

**BRINGING
HEAVEN
DOWN TO EARTH**

CONNECTING THIS LIFE TO THE NEXT

NATHAN L. K. BIERMA

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P U B L I S H I N G
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O N E

LOST IN THE CORNFIELD

Hope in Crisis

Henry David Thoreau lay on his deathbed. His good friend, Parker Pillsbury, leaned over where he lay.

“David,” he whispered, “do you have any vision of things beyond?”

“One world at a time, Parker,” Thoreau replied. “One world at a time.”

The purpose of this book is to show that Thoreau was dead wrong.

Theologian Lewis Smedes once asked a room full of people how many of them wanted to go to heaven. They all raised their

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hands. Then he asked how many of them wanted to go to heaven that day. A couple of people cautiously raised their hands, nervously looking around to see if they were alone. They were.

Would you have raised your hand the second time? Would you want to go to heaven today, to experience heavenly existence before the sun sets? And would you want to stay?

Heaven is an odd element of the Christian faith. We profess it to be eternally important and then live as though it doesn't exist. We are runners who fear the finish line. We go through life with little sense of what heaven will be like, and less sense of why we would want to live there. We carry on with our lives, fixated on the here and now, oblivious to the there and then. The possibility of thinking about heaven on a daily basis—much less hoping for it to come—is washed away in the torrent of the details of daily life.

When you stop and think about it, this is a strange way to live. Heaven is so glorious, and the expanse of eternity so vast, it is a wonder we do not let our minds wander into its mysteries more often, and recognize its reality even in the most mundane moments of our lives. C. S. Lewis said we are like a child who would rather play in a sandbox than dream of the beach. Why is that? Why let a moment pass in this current life, this brief episode of history, without considering the everlasting existence that lies ahead? Why are we so shy?

Think of it, says Philip Yancey, as a math problem. "Although percentages don't apply to heaven, assume for the sake of argument that 99 percent of our existence will take place in heaven," he says. "Isn't it bizarre that we simply ignore heaven, acting as if it doesn't matter?"

We are indeed 1-percent people. The afterlife will reach to infinity, swallowing time, rendering our current age an infinitesimal blip on the cosmic timeline. This life will prove to be

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but the clearing of the throat before a song that never stops. Isn't it backwards, then, how much we concentrate on our tiny 1 percent? The other 99 percent may as well be a dream.

When I lived in Chicago and took the subway each morning, I would see people on a silent march from here to there, keeping pace with the ticking of an unseen clock. A steady stream of people would fill the subway—old bankers with briefcases, young women in business suits, weary college students clutching book bags, bleary-eyed teenagers with headphones ramming noise through their heads. I would mix among them all and march up the stairs of the subway station in silence, our feet pounding a rhythm on the stone stairs. Each of us was following some small destiny—the personal drama of a job to be done, classes to take, people to meet, accomplishments to achieve, failures to endure, all wrapped into the space of that day.

As we stepped together, none of us marchers knew the destiny of the next. We would view each other without warmth, march without passion, and, more often than not, go on to live without inspiration. Something seemed to be missing. Our steps landed too heavily. "You can tell," said the *Chicago Tribune*, "by the glum faces of the folks gobbling lunch at their desks, the ones morosely leaning against the coffee machine wondering how to get everything done by tonight, the walking workplace wounded, the folks who sit strangely hushed as they ride home, bone-tired, soul deflated, job not done, more of the same on the horizon."

Our society whirs on the motor of a small dream: that technological progress will bring us bliss. But our march continues in despond, this bliss ever elusive, the purpose of our march ever fuzzier. Our bargain with technology, writes Juliet Schor, was a bust. Our commitment to capitalism was supposed to

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buy us time, buy us leisure, buy us balance, and most of all, buy us happiness. But we are empty. We march so hard in pursuit of this promise that it only feels farther away. With every new technological advance, it seems we need more time to use it. With every innovation in communications, it's harder to communicate with people. Leisure, writes Schor, is a "conspicuous casualty of prosperity."

