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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

It's odd to express appreciation to a wheelchair, but I do. Almost thirty years of quadriplegia, and almost as many studying God's Word, have deepened my gratitude to God for these bolts and bars. The chair has shown me the way Home by heart.

Great writers and thinkers have helped guide my heart toward heaven. Over the years, I have scoured bookshelves for every essay, sermon, or commentary written by C. S. Lewis and Jonathan Edwards, from Bishop J. C. Ryle to contemporaries like Peter Kreeft and John MacArthur. Of course, when I want to reflect on a more poetic view of heaven, I always brush the dust off old favorites like George MacDonald and Madame Jeanne Guyon. I acknowledge here those marvelous philosophers and theologians, many whose fingerprints you will detect on the following pages.

I also express gratitude to a few others—Scott Bolinder of Zondervan who has been saying for years, “We’d love to hear what you have to say about heaven.” And John Sloan, my editor, who graciously gave me a free hand and a wide berth to write what is on my heart. Also, Bob Hudson for examining my paragraphs with a magnifying glass. John Lucas, art director at Zondervan,

and James Sewell, my art instructor who provided guidance as I worked on the rendering for the cover. And thanks to my friends at Wolgemuth & Hyatt for helping to make it all happen.

I thank Judy Butler and Francie Lorey for graciously serving as my “hands” on this project. And Steve Estes for reviewing the manuscript to keep me on the scriptural straight and narrow. I offer special thanks to the women who come to my home on different days to get me up, dressed, sitting in my wheelchair and ready to face the tasks at hand: Irene Lopez and Carolyn Simons, Patti Guth and Francie Lorey, Donna Condon, Judy Butler and Karen Crum. These friends make a heavenly investment every time they patch my pressure sores, scrub my teeth, or give me bran and orange juice. Of course, I can’t miss saying “thank you” to my husband, Ken, who tolerated more than his share of Mexican take-out platters while I worked late on the manuscript.

Lastly, I’m so grateful that the Lord Jesus moved on the hearts of so many prayer warriors who faithfully interceded. Bunny Warlen, Mary Lance Sisk, Jean Kenoyer, Pam Rosewell Moore, and my Wednesday night prayer group at church. Also, the Joni and Friends staff who gather together every morning before work to pray.

One more thing. I thank you for taking the time to join me on this journey toward heavenly glories above. And who knows. Perhaps before you finish reading, you’ll discover you know the way Home by heart too.

PREFACE 2018

The longer you journey with your eyes on heaven, the more you begin to see. And that's why I've put together an updated version of my 1995 book, *Heaven: Your Real Home*.

Nearly twenty-five years ago, I poured my heart into that book. I had been dreaming of heaven and longing for heaven almost since the beginning of my quadriplegia. When the opportunity came to write about my heart's desire, it filled me with excitement. How wonderful to capture in paper and ink so many of my reflections and long hours of searching the Scriptures. And thank God, the book did well. It was warmly received and has had a healthy readership through the years.

I was content with that . . . until I recently read the book again. And it gave me the feeling of a partially told story or a song half sung.

I'm in a very different place in my journey now. In body, soul, and spirit, it feels like I have come a great distance. Why do I feel that way? Perhaps it's because I've outlived my life expectancy. Perhaps it's the added years of dealing with the effects of remorseless gravity on an aging, paralyzed body. Maybe it's because of the life-threatening, tooth-and-nail battle with stage III cancer. Quite certainly it relates to year after year of living with mind-bending chronic pain.

My earthly life looks different to me now. And so does heaven. I've seen more, studied more, suffered more, endured more, learned more, prayed more.

Most important, I've fallen more in love with Jesus.

That's the nub right there. That's the beating heart of what I want to say.

In the original book, I make the point that heaven isn't so much a Place as it is a Person. But I didn't say nearly enough. Yes, Jesus said, "I am going there to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). But it isn't the mansion or celestial condo or quarter acre of heavenly real estate that really matters to me.

It's Him. Truly.

If He's there—wherever there is—it's heaven. If He's not, then it's not.

All of the suffering and hurt and longing of the past quarter century hasn't focused my heart on twenty-four-karat avenues or tree-lined crystal rivers. Yes, of course I long for the "better country" of Hebrews 11:16, and a new body that runs, dances, swims, and embraces loved ones on the other side. But what I really want is Jesus. The Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me. The Bridegroom. The Friend closer than a brother. The King. My King.

Prolonged suffering gives focus, and as the days slip by, my focus is more and more on my Rescuer and Companion.

In my late sixties now, I'm much closer to heaven than I was in my midforties. And that means I will soon—soon!—hear His voice, look into His eyes, and feel His embrace. And He will say, "Welcome home, Joni."

At the end of each chapter in this revised book, I've included some additional reflections that speak to where I am now, further along on life's winding trail and higher up on the hill of perspective. I've called these thoughts "Climbing Higher," and that's my invitation to all who make this journey with me.

It may have been long ago and far away, but I can still remember hiking with my family, sometimes along switchbacks that zigzagged up the side of a long, steep incline. Stopping to occasionally catch our breath, we would look back at where we had been and where we were headed—constantly surprised to realize how much more you can see with a little more altitude. Sometimes we could make out the tiny figures of hikers way back on the trail, struggling up the slope just where we had walked a half hour before. And it was encouraging to say to each other, “We’ve made good progress! It won’t be long now.”

That’s what I hope these chapter-ending thoughts will do. Together, we’ll stand at a few vistas, looking back on the faithfulness of God to get us where we are. And we will also look ahead to see Someone waiting at Trails End.

Or maybe we should say, at the real Trailhead.

*Though I spend my mortal lifetime in this chair,
I refuse to waste it living in despair.
And though others may receive
Gifts of healing, I believe
That He has given me a gift beyond compare . . .*

*For heaven is nearer to me,
And at times it is all I can see.
Sweet music I hear
Coming down to my ear;
And I know that it's playing for me.*

*For I am Christ the Savior's own bride,
And redeemed I shall stand by His side.
He will say, "Shall we dance?"
And our endless romance
Will be worth all the tears I have cried.*

*I rejoice with him whose pain my Savior heals.
And I weep with him who still his anguish feels.
But earthly joys and earthly tears,
Are confined to earthly years,
And a greater good the Word of God reveals.*

*In this life we have a cross that we must bear;
A tiny part of Jesus' death that we can share.
And one day we'll lay it down,
For He has promised us a crown,
To which our suffering can never be compared.*

NANCY HONEYTREE,
"JONI'S WALTZ"
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Introduction

What's So Great

ABOUT HEAVEN?

