UNSEEN REALITIES

HEAVEN, HELL, ANGELS AND DEMONS
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R. C. SPROUL

Ligonier Ministries
Renew your Mind
CHRISTIAN FOCUS
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During his distinguished academic career, Dr. Sproul helped train men for the ministry as a professor at several leading theological seminaries. He is the author of more than seventy books, including *The Holiness of God, Chosen by God, The Invisible Hand, Faith Alone, A Taste of Heaven, Truths We Confess, The Truth of the Cross*, and *The Prayer of the Lord*. He also served as general editor of *The Reformation Study Bible* and has written several children’s books, including *The Prince’s Poison Cup*.

Dr. Sproul and his wife, Vesta, make their home in Longwood, Florida.
C. S. Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters* is a wonderfully creative little book that teaches Christian living by imagining how demons might wage war against it. It consists of a series of letters in which Screwtape, a senior demon, mentors and coaches Wormwood, a junior demon, as to how best to trip up his “patient,” a new Christian. Ultimately, the effort fails, as the patient is killed during wartime and is taken to glory.

It is interesting to me that in his final letter, when he reproaches Wormwood for his failure, Screwtape recounts the patient’s “escape” with special emphasis on what the unnamed Christian saw in the moments after his death. Lewis writes:

> How well I know what happened at the instant when they snatched him from you! There was a sudden clearing of his eyes (was there not?) as he saw you for the first time, and recognized the part you had had in him and knew that you had it no longer....
As he saw you, he also saw Them.... The [angels] are strange to mortal eyes, and yet they are not strange. He had no faintest conception till that very hour of how they would look, and even doubted their existence. But when he saw them he knew that he had always known them and realized what part each one of them had played at many an hour in his life when he had supposed himself alone, so that now he could say to them, one by one, not “Who are you?” but “So it was you all the time” ... He saw not only Them; he saw Him. This animal, this thing begotten in a bed, could look on Him. What is blinding, suffocating fire to you is now cool light to him, is clarity itself, and wears the form of a Man.

I believe Lewis’ insistence that death will bring a sudden clearing of one’s eyes is wholly biblical. Did not the apostle Paul tell us: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known” (1 Cor. 13:12)? I’m less sure, as Lewis postulates, that we will instantly see that we have been troubled by personal demons and guarded by specific angels, but I am convinced that we will know with certainty that these beings exist and that heaven and hell are real places, just as our faith in God’s existence will be confirmed by the blessing of gazing upon Him face to face.

Most of us accept the biblical testimony that there is a God who rules in heaven and earth (though we don’t always accept everything Scripture says about Him). However, we are much less certain about other spiritual truths, such as heaven and hell, angels and demons, and their prince, Satan. We are like Wormwood’s patient, who, in Screwtape’s words, “even
doubted their existence” until death brought clear sight. Why do we struggle to accept these things? God is no less invisible to us, yet we believe in and worship Him. Moreover, we fully accept that such things as microbes and germs exist, even though we cannot see them with the naked eye. Our selectivity when it comes to what we believe troubles me, for heaven and hell, angels and demons are taught as realities in Scripture as much as is God Himself.

I believe that if we are to be consistent Christians, believing all of the Bible rather than portions of it, we must recognize that the supernatural places and beings described on its pages are real. There is an uncompromised supernaturalism at the heart of the Christian worldview, and we must not let the world’s skepticism with regard to these things affect our belief systems. We must trust and affirm that there is much more to reality than meets the eye. We must declare with Hamlet, “There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy, Horatio.”

I hope this brief tour through the Bible’s teachings in regard to heaven and hell, angels and demons, will bolster your faith in Scripture’s teachings regarding the supernatural. May we stand fast on the firm foundation of the inspired writings of the prophets and the apostles, waiting with anticipation that day when our vision will clear. And as Horatio G. Spafford taught us in his great hymn “It Is Well with My Soul,” may we sing, “O Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight.”

R. C. Sproul
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PART ONE

Heaven
When I was a seminary student, I was completely awed by one of my professors, Dr. John Gerstner. He was awe-inspiring in several ways, not least of which was his encyclopedic knowledge of theology and philosophy, as well as the acute mind that he brought to bear in the classroom. I also admired him greatly for his profound spiritual depth and godliness.