But if prosperity is no longer our goal, and leisure is not our true destiny, why do we keep marching? What is the engine that drives us day after day?

I used to imagine stopping people in the subway tunnel and asking them if they ever thought about heaven. I never dared. I figured I would draw blank looks or a curt dismissal. *Newsweek* reports that 76 percent of Americans say they believe in heaven; 71 percent agree with the description that heaven is "an actual place." The *New York Times* notes that belief in the afterlife has increased since the 1970s, even as church attendance has declined. But heaven is not a topic on which many people dwell, especially not on the noisy subway.

The promise of heaven is meant to place our lives in a larger context, to fix us to a firmer foundation than the thin dreams of today's society, to give us hope. So why is hope for the afterlife not a heartfelt reality in our daily walk? Why do we ignore eternity and live as though it isn't coming anytime soon, and that it doesn't have anything to do with what we're doing now?

In North America, Christians are in crisis. This crisis reaches to all areas of our lives and makes it hard for us to be satisfied and inspired in anything but superficial and sentimental ways.

We have a crisis of hope.

We live without a deep sense of ultimate meaning, broader purpose, or eternal destiny. We proceed with our daily duties

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without a vision for why we're doing them. We go to school, start a business, grow a family, buy a house, take a job, go to church. All of these things make up our personal stories. But rarely do we try to place them in a larger story.

We have a shortage of hope. We may have desires and cravings for food, sex, and other pleasures. We may have allegiances to sports teams or political causes and would like to see their success. We may have optimism about our future at school or the office. We may live with anticipation of future milestones in our lives—graduations, weddings, births, anniversaries. But rarely do we live with *hope*, true hope—the combination of the assurance of God's ultimate triumph over evil, the comfort of an eventual eternal, misery-free existence, and the longing for Christ to come again to bring this about. We are not filled with a visceral, vital hope for heaven that seeps into every crevice of our souls and transforms our daily lives.

“If it is hope that maintains and upholds faith and keeps it moving on, if it is hope that draws the believer into the life of love,” writes Jurgen Moltmann in *Theology of Hope*, “then it will also be hope that is the mobilizing and driving force of faith's thinking, of its knowledge of, and reflections on, human nature, history, and society.” The lack of hope, Moltmann says, is a sin—a rejection of the abundance God's promise, a timidity to live with God's passion, purpose, and direction. Or, as Smedes says more bluntly, “The person without hope is inwardly dead.”

But in our crisis of hope, we focus on what is immediately in front of us. We live in the short term. Every once in a while, a Sunday morning church service or the funeral of a loved one may shake us into an awareness of the coming of eternal heaven. But we quickly retreat into our ordinary routines. We make what the poet John Keats called “the journey homeward to habitual self.” We fail to stay in a constant state of anticipation, the

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trance of the fascinating idea that this world is only a brief prologue to the one to come. Hope is not our constant context.

As a result, the word *heaven* is becoming inoperative in contemporary Christianity. If we keep pushing it to the edges of our periphery and emptying it of meaning, sooner or later it will be worthless. “Like classic cars, some words need to be restored,” says Arthur Roberts in *Exploring Heaven*. “*Heaven* is one such word.”

Part of the problem is that we associate going to heaven with death. Heaven happens to old people when they wither and die, we think, or to younger people when their lives are tragically cut short. In a society that worships youth and fears aging, death is defeat, and heaven is meager compensation.

But the main causes of our crisis of hope for heaven are more profound. As I see it, there are two. First, we don’t know what heaven will be like. Second, we don’t know when Christ will return and unveil eternity. How can we hope for such an unknown quantity?

The truth is, we cannot know now exactly what heaven will be like, and we cannot know exactly when it will come. But if we are going to lead lives tinged with hope and driven by anticipation, we must get a sense of what heaven has to do with the lives we live, the natural world we encounter, the society we are a part of, and the timeline that human existence follows like a ribbon into eternity. We must rediscover what the promise of heaven is and how it is relevant to every area of life. Without this connection, our empty march will go on; our crisis of hope will only get worse.