It was a dark and windy night.

Before returning to the warmth of the house, I huddled against the cold air to listen to my neighbor's whistling pine trees and gaze at the thin slice of moon smiling on the horizon. My eyes scanned the canopy of stars above to locate the constellation Ursa Major—I knew the Big Dipper was part of it, but having only recently memorized it from a book, I had never seen the whole thing.

I searched and searched, and suddenly, there it was, the familiar arrangement of stars spread out grand and glorious across one-fourth of the sky. I had no idea it was so *big*. Nor had I realized how beautiful it was.

I shivered, feeling small and swallowed up underneath the starry dome that seemed to reverberate with a song. Yes, I could have sworn I heard a song. Was it the faint tune of a hymn in my heart? Was it the morning stars singing together? I don't know, but the song struck a chord in me, like a tuning fork resonating in my soul. The stars and music took my breath away, and before the cold drove me indoors, my heart broke with joy, and I whispered toward the sky, "Jesus, I'm coming home; I belong up there."

I wheeled out of that moment, through the garage door and into the kitchen. The fluorescent lights made me squint as I nudged the door shut. I breathed in the aroma of dinner cooking. The house was warm and softly lit; the television was droning in the living room; and my husband, Ken, was in the hallway talking to a friend on the phone.

For a long minute, I sat in the kitchen, letting the warmth caress my icy cheeks. Outside I had touched a moment of great happiness and wisdom, but I knew I was incapable of holding on to that heavenly moment. Few are skilled at holding themselves in a state of listening to heaven's music. Ordinary things—like kitchen pots clattering, telephones ringing, and TV commercials about frozen foods and dishwashing detergent—drown out the song. It is too delicate to compete against mundane things. The music and the moment fades, and we become our ordinary selves, leaving the child outside and shelving our fascination with the moon, the stars, and the night wind. We consign heavenly thoughts to some other time.

Yet we live in the powerful memory of those moments.

Whether we are adults or children, our best memories are usually the sort that, like a tuning fork, strike a resonant chord in our souls. It's a song we never quite forget and recognize immediately whenever we catch its echo. We recognize it because it is so full of heartbreaking beauty. Like deep calling to deep, it is stamped with His imprint; and since we bear His image, the memory is sealed in that deepest, most profound part of us. Such moments cast soundings and plumb the real depths of who we are. And what we hear is a heavenly echo.

We may hear the haunting echo under a night sky or even in a symphony or a poem, or catch it in a painting. In fact, it is singers, writers, and painters who most often try to capture the echo, this heavenly music that compels us to sing, write, or paint something truly beautiful.

I know because I'm an artist. I have to confess, though, that I've never succeeded in painting a picture of heaven. People have asked me why, and I haven't come up with a good answer except to say that heaven defies the blank canvas of the artist. The best I can offer are scenes of breathtaking mountains or clouds that halfway reflect something of heaven's majesty. I'm never quite able to achieve the effect.

And neither is earth. Actual mountains and clouds are exalting, but even the most beautiful displays of earth's glory—towering thunderheads above a wheat field or the view of the Grand Canyon from the South Rim—are only rough sketches of heaven. Earth's best is only a dim reflection, a preliminary rendering of the glory that will one day be revealed.

Trouble is, we rarely let that fact sink in. That is, until we are stopped short by one of those brilliant nights when the air is clear like crystal and the black sky studded with a million stars. It takes such a moment to make us pause, watch our breath make little clouds in the night air, and think, "*What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes*" (James 4:14).

Then we rush indoors to catch the six o'clock news or referee an argument between our kids. The heavenly moment is lost, and we think, *Life doesn't seem like a mist that quickly vanishes*.

We really don't believe it's all going to end, do we? If God hadn't told us differently, we'd all think this parade of life would go on forever.

But it will end. This life is not forever, nor is it the best life that will ever be. The fact is that believers *are* headed for heaven. It is reality. And what we do here on earth has a direct bearing on how we will live there. Heaven may be as near as next year, or next week, so it makes good sense to spend some time here on earth thinking candid thoughts about that marvelous future reserved for us.

I love thinking and reading about heaven. But I've noticed as I've flipped through the pages of Scripture—our best resource about heaven—that its language is cryptic. You almost have to crack heaven's hieroglyphics before any of it makes sense.

What's more, I've gotten lost in the chronological chaos, wondering how Jesus' return to earth connects with the millennium, the rapture, the judgment, and the bowls, scrolls, and trumpets in the book of Revelation. How can we pursue heaven through so much confusion or consider our future "marvelous" if we keep stumbling over word pictures of crowns and thrones?

These things only *seem* to be deterrents. They are actually incentives. The symbols that Scripture uses of palms, crowns, streets of gold, and seas of glass are just that—symbols. They never quite satisfy our curiosity about heaven, and they're not meant to. They are only shadowy images of the real thing, as well as guides and signposts that point us in the right direction to show us the way home.

That's what the following pages are—guides and signposts to point you to heaven, the real home of our heart and spirit. I want to tap on your heart, open up a map, and show you the way home. The thoughts contained here are for those whose hearts break for heavenly joy, or at least would like to have their hearts break for heaven. It's even for those who don't have the faintest idea about heavenly joy but are haunted with curiosity.

True, heaven may defy the printed page of the author, but words and even paintings can sometimes strike a resonant chord, helping us hear the ancient and heavenly song that the morning stars sang together. Rather than let that song retire in the presence of mundane things like scratchy AM radios and grinding dishwashers, I hope the following pages will help you tune into heaven's melody.

Like stealing a tiny sip of stew before dinner, it's meant to be a foretaste of what to expect when you get to the banquet table.

It's meant to point you to the sky and help you see something far, far beyond the constellation of Ursa Major.

Let's not get too settled in, too satisfied with the good things down here on earth. They are only the tinkling sounds of the orchestra warming up. The real song is about to break into a heavenly symphony, and its prelude is only a few moments away.

