

MYSTERIES
— OF THE —
AFTERLIFE

RON JONES



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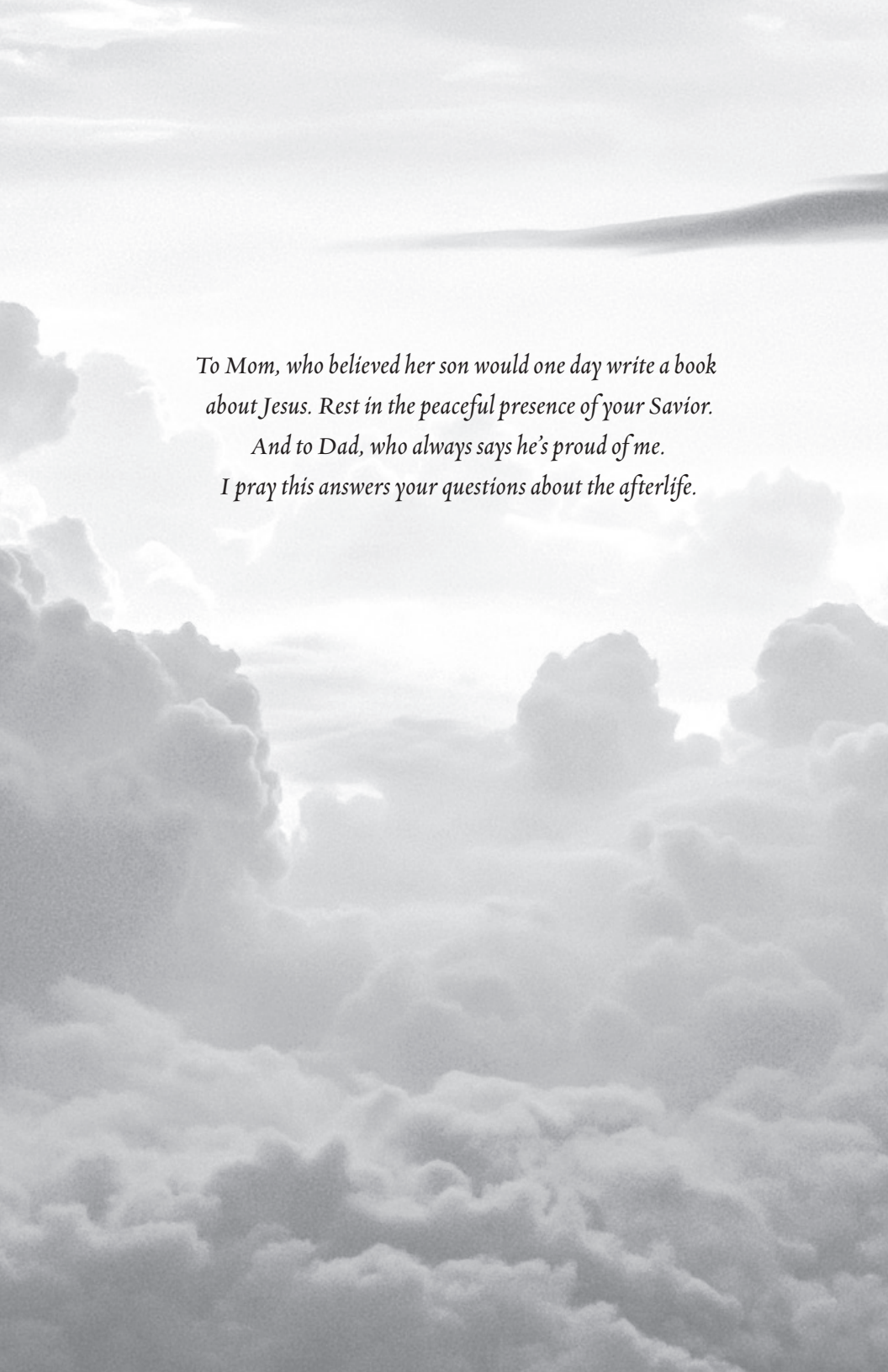
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*To Mom, who believed her son would one day write a book
about Jesus. Rest in the peaceful presence of your Savior.*

And to Dad, who always says he's proud of me.

