

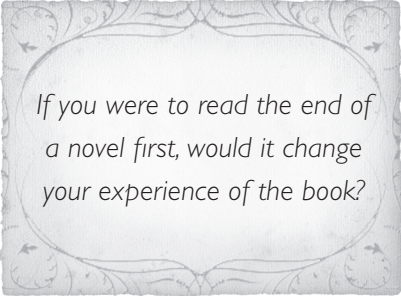


WEEK 1

A Happy Ending

*H*ave you ever been tempted to read the end of a novel first? I confess I have peeked on occasion, especially if the novel has started out a bit slow. To me, a story is only as good as its ending. I've witnessed my husband toss a book across the room when the ending fell short of his expectations. On the other hand, a good ending can save even a tragic story.

If you were to read the end of a novel first, would it change your experience of the book? When I know a book ends well, I'm not tempted to rush through it. I'll persevere through the difficult and laborious chapters. Knowing the ending gives me courage through the nail-biting episodes and hope in the heart-wrenching ones. I'm secure through the twists and turns of the unfolding drama—unafraid of any temporary setbacks. I'm free to enjoy the journey!



If you were to read the end of a novel first, would it change your experience of the book?

My children used to love reading mystery books that allowed the reader to choose the ending. After each chapter, two options were given in solving a mystery. Your choice determined which chapter you read next. The ending changed according to the choices you made while reading.

Isn't that how life is? We make decisions that affect the next chapter of our life. We even make decisions that determine the "ending" to our life's story. That is an enormous responsibility! But God has good news for us. His Word reveals the "mystery." God allows us to know our options and where

they ultimately lead us. He has written a *fabulous* ending to the human story, which really isn't an ending at all! The *last* page of our earthly story will be the *first* page of a heavenly story—"the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."² Knowing the "ending" to our life's story will give us strength in difficult times, courage in fearful times, hope in painful times, and security in uncertain times. *It will free us to fully enjoy our lives.*

Let's begin this first week of our study by discovering *why* we need to know about Heaven. We'll discover that how we live now not only matters for eternity, but how we view eternity affects *how we live now*.

DAY 1 *better by far*

I AM SO HAPPY that you have joined me for this journey into eternity! The Eternal God has given us powerful binoculars that we might peer into the unseen world to come. I need a good, long-lasting look, don't you? What we will see will fill our hearts with hope and joy, positively impacting the way we think and live. The apostle Paul had a life-changing glimpse into the beauty of Heaven, described in *2 Corinthians 12:2-7*. Let's start by reading his vision.

 **How did he describe Paradise?** (vs. 4, 7)

Even if you are new to Bible study, you probably have heard of the Apostle Paul. Once fervent to *persecute* all those who proclaimed Jesus to be the Son of God, he had an encounter with the Risen Christ that made him equally fervent to *persuade* all of that very truth! Scripture claims Paul "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6, KJV) as he traveled from place to place with the message of eternal life. History proves it to be true. His letters in the New Testament have extended his influence throughout the ages and have led countless numbers to faith in Christ. Paul loved God with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength.

⑤ Think about his visit to Heaven described in this passage. **What impact might it have had upon his life?**

⑤ **If you were to have a similar experience, how would it impact your life?**

Undoubtedly, the vision that Paul had of Paradise had much to do with his unwavering dedication to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. He caught a glimpse of a future life that compelled him to spend every ounce of his energy telling the world how to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. I imagine he replayed the heavenly vision over and over in his mind, most especially while he was imprisoned. Read his words written from a jail cell in *Philippians 1:21–25*.

⑤ **How did he describe departing to be with Christ in Heaven versus remaining on Earth?**

You may be doubtful that you could ever make such a statement and mean it! But if you will commit your heart and mind to this study of God's Word, you may come to agree with Paul—to depart and be with Christ is better by far! The goal of our study is to replace any fear of death and doubt of Heaven's existence with a faith and confidence like Paul's. We will learn what Heaven is like, what we will do there, what our new bodies will be like, and how we will interact with others. We will study the Judgment Seat of Christ, what rewards are promised, and how to earn them. We will determine how we live our lives on Earth will affect how we enjoy Heaven. So often we hear "I don't care if I am in the lowliest part of Heaven or not,

just as long as I'm there." Well... is that really the way we will feel when we get there?