A FIRST HINT *of* HEAVEN

The first time I heard that haunting heavenly song, so ancient and so new, was in the summer of 1957. My family and I had packed up, piled into our old Buick, and were heading west through the country roads of Kansas. Daddy pulled the car over onto the gravel shoulder to stop by a roadside ditch so my sister could go to the bathroom. I jumped out of the sweltering back seat and wandered beside a barbed wire fence along the road. It was a chance to dry the sweat off my back, as well as to explore.

I stopped and picked up a piece of gravel, examined it, and then heaved the stone beyond the fence far out into the biggest, widest, longest field I had ever seen. It was an ocean of wheat, waves of golden grain rippling in the wind, all broad and beautiful against a brilliant blue sky. I stood and stared. A warm breeze tossed my hair. A butterfly flitted. Except for the hissing sound of summertime bugs, all was quiet, incredibly quiet.

Or was it?

I can't remember if the song came from the sky or the field, or if it was just the sound of crickets. I tried hard to listen, but instead of actually hearing notes, I felt . . . space. A wide-open space filling my heart, as if the entire wheat field could fit into my seven-year-old soul. I rolled my head back to look up at a hawk circling overhead. The bird, sky, sun, and field were lifting me in some heavenly orchestration, lightening my heart with honesty and clarity like an American folk hymn in a major key,

pure, upright, and vertical. I had never felt—or is it, heard?—such a thing. Yet as soon as I tried to grasp the haunting echo, it vanished.

I was only seven, but standing there by the barbed wire fence in a Kansas wheat field, I knew my heart had been broken by God. No, I didn't actually know Him at the time, but I wasn't so young that I couldn't sense the occasional stirrings of His Spirit. I kept staring while humming an old Sunday school favorite: "This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through." For me, the moment was heavenly.

Daddy honked the horn, and I ran back. Our family drove away with a slightly changed little girl in the back seat.

I can recount handfuls of similar moments when my heart seemed to be a beat ahead of my body and very much in rhythm with the Spirit. One such moment was a few years after the 1967 diving accident in which I became paralyzed. I was just beginning to get my spiritual act together with Jesus, having been pressed up against a wall that caused me to seriously consider His lordship in my life. Those were times I spent long evenings by the fireplace with my friend Steve Estes as he pored over his open Bible.

He was guiding me through the Word of God to help me learn about heaven. Immediately, he had my attention. Everybody wants to go to heaven. We are all curious to know where it is, what it looks like, who's there, and what they wear and do. I'm no exception.

I was fascinated to discover that one day I would no longer be paralyzed but have a new glorified body. Immediately I began imagining all the wonderful things I would do with resurrected hands and legs. Swim a couple of laps. Peel a few oranges. Sprint across fields and splash into waves, scale a few rocks and skip through meadows. Such thoughts enraptured me, and sitting there, in a wheelchair and unable to move, I began to sense a longing, a rising echo of that heavenly song about to stretch wide

open my heart's capacity for joy. I could tell my heart was, once again, ready to break for joy.

Sensing my wonder with it all, Steve pointed me to a passage in Revelation 21. I couldn't wait to read all about this future God was reserving for us. I picked it up with the first verse:

"Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth' . . ."

Okay, I'll buy that. This old planet is in bad need of repair.

". . . for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away . . ."

Wait a minute, you mean everything about this earth will disappear and pass away? But there are lots of things I like. Chili dogs with cheese. The NBA playoffs. Bridalveil Fall in Yosemite National Park.

". . . and there was no longer any sea."

What! No sea? But I love the ocean. The waves. The wind. The smell of salt in the air. What about splashing in the breakers? What about digging my toes in the sand? To me, heaven has to have oceans in it.

"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband."

No seas? No sand dunes? No Great Barrier Reef? No fields of wheat or sequoia trees? That does it! I hate cities, even if they are holy. Who wants sixteen-story housing projects in the center of heaven? Some people may like perfect urban planning, but not me, brother.

My friend closed his Bible. He sensed my disappointment. He knew that as quickly as the wonder of heaven had risen in my heart, it had disappeared. This was *nothing* like the sensation of gazing out over that Kansas field as a kid. Something was terribly wrong, either with me or with the Bible's descriptions of heavenly glories above.

Sound familiar?

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Be honest. Be like any red-blooded, right-thinking Christian with both feet planted firmly on earth. Haven't there been times when word pictures of heaven from the Bible fall flat and boring next to the breathtaking sight and thunderous roar of Niagara Falls? Or scanning the serene Colorado plains from the pinnacle of Pikes Peak? Or swaying with the motion of acres of rippling waves of golden grain? Do you sense that sometimes the musical notes of God's creation almost eclipse Ezekiel's footnotes describing things in heaven as wheels that intersect other wheels and also move in four directions? "Their rims were high and awesome, and all four rims were full of eyes all around" (Ezekiel 1:18). *Whhaat?*

Reading about heaven in Scripture can almost sound like bad copy in a AAA TourBook:

A large set of pearl-studded gates will welcome you to heaven, but be careful of slippery roads that are paved with gold. Don't bother looking for interesting local cuisine, as there is no need to eat while in heaven; you won't need to look for lodging either, since comfortable beds, crisp sheets, and downy pillows have no purpose.

Topping the list of scenic points is a sea of glass. However, local conditions preclude sunsets, sunrises, or full moons. Do not miss the spectacular new Jerusalem, a striking city of the future, employing award-winning architectural design. Marvel at its twelve foundations. Stand amazed before its twelve gates, each made of a gigantic, single pearl. For sheer spectacle, the new Jerusalem eclipses even the Emerald City of Oz.

"This is upsetting. I don't understand," I said to Steve.

For encouragement, he flipped to Jesus' words in John 14:1-4: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not

so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

My friend tried to excite my imagination, explaining that if Jesus is presently preparing heaven, it must be out-of-sight. It only required seven days for Him to create the earth; and, hey, He’s had almost two thousand years to work on my room in His mansion.

A clever maneuver, but it dive-bombed. I could only think of the times I had become bored with the most beautiful hotel rooms in less than a week. He tried again, explaining that all this stuff about mansions and rooms was probably allegorical anyway. I gave him a puzzled look, wondering how that idea improved on the previous.

You can understand why, at least in the beginning, I preferred thinking about heaven from the edge of a cliff overlooking a stormy ocean rather than from the edge of Revelation 21.

WHY DO HEAVEN’S SYMBOLS SOUND SO NEGATIVE?