I pray this answers your questions about the afterlife.

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RON JONES

Virginia Beach, Virginia

CONTENTS

Introduction	9
1. A Traveler's Guide to Your Final Destination	13
2. Can We Really Live Forever?	19
3. Eternity in Our Hearts	23
4. The Last Enemy	29
5. Your Appointment with Death	35
6. Between Death and the Future Resurrection	41
7. Sixty Seconds After We Die	47
8. Can We Communicate with the Dead?	57
9. Saul and the Witch of Endor	63
10. Are You a Citizen of Heaven?	69
11. Is Your Name Written in Heaven?	77
12. The Father's Big House	85
13. Is Heaven for Real?	95
14. Heaven and the New Jerusalem	101
15. Imagine There's a Heaven	109
16. Will the Dead Rise Again?	121
17. The Seven Resurrections of the Dead	131
18. Can God Resurrect a Cremated Body?	139
19. Was John Lennon Right About Hell?	149
20. What Jesus Said About Hell	159
21. The Believer's Day of Reward	169
22. Angels Watching Over Us	179
23. Angels in the Realms of Glory and Beyond	189
24. Eternity for Those Who Can't Believe	197
An Afterword About the Afterlife	207
Notes	213
About the Author	217

IMAGINE THERE'S A HEAVEN

Some things in life are completely beyond description. For example, after returning from a particularly stunning vacation location like the Hawaiian Islands, words fail us as we try to explain to friends what we saw and experienced. Photos help. Some pictures are truly worth a thousand words. However, we quickly say things like, “You just had to be there!”

Recently, this happened to me while leading a “Something Good Radio” tour of the seven churches of Asia Minor. After visiting the ancient places of worship located along the western coast of modern day Turkey, we set sail for Athens. Along the way, we stopped off at some of the beautiful Greek islands located in the midnight blue Mediterranean Sea. Santorini Island was everyone’s favorite. Alluring black sand beaches, breathtaking beauty, incredible outdoor restaurants, ancient cities, and an active volcano are some of the reasons people travel to this exotic place from all around the world. As our ship slowly approached the land mass, it was like experiencing a living postcard. In fact, most travel brochures that advertise trips to the Greek islands use a view from the high cliffs of Santorini to entice travelers. It’s not hard to see why.

Our ship anchored in the bay and we disembarked into smaller

boats that took us to shore. Once in port, we rode the cable car up the steep mountain to the top of the island where hotels, restaurants, and other beautiful whitewashed buildings with blue, domed rooftops virtually hang on the cliffs overlooking the sea below. From there, I called my wife. Sadly, Cathryn was not able to join me on this spiritual tour. She stayed home with our two school-age children. My first words to her were, “I’m standing in the place where we must come to enjoy our second honeymoon. I wish you were here right now.”

As I tried to describe to my wife the spectacular scene before my eyes, words indeed failed me. The best I could do was bring home an artist’s painting of a typical view of Santorini, if there is such a thing. I found it in one of the quaint shops during my brief visit to the island paradise. We framed the eight-by-ten canvas and today it hangs in our bedroom as a reminder of where we soon plan to celebrate the blessings of a long, fruitful marriage.

The Bible says, “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). That means Santorini is not heaven; it’s not even close to what I can only imagine in my mind about heaven. Heaven is better than any place we might believe is the most heavenly place on earth.

Beatles legend John Lennon told us to imagine there’s no heaven. Instead, let’s allow our imaginations of heaven to run like wild horses. Yes, imagine there’s a heaven; it’s easy if we open the pages of Scripture to the Revelation of Jesus Christ and read another of John’s description of the holy city.

IMAGINE A MASSIVE PLACE

We’ve already established that heaven is the Father’s big house. Jesus said it has “many rooms,” leading Christians for centuries to sing about their “mansion in the sky” (John 14:1-3). Revelation 21–22 gives one of the most detailed descriptions of heaven found anywhere in the Bible. Let’s return there for a description of its size.

Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying,

“Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed—on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, 144 cubits by human measurement, which is also an angel’s measurement (Revelation 21:9-17).

Words didn’t fail John when the angel of the Lord showed him “the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God” (v. 10). The Holy Spirit gave him every word the Father wants us to know about the heavenly city, even though John’s description leaves us desiring to know more. One sense we get from the Apocalypse is that heaven is a massive place.

For example, John says the length, width, and height of the city are each 12,000 stadia. What is a stadia? A stadia is an ancient Greek and Roman measurement that equals about six hundred seven feet. So, imagine something like a cube approximately 1500 miles up, down, and across. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, that’s the distance from the eastern seaboard of the United States to the Rocky Mountains, or from the southernmost tip of Florida to Maine.

John goes on to say the wall of the city is one hundred forty-four cubits. How long is a cubit? The length of a cubit was based on the distance from the elbow to the fingertips and varied between different ancient people groups (approximately seventeen to twenty inches).³⁵ So,

if my math is correct, the city's wall is the height of a twenty-four-story building. Are you beginning to get a sense of the grandness of the heavenly city? In his book *The Wonder of Heaven*, author Ron Rhodes notes,

Someone calculated that if this structure is cube-shaped, it would allow for 20 billion residents, each having his or her own private 75-acre cube. If each residence were smaller, then there is room to accommodate 100 thousand billion people. Even then, plenty of room is left over for parks, streets, and other things you would see in any normal city.³⁶

IMAGINE A WELCOMING PLACE

John mentions twelve gates and twelve foundations. That makes three entries on each of the four sides of the cubed city. Architecturally, the city provides for easy entrance from any place on the new earth. The fact that gates are present implies there's inhabitable space inside and outside the city, and God's people will experience both spaces as they freely flow in and out of the new Jerusalem. And because heaven is a perfect place with nothing to defile it, the large and beautiful gates remain open perpetually (Revelation 21:25-27).

Stationed at each of the twelve gates is one angel, placed there presumably as an honor guard and a welcoming committee of one. Can you imagine an angel from heaven greeting you each time you walk through one of heaven's gates? That's what I call a hospitality team! Most churches work hard to put the friendliest people in the congregation at the doors of the church when people arrive and depart. The multiple entries into the holy city, plus the angelic greeters makes heaven a most welcoming place to live.

There's more that makes heaven a welcoming place. Above each of the gates leading into the new Jerusalem is the name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Some Bible scholars believe this is a reminder that "salvation is from the Jews," something Jesus declared to the Samaritan woman He met at Jacob's well (John 4:22). This idea dates back to the time when God told Abram, "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that

you will be a blessing...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2-3). The Messianic line is Jewish from Abraham all the way to Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, Christianity has deep Jewish roots! This is something Gentile believers must never forget in the present life and will never forget in the life to come.

Furthermore, the names of the twelve apostles are written on the twelve foundations of the city. Perhaps this too is a reminder of the role the apostles played in the start-up of the church as Paul mentions in his letter to the Ephesians (2:20). The inscriptions here and on the gates will remind inhabitants of heaven for all of eternity that our spiritual heritage is both Jew and Gentile. Both are welcome in God's forever family.

Obviously the number twelve plays a prominent role in the description of the new Jerusalem. Twelve angels are posted at twelve city gates, each made of a single pearl (twelve pearls in all) and marked by the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. Furthermore, there are twelve foundations inscribed by the names of the twelve apostles. And don't forget the tree of life reappears in Revelation 22, bearing twelve delicious fruits for each month of the year. Sounds like paradise, doesn't it?

All of this points to the fact that God is a grand master of details and calculated precision. It took the Lord God of heaven and earth six days to create the incredible world in which we live and the cosmos beyond. The Carpenter from Nazareth has been preparing the new paradise for at least two thousand years (John 14:1-3). We can only imagine its beauty and detail.

IMAGINE A BEAUTIFUL PLACE

The angel of the Lord compared the holy city to a beautiful bride by saying to John, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb” (Revelation 21:9). Now a city is not a bride and vice versa, but I think we can all agree there's nothing more beautiful and glorious than a bride on her wedding day. I think about that every time I look at my wife's wedding portrait. Is there a better analogy of beauty the angel could have used?

