

Appendix C—Longing For a Better Country

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And 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. (Heb. 11:13-16)

The Lord beckons us to the embrace of eternity and the understanding of all life in the grandeur of its sunrise. Not merely pie in the sky, bye and bye, but the ever-present backdrop to our lives here and now. Christ is the source of enduring delight and joy. He comes to those who receive Him with the simple all-sufficiency of His indwelling presence, which supplies, if not mirth, then hope, in the day-to-day of our lives. The sunrise of eternity bathes our situations with its glimmer of glory. At the core of our universe, yes, even as we face our own death, the face of God in the person of Christ wears a smile.

In the passage quoted above, the author of Hebrews breaks from his treatment of Abraham to make general remarks about people of faith. All the people mentioned in the famous faith chapter of Hebrews 11 died without seeing what was promised. The best that happened to them is that they had glimpses of what God had in store for them. The forward thinking of the heroes of faith is underlined in the quote above. They longed for a better country and that provided for them eyes to see beyond the here and now. They were able to be aliens and strangers on the earth because of this forward view of faith and the ability to hold to God's promises without seeing the immediate fulfillment of them. They saw the long purposes of God and cherished and believed them in the face of impossibilities, dangers, and even death itself.

The author introduces the image of the heavenly city or country in 11:10 and 16, which he will develop in the later chapters of the book of Hebrews. The focal point in these initial references seems to be the Promised Land and the beginning of the ability to see that as a hint of a greater heavenly reality. In 12:12, clearly the heavenly Jerusalem is in view and in 13:14, the future city is contrasted with the one on earth to which one might give allegiance. The author is lifting our eyes to a heavenly reality that awaits us when the heavens and earth are remade. The strands of this great theme are picked up in the description of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22.

Modern believers are often far from this perspective. Indeed, the truth is that we are uncomfortably at home in the world. One believer describes this spirit: "I don't want pie in the sky; I want ham where I am!" God's Word speaks to believers who are not purchasers, but sojourners; more likely to be indigent than self-indulgent; not a significant market to be plumbed, but a movement to be joined. It speaks to a pilgrim people, who must never forget that.

This portion of the Notes speaks of our destination. We are on a pilgrimage; perhaps in the latter stages of that journey. *Destined for Glory* supplies a heavenly perspective. Let us remind ourselves of where we're headed.

Destined for Glory

Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may share in his glory. (Rom. 8:17)

Query for the ages—Go back in your mind's eye, some fourteen years ago to the court of King Edwin of Northumbria. Picture an old wattled hall, ablaze with torches, with a great log fire burning in the middle. The atmosphere is tense with excitement, for the early Christian missionaries have just arrived from Rome. The first discourse of their message has concluded. There's a hush, an opportunity, an invitation to venture forth with questions.

“Can this new religion tell us anything of what happens after death? The souls of people are like sparrows flying through a lighted hall. They enter at one door from the darkness outside, flit through the light and warmth, and pass out to the dark again at the other end. What comes to people after death, in the dim unknown? Can this new religion solve for us the mystery?” A query for the ages and one we cannot avoid.

Anchors to a biblical perspective—If you want to know the purpose of a course of activity, look to the end. The one thing that stands out at the end of the Scripture, the final and ultimate outcome of time and eternity, is the spotless Bride of Christ and the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6, 9; 21:7, 9-10). God invests the Son's bride with royalty and authority. We, the Church, are heirs with Christ in the heavenly places (Rom. 8:17). God's eternal purpose is to prepare and train a Bride for her glorious role.

This eternal purpose is anchored in Christ's victory. It is vital to know with certainty that Christ's sacrifice on Calvary was a glorious triumph. Jesus was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), and tasted of death for us (Heb. 2:9). With his Resurrection and victory over sin and death, Christ was exalted and the Church enthroned (Eph. 2:4-6). In the mind of God, every redeemed believer shares complete identity with Christ from the cross to the throne. We are crucified, raised, exalted, and enthroned with him. We are in his resurrection triumph, if you will. Included in this is exaltation to his authority and victory over the Evil One as we abide in Christ.