I don’t mean to poke fun, but like you, I’m struck that heaven is often described in terms of “no this” and “no that.” No more sea. No more night. No more time. No more moon or sun. And what about food, marriage, sex, art, and great books? Do Ezekiel and the writer of Revelation assume that all the other benefits in heaven should outweigh the “no this” and “no that”? Sitting in a wheelchair for decades has loaded me with a lifetime of glorious memories, everything from feeling my fingers on the cool ivory keys of a piano to the euphoria of diving through the breakers at high tide. Such memories flood every nerve and fiber of my being and, thus, my imagination. It’s awful to think that the best stuff

of which memories are made will have no place in heaven. I'm sure you could say the same.

"However," Steve challenged, "as it is written: 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.' Your imagination can't begin to picture all that God has in store."

"Well, then," I fumed, "God can't expect us to get very excited about heaven. If I've got to stomp underfoot all the wonderful things I enjoy about earth just so heaven can come off looking better, then count me out."

It was lost on me how so much of heaven's happiness could be described in negative terms. Why did God seem to talk about heaven in terms of what it will *not* be rather than what it will be?

That's not all. I was also struck that the positive descriptions about what heaven *is* seem clumsy and ungraceful. Rainbow thrones? Streets of gold? Pearly gates? A glittering city 1,400 miles in length and as wide and high as it is long, with walls two hundred feet thick and made of jasper? It more closely resembled Minnesota's monolithic Mall of America. I was embarrassed to admit it, but even the descriptions about everlasting peace and eternal felicity seemed boring.

My friend sighed and gave one more stab at it. "Joni, you know the Bible well enough to realize it won't steer you wrong. So rather than put us off, shouldn't such descriptions ignite our hearts? Aren't you just a little relieved that heaven can't be reduced to terms we can manage?"

I looked at him blankly.

"Doesn't it console you to think that its marvels defy description?" He paused for a long minute and then added, "Simply put, there are no words for heaven." Now it was his turn to look at me blankly.

What he was saying was, as someone put it, darkness to my intellect but sunshine to my heart. He was right. I wanted those

streets of gold and pearly gates to ignite my heart, not throw ice water on it. My heart wanted heaven to be the tuning fork that God strikes. I wanted the deepest part of me to vibrate with that ancient yet familiar longing, that desire for something that would fill and overflow my soul.

I smiled. Then we both smiled. We knew that God had not brought us this far only to disappoint me with mere negatives. I was not about to be daunted. There must be positives. The Bible was a book to be trusted, so there *must* be more behind the rainbow throne than met the eye. All this stuff about golden cities and seas of glass had to be clues in some amazing mystery. And if Psalm 25:14 was correct—if “the LORD confides in those who fear him”—then it’s a mystery that God intends to stimulate me to seek, to rouse and stir my interest, until I grasp what heaven is about.

I felt recharged. I decided to tell Steve about that long ago and faraway summer afternoon by the wheat field in Kansas. “I was only a little girl, but heaven seemed so close to me then, so real,” I sighed. I described the joy and the wonder, the feeling of space and the sound of music. I then told him I wanted heaven to feel like that. I wanted a kind of map back to that wheat field.

“But your longings about heaven have to hang on something,” my friend warned. “You can’t ignore streets of gold and rainbow thrones just because they don’t thrill you at first glance. They’re the images God gave us—the symbols that Scripture invites us to ponder. They’re not deterrents to your faith; they’re incentives.”

I knew he was right on this point too. If I skirted the glittering celestial city with walls two hundred feet thick and made of jasper—just because I didn’t like the idea of urban planning in heaven—I’d have nothing to hang my faith on but my imagination. And that could be dangerous, if not a little New Agye.

“Joni, don’t mistake signs in the Bible for the reality they only represent. It’s like this: Suppose we’re driving down the road and

see a green highway sign that reads, ‘Chicago: 50 miles.’ In no way would we mistake that road sign for Chicago, right?”

“Right.”

“We both understand it’s pointing us fifty miles down the road to a reality far, far beyond a five-by-eight-foot green sign with white lettering.”

This was easy to track.

“In the same way, don’t walk up to a wall 1,400 miles high made of sparkling jewels and stop there. Don’t get down on all fours to examine whether the gold streets are 18 karats as opposed to 24 karats. These things are only pointing to a mind-boggling reality far beyond mere symbols.”

Slowly the light dawned. The problem lay not with the Bible’s descriptions of heavenly glories, but with the way I was looking at those symbols.

Steve charged ahead. “Since you seem less than enthusiastic about the new Jerusalem, consider this: Its walls are said to be the same height, width, and length. The city is a perfect cube of 1,400-mile proportions. What do you think that means?”

“That heaven’s ugly,” I replied.

“Aha! Watch it or you’ll smack your face on a Chicago road sign,” he laughed. “If you stop with only the symbol, you’re right—it’s not a pretty sight. But symbols point away from themselves to something else.”

We turned to the Old Testament description of King Solomon constructing the Most Holy Place in the ancient temple in Jerusalem, the room where the ark of the covenant rested. First Kings 6:20 reads, “The inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty wide and twenty high.”

“You see,” he said, “the proportions are identical, only heaven is said to be about a quarter of a million times larger. Since the book of Revelation insists that no temple is found in heaven, the idea is probably that Paradise is all temple. Just as God’s dazzling

presence filled the Most Holy Place, so it will fill that Holy City. Only more intensely.”

“Hmmm, that’s something to think about,” I mused.

“Exactly! You *have* to think. When you take time to ponder Scripture, your faith has something to hold on to. Something that’s factual and true. Your faith has something to feed on, something from which your dreams about heaven can take root.”

I didn’t realize it at the time, but Steve Estes had just shown me how to read the map, how to understand the legend and symbols that would show me the way home to heaven. For when it comes to heaven, there is no limit to what the Lord will confide to those whose faith is rooted in Scripture.

SEEING HEAVEN *through* EYES *of* FAITH

The Bible provides the symbols. But it is faith that makes the hieroglyphics of heaven come alive. And heaven *has* to come alive! After all, you’re a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, and according to Philippians 3:20, you’re supposed to be eagerly awaiting it. Heaven is your journey’s end, your life’s goal, your purpose for going on. If heaven is the home of your spirit, the rest for your soul, the repository of every spiritual investment on earth, then it must grip your heart. And your heart must grip heaven by faith.

