

The Message of the Weight of Glory

Following Jesus for the Joy

A paraphrase¹ by Jon Ball

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

—Paul, 2 Corinthians 4:17-18

We're Far Too Easily Pleased

These days we have been taught that being good means we have to be *unselfish*. But if you could ask almost any of the great Christians of history, they would have said that being good, for a Christian, means to *love*. A devious switch has been pulled on us. We've been fooled into accepting a negative idea, *not* being selfish, as a substitute for the positive idea, love. We've been confused about this in western culture ever since Immanuel Kant began teaching that an action is morally good or noble to the degree that it's not in our own self-interest. But this has absolutely nothing to do with the Christian faith! It may have come originally from the Greek philosophers known as the Stoics, but it's quite opposite from what Jesus himself taught.

Love your neighbor as yourself, Jesus said. Love challenges me to get something good for another person. But unselfishness gives me the idea that I should go without something good myself. This is what makes the substitution so devious—on one level they seem so similar, yet they're so very different. Unselfishness means our goal is *doing without* something we want, where love means our goal is someone else's happiness.

Certainly, Jesus talked a lot about denying our self, about taking up our crosses to follow him, about dying to our self. But he never talked about self-denial as a *goal* in itself. If you read the Gospel accounts, you will find it striking that almost every time Jesus says something like that, he also appeals to our desires. For example, look at Mark 10:23-31, where Jesus says we'll get a hundred times what we give up. It almost seems like Jesus *wants* us to desire good for ourselves—more good than we can even wrap our tiny minds around.

I love how C. S. Lewis put it:

If we consider the Gospel's unblushing promises of rewards, and the staggering nature of those rewards, it seems that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with sex and alcohol and ambition, when God is offering us infinite joy. We are like ignorant children who want to keep on making mud pies in the slums because we can't understand we're being offered a vacation at a tropical beach. We are far too easily pleased!²

Inherent Rewards

But I can almost hear you asking, is it really okay to *want* the rewards of following Jesus? There's an ugly word, "mercenary," which means a soldier willing to fight for anyone who will pay. Mercenaries can't claim to be noble as patriots—they're not loyal to any country. In fact, they aren't loyal at all. Their so-called loyalties can be bought by the highest bidder. They can't claim

¹ I love *The Weight of Glory*, an address by C. S. Lewis, which I try read every year. It has deeply affected my thinking and life; but I think its language in the context of 1940's Britain may have slowed its popularity among current readers. Yet there's a mother lode of gold in this essay, and this article is my stab at mining out some of his nuggets and putting them into circulation. At points, I've quoted Lewis verbatim, and at other places I've skipped entire steps in his logical progression. I hope some people will be spurred to read the original address by Lewis, and hopefully this article can serve as a sort of reader's guide.

² *The Weight of Glory*, slightly paraphrased

to be noble because they fight for freedom or justice. They fight to make themselves rich, and they don't care if they're fighting oppression or enforcing it.

Some people might say you're a mercenary if you obey God for the rewards; that you're somehow less moral; that Christians should be nobler than that. Let's think about our motives for a minute.

We know motivations matter a lot to Jesus. To boil down his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (especially in Matthew 6), God doesn't just care what we do. God cares about the *heart* behind our actions. That's pretty radical. You can give generously, you can pray, you can even fast, and God will not respond—if you're not motivated by the right rewards! Jesus wants us to seek rewards, the *right* rewards. Our motivation matters as much as our actions themselves.

Now, there are different kinds of rewards. Someone who marries a millionaire for their money is a gold-digger and a hypocrite, but someone who marries a millionaire out of love doesn't trouble us. Why not? Because money's not the natural reward for love, and we all know it. But marriage is a proper reward for love, and there's nothing immoral about desiring it!

We say that recording artists sell out when they compromise their art for the sake of popularity and money; but nothing's immoral about creating great music out of a passion for music and the desire to bring a message to the world. A politician who seeks money and fame is a mercenary, but nothing's wrong with wanting to be elected because you're passionate about peace and justice for the community. In fact, that's noble, because a better society is the natural reward for governing well.

So proper rewards aren't just tacked onto the activity, but are the natural fruit and product of that activity. Jesus, contrary to Kant, urges us to pursue that kind of reward, actively. It's not selfishness. But it is in our best interest. And it's moral.