Faith must be a seeing grace—This truth must be a structuring truth. Faith often means believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse. Thus, we will start at the end of the matter—our destiny in glory. If we do not meet our deaths with hopefulness, then we are failing to preach the gospel to ourselves.

The Father calls us into the sunrise of eternity. The Savior purchased and promised us this. The Spirit prepares us for it and provides the longing for home. It must shape our approach to illness, bereavement, and death itself. The more a Christian lives in the consciousness of the presence of God in the here and now, the easier it is to anticipate the unqualified delight that will be experienced in God's presence hereafter. Encourage our souls with this—we follow in the triumph of his death and resurrection. We step into a glorious inheritance.

Let's break this down into some particulars:

—*We are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, princes and princesses of the realm*—

Romans 8:15-18 says it this way:

“For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father”. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then ***we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ***, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

We are fashioned in the image of the Son and will share his glory and dominion. While there is an infinite distinction between the Eternal Son and those fashioned in his likeness, yet such is the heredity resulting from the new birth, that God recognizes us as bona-fide blood brothers and sisters. Rees Howell captured this mystery in verse:

So nigh, so very nigh to God, I cannot nearer be;
For in the person of his Son, I am near as He.

The psalmist soars with a similar accolade: “What is man that Thou are mindful of him? And the son of man, that Thou visits him [in the Incarnation]? For Thou has made him a little lower than God.” (Ps. 8:5). This may seem like megalomania and utter fantasy, but redeemed humanity outranks all other orders of created beings. By the new birth, a redeemed human being joins the cosmic family, next of kin to the Trinity itself, the aristocracy of the universe. From all eternity, God purposed to have a family circle of his very own, not only created, but generated, by his own life. Christ is the prototype after which all other sons and daughters are fashioned (Rom. 8:29). In and through Christ, God realizes and fulfills his paternal longing for a generic family relationship.

—***We are conquerors and victors over all that would thwart God's good for us***—Romans 8:37-39 says:

No, in these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, now anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We will abide in the victor's circle, overcomers through Christ of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. A fabulous inheritance awaits us. This prospect of eternal glory far outweighs our earthly concerns. 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 states this truth this way:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Think of it. Our knowledge will be perfected. We will know him face to face and probe the mysteries of our redemption. We will be in the heavenly Jerusalem, with the church triumphant. We will better understand God's Word and his works of providence. We will be flooded with the nature and excellencies of God's mercy. Our wills will be perfected. No more sinful inclinations, no more striving against God's Spirit, no begrudging God's words, works, and ways. No principle of enmity or rebellion

left to raise its ugly head. Our wills will find peace in perfect conformity to the will of God. And not the least of heaven's pleasures will be the society and companionship of kindred spirits perfected by the grace of God. How can we not yearn for such a destiny?

—*Death is far less daunting an experience when viewed from a biblical perspective*—Death most certainly remains an enemy, an outrage, a sign of judgment on sin, a formidable opponent to be met. However, from another perspective, it is a portal through which we must pass to a consummated life (Isa. 57:1-2). Edwin Lutzer has said: “On this side of the divide, death is our terrible enemy. But just on the other side, the monster turns out to be our friend.” We are in the Lord Jesus' resurrection triumph and, for those in that triumph train, death has been defanged.

Practical suggestions for making truth real—In our day, these truths are either ignored or openly challenged. Calvary, if portrayed at all, is portrayed as an act of symbolic sympathy or as a defeat, a stupid display of supine weakness. The Resurrection is asserted to be a hoax only believed by gullible types or understood as a sort of symbolic triumph of the human spirit. “So Scripture says that you will be the aristocracy of the universe, eh? Do you really believe that?”, a sarcastic voice asks mockingly. “Yes I do” needs to be my and our emphatic answer.

We must dwell with biblical truth to reflect properly on the journey home. It is so necessary because of the general worldliness of our age that so readily grinds us down. Our natural aversion to death has been greatly increased by sin, by unbelief, by the darkness of our flesh, by our too great familiarity with this visible world, and by our want of more lively foretastes of heaven. How do we make biblical truth our structuring truth?