Heaven has been, and always shall be, a matter of faith. “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see,” reads Hebrews 11:1. Stop and pick that verse apart. Faith means believing in realities that go beyond sense and sight. It is being sure of something you hope for, that is, sure about unfulfilled things in the future. And it’s being assured of something you can’t see, that is, being aware of unseen divine realities all around you. To put it another way, faith not only

makes you sure that heavenly streets of gold really exist, but it helps you see something beyond the earthly streets of asphalt that exist in the here and now.

Now, it takes no more than a mustard seed–sized grain of faith to be sure of unfulfilled things in the future. It takes no great faith to be aware of unseen divine realities all around us. If you are aware of realities you can't see, and if you're certain there are many more realities yet to be fulfilled, you are halfway to solving the mystery!

Let's try it out on a few word pictures in the book of Ezekiel.

The prophet is sitting by a riverbank when suddenly—in a flash—he squints at the heavens opening above him: “I looked, and I saw . . . an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures . . . Their faces looked like this . . .” (Ezekiel 1:4–5, 10). Then Ezekiel goes on to describe four heads with eyes, ears, noses, and mouths of oxen and men, lions and eagles.

My heart goes out to Ezekiel. He was just minding his own business by the river when, without warning, God pressed his eyes smack-flat against the brilliance of heaven, a brilliance that the ordinary faithful see from a distance, and then, only through a glass darkly. The prophet strained to find words to describe what he witnessed, but after hunting through his dictionary for adequate nouns and adjectives to draw a picture of heaven, he had to fall back on language that was old and familiar. Thus, the strange pictures of beasts with weird faces and wheels that science fiction writers would dream up.

Ezekiel courageously plunged ahead and put it into writing. God revealed to him something supernatural—a whole bunch of unseen divine realities—but God didn't give the prophet a thesaurus of supernatural words. So Ezekiel had to rely on the language of resemblance. The center of the fire looked *like* this . . . and the

faces looked *like* that. In fact, the closer Ezekiel got to the burning throne, the less sure his words.

You can almost hear Ezekiel stutter and stammer, starting with verse 26 of chapter 1:

Above the vault over their heads was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be his waist up he looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down he looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him.

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.

Did you count all the “looked likes” and “like that ofs” and “what appeared to bes” and “as ifs”? Poor guy. The throne wasn’t anything like King David’s; the piece of furniture Ezekiel observed was more like *the appearance* of a throne. And the Lord who was sitting on it? He could only be described as *the appearance* of the likeness of a man.¹

The same is true for the apostle John scrambling to write down his heavenly vision as he sits on the beach on the island of Patmos. Thus, it is the apostle’s best effort to describe what looks like rivers of glass, streets of gold, and gates of pearl.

My point? Were Ezekiel and John sure of what they hoped for? Of course. Were they certain of things they had never seen? You bet. They witnessed far into the future something yet to be fulfilled, and when the Lord pulled back the curtain so they could actually see the unseen realities, they trusted Him to bring it to pass. Their faith about heaven may have been hazy in days gone by, but once their eyes were opened, realities with a small *r* became Realities with a capital *R*.

Now it's true they had a slight advantage. When they saw heaven, it was a little like standing in front of an arc light without sunglasses on. They couldn't miss it. They saw with their eyeballs what they had been hoping for all their lives. But before you envy them, remember that "hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?" (Romans 8:24–25).

Ezekiel and John saw their hope. We cannot. And this is why the heavenly song is still an echo. It's a yearning, something that is unfulfilled. A longing that is still an ache. But that's not such a bad thing. We may strain and squint to see heaven through a glass darkly, but when we, the ordinary faithful, catch a glimpse, we may be in a more blessed state than even that of a prophet. How so? Jesus commends the faith of people like you and me in John 20:29 when He elevates us, saying, "Blessed are those *who have not seen* and yet have believed" (emphasis added).

Jesus says there is a special kind of blessedness, a unique happiness reserved for people like you and me who dig through earth's dirt to decipher heaven's hieroglyphics. When it comes to heaven, if you can move beyond the symbols and be sure of what you hope for, as well as certain that what you do not see is *there*, then you are edging close to the fellowship of prophets and apostles. For although a rainbow throne was emblazoned on their eyes, you can glimpse what the throne symbolizes, and you can see what's beyond, albeit through a glass darkly.

WHY HEAVEN IS HARD *to* UNDERSTAND

There is something else we can learn from Ezekiel and John. As weird and strange as the word pictures are, they convey one thing for certain: The whole scene in heaven is very real. There's nothing wispy or vaporous about the exact measurements of a twelve-layered foundation of precious stones.

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It's real, but it's entirely alien to anything that people have heard of on earth.

God has good reasons for describing it this way. You see, if Ezekiel or John or even we were able to break down the infinitely high wall that separates “everything that is spiritual” from “everything that is not spiritual,” if we were able to scale that wall with the ropes and grappling irons of human understanding, then, good grief, our faith wouldn't mean very much.

God designed both heaven and humans so that a cloud of mystery prevents you and me from fully grasping heaven with language and logic. The apostle Paul, like Ezekiel and John, saw heaven with his own eyes; but unlike them, he was not only unable to describe the sights; he wasn't permitted to! The mystery is *supposed* to remain intact. We cannot fashion heaven solely out of the Lincoln Logs of our logic. Even if we could, we would merely be illuminating the sun with a flashlight. We are only allowed to break through the glass darkly by faith.

I'm thankful heaven is grander than human language. And as for those “clunky” sights in that AAA TourBook, faith removes the clunkiness. Trying to grasp heaven without faith is like trying to admire the outside of a huge great cathedral with grand windows. Standing outside, you see an impressive but imposing structure. The building is striking, but has no real glory. But if you go inside the cathedral—which is a little like looking at heaven through eyes of faith—you are breathless as you stand awash in glorious colors from the light that streams through the window.²

Faith takes us beyond the imposing and impressive language of golden cities and thrones and reveals the better, brighter glory inside the walls of the new Jerusalem. Faith takes the descriptions of 24-karat asphalt and big pearls swinging on hinges and makes us certain that what we hope for is far, far better than here.

How much better?