Some people may feel that wanting eternal life is a mercenary reward. It seems like a tacked-on bribe to obey God. And avoiding hell as a motive troubles us even more. "Fire insurance," some people call it. But Jesus talked constantly about the joys of the coming Kingdom of God. Not only that, he went on about the terrifying realities of hell enough to make most of us, if not all of us, pretty uncomfortable. Jesus painted our inheritance in the age to come as the natural fulfillment of loving God, and hell as the natural result of distancing ourselves from God.

Longings Too Deep For Words

Recently, I had an experience I'm almost embarrassed to share. I was at a conference and a worship leader began to play the guitar, which I love. Then she began singing a beautiful song in Spanish, and I felt like I was being pulled in by her rich, deep voice, and I felt like I couldn't resist this pull towards her. Her singing ached me somewhere deep inside—I'm not even sure where. I only know I sat on the edge of my seat, watching and listening, and I didn't want her song to end. When it did end, I wanted her to sing again, and (this feels more embarrassing) I felt abandoned somehow. The song kept running through my mind and heart. What was I feeling?

At first, (also embarrassing!) I thought my feelings were about her. I actually had to check my heart to see if it was lust. But then I realized it wasn't that . . . it was the beauty of her voice, of the song, of the guy dancing to her music, the beauty of the guitar, all calling out a deep longing in my soul, a longing too deep for words, a longing that I can't find words to write about. Haven't you had that feeling? And I realized that in the past I have confused that feeling with lust or a sweet tooth craving or . . . or . . . well, lots of longings I have no name for. Sometimes it feels like restlessness, or loneliness.

Now, if we are made for the new heavens and the new earth, then we *already have* the desire for our true home, but our desire won't be attached to its true object yet. We may find ourselves driven to pursue other pleasures, attempting to meet that yearning, not realizing those things can

never meet that aching need. We will never be fulfilled by anything less than full union with God. Ironically, we find ourselves caught: our desire drives us to pursue certain things, which compete with the one thing that would really satisfy us!

If our true home is outside this world, then any good *earthly* things we pursue can only be false pleasures that can never quench our thirst. We really should obey our thirst, but we have to be careful that what we're buying can actually quench it! The good things we eat and drink here are only symbols of what we truly long for.

It's very difficult to talk about these desires for soul-satisfaction, and I'm having a hard time trying. It's like trying to expose a desperate secret we each carry deep inside—buried deep because it hurts. It's so painful that we try to dismiss it with words like *nostalgic* and *romantic*—or just laugh it off. We can't talk about it because it's a desire for something no one's ever actually experienced, in this world. But we can't hide it because our experience keeps bringing it up.

Sometimes we take the shortcut of calling it *beauty* and acting like that settles it. Or we think it was certain good times in our past. But we're mistaken. If we could actually go back to those moments, we wouldn't really find what we desired, but just the reminder of it. Those memories were actually moments when we were *feeling* that desire, not actually having it fulfilled, like my experience of the worship leader's song.

When we turn to music or movies or anything else because we think they have what we desire, they always let us down. Because what we long for isn't actually *in* them: they're just stirring up our longings.

When I was sitting there entranced by her song, I searched my feelings. Did I want the woman? Lust means wanting to possess something, and the singer was beautiful. But that wasn't it. Her voice was amazing, but that wasn't it, either. Was it the song? Well, as I pondered, no. The words weren't particularly striking. The melody was pretty, but not enough to pull me in like that. I even tried singing the song again, but that feeling's gone and I can't recapture it.

Delayed Gratification

Then the source of the feelings dawned on me: they were inside me. Her playing and singing awoke a longing already in me, and I had assumed those feelings were to something outside me—the woman, the music, the song . . . I do long for something outside me, but not something in this world. I long for eternal intimacy, eternal beauty, eternal reality, which I will never find in a person or a work of art.

If I hadn't realized that these things were images of what I really desired, I could have easily turned them into idols. Have you ever pursued sexual lust in some way, only to be disappointed afterwards? Our slight momentary pleasure turns into desolation. We follow a promise of joy and delight, but in the end, it delivers regret, shame, and a sense of rejection.

