish them from those of the slaves.” Alexander got the point. *All are equal in death.*

Death has been called the great equalizer. It afflicts the young and the old, the weak and the strong, the king and the commoner, the rich and the poor, the educated and the ignorant, both male and female, and people of all colors. As the great Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards (A.D. 1703–1758) put it, “Time cuts down all, both great and small.”<sup>1</sup> J.C. Ryle (A.D. 1816–1900), Anglican bishop of Liverpool, likewise said that “we may die any day.... The youngest, the fairest, the strongest, the cleverest, all must go down one day before the scythe of the King of

Terrors.”<sup>2</sup> Death has no favorites. All are equally victims of the grim reaper.

In this world of uncertainty, death is the one thing a person can really count on. From the moment of birth, human beings are on their steady way toward death. Pastor and theologian J. Sidlow Baxter (A.D. 1903–1999) lamented that “a million graveyards proclaim with ceaseless voice that man is mortal and that the living are dying.... What is this revolving orb on which we live but the vast cemetery of mankind?”<sup>3</sup>

The current death rate among human beings is 100 percent. Current estimates are that over 90 million people die every year throughout the world. Randy Alcorn observes that “worldwide, three people die every second, 180 every minute, and nearly 11,000 every hour. If the Bible is right about what happens to us after death, it means that more than 250,000 people every day go either to Heaven or Hell.”<sup>4</sup> If you are an average reader, then since the time you began reading this chapter, 305 people have died on planet Earth. Understandably, in view of the aging of America, with a steadily increasing percentage of the American public entering old age, the issue of death has become extremely relevant in this country.

Prior to the early twentieth century, most Americans died at about age 50 due to illness, and death normally occurred in the home. Typically the dying person’s family would gather in the home, often at the person’s bedside, and the person was helped to prepare for impending death.

By the middle of the twentieth century, however, death in America had become a more private matter. People did not want to openly discuss it anymore. Even though death is a universal experience, people did not want to think about it until absolutely compelled to.

In their attempt to avoid dealing with the issue head-on, people

would often discuss things related to death and dying in disguised terms and clever euphemisms. Instead of saying someone died, people would say he or she was “laid to rest.” Instead of making reference to the grave or the cemetery, people would speak of “perpetual family plots.”

In their feeble attempt to defeat the grim reaper, some people have even paid so-called experts in the “science of cryonics” to take their freshly dead bodies, drain the blood, fill the body with freezer fluid, encase it in aluminum, and suspend it in a bath of liquid nitrogen. Far in the future, when a cure has been discovered for whatever disease caused the death, it is hoped that the body can be thawed and cured, and the person can resume living.<sup>5</sup> *Such folly!*

In recent years, Americans have become much more open in talking about death. It is no longer a taboo subject. After all, many Americans have reached an age in which they are confronting mortality—through the passing of a parent, the loss of a sibling or friend, or perhaps pains beneath their own breastbones.

In fact, Bill O'Reilly, of *The O'Reilly Factor*, says life after death has become big business today. “It is a huge business in America—books, tapes, lectures—and 65 percent of Americans say they do believe in an afterlife.”<sup>6</sup>

Even though we are more willing to talk about death these days, however, our actions continue to indicate a powerful resistance toward the reality and finality of death. As Barry Morrow put it in his book *Heaven Observed: Glimpses of Transcendence in Everyday Life*, “We embalm our corpses, dress them up in new suits, pronounce last rites over them, and bury them in airtight caskets and concrete vaults in order to postpone the inevitable decay. Through our rituals we act out our stubborn reluctance to yield to this most powerful of human experiences.”<sup>7</sup>

In recent days, it has become fashionable for some “experts”

on death and dying to say that death is just a natural part of life. I beg to differ. Death is an *unnatural* intruder, for God created human beings *to live*. It was only after the entrance of sin into the universe that death became a regular feature of earthly existence. One Christian leader suggests that the claim that death is a natural part of life is “like telling a quadriplegic that paralysis is a stage of exercise, or a divorcee that divorce is a stage of marriage. It’s the kind of joke only a moron or a sadist would tell.”<sup>8</sup>

By the way, I find it sobering to report to you that if you are an average reader, then since the time you began reading this chapter (assuming you are reading it in one sitting), 814 people have died on planet Earth.

