SETTING OUR SIGHTS ON HEAVEN

Why It’s Hard
And Why It’s Worth It

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THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST
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If you have picked up and opened this book because you are intrigued by the title and wonder what Paul Wolfe’s ‘take’ on heaven might be, I would like to make a suggestion.

By all means read Setting Our Sights on Heaven. You will find it enormously helpful. But first, if you have not already done so, buy and read an earlier book by Paul Wolfe, because it will help you understand why he wrote this one. And it will also reassure you that he has walked along the pathway he describes in these pages.

That earlier book is entitled My God is True! But it is the subtitle that will arrest your attention: Lessons Learned Along Cancer’s Dark Road. It tells the story of a very significant part of his personal pilgrimage. This later book is not so much a continuation of that story as it is a chronicling of the meditations of the author on the gospel lifestyle that brightens every road.

Books on heaven, its nature and inhabitants, constitute a minor industry in contemporary publishing. Near-death experiences, after-death experiences, visiting-heaven-and-returning-to-earth experiences, all regularly emerge from the press and feed the peculiar fascination of our society (and sometimes our churches) with heaven.

It is rare, however, to find a book like this one. And, truth to tell, many books of this genre fail to produce in their readers what

1 Paul Wolfe, My God is True! Lessons Learned Along Cancer’s Dark Road (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009).
a true sense of heaven always does—a heavenly-mindedness that pervades the whole of life, fills the heart with love for Christ, and transforms a person’s character as they set their sights on heaven.

It is still often said today that some people are ‘too heavenly-minded to be any earthly use’. But gospel-centred thinking reverses that naïve adage. As C. S. Lewis once eloquently put it:

If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’; aim at earth and you will get neither.²

Paul Wolfe has learned this in a personal way. It is clear that in the process he has become deeply acquainted with the teaching of God’s Word. He has also sat at the feet of some of the great masters of the spiritual life. He has tested his own thinking and digested their wisdom, and this has ensured that his own thinking is free from personal eccentricities, speculations, or hobby-horses that could divert us from a God-honouring view of heaven, a Christ-centred perspective on it, and a Spirit-given heavenly-mindedness in the present world.

More than that, Setting Our Sights on Heaven will take beginners by the hand and gently lead them on, but at the same time will refresh and reinvigorate more mature believers. It is biblical, and full of helpful meditation. It is practical and has a ring of both

truth and life. It is wonderfully simple in the best sense, clear and fresh like the water of a mountain stream.

In many places in the English-speaking world today, public buildings and hotels have become ‘smoke-free’ zones. Before, the air might be filled with smoke but only the most sensitive found it distressing. Now, however, in a smoke-free environment, it takes only one person who has been smoking to enter an elevator for everyone to become conscious that the atmosphere has been changed. Spiritually, however, the reverse has taken place. We live in such an earth-bound and spiritually polluted atmosphere that hardly anyone notices. We have become insensitive to the smoke; this-world-focused, self-absorbed lives are regarded as normal. We are inexperienced in breathing in heavenly air. But the soul that has breathed in heaven’s joyful passion for the glory of God senses more and more just how abnormal, fallen, and distorted this-world-focused life has become.

The heavenly-mindedness to which Paul Wolfe introduces us brings us into a realm of grace and purity even while we live in this world. Breathing in that atmosphere produces attractive as well as holy lives. And from the earliest pages of Setting Our Sights on Heaven, you will be able to tell the difference! As the subtitle wisely suggests, this may be ‘hard’, but it is certainly ‘... worth it’.

So, read on, and join Paul Wolfe in setting your sights on heaven!

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We have all had the experience of being stunned by words that someone else has just spoken. A surprising announcement at the family dinner table, perhaps, or an inappropriate revelation made around the office water cooler. With the words still hanging in the air and ringing in our ears, we were left wondering, ‘Did he really just say that?’ But have you ever been in the position of being stunned by something you just heard yourself say? I mean, stunned not because you had said anything terribly brilliant or shocking, but simply because your own words sunk in and confronted you with reality in a way you had not anticipated. I have, and I want to share the story.

Our children (now aged six and five) once went through a phase in which they regularly asked my wife and me to tell them what year it would be when they turned a certain age. This combined their fascinations with numbers and with growing up. ‘Daddy, what year will it be when I’m 10?’ ‘Mommy, what year will it be when I’m 16?’ ‘Daddy, what year will it be when I’m 50?’ And so on, and so on, and so on. (And then so on some more. Little children harbour no hesitancies about repetition.)

One day as we were driving home from an outing, one of our sons piped up from the back seat, picking up that well-worn theme. ‘Daddy’, he asked, ‘what year will it be when I’m 80?’ The multiple of ten made the math problem easy for even this liberal arts major
to solve. ‘2084,’ I answered. And then I added, half to myself, ‘Of course, by then your Mommy and I will be in heaven.’