North American Christians find themselves in a peculiar place in history. We live under some of the most powerful governments in the world in an era of unprecedented prosperity,

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with a quality of life that makes medieval kings look like peasants. And yet we are empty, deflated by the despair of personal failure and spiritual disorientation, discouraged by the evil and uncertainty around the world and next door. And so, in the midst of the proudest society humankind has ever brought about, we have an alarming deficit of hope. We are so depleted now that nations we had been sending missionaries to for centuries, in Asia and Africa, have now caught spiritual fire and are sending their own missionaries back to North America.

What does it mean to live as a Christian under these circumstances? What does it mean for the church to exist and to bless a continent blighted by this crisis of hope? How do we rediscover what hope is and begin to hope again? How do we tether ourselves to hope's anchor, the promise of eternal heaven? How do we lose our shyness about talking about heaven and gain the confidence to know enough about it to want it? How do we rediscover that the earth we inhabit and the things we make in its midst are part of a larger cosmic story, of which God pens every stroke? How can we begin to sketch a basic framework that encompasses our lives, our earth and society, history and the future, and from this framework find deeper meaning?

These questions have consumed me since, after being reared in a religious home and a church-laced community, I first encountered the truth of the biblical picture of heaven in high school, in a book called *When the Kings Come Marching In* by Richard Mouw. His interpretation of the prophet Isaiah's vision of the heavenly city so altered my assumptions and ignited my thinking that I lost some of my shyness about the subject. I have since come to believe Christians are missing out on a major sense of purpose by having too small and too distant a view of heaven.

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Foolish as it would be to try to improve on Dr. Mouw's work, and unreasonable to demand he defend my digressions from it, I do hope to call Christians to take a new look at Dr. Mouw's ideas by tying them more explicitly to John's vision of heaven in Revelation 21, from the standpoint of a journalist. As I found out, adjusting our picture of heaven means undoing some heavily enforced learning. But any small measure of success opens the possibility of living with a new sense of hope and meaning.

Ultimately, heaven remains a mystery, a foreign realm that has no natives save for the angels and the glorious presence of God. And so there are a lot of good reasons not to think about heaven very much. But there are even better reasons why we should.

In the series finale of the sit-com *SportsNight*, Dana, a television producer, takes her worries to a Manhattan bar, where she encounters a friendly stranger. The stranger listens to Dana as she spills her fears. When she finishes, he says, "Dana, I'm what the world considers to be a phenomenally successful man, and I've failed much more than I've succeeded. But each time I fail, I get my people together, and I say, 'Where are we going?', and it starts to get better. And that's what you should do." His company, she learns, is called *Quo Vadimus*, which is Latin for "Where are we going?"

Christians need to ask the same question. We need to get our people together and say, Where are we going? Where does this all end? What's the point? To give meaning to the ongoing drama of history, we need a healthy new look at how history ends. To rediscover the meaning of the present, we need to unlock the secrets of the future. Somehow, some way, we need to have hope for heaven.

Heads in the Clouds

Follow an empty dirt road out of the tiny town of Dyersville, Iowa, until you find yourself in the middle of nowhere. Keep tracing the endless rows of corn until you round a bend and see a startling sight: the neatly trimmed lawn and golden sand of a baseball field. Stadium lights sprout from telephone poles surrounding the field like sentries, and nearby stands a white farmhouse. Each year, thousands of people make this pilgrimage to the farm of Don Lansing, where the movie *Field of Dreams* was filmed. Lansing maintains the field for the crowds of tourists. Many of them run around the bases and snap photographs of his famous farmhouse.

In the movie, Ray, played by Kevin Costner, hears a whispering voice from the sky that inspires him to build a baseball diamond in his cornfield. When he builds the field, the ghost of baseball legend Shoeless Joe Jackson appears on it at night. Soon Shoeless Joe is joined by other baseball greats who materialize as they walk out from the corn stalks in the outfield. Today, tourists instruct family members to take their pictures among the same corn stalks, ambling out in the manner of the movie's phantoms.

