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## Coming to Grips with Heaven

**I**n the Middle East a fable is told of a Baghdad merchant who sent his servant to the marketplace to run an errand. When he had completed his assignment and was about to leave the marketplace, he turned a corner and unexpectedly met Lady Death. The look on her face so frightened him that he left the marketplace and hurried home. He told his master what had happened and requested his fastest horse so that he could get as far from Lady Death as possible—a horse that would take him all the way to Sumera before nightfall.

Later that same afternoon the merchant himself went to the marketplace and met Lady Death. "Why did you startle my servant this morning?" he asked.

"I didn't intend to startle your servant—it was I who was startled," replied Lady Death. "I was surprised to see your servant in Baghdad this

morning, because I have an appointment with him in Sumera tonight."

You and I have an appointment. Perhaps it will be in London, Taipei, or Chicago. Wherever, it is one appointment we will not miss. As C. S. Lewis observed, the statistics on death are impressive—so far, it is one out of one!

Of course believers can be confident that we die in God's time. When Christ was told that His friend Lazarus was sick, He stayed away two extra days so that Lazarus would already be dead and buried by the time He arrived in Bethany. The sisters individually voiced their complaint, "If only You had been here, my brother would not have died." Yet Christ wanted them to understand that Lazarus had died within the will of God; he died according to the divine schedule.

In recent days I have conducted two funerals. The first was that of a Christian woman who had distinguished herself by a life of sacrificial service for Christ. The triumph of the family was striking; there was irrepressible joy mixed with the sorrow.

The second was that of an apparent unbeliever who was killed in a highway accident. The grief of the relatives was marked by desperation and hopelessness. They refused to be comforted.

We all are following those two people to the grave. Unless Christ should return in our lifetime, we will all pass through that iron gate described by Hamlet as “the undiscover’d country from whose bourn no traveler returns” (III, i, 80-81). The question is: Where will we be five minutes after we die?

I’m told that there is a cemetery in Indiana that has an old tombstone bearing this epitaph:

Pause, Stranger, when you pass  
me by  
As you are now, so once was I  
As I am now, so you will be  
So prepare for death and follow  
me

An unknown passerby read those words and underneath scratched this reply:

To follow you I’m not content  
Until I know which way you  
went

The way we go is determined in this life. At death our destiny is unalterably fixed. For those who have admitted their sinfulness and received the free gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ, death leads to the realm called heaven, the abode of God.

Why is the contemplation of heaven so important for each of us? First, because it gives us perspective. Visualize a measuring tape extending from the earth to the farthest star. Our stay here would just be a hairline; it would be almost invisible compared to the length of the tape. Eternity is even longer, of course, and when that becomes our measuring rod the longest life is but a dot of time. That's why Paul says that the suffering of this present life cannot be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us. Eternity gives perspective to time.

Second, the contemplation of heaven is crucial because we must use our time and resources to lay up treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not corrupt and where thieves do not break through and steal. Every one of us wants to make wise investments, to get the "biggest bang for our buck," as the saying goes. The best investments are those that are safe and permanent. Although entrance into heaven is a free gift, the extent of our inheritance will be determined by our faithfulness here on earth.

Imagine spending time redecorating a room of a house that is on fire! Why waste effort on that which is so temporary? Yet all that we have will be destroyed. Nothing we can

see is forever. Why not send on ahead investments that will have permanent value and reward?

Recently I was browsing in the Travel section of a bookstore. Potential travelers choose from a dozen different books on Hawaii or Europe. They will be saving their money and making other sacrifices to prepare for their vacation, and though it will last but a few weeks they learn as much as they can about their destination. Some even try to learn the language of the country they intend to visit.

With heaven as our final destination, we should be learning all we can about that eternal home. The daughter of a fine Christian man who eventually died of cancer was heard to remark, "In Dad's final weeks he spent more time in heaven than he did on earth." And why not? The sufferings of this life often make us anxious to get on with the life to come. The certainty of heaven helps us cope with the uncertainties of earth.

A knowledge of heaven takes the sting out of death. A dying woman told her children, "Don't give me any further treatment. . . . Don't interfere with God's plan for my glorification." That represents the strong faith of one who walked with God for many years. There is no reason we cannot face death with the same degree of