### **What Happens at the Moment of Death?**

Modern science tells us that death involves the cessation of all life (metabolic) processes.<sup>9</sup> Seen in such terms, death is strictly a physical, material event. It does not give recognition to the non-material (spiritual) part of humanity.

I once heard a sermon in which the preacher said,

I remember talking to a medical student who just that morning had dissected his first human corpse. The body had been there in front of him on the bench and he had cut away different parts of the anatomy. It was like a lifeless wax model. He said to me, shaken a little from his first experience, “If this is all that we become at death, what is the point of anything?”<sup>10</sup>

From a biblical perspective, human beings are made up of both a material part (the physical body) *and* an immaterial part (the soul or spirit). When a human being physically dies, his or her immaterial part departs from the material body.

The New Testament concept of “death” (Greek: *thanatos*)

involves the idea of separation. More specifically, at the moment of death, a person's spirit or soul separates or departs from the body. This is why, when Stephen was being put to death by stoning, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). Verses such as this indicate that death for the believer involves his or her spirit departing from the physical body and immediately going into the presence of the Lord in heaven (see 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:21-23). Death for the believer is thus an event that leads to a supremely blissful existence.

For the unbeliever, however, death holds grim prospects. Indeed, at death the immaterial part (soul or spirit) departs from the material body and goes not to heaven but to a place of horrific suffering (Luke 16:19-31) where they await the future judgment (2 Peter 2:9; Revelation 20:11-15).

Both believers and unbelievers remain in a disembodied state until the future day of resurrection. And what a glorious day that will be! God will reunite believers' spirits with their resurrected physical bodies (see Job 19:25-27; Psalm 49:15; Isaiah 26:19; John 6:39,40,44,54; 1 Corinthians 6:14; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; Revelation 20:4-6). These bodies will be specially suited to dwelling in heaven in the direct presence of God—the *perishable* will be made *imperishable* and the *mortal* will be made *immortal* (1 Corinthians 15:53). As one Christian scholar put it, believers "will exchange the temporal and imperfect for the eternal and perfect."<sup>11</sup> Unbelievers, too, will be resurrected, but they will spend eternity apart from God (Matthew 25:41,46; Revelation 20:13-15).

It is again sobering to report to you that if you are an average reader, and you are reading this chapter in one sitting, then since the time you began, 1202 people have died on planet Earth.

## The Sin-Death Connection

In Scripture there is a direct connection between sin and death

(1 Chronicles 10:13; Proverbs 11:19; Ezekiel 18:4; Romans 5:12; 6:23). *One causes the other*. Death came into the universe because of sin. As noted previously, this means that death is not natural. It is an *unnatural* intruder. God intended for human beings *to live*. Death is therefore something foreign and hostile to human life. Death has arisen because of our rebellion against God; it is a form of God's judgment.

But there is grace even in death. For death, as a judgment against sin, serves to prevent us from living forever in a state of sin. When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:17; 3:19), God assigned an angel to guard the Tree of Life. This was to protect against Adam and Eve eating the Tree of Life while they were yet in a body of sin. How horrible it would be to live eternally in such a state.

By death, then, God graciously saw to it that every human being's existence in a state of sin had definite limits. And by sending a Savior into the world—the Lord Jesus Christ—God made salvation possible (Luke 2:11; John 3:17; 4:42; Acts 5:31; 1 Timothy 1:15; Hebrews 7:25). Those who believe in Him will live eternally at His side (John 3:15; 5:24; 11:25; 12:46; 20:31; Acts 16:31).

### Man's Natural Fear of Death

In 2007 a film entitled *The Bucket List*, starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman, portrayed a road trip of two men who wanted to do the things they always said they would do before they “kicked the bucket.” In an interview prior to the film's release, Nicholson was interviewed by *Parade* magazine. Reflecting on his personal life, Nicholson mused:

I used to live so freely. The mantra for my generation was “Be your own man!” I always said, “Hey, you can have whatever rules you want—I'm going to have

mine. I'll accept the guilt. I'll pay the check. I'll do the time." I chose my own way. That was my philosophical position well into my 50s. As I've gotten older, I've had to adjust.