When Shoeless Joe first appears in the movie, his eyes widen as he surveys the emerald field and the sparkling sand.

"Hey," he shouts to Ray. "Is this heaven?"

"No," Ray chuckles. "It's Iowa."

Ray's memorable reprimand aside, the idyllic setting of this magical baseball field contributes to our imagination of what heaven will be like. The scene of baseball players playing their beloved game on this field apart from time, without a care in the world on the tranquil Iowan plain, makes Shoeless Joe's question eerily resonant for the thousands of tourists who travel

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to Dyersville each summer. They are transfixed by their encounter with an unknown world.

Because we know so little about what heaven will be like, we seize upon poignant images and icons like the *Field of Dreams* farm in Dyersville to give us a hint. We may not think about heaven that much, but when we do, we take our cues from the images of paintings, hymns, and popular culture. We tend to pay little attention to the theological work we let them do for us. As evangelical pollster George Barna told the *Dallas Morning News*, “Many Americans adopt simplistic views of life and the afterlife based upon ideas drawn from disparate sources, such as movies, music, and novels, without carefully considering those beliefs.”

Despite their vagaries, our images of heaven are some of the most beautiful scenes known to human beings. One of the most vivid portrayals of heaven on film is another movie with dreams in the title: *What Dreams May Come*. When the main character, played by Robin Williams, is killed, his first vision of the afterlife is the living world of the paintings of his wife, an artist. He walks into a picturesque setting that resembles her scenic landscapes and awesome vistas. He dives off a steep cliff, tumbles over a waterfall down thousands of feet of sheer rock, and lands comfortably in a flowerbed. As he walks, the grass and flowers beneath his feet squish and smear; they are made of his wife’s paint. He laughs as he turns and surveys a world that stretches as far he can see, to an elusive horizon beyond canyons and lakes, as the sun streams down all around him. Our own imagination of heaven may resemble this wondrous realm.

Another way we imagine heaven is as a place where we get everything we want, the perfect fulfillment of our greatest indulgences. We suppose that if we could play golf all day long, or eat ceaseless supplies of chocolate without a care, or go on vaca-

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tion and never come back, we would be in seventh heaven or on cloud nine.

The things we see and read feed this idea. I signed on to America Online recently and was greeted by a picture of a luscious piece of raspberry cream pie. Next to it was the headline, "What Heaven Must Taste Like." I opened my *New Yorker* and found a special advertising section urging readers to vacation in the Dominican Republic. One resort said that while the whole island nation is beautiful, "the real paradise here is Punta Cana Resort and Club, where [various celebrities] have all built their Caribbean vacation homes." This appeared alongside another advertisement that blithely proclaimed, "Heaven Can Wait."

We also rely on portrayals of heaven based, however loosely, on the Bible. The most common scene in popular culture is the sight of Saint Peter standing in front of the pearly gates, admitting people into heaven. In the comic strip "Frank & Ernest," the two characters are perched on a puffy cloud before a kindly old Peter, his wings jutting out the back of his white robe, a halo hovering over his forehead. He stands before a podium that bears a thick book while light rays pulse from a grand gate behind him. A sign by the gate reads, "New Arrivals Stop Here For Admissions Processing." In the comic strip's punch line, one of the characters pleads, "Don't ask me any tough questions—I left my brain to Harvard."

In a commercial for a candy bar, people wait in line on a long cloud to pass through Peter's heavenly checkpoint. One would-be entrant is taking a while with Saint Peter, and a man farther back shouts that they should hurry things along. In an instant the man plunges through the cloud, presumably on his way to hell. (The message of the ad was to eat a candy bar when you have a long wait.)