One day, after Dr. Gerstner had given a provocative lecture, I felt compelled to ask him, “What’s heaven like?” He gave me a strange look, as if to say: “How am I supposed to know? I haven’t been there.” I was so impressed by Dr. Gerstner’s spiritual depth and understanding that I almost expected to get an eyewitness report from him. He ended up giving me some reading material that proved helpful to my understanding.

I don’t think there is anyone who hasn’t wondered what heaven is like or who hasn’t considered the even more fundamental question: Is there a heaven?
Christianity has been criticized loudly in modern times for being a so-called “pie-in-the-sky” religion. Karl Marx popularized the idea that religion is the opiate of the masses; his thesis was that religion was invented and used by the ruling classes to exploit and oppress the poor people of the world and to keep them from revolting. The promise of “pie in the sky” was designed to encourage them to be good workers and to obey their masters—their reward would be deferred to eternity.

But one cannot take Christianity seriously without seeing the central importance of the concept of heaven. There really is a “pie-in-the-sky” idea that is integral to the Bible, and especially to the New Testament, and I’m afraid we’ve lost our appetite for the delights God has stored up for His people in the future.

From time to time, pollsters have asked Christian people to name their favorite chapter in the New Testament. When polls like that appear, there always seem to be two chapters that come in first and second. The chapters that vie for the greatest popularity in the New Testament are 1 Corinthians 13, the great “love chapter,” and John 14.

As John 14 begins, Jesus is speaking to His disciples in His last great discourse with them in the upper room on the night in which He was betrayed, the night before His execution. He says: “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you” (vv. 1-2a).

Jesus begins this part of the discourse with an admonition, an imperative to His disciples. He tells them, “Do not allow your hearts to be distressed or
disturbed.” This is a call to trust and to faith. He then goes on to reason with them in a succinct but profound manner. Because these words are so comforting to us, we may too easily gloss over the cogency of the argument that is contained in this brief exercise in reason.

Jesus says, “Let not your heart be troubled,” and then He makes an assertion about the disciples. He says, “You believe in God.” He doesn’t ask them, “Do you believe in God?”: He knows that they do. That’s His first premise. He goes on to say, “Believe also in Me.” This is central to the testimony of the New Testament—it is God who certifies and verifies the identity of Jesus. By endowing Christ with miraculous power and raising Him from the dead, God certifies that this is His beloved Son. Three times in the New Testament it is recorded that God speaks audibly from heaven, and on all three occasions the announcement is substantially the same: “This is my beloved Son.” In one case, the voice says, “in whom I am well pleased.” Another time it says, “Hear Him.” Jesus is telling His disciples that God the Father both sent Him into the world and bears witness to His identity in the world; now, the night before He is to die, Jesus tells His disciples, “You believe in God; therefore, believe in Me.”

Why does Jesus start with this premise, “You believe in God”? There’s a real sense in which that proposition is the controlling idea for one’s whole understanding of life, of the world, of death, and of heaven. If there is no God, there is no reason to have any significant hope for the continuity of personal existence that we call life; and yet, if God exists, what would be more ridiculous than to assume that He creates creatures in His own image who are destined to live as grass for
a season, only to perish with all of their memories, all of their hopes, and all of their labor ending in meaninglessness?

We remember the line from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*: “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more.” This refers, of course, to the life of the actor or the dramatist. What’s the assessment? “It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” The image we get from that statement is that of a person who is in the limelight, in the spotlight, for a brief interlude of life, and then suddenly is silenced. The sentiment of this idea is that if this is the final conclusion to human existence, the story of life is an idiot’s tale. An idiot is someone who is irrational, who doesn’t make sense. An idiot is on the rim of madness, and the tales that he tells are not credible stories. They may be filled with sound and fury, with noise and passion. They may be loud and moving. But what do they signify? Nothing. I think the meaning of life is the great existential question that every human being faces at death.

I’ll never forget the day that my son was born. I stood in the hospital and looked down at my firstborn son. I knew that my life was irrevocably changed. All relationships would now be different. I remember that occasion vividly because, when I went back to the hospital that evening, I took my mother to see her grandson. She was absolutely ecstatic about him, and when we got home, she said, “This is the happiest day of my life.”