And that’s when I was stunned.

*By then your Mommy and I will be in heaven.*

Did I really just say that?

Admittedly this was no brilliant observation about God and man, no profound insight into the nature of time and eternity. It took no sophisticated training, not in mathematics, nor in biology, nor in theology, to reach the conclusion I had articulated. And yet the sound of those words—better, the *meaning* of them—floored me. It would be an exaggeration to say that I nearly drove off the road . . . but not much.

What was it, precisely, that I found so striking about that statement? It was, I believe, the sheer matter-of-fact-ness of it. It rolled off my tongue as easily as something like, ‘This time next week we’ll be in Pittsburgh visiting your Grandma and Grandpa Wolfe.’

There was something about my brief aside that powerfully impressed upon me the reality of heaven and of my own heavenly destiny. There I was, thinking about a date certain on the calendar, and doing the math, and realizing that by the time that year rolled around I would be in the very presence of Jesus Christ.

There is so much *un*-certainty that surrounds the subject of heaven: What is that place like? What does Jesus look like? When precisely will I arrive there? And what will it be like in death to go there? In the midst of all that uncertainty, it was jarring to hear myself speak with certainty about a time to come, identifiable on the calendar, when I will no longer be here but there, seeing Jesus and sharing fellowship with countless souls who arrived there before me. It is one thing to say, ‘Someday I’ll be in heaven.’ I have sometimes spoken in such indefinite terms, and there is nothing wrong with doing so. But that day in the car I realized there was something surprisingly solid—surprisingly real—about fixing
upon a specific future year and realizing that by then I will have crossed the River.

By the way, in case you’re curious, Christy and I were both born in 1971, meaning that we will be 113 years old in the year 2084. It is exceedingly unlikely that we will not be in heaven by then. If it turns out that I do live that long here on earth, look me up and I will give you a free copy of this book.

**LIFT THINE EYES**

My experience in the car that day—the words I said, followed by the inward reaction they provoked—raised for me once again the issue of heavenly-mindedness. I found myself challenged again to consider questions like these: Do I grasp firmly that heaven is a real place? Do I believe assuredly that heaven is where I am going? More fully, do I believe that one day heaven is coming here (that is, when our heavenly Saviour, Jesus Christ, comes back here to renew this world)? And am I living day-to-day in the bright light of those realities?

The Bible itself raises this issue. The Apostle Paul urged the Christians in Colossæ to ‘seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth’ (*Col. 3*:1-2). The Apostle Peter urged Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor to ‘set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ’ (*1 Pet. 1*:13). Notice that each apostle in his own way charged his readers to ‘set’ themselves on heaven. Paul did so by pointing them upward, to that world above. Peter did so by pointing them forward, to the Day when that world will be all in all. In each case the summons was essentially the same: borrowing words sung beautifully in Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*, we can say that Paul and Peter urged their readers to ‘Lift thine eyes.’
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Of course, the apostles’ words to those churches, we rightly receive as the words of our Saviour to us today. The calling remains unchanged: Christians in this age, as in every age, are meant to be a heavenly-minded, heavenly-hearted people.

So . . . why aren’t we? To some degree every Christian struggles to live mindful of heaven, and sadly some Christians live as though they were entirely oblivious to it. Why do we find it so hard to live steadfastly heaven-directed, heaven-saturated lives?

This is a question I have mulled over in recent years. And I have done so not because the matter struck me as interesting to consider in the abstract. No, for me this has been personal. I have pondered this question precisely because I struggle to heed the summons that Paul and Peter set before us, the calling to live as a heaven-oriented man.

The pages that follow represent the fruit of those personal reflections. At least, I pray they will prove fruitful for those who read them! This book divides into two parts. In Part 1 we will consider the Bible’s teaching about heaven and heavenly-mindedness, including the impact these truths ought to have in specific areas of our lives (for example, marriage and finances). In Part 2 we will turn our attention to the work of spiritual diagnosis and prescription: What are the various factors (personal and social, theological and moral, subtle and overt) that tend to push heaven out of our minds, and what can we do to push it back to where it belongs? What remedies does the gospel itself prescribe to restore our heavenly bearings?

Some suspect that immersing ourselves in the truths of heaven will only render us inattentive to the things of earth, even neglectful of vital relationships and responsibilities. But those who have tasted and seen the goodness of real, biblical heavenly-mindedness know the opposite to be true: the one who faithfully contemplates things unseen and things yet to come finds new zeal for the glory
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of God and the cause of Christ here on earth. ‘Lift thine eyes’, and see for yourself.