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Peter's benediction in a cartoon printed on a greeting card I saw seems to sum up our expectations: "Welcome to heaven," he says. "Here's your harp." (The joke was that people in hell got accordions.) Many of us have come to expect that Peter will indeed greet us this way when we get to the pearly gates.

Sacred hymns, seizing on images from the Gospels and the Book of Revelation, spin out these fantastic visions even further:

By the sea of crystal saints in glory stand,
 myriads in number drawn from every land.
 Robed in white apparel, washed in Jesus' blood,
 they now reign in heaven with the Lamb of God.

And:

In mansions of glory and endless delight,
 I'll ever adore thee in heaven so bright.
 I'll sing with a glittering crown on my brow,
 "If ever I loved thee, my Jesus, 'tis now."

All of these fantasies may leave us with a heartwarming but rather vague sense of the afterlife. As pleasant as they are, these pictures are not enough to inspire us to hope for eternal heaven on a daily basis. Heaven, we gather, is an airy and serene existence among clouds and meadows, where we wear robes and strum harps. It is peaceful and quiet. Maybe too quiet.

Many of us are in no hurry to hear Peter tell us, "Welcome to heaven. Here's your harp." When I e-mailed my friend Nathan, who shares not only my name but also my vocation as a newspaper reporter, and I told him about my idea for this book, he asked some of his colleagues about what they thought of heaven. He e-mailed me back and paraphrased what they said.

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“They told me flat-out that they simply didn’t want to go to heaven. Who wants in to a place with twenty-four-hour harp Muzak and hallelujah choruses on the quarter hour from here to wherever infinity takes us? I’d rather be mortal.”

I was surprised to read that C. S. Lewis says something similar. Noting that the Bible decorates heaven with “palms, crowns, white robes, [and] thrones,” he comments, “The natural appeal of this authoritative imagery is to me, at first, very small. At first sight it chills, rather than awakes, my desire.”

But Lewis goes on to say that the way we have adopted these heavenly images is fraught with mistakes. The first problem is that the biblical images we use are actually metaphors for beauty, happiness, and wholeness, and we distort their meanings when we take them too literally. The clouds, the meadows, the harps—all of these are meant only to hint at the perfect gladness of being with God in heaven. Although we have every reason to believe that heaven will contain natural beauty and music, these biblical images are not snapshots of heavenly locations. J. Nelson Kraybill makes a good point in comparing the writing styles of John and Paul in the New Testament: “Instead of using logical argument and deductive reasoning like Paul the apostle, John uses pictures and narrative to convey his inspired message. Think symbol. Think metaphor. Think poetry. Don’t get trapped with wooden literalism—unless you really expect to get to heaven and find that Jesus is a sheep.”

So we should not get carried away. The idea of pearly gates, for example, comes from the Book of Revelation, where heaven is portrayed as having twelve gates, one for each of the twelve apostles. Each base of the gate is made of a different kind of precious stone, and the gates themselves are made of pearls. The number twelve stands for completeness, and the pearls sig-

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nify splendor and durability. Many of our other heavenly fixtures—such as angels, robes, and harps—also come from the last book of the Bible. But we must be careful how much we embellish these heavenly symbols in our movies, cartoons, hymns, and imaginations. We must realize that, by themselves, these pictures cannot convey such a blissful existence. This is how Lewis explains it:

Musical instruments are mentioned because for many people (not all) music is the thing known in the present life which most strongly suggests ecstasy and infinity. . . . Gold is mentioned to suggest the timelessness of Heaven (gold does not rust) and the preciousness of it. People who take these symbols literally might as well think that when Christ told us to be like doves, He meant that we were to lay eggs.

When we take these things too literally, they turn out to be not much to hope for. The heaven they foreshadow may seem like a nice vacation—who wouldn't want to lounge around in a tropical paradise after a hard week at the office?—but they do not give us a heavenly promise we can seize and implant in our hearts to change our lives. They are not a very welcoming vision of our permanent residence. Is heaven just a nice place to visit, or would we really want to live there?