The next morning, I was awakened by my daughter calling to my mother. She came into my room and said, “Grandma won’t wake up.” As I walked into my
Thinking of Home

mother’s room, I realized that she was dead; she had died in her sleep. It was one of those weird, uncanny moments of human experience. It seemed to me that just moments before I had heard my mother say to me, “This is the happiest day of my life.” She was a living, breathing, caring, passionate human being. Now she was lying lifeless in her bed. The previous morning, I had seen the newness of life with the birth of my son. On the same day that my son was born, my mother died. So I had an experience of the conflict between life and death. As I stood there, I said: “This doesn’t make sense. Death doesn’t make sense.” Every fiber in my being said to me, “This cannot be the final conclusion for human experience.”

My response could be explained away as an emotional need in my soul to believe that life is meaningful, but I was thinking in these terms: “If God exists, this cannot be the end.” That’s what Jesus is saying to His disciples when He says, “Let not your heart be troubled.” When I stood beside my mother in that room, my heart was troubled—deeply troubled. But Jesus says: “Don’t allow that. Let not your heart be troubled. If you believe in God, believe also in Me.” And immediately upon making this connection between faith in the Father and faith in Him, Jesus says, “In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you.” Do you hear what Jesus is saying to His disciples? As He approaches the moment of His death, He says to them: “Trust me. Trust the Father. He has a huge house with many mansions in it.” And He says, “If this were not so, if this were just fantasy, if this were just emotional wish projection, if this were a fairytale or human superstition, I would have told you that.”
Keep in mind that if Jesus Christ is God incarnate, He is the greatest theologian who ever walked the planet. He doesn't make theological mistakes, nor does He approve of theological error. He would not allow His disciples to go through the rest of their lives holding to a belief that was false. He says: “Your hope for life after death is not groundless. It is not a false hope. If it were a false hope, I would have told you. I would have corrected it.”

He then goes on to say: “I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (vv. 2b-3). Jesus says: “I’m going home. I’m going to My Father’s house. I’m going to receive My final inheritance, but I’m not going to heaven alone. I am going there to prepare a place for you so that where I am, you may be also.”

Everyone, Christian or not, longs for reunion with those loved ones who have gone on before them, but the Christian longs to be with Christ. I cannot wait to see my father, my mother, and my friends who have died when I get to heaven, but the ultimate hope of my soul is to see the resurrected Christ in His Father’s house, and He also has promised that that will happen.

How often have you wondered whether there is life after death? Sometimes we shrink in terror and in doubt when we contemplate something as wonderful as heaven purports to be. We sometimes are assaulted by the idea that it’s just too good to be true. A few years ago, my wife and I were involved in a train accident in Alabama that killed more people than all the rest of the accidents in the history of Amtrak. Afterward, we had newspaper reporters poking microphones in
our faces and asking questions like, “Why were you so lucky as to survive this?” and, “Why would God allow you to survive while He took other people’s lives?” I’ve often thought about that experience, and one of the things that pops into my mind is the assumption behind those questions: the idea that I was the lucky one because I survived the train wreck. But if I hadn’t survived it, I’d be home. I would be in heaven. We naturally cling to life in this world, fearful that what lies beyond is worse. But for those who are going to heaven, the bliss that God has stored up for them is unworthy to be compared with any joy or any delight we may cling to in this life.
I think every person who has ever been married has a humorous story to tell about his or her honeymoon, and I have one, too. It wasn't funny to me at the time, because my wife and I had gone together for eight years and had waited patiently for the day of our wedding. But all those years of waiting had not prepared us for how long the day of our wedding would be.

The afternoon wedding finally occurred on June 11, 1960, in Pittsburgh. After the wedding came an interminably long wedding reception, during which I shook hands with every person in the world, or so it seemed. Then came another reception at a relative’s home, and then a long drive to the airport. We finally boarded a flight for New York City. We were planning to spend the night there at a hotel and fly out the next morning for the destination of our honeymoon, Bermuda.

We were excited about going to Bermuda. In preparation for our honeymoon, we had looked at all of the
pictures and read all of the brochures, and had imagined the enchantment that awaited us once we arrived. I could think of no more enchanting place in all the world to go than Bermuda.

