

The Angel and the Voyager



This spiritually rich art book provides a study that ties together Thomas Cole's two masterful series—ultimately prompting readers to consider the dilemma of mortality and the meaning of life.



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REVERSAL OR RENEWAL?

Early in the year 2000, research geneticists excitedly announced the discovery of a genetic “switch” that might slow down the aging process in humans. They had already found success in using the treatments with earthworms, and they hoped to begin testing the process in humans. Based on their research, they conservatively estimated that within a few years the life expectancy of a newborn might be 120 years (needless to say, decades later, scientists are still trying to solve the longevity puzzle).

The Bible provides us with much-needed perspective when we consider such research. Although these and other new technologies allow us to live healthier and longer lives, the reality is that “our outer man is decaying.” About the time we develop enough wisdom to live life successfully, our bodies begin to deteriorate. Every human being on planet Earth, apart from the end-of-history intervention of Christ’s return, is destined to die. Such is life in a fallen world. While medical technologists are to be commended for their efforts, no research will ever reverse the fact that human bodies in a fallen world are born to waste away and die.

Thankfully, the Christian does not depend on the reversal of aging for his or her hope. Rather than obsessing about reversing the effects of age, we revel in renewal—the renewing of the inner person as the days wear on. This is a paradox in the believer’s life: As the outer body decays and wastes away, our spirit should become stronger and more vibrant. The apostle Paul certainly found this to be true. He who had been “afflicted . . . perplexed . . . persecuted . . .

[and] struck down” (2 Cor. 4:8–9) in service to his Lord became more Christlike and mature with every passing day.

Whether your body is in its prime or is wasting away, either due to extreme physical demands like Paul’s or because it’s drawing near the end of your allotted years of life (Ps. 90:10; 139:16), be encouraged that there is no upper limit on the renewal of the inner person. Whatever your age, invest your energy daily in cultivating spiritual fruit. The legacy you’ll be building to pass on to other generations will far outlive you.

God’s Promise:

Your strength of spirit can always compensate for weakness of body.

REFLECTIONS

A teaching letter encouraging believers to develop a clear mind and a warm heart

GOD’S LOVE LETTER

What we could not have learned from the glories and marvels of Your world, You have revealed through Your Word. We know from the heavens and the earth that you are all-powerful, utterly wise, and everywhere present; Your eternal power and divine nature have clearly been revealed. But it was only through Your special revelation in Scripture that we could know that the One who has dominion over all things is also the Lover of our souls. Your Word is a love letter to the people You created to enjoy forever in loving communion with You. May I be diligent to be a student of Your Word so that it will renew my mind and give me an eternal perspective as I meditate on Your timeless truths.

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Eternity in Our Hearts

“And let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us;
and do confirm for us the work of our hands; yes,
confirm the work of our hands”

Psalm 90:17

Reflection on Psalm 90 is an antidote to the spirit of our age. This psalm is a clarion call to live our transient lives on earth in the light of eternity. Because God has planted eternity in our hearts (Eccles. 3:11), we were never meant to feel completely at home in this world.

The psalm begins with a brilliant contrast between the eternity of God and the evanescence of man. The Lord is “from everlasting to everlasting,” but we appear on earth for only a moment before turning back into dust (vv. 1-2). To accentuate this truth, Moses compounds four metaphors of the brevity of life (vv. 3-6). From the divine perspective, a thousand years is like 24 hours, or even like a three-hour “watch in the night.” The accomplishments of a generation are swept away like a sand castle on the beach, and our lives are like delicate flowers that wither soon after they bloom.

This truth would have been especially vivid to Moses if he wrote these words near the end of the years of wilderness wandering during which the entire generation of Israelites who escaped from Egypt perished. Because they refused to believe that God would protect them when they conquered the promised land, they were consigned to do nothing but kill time for the next 38 years. They were consumed by God’s anger and withered in the wilderness (vv. 7-11; see Heb. 3:16-19). Reflecting upon this, Moses wrote, “We have finished our years like a sigh. As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years, yet their pride is but labor and sorrow; for soon it is gone and we fly away” (vv. 9b-10).

Yet in the pivotal verse of the psalm, we are told that a growing awareness of the brevity of our earthly sojourn is actually an indispensable component for the attainment of wisdom: “So teach us to number our days, that we may present to Thee a heart of wisdom” (v. 12). (I know someone who literally applied this by calculating the precise number of days he had left, based on a seventy-year life. He wrote this number on his daily planner, and reduced the figure by one on each successive day. For him, this became an ongoing reminder of the preciousness of each day.) The better we understand that we are pilgrims and aliens on this planet, the more likely our value system will treasure the eternal over the temporal. This is the wisdom of conforming our wants to reality instead of the illusions promoted by the world system.