Heaven is not a never-never land skirted by clouds. When we realize this, and when we re-imagine what heaven will be like, we can begin to truly hope for heaven rather than keep our anxious distance from it. Revising our heavenly visions by taking a closer look at what those biblical metaphors mean can allow us to live with a meaningful vision of the afterlife. We need to look past the pearly gates at what really lies behind them.

False Alarms

The announcement said to mark your calendar for Wednesday, October 28, 1992. A chart listed the time for major cities around the world: 10 a.m. in New York. Three in the afternoon in London. Four o'clock in Rome. Midnight in Tokyo. And there was no mistaking the urgency of the notice.

“**RAPTURE,**” read the flyer across the top in bold capital letters. “**OCTOBER 28, 1992, JESUS IS COMING IN THE AIR.**” Beneath this banner headline was a Bible verse: “Fear God, and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come” (Rev. 14:7). This banner’s “**TIMETABLE OF RAPTURE**” pinned down the minute of doomsday for each time zone. Above it was a chaotic picture of a cityscape. Cars lay askew along the side of freeways, their drivers, looking like white tadpoles swimming upstream, floated heavenward with their arms outstretched. The shimmering figure of Jesus appeared above it all as a magnet drawing the raptured souls to the sky. The flyer was distributed by the Mission for the Coming Days in Flushing, New York, and included the organization’s logo and phone number.

But on October 29, 1992, the world kept spinning. People went about their business as they had on the 28th, and the 27th before that. The rapture warning was a false alarm. Life on earth went on.

It’s hard to hope for heaven because we don’t know when Christ will come back and usher in the rest of eternity. He could come in a second, in an hour, or in a millennium or three. So eternal heaven is a mystery for its time of arrival. The trumpet could blast at any minute, or it could be silent for another century. Jesus could return before you finish this chapter, before the week is out, or long after you’re cold in the grave. What an

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awkward way to live. Our eternal destiny, 1 Thessalonians 5 tells us, will come “like a thief in the night,” which sounds more like a threat than a promise.

In a soccer match, the clock ticks steadily until it reaches ninety minutes. At that point the referee takes out his personal stopwatch and counts the minutes he or she estimates were lost at noncompetitive moments in the match. It may be two minutes; it may be four or more. The players proceed to play with no precise notion of when they will finish. Unlike basketball players, who keep an eye on the ticking clock as the final seconds wind down so that they can try a winning shot at the final buzzer, the soccer players play in a strange state of limbo. Then, all of a sudden, the referee blows the whistle, and the match is over, just like that.

Now imagine that the entire match is played by the referee’s watch. Imagine that the players have no concept of temporal dimensions for the entirety of their playing time. The referee could blow the whistle seven minutes after kickoff or midway through the second half. No possibility is more likely than any other. What would it be like to play such an uneasy game? Would you run faster throughout the second half, as your anticipation of the end grew more acute? Or would you run as fast as you could the entire time, unwilling to let the whistle blow during anything but your fiercest effort?

This is the puzzle that surrounds us as we live. We have no concept of when time will run out, when the whistle will blow, when Jesus will return and interrupt life like a clap of thunder. We conceive of terms like *history* and *the future* while ignoring the larger book that gives them meaning—a story that has been building for thousands of years but will surely stop on a dime. We keep clocks, watches, and timepieces all around us but remain oblivious to the apocalyptic nature of time itself.

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We find ourselves in the same state of uncertainty as the ten bridal attendants in Jesus' parable in Matthew 25. They went outside to wait for the arrival of the bride and groom at the wedding banquet, and each took an oil-burning lamp to help them keep watch. Five of them brought extra oil with them to keep handy in case the wait was long. The others did not, and they ran out of fuel before the bride and groom arrived. But while they were away, getting more oil, the couple came and the banquet began. The five latecomers tried to enter, but they were turned away. "Keep your lamps trimmed and burning," intones the spiritual. "The time is drawing nigh."