Like Paul, the more we know about Heaven, the more passionately we will live on Earth. Jesus repeatedly told His disciples that He had come forth from God and was going back to God. That knowledge permeated every decision, every action, and every reaction of His journey on Earth. Scripture testifies to the many benefits in knowing God's truths concerning Heaven—precious commodities such as peace, joy, and freedom from the demands of the world. So fasten your seatbelt! The next eight weeks will be an adventure into the future that has the power to radically change your present!

Scripture encourages us to know all we can about life after death. Read *1 Thessalonians 4:13–18*. We will study this passage in more detail later.

🕒 **For now, note how Paul begins this passage.** (v. 13)

🕒 **How does he conclude?** (v. 18)

Paul is answering the Thessalonians' questions regarding their loved ones who have died and gone to be with the Lord. Our point for now is this: God does not want us to be ignorant or uninformed about our eternal destinies! Paul's words concerning Heaven were given to bring encouragement and comfort. God knows our questions, our concerns, and our fears concerning life and death. He knows that for us to live well, we need hope for the future.

🕒 **Look back at verse 13.** Paul did not want the Thessalonians to grieve like the rest of men, who have no _____ .

The Thessalonians had come to false conclusions concerning the return of Christ and how it affected their loved ones who had died (those Paul referred to as "asleep" in Christ). Their ignorance resulted in unnecessary grief. They needed to know God's truth concerning life after death. *And so do we!* If we are ignorant of what the Bible teaches about life after death, we too may live without the hope God intends for us to possess.

Heaven should be the focus of our hope on Earth. Biblical hope differs in meaning from our typical use of the word. We often use the word “hope” for something that may or may not happen. In contrast, the Greek word for hope (*elpis*) is defined as “a sure expectation or confidence; to anticipate with pleasure.” Biblical hope is a sure thing! Its focus is not on what *might* happen but rather what *must* happen. It’s a future happening, but a *sure* happening.

Read *Titus 3:4–7*.

🕒 According to verse 7, what have we become heirs to?

🕒 Look back to verses 5–6. How is our hope of eternal life possible?

I love verses that mention each member of the Trinity! The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all desire our company in Heaven and play a role in making it possible. God’s kindness, love, mercy, generosity, and grace enable us to become heirs of eternal life.

🕒 Read the scripture below and circle why our “hope” of Heaven is a sure thing:

“Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.”

(HEBREWS 6:17–19)

Heaven is real, you have God’s *word* on it! He has confirmed it with an oath. Unlike people, God does not go back on His word and He cannot lie. We don’t “hope” for Heaven because it *might* be so or because we *wish* it were so—it *is* so! Its promise can be our anchor, holding us steady in a tumultuous world.

But exactly what are we hoping for? Streets of gold? Pearly gates? Harps and clouds? Eternal life is a *long* time! What will it be like?

Sometimes our understanding of Heaven is so distorted we couldn't possibly look forward to spending eternity there. There is a story about a young boy who hated the idea of Heaven. He would puzzle his Sunday school teachers by stating quite boldly that he didn't want to go to Heaven. Finally someone asked him why. He answered, "I don't like peas." He had heard the Christmas carol "Silent Night" and thought the refrain "sleep in heavenly peace" was actually "sleep in heavenly peas." No wonder Heaven was unappealing! Who would want to sleep in peas?

Our images aren't much better. People have very different concepts of Heaven. Some are valid differences based on how one interprets Scripture. But some of our ideas aren't based on what the Bible says, or even on the character of God. Opinions are often formed from movies, television, comments made at funerals, and personal wish lists.