Maybe you have been let down by following a craving for something else—food, a drink, an experience—and the high was quickly eaten up by the crash. Sometimes the high lingers, but eventually you come down. It always leaves me feeling desolate, worse than before.

What's happening to us is called idolatry. We have taken the good gift from God, and mistakenly thought that's what we need. The gift only reflects the eternal pleasure we really desire: God alone will satisfy our heart and soul, and his gifts only point to Him. We have mistaken the image for the reality.

Unfortunately, my first response is usually foolish: I go back to the same place to see if its promise will come true if I go further down that path.

When we turn good things into idols, like all false gods they break the hearts of their worshippers. They are not really the things we long for. They cannot give soul-satisfaction. They're only the shadows, the mirages, the counterfeits of the real source of joy that awaits us.

Attacked But Not Destroyed

In some ways this shy but persistent inner voice teaches us about the joy we're waiting for. This voice should be listed as an endangered species, because almost our entire education has tried to silence this voice, and almost all our culture's philosophies have tried to convince us that our good can be found on this earth.

Take as an example, the very popular twin philosophies of social progress and of biological evolution. The philosophy of social progress tells us we are getting better and better as a human race, decade by decade and century by century, in a moral and political sense. The theory of biological evolution says that the species are getting better and better in a physical sense. Both of them were made popular around 150 years ago by people who wanted to stamp out belief in God and the supernatural.³

Yet ironically, these philosophies prove what they're trying to deny: that our real goal is somewhere else! Notice how they try to convince us that this earth is our true home. First, they try to persuade us that earth can be made into heaven, because we are evolving into better and stronger and smarter beings, and that our science and technology will solve all our problems. They try to convince us that the problems we face here, and hate so much, can be resolved here, in order to pacify our gut sense that we're living in exile here, that this isn't our true home.

Then they tell us that this blissful goal is a long way off in the future, to pacify our gut sense that paradise is not here and now, that things are not how they're supposed to be.

Finally, they need to keep our longing for ultimate reality from waking up. That would undermine the whole illusion! So they use lots of rhetoric to confuse us, so we won't remember that even if paradise did appear on earth, we would lose it when we die. Every single generation would lose it, one after another. And even if we did overcome death someday, think about it: the sun will still go supernova eventually. All the social and biological development we can imagine can't overcome the second law of thermodynamics! (This basic law of physics tells us that everything is running out of energy.)

No, the modern philosophies can't convince us—we still have a deep longing no natural happiness will satisfy. This is why new age philosophies and postmodern thinking have sprung up in our time. Yet they turn out to be just as bankrupt as the previous philosophies—but that's another subject.

Do we have any reason to believe that our souls will ever be satisfied? Just because we're hungry, that doesn't prove that we'll be fed. Someone lost in the desert may be hungry and never find anything to eat. But doesn't our hunger give us pretty good evidence that human beings live by eating, and that our world really does provide food to sustain our bodies?

In the same way, this shy voice, this soul hunger for paradise, doesn't prove (unfortunately) that we will enjoy eternal life. But I think it does give pretty good evidence that we were made for more than this world, and that a glorious new world where justice is at home actually will exist. To change the analogy, we might fall in love with someone, and never have a relationship with them. But it's hard to imagine that anyone would fall in love in a world without sexuality. Our feelings of love gives us pretty strong evidence that our species is sexual by nature—and our longing for

³ T.H. Huxley, for one. He was a major promoter of Darwin's theories, and an outspoken atheist. By the way, it's interesting to note that he also had the explicit goals of proving the superiority of the so-called white race over other ethnicities and of men over women, and found Darwinism an excellent vehicle for promoting these values.

things like world peace and personal security gives us pretty strong evidence that we're made for that glorious new world.

Strange Symbols

So we're hunted by this vague uncertain desire, not even sure of its goal, and barely able to see what the ages to come would look like—even when we're looking in the right direction. God has given humans an incredibly powerful gift, the gift of imagination. I've found that it greatly benefits my soul to invest good time and energy in imagining the true reality we can't see physically. The Bible gives us a lot to work with here.

Of course, Scripture uses lots of symbolism to describe of the new heavens and the new earth. By definition, they're outside our experience. But to communicate anything new, we always use things inside our experience that we can understand. So, Scripture paints the new creation using symbols or images, just like our own desires come up with symbolic images of what will satisfy us. We don't really believe our new home will be paved with precious metals anymore than we believe that's it's just an eternal sunrise or a brilliant symphony.