The reality of aging has been a wake-up call for Nicholson. He represented the feelings of many without a Christian worldview when he said: "We all want to go on forever, don't we? We fear the unknown. Everybody goes to that wall, yet nobody knows what's on the other side. That's why we fear death."<sup>12</sup>

Job aptly referred to death as the king of terrors (Job 18:14). The psalmist said, "My heart is in anguish within me; the terrors of death assail me" (Psalm 55:4). The psalmist likewise said, "The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow" (Psalm 116:3). Hezekiah, a godly king of Judah, was grief-stricken when he was informed of his impending death by Isaiah, and he bitterly wept (2 Kings 20:1-11; see also Isaiah 38:10-13). Like others, he was naturally fearful of death, and in a unique show of grace, God extended his life another fifteen years. That was a one-of-a-kind intervention on God's part, however. Hebrews 2:15 indicates that death has a long, long history of enslaving people in fear.

Death is *the* great enemy of *all* human beings. Death strikes down the good and the wicked, the strong and the weak. Without any respect of persons, death carries its campaign of rampage and destruction through whole communities and nations.

Unbelievers can find themselves faced with a nightmare of nightmares at the prospect of death. Voltaire (1694–1778), a French opponent of Christianity, found himself face-to-face with his own death. He wrote, "I wish I had never been born." His sense of desolation was so deep and chilling that toward the very

end, he implored his doctor, “I will give you half of what I am worth if you will give me six more months of life.”<sup>13</sup>

There is something in each of us—even *Christians*—that shrinks back from the very mention of death. After all, God created us to live. Even the apostle Paul, a spiritual giant if there ever was one, considered death the “last enemy” to be conquered (1 Corinthians 15:26-27; see also Isaiah 25:8).

Except for those living Christians who will be instantly transformed into their resurrection bodies at the future Rapture,\* *all* Christians will eventually go through death’s door. There will come a time when each of our spirits will depart from the body. In some cases, death will be near-instant (as in a car wreck). In other cases, the process of death may be long and drawn out (as in some cases involving cancer).

If we’re honest, most of us would admit that we’ve thought about what death might be like for each of us. In her interesting book *Heaven: Your Real Home*, Joni Eareckson Tada reflects:

I look at my own degenerating body and wonder how I will approach that final passage. Will it be short and sweet? Or long and agonizing? Will my husband be able to take care of me? Or will my quadriplegia better suit me for a nursing home? It’s not so much I’m afraid of *death* as *dying*.<sup>14</sup>

Thankfully, regardless of the actual *process* of dying, the prospect of heaven does much to reduce the Christian’s fear of death itself. As Anne Graham Lotz (daughter of evangelist Billy Graham) put it, “The prospect of death can fill you and me with terror and

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\* The “Rapture” is that event immediately prior to the beginning of the future Tribulation period when believers will be physically snatched off the earth by Christ. At that time living believers will instantly (in the blink of an eye) receive their glorified resurrection bodies. See 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-52.

dread—*unless we know where we are going.*<sup>15</sup> Her words reflect the apostle Paul's teaching that because of what Jesus has done for us, the sting has been taken out of death (1 Corinthians 15:55-56; see also 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Bible scholars tell us that Paul was alluding to the lethal and excruciatingly painful sting of a scorpion. This is metaphorically what death is like. The good news is that Christ, in His resurrection from the dead, extracted death's stinger and robbed the grave of its triumph.<sup>16</sup>

Because of what Christ accomplished at the cross, and His subsequent resurrection from the dead, we need never be terrorized by death's ever-present threat again. Because He is risen, we too shall rise. Our destiny is heaven!

For the Christian, then, physical death is actually a step into life. It is not a *terminus*, but a *transition* into great glory, a glory that has been revealed by God. The apostle Paul wrote, "As it is written: 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him'—*but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit*" (1 Corinthians 2:9-10, emphasis added). These wondrous things about heaven and the afterlife that were once unknown to humankind (especially in Old Testament times) were now revealed by the Holy Spirit to God's apostles and are recorded in the pages of holy Scripture for us. And what Scripture reveals about heaven and the afterlife is truly astounding. The greater part of this book will seek to expound on these splendid revelations.

In view of the above, even though 2800 people have died since the time you began reading this chapter (assuming you read it in one sitting), we as Christians need not fear passing through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). Our Lord is with us during life, and He will meet us face-to-face at the moment of death (Philippians 1:21-23; 2 Corinthians 5:8). *It is an event to anticipate with joy.*