 **What are some popular images of Heaven?**

 **Are there any that disturb you?**

We've all seen the pictures of Heaven with seemingly bored saints lying around on clouds, strumming a harp every now and then. I confess I used to fear I'd be singing 5000 rounds of *Amazing Grace* every day in Heaven. I grimaced at the thought of an endless worship service. How could anything keep my attention *forever*, after all?

Peter Kreeft writes:


Our pictures of Heaven simply do not move us; they are not moving pictures. Our pictures of heaven are dull, platitudinous and syrupy; therefore, so is our faith, our hope, and our love of Heaven. Dullness, not doubt, is the strongest enemy of faith, just as indifference, not hate, is the strongest enemy of love.³

Kreeft tells a story of an English vicar who was asked what to expect after death. He answered, "Well, if it comes to that, I suppose I shall enter into eternal bliss, but I really wish you wouldn't bring up such depressing

subjects.”⁴ When turning forty or fifty years old, people often tease saying “It’s better than the alternative!” All joking aside, do you hear the implication? Do we really think life on Earth surpasses life in Heaven? Even in jest, we are a far cry from Paul’s statement “to depart and be with Christ is better by far.”

If we have incorrect images of Heaven, we may only desire Heaven because the alternative seems worse. We need a vision, like Paul. Scripture gives us one!

Read *Matthew 13:44–46*.

 **What does Jesus communicate in these parables about the Kingdom of Heaven?**

The Kingdom of Heaven is a treasure beyond measure. Surely if it were an earthly place we would all want to live there. We would most certainly seek to know about it and save our money to go there. Yet, most of us spend more time researching our vacation destinations than we do our eternal one. Are you willing to search the Scriptures for glimpses of your future home?

Some have claimed it is impossible to envision Heaven. After all, Paul did write, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9). Yet the verse that follows it is often overlooked.

Read *1 Corinthians 2:9–10*.

 **Can we understand the deep things of God? If so, how?**

Grasping the wondrous joys of Heaven may be beyond *human* understanding, but we have access to *divine* understanding! God wants us to desire His Heaven, so He gives us revelation knowledge through His Spirit. This is vital to the mission before us. We need the Holy Spirit to open our minds and expand our imaginations. The Bible contains ample information for us to envision Heaven. True, it does not explain everything or give us an

exhaustive understanding, but what God *has* revealed is more than enough to set our hearts on fire.

The goal of this study is to paint a picture of Heaven that will energize our faith, relieve our fears, and enliven the way we live and love. Let's ask God's Spirit to be our Tour Guide each and every day of our journey. Surely a mystery will remain; we will undoubtedly be surprised in a multitude of ways when we arrive in Heaven. But we will live this life in greater victory, knowing as Paul, that to depart and be with Christ is *better by far!*



DAY 2 “do you believe this?”

A FEW YEARS AGO, I was leading a weekly Bible study at a retirement village. God had just begun to prick my interest in the subject of Heaven and I thought it would interest this group of senior citizens. Much to my surprise, I discovered the prevalent attitude to be “I just trust Heaven will be good.” This otherwise knowledgeable group only knew isolated scriptures concerning Heaven. One very sweet and godly lady insisted we would not know one another in Heaven. When I asked her why she believed this way, she explained: “Because if we knew one another, then we would know who was *not* in Heaven. Scripture says there will be no more tears in Heaven. How could there not be tears if a loved one is missing?” Her reasoning was understandable, but not entirely accurate. Leading her to Bible passages that indicated we would recognize one another in Heaven did not help. It only upset her, which unsettled me and caused me to question my choice of topics for our Bible study. What I thought would bring comfort was causing discomfort! Being a coward, I planned to change topics the next week.

But God had a purpose in our study. That very week, this precious woman's grown son died unexpectedly. At the funeral, she pulled me aside and praised God for our study on Heaven. She believed with all her heart that the Lord placed her in the study because He knew this day was before her. Truths she previously fought were now her greatest source of comfort and hope. She couldn't get over God's goodness to her.

Our question this week is “Why should we study Heaven?” As we learned yesterday, one reason is to get a clear, accurate, and scriptural picture of Heaven. Like the Thessalonians, our misunderstandings can lead to