But the biblical images have authority. The Bible was written by people who were closer to God than most of us are. The powerful truth of its words have been tested by centuries of life-experience by people of many different cultures and life circumstances.

But it's funny—although the Bible's imagery about glory is authoritative, it doesn't really appeal me! It feels irrelevant to my life, and even leaves me a little cold. It doesn't *feel* like good news right away. But isn't this what we should expect of truly good news? If the Bible only told me what I can dream up on my own, then it would be no better than me. Maybe the message is such a stretch for me precisely because it's so much greater than my own dreams and fantasies.

If the Gospel teaches something real, outside of us, we can't afford to make the mistake of avoiding the parts that seem confusing or ugly. We actually need those parts the most—it's what we don't like or disagree with that will challenge us, that will shake us up, that will bring God's revolutionary way of thinking into our lives. We need the Holy Spirit to give us the grace of courage and of understanding to deal with those parts—but let's not skip over them.

Let's turn to some of those difficult points now.

Five Species of Promises

C. S. Lewis says all the promises of Scripture about our eternal reward fit roughly into five main categories. God promises:

1. We will be **with Jesus**
2. We will be **like Jesus**
3. We will **receive "glory"** (described by an enormous wealth of imagery)
4. We will be **feasted, fed, and entertained**
5. We will be given some sort of **official position in the universe**—ruling cities, judging angels, and so on.

Now, why do we need any more promises than the first one? Isn't being with him enough? Intellectually, that covers the other four. Emotionally, it's the one we really desire, right? (Although if you're like me, you may be excited about the feasting, too!)

Well, it is true that if we have God we have everything.⁴ But every analogy breaks down, so having only one symbol could mislead us; thus, we need the dozens of symbols the Scripture gives us, each to correct and expand on the previous images.

⁴ The great African theologian, Augustine, said, "He who has God has everything. He who does not have God has nothing. He who has God and everything has no more than he who has God alone."

“Hold on!” I can hear you saying. “The first one isn’t a symbol! We really *will* be with Jesus.” Yes, that’s true. But when we think about being with him, we have to use our imaginations. If you think about the images you come up with, you’ll probably see how symbolic they really are. Our images usually focus more on the humanity of Jesus than his divinity. And, in fact, the great poets, prophets, and preachers who focus on this promise that we’ll be with him tend to use very earthly images, usually marriage imagery, and often even erotic imagery.

Now these aren’t bad images. In fact, it was Jesus who introduced the picture of himself as the bridegroom and us as his bride. The Song of Solomon and the Old Testament prophets rhapsodize with the language of lovers, to help us grasp the joy of intimacy and the power of the union we will have with God. I personally have been helped by this imagery a great deal, guided by some of the great saints like John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and John Donne, and I pray that I’ll grow even more in this.

But my point is that these images are still only symbols, which capture reality in one way, but mislead us in other ways. So God has filled the Scriptures with a variety of promises for us—not to teach us that anything besides God will ultimately delight our souls in bliss, but because God is more than a person. For example, Revelation doesn’t describe streets of gold because gold will really satisfy us, but because God is so precious and valuable that in comparison, gold can be used like mere asphalt.

If our only symbols were those relational images, then our concept of being with Jesus would be limited to our own experiences of human love. Even our best relationships are filled with tensions and strains. Often they become monotonous. Thank God for all the other kinds of promises he’s given to expand our imaginations!

Glory

The idea of glory is prominent in the New Testament and early Christian writings. The Bible constantly describes salvation with promises of receiving glory, getting crowns, thrones, and shining like the sun.⁵ Maybe I’m just dull, but those promises don’t fill me with excitement when I read them, and somehow I doubt they appeal to many of us these days.

Glory can mean two things. It can mean fame, but that doesn’t seem godly. Isn’t fame a competitive desire of our egos, from hell rather than heaven? But then the other meaning sounds ridiculous, because glory can mean “brilliant light.” But who wants to turn into a living neon sign?