Of course, the bride the angel put on display is the church that in the New Testament is also called the bride of Christ. A city without

inhabitants is an empty shell. But when the holy city is inhabited by the “holy ones” of God, apparently there is no sight more beautiful in all of God’s creation. John added layers of beauty by describing the descending city as “having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.” A bride dressed in rare and radiant jewels. Really, is anything more beautiful?

A few verses later, John expands the dazzling description by saying, “The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, like clear glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel” (Revelation 21:18-19). What he writes next sounds like an enchanting trip to Tiffany & Co. of New York as he mentions jasper, sapphire, agate, emerald, onyx, carnelian, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoptase, jacinth, amethyst, and twelve gates, each made of a single pearl. “And,” he adds, “the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass” (v. 21). No ugly concrete or asphalt in paradise, and no potholes! What we consider beautiful and precious stones will be common building materials in heaven.

The late fiery Baptist preacher W.A. Criswell unpacks the imagery even further by noting, “The entire city of splendor proclaims God’s covenant relationship with the bride of the Lamb—His people Israel and His redeemed Church.”³⁷ Yes, heaven is all about the beauty of covenant relationship as pictured in the marriage union between one man and one woman, which God created as a divine institution from the very beginning to demonstrate His eternal love (Genesis 1–2). The glory of God in heaven is one reason we must always protect the sanctity of marriage, and the same reason the devil relentlessly attacks it.

Heaven is also a place where we will experience true beauty with all its divine allure. Thinking people in every generation have contemplated the essence of beauty. What is beauty? Is beauty universal? Is beauty anything more than aesthetic appreciation? Philosophers pose many questions but offer few concrete answers. “That’s beautiful” is a common phrase we use in our casual conversations. But can we say with certainty what’s beautiful and what’s not? Is beauty truly in the eye of the beholder? Can beauty be turned into an industry and sold in a way that satisfies our deepest desires? And what are we missing as fallen

creatures, though created in the image of God, when we exchange true beauty for cheap, worldly substitutes? Deep questions, I know. But let's go deeper into beauty with the help of C.S. Lewis who expressed serious thoughts about the subject in his book *The Weight of Glory*.

We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why we have peopled air and earth and water with gods and goddesses and nymphs and elves—that, though we cannot, yet these projections can, enjoy in themselves that beauty, grace, and power of which Nature is the image... At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Someday, God willing, we shall get in.³⁸

Indeed, one day we shall mingle with the splendors John saw in heaven when the rumors rustling in the New Testament leaves become reality for us. At present we see beauty imperfectly, through fuzzy spectacles, and from the underside of a magnificent tapestry. We wait in faith and hope for the beauty that promises to fulfill us completely one day. And when that day arrives, when we step through one of heaven's jeweled gates and walk on her translucent gold streets, we will take it all in, breathing deeply until we become one with splendor. Until then, as Lewis says, we are like little children who too easily settle for "making mud pies in a slum because we cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea."³⁹

IMAGINE A HEALING PLACE

John's vision of paradise continues as he begins the final chapter of the Apocalypse.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1-2).

The tree of life reappears in the new holy city with special leaves that heal the nations. Paradise lost is now paradise regained. The prince of preachers, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, says, “That paradise which the first Adam lost for us the second Adam will regain for us, with added bliss, and superior joy; we shall dwell where a river rolls with a placid stream, and surrounds a land where there is gold.”⁴⁰

Cathryn and I used to live in Cinco Ranch, a master-planned community on the west side of Houston in Katy, Texas. The ranch is far from heaven, but part of what we loved about living there was the beautifully manicured boulevards lined with fast-growing crepe myrtles that bloom brilliant colors from spring to fall. Multiply that breathtaking image a million times over when you think about beautiful trees of life lining either side of a crystal clear river of life flowing from the throne of God.