—*Meditate on the joys of our destination*—

- **Think on the preciousness of heaven**—Our Father is there (Mt. 6:9). Jesus is there (Heb. 9:24). Our spiritual brothers and sisters are there. Our names are recorded there (Lk. 10:20). Our citizenship is there (Phil. 3:20). Our real wealth and reward is there (Mt. 5:12; 6:19-21). Meditate on Revelation, chapters 4 and 5 and 21 and 22. Picture yourself looking into the throne of some illustrious king and then looking beyond into the far more glorious hall of the King of kings and Lord of lords.
- **Adopt a worldview that looks to heaven**—Heaven is our home, where we belong, with a place uniquely prepared for us (Jn. 14:1-3). A proper Christian worldview is focused on heaven (2 Cor. 4:16-18; Col. 3:2; 1 Pt. 1:3-5). Nothing is more obvious than the transitoriness of human life and yet we cling to it so. If this earthly life were the sum total of human existence, then our existence would be tragic indeed.
- **Ponder the prospect—Heaven is a perfect place for people made perfect.** What a wonderful prospect! The most earnest Christian well knows the sentiment expressed by Paul in Rom. 7:24—“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” In the next chapter, he says that the whole creation is groaning for our revealing as the children of God (Rom. 8:22). There will be a remedy. We will be changed from the inside out. Redeemed without any trace of human fallenness. In heaven, God graciously glorifies us and admits us into his presence.
- **Withering into glory—We will have glorified bodies**—This body, withering away now as it is, is an eternal aspect of our humanity. In heaven, we will have glorified bodies (1 Cor. 15:42-49; Phil. 3:21). Bodies that never die or break down (Lk. 24:36-39; 1 Cor. 15:49).

Never again diseased or withering away.

- ***Our relationships will be perfect***—The present scheme of this world order will be done away. Our manner of life and ways of doing things will change, but we will recognize one another and know the joy of reuniting with friends and family in heaven, minus the down side of damaged relationships in this fallen world with which we are all too familiar.
- ***Unbroken friendship with God***—Living in the presence of God is the final summary of heavenly life (1 Jn. 1:3; Rom. 8:15-17; 1 Cor. 13:12; Rev. 21:3). In heaven, we will be free from sin and will see God's glory unveiled and in its fullness. It will be an abode of ceaseless worship and everlasting praise; a place of perfection and unimaginable joy.

—***Develop a homesickness for heaven***—An earthbound perspective harangues us from every media platform. Not to make heaven the Christian's hope and goal is not only unfaithful to the Scriptures, but robs us of the perspective to help us cope with the pressures of the here and now (Phil. 1:21-24; 1 Pt. 1:3-9).

Author Malcolm Muggeridge states: “I long to be gone. Extricating myself from the flesh I have too long inhabited, hearing the key turn in the lock of time so that the great doors of eternity swing open, disengaging my tired mind from its interminable conundrums, and my tired ego from its wearisome insistencies.”

C.S. Lewis joins in the chorus: “If we really think that home is elsewhere and that this life is a 'wandering to find home,' why should we not look forward to the arrival?”

Jesus, the prize of contrite hearts—The greatest prize does not rest with a perfect abode, a perfect body, or in blissful times with fellow pilgrims. We have had human relationships that hint at the richness awaiting us. Relationships that got us beyond ourselves, out of the shallows of our own secure egocentricity and into the dangerous and unpredictable depths of real interpersonal encounter. These prepare us for the ultimate personal encounter with the Lord itself.

Richard Baxter counsels his own soul: “Draw near, my soul, to the Lord of love, and be not seldom and slight in your contemplation of his love and loveliness. Dwell in the sunshine, and you will know that it is light and warm and comfortable. Distance yourself from your doubts and strange ruminations. Acquaint yourself with him and be at peace.”

Bernard of Clairvaux reflects on the home for which our hearts truly long in the hymn *Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee*:

Jesus, the very thought of Thee, with sweetness fills the breast
but sweeter far Thy face to see and in Thy presence rest.
O hope of every contrite heart, O joy of all the meek,
to those who fall, how kind Thou art! How good to those who seek!

But what to those who find? Ah, this nor tongue nor pen can show
the love of Jesus, what it is, none but his loved ones know.
Jesus, our only joy be Thou, as Thou our prize will be;
Jesus, be Thou our glory now, and through eternity.