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LOOK BEYOND *the* NEGATIVES

Remember how I soured on all the “no this” and “no that” descriptions in heaven? No food, no marriage, no moon, no need for good books? *Faith reminds us that every negative is only the reverse side of a fulfilling.* A fulfilling of all that God intended our humanity to be. True, we may enjoy a good charcoal-broiled steak or a night of romance with our husband or wife under a full moon, but faith tells us these things are inklings of better tastes and enraptured delights yet to come. They won’t be negated, no; rather, the whisper of what they are on earth will find complete fulfillment in heaven.

Don’t assume that if there is no marriage in heaven, we will be forced to embark on an eternal abstinence. Don’t chew on the idea that with no charcoal grills in heaven, we will be compelled to take nourishment in gray tasteless pills.

Use your eyes of faith. Think of it in terms of “future divine fulfillments.” See that every negative is just a reverse side of a fulfilling. Because what is no longer needed for biological purposes, such as procreation or digestion, may serve a far higher, more beautiful function.

This is one of those realities that goes beyond sense or sight. Consider where it says, “Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life” (James 1:12 KJV). From a verse like this we can infer that when we curb our appetites on earth and refuse to let lust and gluttony ruin wonderful things like marriage or food, our victories gain glory and splendor in heaven. If we controlled our hormones on earth, then fidelity in marriage will serve us in eternity as a triumphant weapon with which we defeated temptation. All of this will bring greater glory to God.

I broached this subject of “controlling hormones” on another one of those pleasant evenings around the fireplace with Steve.

It was the big question everybody wonders about heaven sooner or later. I was only a teenager and embarrassed to use the word *sex*, so I casually remarked, “What’s this stuff about ‘no marriage in heaven’ supposed to mean?”

He seemed to read my mind, and smiling, he said, “Joni, things like procreation and digestion are physical functions necessary for our life here on earth. When it comes to heaven, I don’t think we’ll become genderless or never sink our glorified teeth into a juicy peach. It’s just that heaven promises something far, far better. Far better than even the pleasure that people enjoy in marriage.”

I looked at him with skepticism. “I’m not married, but that’s pretty hard to imagine.”

“No, it’s not *hard* to imagine; it’s impossible. Absolutely impossible. We have no idea what God is preparing. But look at this verse in Psalm 16:11,” he said as he flipped back to the Old Testament: “‘You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.’ Faith tells us that the pleasures and the privileges people enjoy in marriage are only hints and whispers of greater delights yet to come.”

I gave him a doubtful grin. I decided, though, that he was right. My questions about intimacy and food would have to be shoved to the back burner for the time being. I would have to cultivate faith that every negative is only the reverse side of a fulfilling. A fulfilling of all that God intended our humanity to be.

Not only will there be no need for procreation and digestion, there will not—I repeat, *will not*—be a sun or a moon in heaven. Revelation 21:23 reads, “The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it.” But don’t grieve. Heaven won’t be less than the wonder you experience over a glorious sunrise or a glowing moonlit night, “for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.” Even light will have its future divine fulfillment, for it will be a better light, “not as a candle flame that is put out but

as a candle flame which becomes invisible because someone has pulled up the blind, thrown open the shutters, and let in the blaze of the risen sun.”³

Faith tells us not to grieve. We will not lose in heaven. We will gain. The Lord who has planted the seed of future divine fulfillments in almost every good thing on earth will carry it on to completion until the day He arrives and makes crystal clear all the unseen divine realities. God won't throw any good thing away. As C. S. Lewis writes, “The old field of space, time, matter, and the senses is to be weeded, dug, and sown for a new crop.”⁴

SEE INTO *the* POSITIVES

May I pose a question that will explain something else about all those negatives in heaven? Do you know why a photographer uses a negative to take your photo? He uses it to show us a positive image. It's the same principle when I paint at my easel. Sometimes I choose not to outline a shape, such as a leaf, with a brush, but rather I paint the sky all around the leaf, which then defines its shape. It's called “negative space” painting, and it's a way—some would say a better way—of giving definition to the shapes of leaves against a sky. The artist helps you see by painting what you don't see.

The principle is the same when it comes to heaven: *The negatives are used in order to show us the positive.* On earth, we know all too well what the negatives are: suffering, pain, and death. Show us their opposites, the positive side, and we will have the best possible idea of the perfect state. For instance, there may be no moon, no marriage, and no need to eat in heaven, as suggested in Revelation 21, but there are also some pretty *good* negatives we can relate to, and curiously, they're all listed in Revelation 21 too.

- no more mourning
- no more crying

- no more pain
- no more curse
- and, praise God, no more death

Selah. Pause. Think of that.

We'd all admit that the sum of human misery on earth vastly outweighs the sum of human happiness. Job said, "Mortals, born of woman, are of few days and full of trouble" (14:1). David the psalmist expresses this in Psalm 55:6, 8: "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest . . . I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm."

I'm with Job and David: Get me outta here!

Have you ever felt that way? I can't tell you how much sorrow I've held at bay over the years. Tears could come easily if I allowed myself to think of all the pleasures of movement and sensation I've missed. Diving into a pool and feeling my arms and legs slice through the water. Plucking guitar strings with my fingers. Jogging till my muscles burn. Cracking steam-broiled Maryland crabs with a mallet. Throwing back the covers in the morning and hopping out of bed. Running my hands across my husband's chest and *feeling* it. To think that one day we will hear these words uttered that haven't been spoken since Adam was thrust out of Eden: "There shall be no more sorrow."

FAITH *to* FIND YOUR WAY HOME

Do you see it? Are your eyes of faith focusing better? Or rather, can you hear it? The faint echoes of some distant heavenly song? It's whispering that heaven will not be an *unmaking* of all the good things we know, but a new and vastly improved version. Heaven will also be an *undoing* of all the bad things we know as God wipes away every tear and closes the curtain on pain and disappointment.

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In fact, I'm going to correct something I wrote earlier. Remember the comment made during one of those fireplace discussions: "There are no words for heaven"? It should be, "Heaven is too specific, too real, for language."⁵ If we've learned anything from the prophet Ezekiel and the apostle John, it's that heaven is real. It's not a state or a condition, but a place. A place with streets, gates, walls, and rivers. We are wrong in thinking that heaven is wispy, thin, and vaporous. It is earth that is like withering grass, not heaven.

What it takes to know the place that Jesus has gone ahead to prepare is faith. Faith in what God has to say about heaven from His Word. For when God chose to talk about heaven, He did so using the nouns and verbs, the syntax and grammar, of the Bible. And although He mainly expounded on heaven in highly symbolic books like Ezekiel and Revelation, these symbols are meant to be motivation for our minds and fodder for our faith.