The tree of life is unlike any other tree we know. It yields a different fruit each month of the year, like a fruit-of-the-month club only better. And its leaves have special qualities “for the healing of the nations.” Interpreters are divided on the symbolic versus literal understanding of the trees and river. There’s no reason not to embrace both. Although there is no sickness or death in heaven, the tree’s fruit and leaves seem to contribute to the overall wellness of people living in the eternal city. The word translated “healing” comes from the Greek word *therapeian* from which the English word “therapeutic” also derives.

In what ways do the nations experience healing? Certainly the absence of war, ethnic cleansing, tyranny, injustice, pollution, corruption, collapsing financial markets, disease, and more give way to healing. In some sense, healing will be complete but ongoing, our wellness deepening throughout eternity. For once, the nations of earth

will truly be united as people from every tribe, ethnicity, and language will stand before the Lamb's throne and worship Him in perfect unity (Revelation 7:9).

IMAGINE A WORSHIPPING PLACE

It goes without saying but is worth noting that heaven is a worshipping place. Revelation 22:3 (ESV) simply says, "And his servants will worship him." Since we were created for worship, and because the Father is always seeking true worshippers who will "worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24), heaven will be a place where authentic worship happens perfectly.

John pauses three times in the book of Revelation to give us a glimpse of worship in heaven (4:8-11; 5:8-14; 7:9-12). While apocalyptic disasters are happening on earth during the Tribulation period, exhilarating worship is taking place in heaven. John's descriptions are breathtaking. For example,

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped (Revelation 5:11-14).

What a fabulous picture! All of God's creation joins their applause in rapturous worship. John includes, "Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them." Did he leave out the rocks that Jesus said would cry out if we did not worship Him (Luke 19:40)?

In many ways, this life is a dress rehearsal for the life to come. That includes the way we worship. Whenever we gather with God's people for corporate worship, and when we enter into times of personal and private worship, we are practicing for one of heaven's grand worship experiences. Keeping that thought in mind might just transform the church on earth with no more business-as-usual Sunday worship!

I also get the sense that in heaven our worship and our work will become more integrated. There's no false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular in heaven like there is on earth. I say that because Revelation 22:3 (NIV) can also be translated, "And his servants will serve him." In heaven, we will no longer worship our work or play at our worship, but the work we do will truly be an act of worship as we serve the true and living God in His eternal abode.

Maybe you thought heaven equals the absence of real work. Sorry to disappoint you. Work has always been part of God's created order. God Himself worked for six days and rested on the seventh, establishing a healthy rhythm of life for humans.

One of the first responsibilities God gave to Adam was to care for the Garden of Eden. Even in paradise Adam worked. His work was not a burden but a delight, and work itself was never a curse but a blessing. Only after man fell like Humpty Dumpty into sin was the ground cursed and work became harder in a fallen world (Genesis 3). Can anyone who runs in the rat race every day disagree? But the dignity, purpose, and meaning found in work remains.

All in all, your work and mine matters to God! The paradise regained by the new heaven will, in many ways, mirror the original paradise for which we were created, including the opportunity to experience meaningful work and the responsibility that goes along with it.

What kind of work will we do? That remains a mystery, but Jesus left clues in His parables by saying the one who is "faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things" (Matthew 25:23 NKJV). God is ordered in everything He does, and we will join His order as rulers in the heavenly city in a measure that is in keeping with how we faithfully served Him on earth. Some scholars speculate that the "many things" may also include responsibilities for the vast, unexplored galaxies God

created. John Morris of the Institute for Creation Research, for example, asks, “Has God created this immense universe as our ‘Garden’ for eternity?”⁴¹ Again, we must leave the answer to this question in the realm of mystery and say we do not know.

What we do know is this: there are no white clouds on which to sit passively in heaven. Nor will harps be handed out for us to strum during a long and boring retirement. Heaven is a productive place where both worship and work are meaningful and fulfilling. The Father is always at work and He will employ us in His joyful service where all of our eternal life is a worship experience.

Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* clicked her red heels together and said, “There’s no place like home.” She was thinking only of Kansas, but in one sense she was right.

There’s no place like our eternal home called heaven.