Our flight was supposed to take us to Kennedy International Airport in New York, but we had to land instead at the Newark airport. Our hotel, of course, was at Kennedy; we were to fly from there to Bermuda in the morning. I found a cab driver at the airport in Newark and asked, “How long will it take us to get over to Kennedy Airport?” He said, “In this traffic, it will take an hour to an hour and a half.” I said, “No way am I going to do that.” So I went back into the airport and hired a private plane, a little three-passenger thing to fly us from Newark to Kennedy. That was an adventure. The plane flew low over the skyline of New York, in between buildings and by the Empire State Building. In just a few moments, we were at Kennedy Airport.

The next step was to get from the airport terminal to the hotel. The pilot of the little plane told me, “When we land, go inside the terminal building. They have courtesy phones on the wall, and you can call the hotel where you’re staying and they’ll send a limousine to pick you up.” So that’s what we did. When I called the hotel, the receptionist said: “Yes, we have your reservation, Mr Sproul. We’ll be right over to pick you up.” Vesta and I went to the front of the terminal and sat down on our suitcases to wait. We sat there for an hour and a half, waiting on our wedding night for a limousine that never came. It took me that long to realize that they had forgotten us. When I called back, I learned they had picked up some other people,
thinking they were Vesta and me. We sat there on our suitcases on our wedding night for an hour and a half.

Now here’s my question: What would you think of us if I had said to Vesta, “We’re having so much fun sitting here on our suitcases that I think we’ll forget about our trip to Bermuda and cancel it”? You would think I had lost my mind. Yet that is the way we behave with respect to heaven. Jonathan Edwards once made the comment that no person who seeks to go on a pilgrimage to a glorious and exotic place will take up permanent residence at an inn along the way. It’s nice to have a resting place, but we’re always moving toward that which is better. Edwards said that Christians who cling tenaciously to this world and to this life are like sojourners who get stuck in a wayside inn, having lost sight of their glorious destination. We’re headed for a place far more glorious than Bermuda. We’re headed for heaven, and we need to understand not only that there is a heaven but that it is vastly superior to anything we experience in this world.

When the apostle Paul wrote the Philippian church, he was in prison and nearing the end of his life. The letter indicates that he’s struggling with the circumstances in which he finds himself. He makes this statement: “For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death” (1:19-20). Do you hear what Paul is saying? “I don’t know what they’re going to do with me. They may cut my body to pieces. They may chop off my head. But whether I live
or whether I die, Christ is going to be magnified and honored in my body, and I can say that with boldness.”

How could he face this kind of circumstance with such confidence and such serenity of heart and spirit? The apostle writes, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (v. 21). Paul had one idea, one consuming passion: Christ. He was so focused on Christ that he said, “For me, to live is Christ. That’s what I’m caught up in.” But what’s the next part of the statement? “And to die is gain.” Paul is saying: “I enjoy fellowship with Christ right now. If I am alive, I am in Christ. For me to live is to enjoy fellowship with Christ, and if I die, it’s gain.” Now gain is an antonym for the word loss. We have a tendency to look at death as not only a loss but the worst of all possible losses. It is a loss for us when we lose loved ones to death, but is it necessarily a loss for them? Not if they’re destined for heaven.

Let’s see what else Paul says: “But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless, to remain in the flesh is more needful for you. And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith, that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again” (vv. 22-26).

From the record of history, it seems that Paul did survive this period of incarceration—this was not his final imprisonment—and that there was an extension of his earthly ministry so that he could fulfill the idea that he announced to the Philippians. But do you see the dilemma he expresses? “I’m in a strait between two
things. I’m betwixt and between.” He is experiencing a profound sense of ambivalence, a struggle within his heart in terms of his desires. On the one hand, he sees that it is pressingly urgent that he continue to live for the sake of his children in the faith. He wants to be of service to them. He knows that they need him, and he says, “I’m in a strait between these two things: whether to stay and be with you, which is far more needful, or to depart and be with Christ.” It’s as if Paul is saying: “I love being with you folks. You’re my children in the faith. You’re my friends. You’re my beloved, but when it comes to being with you or being with Christ, there’s no contest. So I’m torn between staying with you and leaving to depart and to be with Christ.”