Instead, we are content to live short-sightedly. We choose the most comfortable way to adjust to the odd reality that existence could be suspended at any second; we choose the path of least resistance. We lapse into complacency. We keep the second coming out of our minds. We live our lives from day to day, following our routines from sunrise to sunset. " 'Thy Kingdom come,' we pray," says Cornelius Plantinga, " 'but not right away.' " We make plans days and years in advance, without giving the impending trumpet a second thought. After all, "it's so full of emergency," Plantinga said, in a sermon I heard him preach when I was in college. So we try to reach a point of greater stability.

And who can blame us? Who can walk around with their heads in the clouds? Who can maintain the pose of the apostles, heads arched toward the sky as they watched Christ ascend and were told to wait for him to descend in the same way? Realistically, if we amble around with our eyes fixed to the heavens, we'll get sore necks, and we'll bump into things. As William Willimon puts it, "It's hard to stand on tiptoe for two thousand years." As we lose our sensation of the coming eternity, Plantinga says,

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“people settle into a kind of ‘everydayness’ in their faith, and they quit scanning the horizon.” It’s a functional way to maintain our religion, if not a very powerful one.

The problem is that we’re supposed to not only *expect* the earth-shattering suddenness of the second coming; we’re supposed to *hope* for it. But how can we desire something so impossible to predict? It’s one thing to hope for, say, the birth of a baby, which will happen in about nine months, or for graduation, whose month and day are settled upon enrollment, giving relatives enough time to book plane tickets. Even when you get a new job, you don’t vanish from your old one; you give your boss two weeks’ notice. So if the issue is making heaven a reality in every moment of our daily lives and avoiding complacency, we have to wonder: how can we naturally hope for something that will come so suddenly and yet hasn’t come for hundreds of years?

To solve this problem, too many people have tried to crack the case of when Christ will return. Anne Lamott calls them “Christians who think that Jesus is coming back next Tuesday right after lunch.” As the authors of *The New Millennium Manual* report, many have produced careful calculations, with impressive evidence, and formed a timetable for the second coming.

Third-century Roman theologian Hippolytus was one of the first to guess the date of Christ’s return. He went through the Bible like a mathematician and calculated that Christ would come back in the year 500. But 500 came and went. Centuries later, Joachim in Fiore guessed that the date would be 1260, and throughout that year he paraded around with bands of men who beat themselves with whips, calling others to repentance. But 1260 came and went. Others thought the bubonic plague,

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the Black Death, signaled the end of the world, and so Bohemian monks set 1420 as the year of Christ's return. But 1420 came and went.

In 1836, William Miller published a book that forecasted a second coming for 1843. He developed quite a following of people, who are known today as the Seventh-day Adventists. Miller's followers didn't lose hope when 1843 came to an end; they set a new date: October 22, 1844. October 23 came to be known as "The Great Disappointment."

Charles Taze Russell, the founder of Jehovah's Witnesses, first predicted an apocalypse for 1873 or 1874. Then he said 1878, and then 1914, then 1918. In 1981, Bill Maupin of Tucson, Arizona, predicted the end of the world would come on June 28, 1982. A reporter asked him what would happen on June 29 if his forecast proved false. "I can't even answer a question like that," Maupin said. "Come back and see us on June 29 and we'll talk about it." June 28 came and went.

A few years later Edward Whisenant sold two million copies of his book, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 1988*. He predicted a second coming for September 11–13 of that year. One publishing company in Raleigh, North Carolina, was so taken by the book that it closed for the day on the 13th. The 13th came and went.

Then a pamphlet pronounced, "In Autumn 1992, Jesus is Coming! In 1999, Human History Will End!" The Mission for the Coming Days poster, with the raptured drivers floating to heaven, was more specific, setting the time as October 28 at ten in the morning. But of course 10 a.m., and the rest of the day, came and went. This didn't deter religious broadcaster Harold Camping, who wrote *1994* and *Are You Ready?* But New Year's Eve confetti sprang like Old Faithful in 1995.