Moses cries to the Lord for the restoration of his people (vv. 13-16) and concludes his prayer with a longing for the grace and beauty of God to establish them. “And let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; and do confirm for us the work of our hands; yes, confirm the work of our hands” (v. 17).

We cannot keep score by two systems. Each day we must make the decision to be defined by the eternal, or by default we will allow ourselves to be defined by the temporal. It is only when the focus of our hearts is on the eternal that our work in the temporal arena will endure, because it will be done for Christ rather than for men (Eph. 6:7; Col. 3:23).

HEAVEN, HELL & REWARDS PART 1: HEAVEN

If the essence of hell is separation from the presence of God because of a refusal to bow to His claims (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9), the nature of heaven is union with God through the gift of forgiveness and newness of life that was paid for and offered by Christ. In contrast to the self-imploding isolation of hell, the dynamic of heaven is other-centered relationships with God and His people.

Heaven is the fulfillment of the deepest longings of the heart that we rarely encounter because of our pursuit of lesser desires and pleasures. In one sense, heaven is a place (e.g., the new Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth described in Revelation 21), but in a more profound sense, it is the unmediated presence of a Person (e.g., John 17:3 and Revelation 22:4: “this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. . . . and they shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads”). If this is so, there is a real inconsistency with the many people who want to go to heaven but who show no interest in knowing God while they are on this earth. They are more interested in a sensory paradise than in the supreme pleasure of knowing the infinite-personal Creator.

Distorted Images

There are a variety of misconceptions and trivializations of heaven, and most of these involve a projection of the temporal onto the eternal, the material onto the spiritual, the symbolic image onto the reality of the new creation. Thus, the few biblical descriptions of the eternal state that we have are typically distorted and cheapened. For instance, we think of “streets of gold” and “pearly gates” and arrive at a garish and gaudy image of heavenly existence. But when we look at what Scripture really says, we discover that it is more profound and subtle: “And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; each one of the gates was a single pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass” (Revelation 21:21).

The deficiency is not in the biblical portrayal, but in our childish incapacity to conceive of the radical new reality hinted at in Scripture. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Corinthians 2:9). The sinless, deathless, painless, and tearless realm of heaven will be appropriate for us only when we have been perfectly conformed to the image of Christ in body, soul, and spirit. Our capacities will be vastly enhanced when we are resurrected. In my first book, *God I Don’t Understand*, there is a chapter on the resurrected body that lists some features of the eternal bodies that each believer in Christ will possess:

(1) The resurrection body is a spiritual body, designed to exist in the new heavens and new earth; (2) it consists of glorified flesh; (3) it is a perfect body—it cannot become diseased or die; (4) it will not require sleep; it cannot be fatigued since it is imbued with the power of the Holy Spirit; (5) it will not require food (see 1 Cor. 6:13), but it can eat and assimilate food; (6) like the angels (Matt. 22:23-32; Luke 20:35-36), we will neither marry nor be given in marriage (because we will not die, there is no need to reproduce); (7) this body will be recognizable, though to an extent it can change its form and appearance at will; (8) it can move instantly from place to place; (9) it will be brilliant, reflecting God’s glory (see Rev. 1:16; Dan. 12:3); (10) it will not be subject to time and space restrictions as we now experience them; (11) it

will be free from all sin; (12) the ability to appreciate, worship, and understand the things of God will be much increased, because the mind will be freed from the errors and restraints caused by sin; (13) we will be above the angels in God’s order (see 1 Cor. 6:3); (14) the body will have supernatural abilities; what is normal to that body would appear miraculous to us now; (15) each new body will be unique and yet the body of Christ will still be a corporate entity, the whole body being resurrected at once; and (16) it can be seen and touched, but it can also vanish or appear at will.

Hints of Heaven

Try to imagine a realm in which the downward pulls of (1) the flesh (our capacity to sin), (2) the world system that lures us away from God, and (3) the warfare with the spiritual forces of evil are completely removed. Add to this the amplified capacities of resurrected existence and the implications this has for a radically different sense of time and space (the vast bulk of our brief earthly sojourn is occupied with things such as food, clothing, and transportation that will be unnecessary). Far from being boring, I see our future existence as a context of unlimited creative activity without frustration to the glory of God. The relational richness with God and others will be so great that our most profound earthly experiences of intimacy and joy with other people can only hint at what will be true of all relationships in heaven.

The ultimate joy will be found in the beatific vision of God; our greatest pleasure will be to worship Him and explore the unimaginable depths and mysteries of His person, powers, and perfections. Since He is infinite, there will be endless surprises and ever-new sources of jubilation, delight, and rejoicing. Until then, we would do well to associate the hints of heaven in Scripture with the powerful longings and desires we sense only occasionally. As C. S. Lewis tells us, these images and desires are “not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited” (*The Weight of Glory*).

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