However, I’ve found many thoughtful and godly people—ancient theologians like Augustine and Aquinas, brilliant imaginatives like Madeleine L’Engle and Dorothy L. Sayers, even cutting edge thinkers like N. T. Wright and Dallas Willard—take this idea of glory literally, as fame or honor. Not fame given by other people, but fame with God: God’s approval, honor, and appreciation, as strange as that may seem.

When you think about it, this view is quite Biblical. Jesus presses the point with his parable that ends with God’s great compliment, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” Remember that no one can enter the Kingdom of God except like a child. Children love to be praised, and they don’t try to hide it. If you visit a family with young kids, they will beam with delight as you admire their “artwork” hanging on the refrigerator.

Here’s the irony: we think of seeking fame as prideful and egotistical—and with good reason: just peruse celebrity stories in the tabloids! However we may have twisted and warped it, though, praise starts out as one of the most childlike pleasures. Even dogs and horses soak it up. This

⁵ Doing a search on “glory” in the New Testament makes for a great study, but here are a few references if you’d like to look at them yourself: Matthew 13:43, John 12:23, John 17:22, Romans 2:6-10, 2 Corinthians 3:18, 2 Cor. 4:16-18, James 1:12, 1 Peter 5:4, Rev. 3:21.

kind of pleasure seems to be humble, not prideful. We've all felt this joy at some point, when a teacher said, "Outstanding work!" or when our boss held us up as a model to imitate.

I have been steeped in false humility for as long as I can remember, which makes it hard for me to admit that ambition could be good or biblical. I know from experience how quickly this desire to please our superiors turns into the deadly crack cocaine of self-admiration.

But don't you remember how it feels for a quick moment, before it turns poisonous, when this pleasure is still innocent and pure? That's a hint, a shadow, of what our souls will experience when and if we are redeemed, as we stand before the one we were created to please, when we learn we've actually pleased him!

On that day we won't have room for even a trace of vanity, no space for the old, miserable illusion that we did it ourselves. Our souls will rejoice with complete innocence. The word "duty" won't feel burdensome anymore—it will describe what we love to do, what we were made to do, what we long to do, in order to get the praise the Bible commands us to pursue.

Hearing God praise us—can you believe it? That will heal our deepest insecurities. At the same time it will destroy our false pride, as fully like the ring of power was annihilated in the rolling lava, deep in Mount Doom. Perfect humility makes modesty irrelevant. If God is satisfied with us, his handiwork, then shouldn't we be satisfied with ourselves? When God created us, "God saw that it was very good." My self-hatred contradicts God, and thus reveals my deep-rooted arrogance.

Two Divine Thumbs Way Up or Down

Lewis surprised me by challenging a conception I held, that the most important thing about me is what I believe about God. He comments, "I read in a periodical the other day that the fundamental thing is how we think of God. By God Himself, it is not! How God thinks of us is not only more important, but infinitely more important. Indeed, how we think of Him is of no importance except in so far as it is related to how He thinks of us."⁶

In other words, what we think about God isn't really that relevant in the end. It is relevant, but only to the degree that it affects what God thinks of us.

Jesus often speaks of the day of judgment. There's a pleasant topic! But sarcasm aside, the idea of standing before the judgment throne scares most of us, so we avoid thinking about it. But as Jesus preached "the good news of God," he said we *will* face God and give an account for our lives. How could that possibly be a part of good news?

Because he *also* promises us that we can share in his glory. In other words, that God will approve of us and praise us like Jesus himself! In other words, any of us can choose to pass that final examination, that day of accountability. Unbelievable!

Note that we really have to choose it. And only Jesus' work on the cross makes it possible. But imagine this: standing before God's throne, on judgment day. We may be completely terrified, or we may be full of joy. We will look God in the face, and his expression might scare us to death, or it might thrill every fiber of our being.

Try to wrap your mind around that. To please God! To be part of what makes God happy! That God would really love us—not just be amused by us, but that he would like us, love us, be delighted by us, like an artist delights in a masterpiece or a mother delighting in her newborn baby—that seems impossible. That is heavy glory, "a weight of glory," as Paul calls it. Glory so massive that our minds can't carry the thought for long before we drop it from fatigue. But it's real, whether we can believe it or not, whether we can understand it or not, whether we can remember

⁶ *The Weight of Glory*

it or not.