Faith that focuses not *on* the scriptural symbols, but *inside* and *beyond* them.

Faith that develops the skill of holding on to that heavenly moment.

Faith that shows us the way home.

This kind of faith will bring heaven forward into vivid reality. It will bring into vital contact with your heart the things that people call invisible and distant. It will involve your heart and your eyes. If the apostle Paul were here, he would repeat Ephesians 1:18: "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people."

Step back for a moment, focus your eyes of faith, and then walk with me into a world you've heard about from your youth but have never seen: heaven. What will we be like there? What will we do? Where is this place called heaven, and why is it called

“home”? Look with me through a glass darkly, and you just might discover that Home is closer—and more real—than you ever thought.

CLIMBING HIGHER

In his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul tells us, “Let heaven fill your thoughts; don’t spend your time worrying about things down here . . . Your real life is in heaven with Christ and God” (Colossians 3:2–3 TLB).

For years I’ve been trying to do that. With all my heart I *want* to think about my “real life” with God’s Son and the place He is preparing for me. But I don’t often succeed—not nearly as much as I would like to. For so much of the time, so many other things fill my thoughts: worries, regrets, fears, frustrations, and all sorts of earthly, here-and-now, Joni-centered things.

But there are moments.

Something I see, hear, dream, or remember will open my spirit like a shutter. In those breathless intervals, I slip from my temporary earthbound citizenship to my true and rightful one. For several heartbeats, I catch a glimpse of another Reality, inhale the fragrance of a Better Country, and sense a moment in time that’s somehow beyond time.

And it feels like home.

Always, when something like that would happen, I would try to capture the experience, bottle it up, tuck it away in a secret place, or even slip it into a Ziploc bag (to open and experience all over again). But I was never able to do it.

All that changed when I read something in C. S. Lewis’s last book. He made a passing reference to the poet William Blake and spoke about joy and how we must “kiss it as it flies.”⁶

I had to look that up to see what it meant. The actual four-line poem goes like this:

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*He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity's sun rise.⁷*

I'm not positive what Blake or Lewis meant by that, but here's what occurs to me. You can revel in heart-melting moments of beauty, inexpressibly lovely dreams, and even happy times of companionship with Jesus, but you can't freeze time to hold on to them. If you tried to wrap your fingers around them, capture them in a golden cage, or encase them in amber, you would only kill them.

What do you do with those rare golden moments of life when you are swept into wonder or joy bubbles up in your heart like an artesian spring?

You savor them.

You humbly thank God for them.

And you let them go.

At the beginning of this chapter, I wrote about a time out on my back porch on a clear cold night. After searching the stars to find Ursa Major, I simply let my spirit soar. That was when I had the unworldly experience of hearing some faint, mysterious strain of music. It wasn't from the neighbor's house, and it wasn't the TV in the family room. It was in the moment; it was in the heavens; it was for my ears only; and it created a deep, unspeakable, half-joyful, half-sorrowful longing for heaven.

It broke my heart, and it healed my heart, and then it was gone.

I couldn't cling to that moment, and to this day I can't recall a single note of that celestial music. As much as I treasure the memory of those few seconds, nothing quite like that has ever happened to me again.

I have a friend who described his first raft trip down a wild river in the remote backcountry of Oregon. As the raft swept

along in the rapid current, he would fill his eyes with a rugged vista unlike anything he had ever seen. Keeping his eyes pinned on the sight, he would soon find himself facing sideways and then backward as the beautiful tableau swept by. But facing backward to see what was now departing behind him, he realized that he was missing the *next* beautiful scene around the *next* bend in the river.

He couldn't stop the river. He couldn't freeze the moment. And he soon realized that he had to taste and treasure each scene as it filled his eyes . . . and then quickly let it go.

So it is with those heart-lifting moments when the Lord allows you the tiniest glimpse into your future home. Heaven fills your thoughts, as Scripture says, but it's not like a snapshot you can put on your refrigerator. It's not like a shrine that you come back to.

It's just a shaft of grace through a quick opening in the clouds. And there will be more.

FIND YOUR TRAIL

1. In Acts 1:7–11, the writer paints a somewhat comical scene. Why were the disciples staring at the sky? What did it take to turn them back to the Lord's words and the urgent business at hand? How does this incident speak to us about moving forward in our walk with Christ?
2. In the midst of work, relationships, and dozens of competing priorities, how do we follow Paul's command in Colossians 3:2 to let heaven fill our thoughts?

A HIKER'S PRAYER


Lord Jesus, thank You for the nudges, whispers, confirmations, and bright, fleeting glimpses of heaven that remind me that I belong to You, that this life on earth isn't everything, that You are at this moment preparing my room in the Father's house, and that a vast, unspeakable joy awaits me just over the horizon.



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PART ONE

What Will Heaven Be Like?



Different people through the years have written books and gone on speaking tours talking about briefly dying, visiting heaven, and then miraculously returning to resume their lives on earth. I don't want to refute what these people say they have experienced. Who knows? Maybe the Lord in His mercy gave them a vision, a hint, or a little foretaste of glories ahead. Even so, I hold to the words of Scripture: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9 NLT).

Reading any of these contemporary claims of heavenly visits sound titillating, but it will inevitably result in one thing: disappointment. What they describe is still encased in time and in two-dimensional terms, and we think to ourselves, *That's it? That's what it will be for all eternity?* We feel let down by the pale, diminished, lukewarm realm they describe.

When the apostle Paul was caught up to the third heaven and then returned, he refused to give his readers any details at all (2 Corinthians 12:2). He said, in effect, "I really can't talk

about it.” And he never did. But one thing for sure: For the rest of his life, he couldn’t wait to go back. He could say, from actual experience, “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far” (Philippians 1:23). In so many words, he told his friends, “I’ll stick around here as long as I’m needed and as long as the Lord wants me to. But if I see that door of heaven crack open again, if I hear the Lord’s call—just get out of my way, because I’m out the door!”

And in this section, “What Will Heaven Be Like?” I hope I can crack the door for you just a tad. Just enough to help you take Scripture, logic, a little imagination—and get a small glimpse of what God is preparing for those who love Him!

One

Who Are We

IN HEAVEN?

I've been thinking about my heavenly home for years. Naturally, you can understand why: My earthly body doesn't work. That's one reason I dream about heaven all the time.