Then he gives a little parenthesis: “Which is far better.” To live is Christ; to die is gain. Paul doesn’t just say that the difference is between the good and the better, nor does he say that the difference is between the good and the best; the difference is between what is good and what is far better. The best is still beyond heaven, with the final consummation, with the resurrection of the body and so on, but the evaluation of the apostle is that the state we enter at death is not only a better situation than anything we enjoy in this world, it is far better. What would it do to our lives and to our confidence and to the health of our souls if we really believed that?

A few years ago, I was preparing to make a trip to speak at a conference. Everything was scheduled. People had registered for the conference. There was no way I could arbitrarily cancel my presence there. However, the night before I was to leave, I received a phone call that informed me that my beloved mentor, Dr. John
Gerstner, had collapsed in Pittsburgh while delivering a series of messages. I was told that he had had three strokes and that he was comatose and was not expected to live. I was shaken to my boots. Dr. Gerstner was elderly, and he had had close encounters with death before, so I had anticipated that at some point he would go home. I had wondered how I would feel when word came to me that my mentor had died. I knew I would feel like a spiritual orphan. I would feel vulnerable. I would feel alone. I would feel threatened to not have his stabilizing influence in my life anymore, just as a son feels when his father is taken from him.

So I was very concerned in my soul, and I thought, first of all, of mundane things. I wondered how in the world I could rearrange my schedule to go to this conference and get to the funeral in time if he should die in the next forty-eight hours. Then I began to think about how costly this would be for my life and my soul to be without my mentor, and then finally, through the grace of God, I began to think of what it would mean for him, and I thought: “If Dr. Gerstner goes home now, this afternoon, my guess is tonight he’ll be sitting at a table, talking theology with Martin Luther, John Calvin, Augustine, and Jonathan Edwards, and for the first time in his entire life he will be having a theological conversation with peers, because he’s never had that privilege in this world.” And I thought, “What a glorious thing it will be for him when he crosses the threshold and enters into the heavenly sanctuary.” This was a man whose indefatigable energy shamed all of us. If I had to speak four times in a single day, I would be spent and exhausted. After I was finished, I wouldn’t be able to do anything productive for the
rest of the day, and yet I had seen Dr. Gerstner, when he was seventy-five years old, stand in front of a camera and deliver twelve consecutive lectures and then say, “Would you like more?” He was tireless and relentless day in and day out. It occurred to me how weary he must be, and for him to enter into his rest, into the presence of Christ, would be far better for him. In that episode I was experiencing the struggle not for myself, about my own life, but about his life, the same struggle Paul was experiencing.

We know the answer to his struggle. Christ said to Paul: “Not yet, Paul. You still have more work to do. The hour will come when you can come home. I’ve prepared a place for you, but right now your place is in the ministry, working on behalf of the people.”

So for a period of time, Paul had to experience what the Old Testament saints experienced. In Hebrews 11, the great faith chapter of the Bible, we read: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them” (vv. 13-16). The saints of the Old Testament looked beyond the grave, even as Job, in the midst of his torment and suffering said, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my
flesh I shall see God” (19:25-26). The Old Testament patriarchs did not have the benefit of the historic record of the resurrection of Christ or of the words of Jesus, as we are able to study them today. They had vague, shadowy hopes and the promises of God, but on the basis of that, they withstood unimaginable torture, persecution, hatred, pain and suffering, because they sought a better country, a heavenly country, and they sought a city prepared by God. They did this because they understood that to depart and enter into heaven is far better.

I mentioned above the episode of Dr. Gerstner’s collapse in Pittsburgh. The bulletin the next day was radically different. He woke up, and two days later he went home. A few weeks later he resumed his ministry, and he had to endure the same kind of delay that the apostle Paul experienced; he had to wait longer to enter into his rest.

I can remember talking with my grandmother when she was eighty-eight years old. A little tear formed in the corner of her eye, and she looked at me wistfully, and said: “I just don’t understand why God won’t take me home. I want to go.” She was experiencing what Søren Kirkegaard said is one of the worst pains that we are ever called to endure: to want to die and not be allowed. To want to die in order to be free from pain is one thing, but to want to pass across the veil to see the face of Christ is something else. Have you come to the place in your thinking where you understand that death is not tragic for the Christian, but that it is a triumph—that it means crossing the threshold into glory?