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The Y2K computer scare brought another massive wave of apocalyptic panic. Wrote a Jerusalem reporter in 1999, “Among those who are preparing for the Second Coming are about 100 evangelical North Americans who have moved to apartments on the Mount of Olives, for a close-up view of the prophesied return of Jesus.” New Year’s Day 2000 came and went.

Now a new movement is emerging: Exit 2007.

All these self-anointed prophets boldly ignore Christ’s words that the time of his arrival is a bona fide unsolved mystery. “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father,” he says in Matthew 24. These prophets are trying to win at a game that Christ chose not to play. Of course, they may claim that although we can’t know the day or the hour, we can know the month and the week, but this violates the spirit, if not the letter, of Christ’s words. These prophets have somehow found a greater emphasis in the Bible on the need to decipher prophecy than to wait in mystery.

After a while we become mindful of the story of the boy who cried wolf. As the story goes, the town appointed a boy to keep watch for wolf attacks on the town’s flocks of sheep. One night, out of boredom, he awoke everyone with a desperate cry of “Wolf!” And the townspeople ran around in a panic, scrambling to protect their sheep. But there was no wolf. The second night, bored again, the boy did the same thing. But there was no wolf. The third night, a wolf actually came. But when the boy cried out “Wolf!” the townspeople were wise to what they thought was another game, and so they ignored the boy and stayed in bed. The wolf had its fill of lamb chops.

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Although we must give doomsday prophets the benefit of the doubt about their intentions and not automatically assume that they are making a ruckus and getting people panicked simply for their own amusement or profit, we must also acknowledge the cumulative effect of their errors. Every time a rapture alert comes and goes, we pay less attention the next time. It's why few people are holding their breath for Exit 2007. After so many false alarms, we are no longer alarmed at all.

Plantinga coined a provocative phrase in his sermon about waiting for the second coming. He said that the majority of Christians respond to these fantastic guessing games by piously distancing themselves from any mention of the Book of Revelation and the end of the world. We're so embarrassed by these alarmist prophecies that we begin to neglect the second coming altogether. After all, this talk of the future is so exotic, but religion can be more predictable. "We've got *eschatological chastity*," Plantinga said. "We've got restraint." And we're proud of it.

But as we practice abstinence from the study of the last things, we also lose hope. We let time go by and push history's surprise ending out of our minds. We don't know when eternal heaven will come, so we let it go. Our crisis of hope gets worse.

So we miss out on the biggest piece of life's puzzle: the afterlife and what it means for our current life. "If people really understood the Christian promise of heaven, they'd be more excited about it and more inclined to try to get there," Anthony DeStefano, author of *A Travel Guide to Heaven*, told the *Dallas Morning News*. Lewis says the same thing in "The Weight of Glory," the most incredible sermon I have ever heard or read:

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Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

So much for eschatological chastity. Our restraint around matters of the afterlife doesn't impress God. It disappoints God.

The truth is, we can do nothing to eliminate the two major causes of our crisis of hope—that we don't know what heaven will be like and we don't know when eternity will arrive. Although this book is about heaven, it will not—cannot—disclose what exactly heavenly living will be like or when the rest of eternity will begin. Christ said it himself: it's unknown.

But even though we shouldn't play guessing games about the second coming, it is a grievous mistake to ignore it. As many great preachers have said, the signs of the times do not tell us *when* Jesus is coming back, but they tell us *that* he is coming back. And they do so with a forcefulness that condemns the complacent act of simply pushing the promise of Christ's return out of our minds. We need to ask and answer the all-important question about our faith and our life: Where are we going?

We need to lose some of our eschatological chastity and trade it in for some eschatological *curiosity*—some healthy imagination about the coming of heaven and what it means for life now.

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Until we second-guess and tweak our typical pictures of heaven, we will not let them inspire us as glimpses of the world toward which this one is building. We will not correct our crisis of hope. But by reexamining what the biblical message about heaven really is and painting a new picture of what it means for daily life, hope can be reborn.