I can't say my dreams are Technicolor versions of pearly gates and streets of gold; rather, they're more like rough sketches or dim reflections, as when my "eyes will see the king in his beauty and view a land that stretches afar" (Isaiah 33:17). Like the rolling vista of a Kansas wheat field . . .

. . . Except for one extraordinary heaven dream I had one night in a hotel in Stavanger, Norway. My quiet time that week centered on Revelation 21:21, where the apostle John writes, "The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass." It didn't make sense. Gold is not transparent, and it's nothing like glass because you can't see through it. It was another one of those heavenly images gone gawky. I shrugged my shoulders and closed my Bible.

That night, as the cold Norwegian wind rattled my bedroom window, I snuggled down and slipped into the most amazing dream. I saw myself standing in a bright yellow bathing suit at

the edge of a pool. This was astonishing, since I rarely dream about being on my feet. Usually I can't see or feel my body from the shoulders down; my torso and legs are always hazy and unfinished, like the half-completed edges of a painting. But not in this dream.

I stretched my arms above my head, arched my back, and gracefully dove into the water. When I came up and slicked my hair with my hands, I was stunned to see them glow, all rose-red wet and honey-ivory, bathed in life, beauty, and well-being. I pressed my palms to my nose. They smelled wild and sweet. Some might have mistaken me for an angel, but I never felt more human, more a woman. I cocked my head and admired my outstretched arms and then looked around. This is hard to describe, but the water and air were brilliant, ablaze in light, like pure gold, as transparent as glass.

Each breath was piercing to my lungs, but with a sweet sting that made me want to breathe deeper. I looked down to see the pool water shimmering like diamonds. You know how we say "the water sparkles"? In my dream, it was doing exactly that. The air was sparkling too. Everything was flashing, clear and golden.

I saw a friend sitting poolside, relaxing in a chair under a white cabana and watching me. Oddly, he looked awash in light too. He seemed more real, more a man, than ever before. He was my old friend, but a thousand times more himself, and when our eyes met, youth infused my heart. I wondered if he felt the same. I smiled, waved, and then began swimming, smoothly parting the water with long, powerful strokes. The ripples felt cool and slick, more like satin than water. After a while, my friend dove in. He touched my shoulder, and it burned, but in a painless way. There was no need to talk; our smiles said that we were friends for the first time again. We swam together stroke for stroke. And the longer we swam, the stronger we grew. Not weaker, but stronger.

It was the most remarkable dream I've ever had. When I woke up, I had no doubt it was a dream about heaven. I was convinced that "gold, as pure as transparent glass" existed. It wasn't a gawky image. I saw it with the eyes of my heart.

NEW BODIES

One day the dream will come true.

One day, if I should die before Jesus returns, my soul will be reunited with my body. Pause and dream with me . . .

One day no more bulging middles or balding tops. No varicose veins or crow's feet. No more cellulite or support hose. Forget the thunder thighs and highway hips. Just a quick leapfrog over the tombstone, and it's the body you've always dreamed of. Fit and trim, smooth and sleek.

It makes me want to break into giggles right now! Little wonder that "we eagerly await a Savior from [heaven], the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:20–21).

Our lowly bodies . . . will be like His glorious body. Astounding. Like Jesus in His resurrected body, we will have hands and arms, feet and legs. We won't be spirit beings, floating around like angels who have no bodies.

A promise like this, though, almost raises more questions than answers. Does a glorified body translate into glorified digestive systems? What about sleeping? What if we prefer our teeth a little crooked rather than perfect and straight? Will we look the same? And if we do, will we recognize each other? Will my husband be "Ken Tada," and my mother, "Margaret Johanna Eareckson"? Will I wear a bright yellow bathing suit in heaven if I want to and take a swim with a friend if I wish?

Another thing. What about people who died in the ocean

centuries before, whose bodies long ago became fish food? Or people who were blown to smithereens in bomb blasts, or pioneers who perished on the prairies, whose bodies dissolved into dust that was scattered to the four winds? Will God vacuum up the winds, collect and sort everyone's body particles, and divvy out the correct DNA?

These questions became real to me in the summer of 1990 when my ninety-year-old father passed away. He had led a cowboy roughrider life, trading with Native Americans, riding fast horses, and scaling the highest peaks of the Rockies. So it wasn't an unusual activity that summer for my family and Ken and me to drive to the top of Pikes Peak to scatter my father's ashes.

We found a private place near the edge of a cliff. Thousands of feet beneath us spread a green valley patchworked in sun and cloud shadows. The icy wind whipped our hair, and we held on to our wool hats. An eagle hang glided above our heads. Ken opened the *Book of Common Prayer* and read:

Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God, in his wise providence, to take out of this world the soul of our beloved father, John Eareckson, we therefore commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; looking for the general Resurrection in the last day, and the life of the world to come, through our Lord Jesus Christ; at whose second coming . . . the earth and the sea shall give up their dead; and the corruptible bodies of those who sleep in him shall be changed, and made like unto his own glorious body.¹

Ken closed the book and read a final verse from Romans 8:11, which assured us that "if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you." With that, my mother stepped closer to the edge,

took her husband's ashes in her hand, and threw them to the wind. I watched with wet eyes as a gust carried my father's ashes up and beyond the clouds.

Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust.

Later that afternoon, we talked about how God would resurrect our dad's body. We didn't get into details, but our faith assured us that somehow it would happen. That night in bed, I wondered *how* will it happen? Billions and billions of people have lived on earth and have probably shared the same dust and ashes. For all I know, my father's ashes settled on some field in that green valley, providing fertilizer to feed the next generation. It seems silly, but how will John Eareckson's molecules remain distinct from the rest?

Others have wondered the same. The apostle Paul framed their thoughts in 1 Corinthians 15:35 when he wrote, "But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?'"

Paul then cuts those big scary questions down to size when he writes, "How foolish!" In other words, "Guys, get real. Open your eyes." And starting with verse 36, he sketches a few lessons from nature: "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body."

HOW ARE *the* DEAD RAISED?

Have you ever seen those nature specials on public television? The ones where they put the camera up against a glass to show a dry, old lima bean in the soil? Through time-lapse photography, you watch it shrivel, turn brown, and die. Then, miraculously, the dead shell of that little bean splits open, and a tiny lima leg-like