Welcomed In

Back to our spiritual longings which may be awakened by moving music, or the beauty of nature, or breath-taking art. Have you noticed they often bring up some bittersweet feeling? The bitterness comes from the pain of not fully getting in—the sweetness pulls us in for a minute, and we feel like we're in another world that's real, and good, and right, that's peaceful and just. It feels like home. Where we really belong. But then—the moment's gone. We feel like spectators looking in from the outside. We feel bittersweet pangs because we weren't invited to the party, and we weren't asked to join the game. We weren't even acknowledged. It's as if the people in that world don't care if we exist and don't miss us when we're gone.

And now we can see how God's promise of glory actually matters deeply to us and meets our soul longings that we've felt all along. By searching into this idea that first seemed irrelevant and unattractive, we found that the Bible really does offer good news. We've found that glory means God's approval, God's acknowledgment of us, God's pleasure in us. He sees us, he responds to us, he really cares about us. Glory means we will be welcomed in, into the heart of reality.

Could it be true? Or is this just a rabbit trail of words? In fact, the New Testament does talk about being welcomed personally. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." Earlier in chapter 8 he said, "Anyone who loves God is known by him." Striking, because you would expect him to say, "Anyone who loves God *will know him*," but he doesn't. Isn't it also strange, since God knows everything, anyway?

Keep in mind that the Jewish understanding of knowledge always meant intimate personal relationship. That's why Mary said to the angel, "How could I be pregnant, when I've never known a man?" Clearly she knew many men in our way of using the term. She had met men, talked with them, knew many things about them. But she hadn't *known* a man, if you catch her drift.

Paul's saying God will relate us in a deeply personal, intimate way. Jesus uses the word in the same way, but scarier, when he warns us that we might face God and hear, "I never knew you. Depart from me."

What a horrible thought. Dreadfully scary. And hard to accept. Somehow, God who is present everywhere, can banish us from his presence. If we choose to ignore him and shut him out now, in the end we may be left out ourselves, utterly and absolutely *outside*—rejected, exiled, denied, thrown out, ultimately ignored.

Or we can be called in, welcomed, received, and acknowledged by God. The door we've been outside all our lives will open, finally, and we will make it into the true inner circle of reality. Suddenly glory sounds very important. "Every day we walk on the razor edge between these two incredible possibilities."⁷

So that restless feeling we all have, of being on the outside but aching to be on the inside, turns out to not to be paranoid or neurotic. In fact, that feeling reflects the reality of our situation. To be invited and welcomed inside at last would be more glory and honor than we ever deserved, and would utterly heal that lifelong aching loneliness.

Shine On

Let's go back to the other meaning of glory, glory as brightness and splendor. Jesus did promise in Matthew 13:43, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." And in Revelation 2:28 he said, "To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star." Of course,

⁷ *The Weight of Glory*—surprise, surprise!

in one sense God's already given us the morning star, which you can enjoy on many fine mornings if you get up early enough.

But we want so much more than that! We don't just want to *see* or *hear* beauty, although we enjoy that. We want something else, which we can hardly describe. Don't we long to enter into the beauty we experience, to be united with it, to bathe in it and have it soak into us, to become part of it?

Our great myths and poetry promise this—that we will become one with the beauty of nature. But we won't. At least, not yet. But if we believe that one day God will give us the morning star, and make us shine with the splendor of the sun, then both the ancient myths and the modern poetry may almost be true in one sense.

We still live on the outside of the world right now, on the wrong side of the door. So, for example, we feel the freshness and purity of the morning, but it does not make us fresh and pure. We can't mingle with all the beauty and splendors we see.

But all the pages of the New Testament rustle with the rumor of one day . . . one day, God willing, when we *will get in*. When our souls become perfect and willing to obey God by our own free choice, as willing as nature which obeys God without life, then our souls will put on the glory of nature. Actually, nature is only God's rough draft of the greater glory we'll put on.

Let's be careful not to confuse this with the pagan and Buddhist teachings that we'll be absorbed into nature. God created nature, and it will pass away; we will outlive it. When all the suns and galaxies are dust, you will still be alive. Nature is just a symbol, but it's a biblical symbol. The Bible takes the most glorious, amazing parts of creation, such as the brilliance of the sun, and tells us that those only dimly reflect the awesome brilliance of what we're invited to become.

That's one image of eternal life—an attempt to use our words and our current experience to describe something far greater than our words or our experience could possibly grasp. That's what Jesus and the biblical writers try to capture with the word "glory."

Torrents of Joy

Right now, if we're reborn in Christ, our spirit lives by feeding directly on God. But our bodies actually receive life from God, too, but indirectly, through food, air, and water. God implanted the energy they contain, which they pass on to our bodies, in nature when he created the universe.

And isn't it striking how much pleasure we get from these simple necessities. I could imagine a world where eating and drinking were just functional, like taking a pill with nutrients or absorbing moisture through our skin. But there's nothing better than a cold drink when you're hot and tired after running hard. And we eat at our celebrations because we get such pleasure from the incredible variety of great foods—and desserts—people create.

We experience these physical pleasures because God's energy saturates this world with joy. Although physical matter tones down God's joy and beauty, these physical pleasures often overwhelm us, and can even become addictive.

If these small streams of joy and beauty intoxicate us, what would it be like to drink straight from the river itself? Imagine! Yet that's what God has promised us. We, our whole self, will "drink joy from the fountain of joy." Augustine said the rapture of our rescued soul will overflow into our glorified body.

We just can't imagine this torrent of passion and pleasure. And it would be dangerous to try, because our appetites are broken and twisted right now. But we desperately need to understand God's promise, and hold onto it, because otherwise we'll believe the insipid pictures our culture feed us about heaven.

I saw a bumper sticker proclaiming gleefully something about being the life of the party in hell. Hell sure sounds like fun these days, because who wants to sit on clouds playing harps? I'd be bored after a few days, and for eternity? Miserable.

That's a scam the world and the devil would love to play on us. In fact, the New Testament doesn't really talk much about heaven as the place we go when we die. Yes, we do, but our ultimate goal isn't heaven but the *new heavens and new earth* that God is going to create once he destroys this one by fire. The concept of heaven as our eternal home was popularized in the Middle Ages, and the world and the devil love to play up the idea that we'll live forever in an ethereal place as ghosts with no substance or feeling. They want us to forget that we've been promised actual *resurrection*, like Jesus, with new, physical bodies like his.

In reality, God said this creation was good, very good. He intends to refine it like gold through fire, and remake the world physically, with all the good aspects we now experience, but without any of the injustice, oppression, sickness, thorns, or the death which rules in our present age. And every pleasure we can taste now in this creation is a merely sip that dimly reflects the Niagara Falls of joy into which we'll be plunged for ever and ever.

Here and Now

Let me close with one important application. Jesus showed us that in his Kingdom, the cross comes before the crown. We've been invited past the cold, painful reality of this present world, to follow our master into the heart of reality, and into all the joy there. The crucial point, of course, is following him.

You may be asking me, "What difference does all this make, practically?" Great question—and I hope you are asking it! How do we apply this on a Monday morning?

Well, it be bad for you to think too much about your own potential glory in the age to come. But it's impossible for you to think too much or too often about the potential future glory of your friends and neighbors. Lewis put it so well:

The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid on my back daily, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, so heavy that it will break the backs of the proud. It is a serious thing to live in a community of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most boring uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption that you meet now, if at all, only in your worst nightmare. All day long, we are in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations.

We should always deal with one other in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, with the awe and thoughtfulness they deserve: in all friendships, all love, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life, compared to ours, is the life of a gnat. But it is immortals with whom we joke, work, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.⁸

This doesn't mean we should be serious all the time. It's good to play. But our enjoyment must be the kind of fun that people have when they take each other seriously—and it's really the most fun: humor without insults, superiority, or disrespect.

Loving our neighbor from this perspective requires real love, costly love. Loving the sinner, even while we take their sins seriously and grieve over them. Sacrificial love, not mere tolerance,

⁸ *The Weight of Glory*, of course, slightly paraphrased.

political correctness, or indulging each other. Those are only parodies of real love, like sarcasm parodies real joy.

“Your neighbor is almost the holiest object presented to your senses.”⁹ Jesus said that how you treat your poorest neighbor is how you are treating him. And your neighbors who are Christians will be with you in the new world, forever. Not only that, but they are already holy in a special way, because Jesus himself really does live in them, here and now.

⁹ Ditto.