



Title: Split Second: What Happens the Second After We Die?

Text: Various passages (listed below)

Date: June 5, 2022

Main Idea: To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

Personal Study Guide

READ ENTIRE TEXTS: VARIOUS PASSAGES (LISTED BELOW)

***This sermon series will be different since it covers a topic, not one specific text. These lessons will still be text-based but we will also focus on theological themes and ideas throughout the lessons as well.**

There are three areas we are going to look at in this section.

1. The intermediate state.
2. The resurrection.
3. The new heaven and new earth

The Intermediate State:

1. Read Luke 23:39-43; Philippians 1:19-24; 2 Corinthians 5:1-8. Based on these verses what happens right after you die?

The Resurrection and Judgement:

1. Read Matthew 25:31-46; Hebrews 9:27; John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15. Based on these verses, what is coming?
2. Why do you think there is a gap between the two (death and the final resurrection)?

New Heaven and New Earth

Read Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21

1. Make a list of everything you notice about God's original creation. Make a list of everything you notice about God's new creation. How is it similar? How is it different?
2. What do the similarities and differences tell you about who God is and what he wants us to know about him?

Apply – How does this change me?

1. Read Revelation 6:9-11. How does this help you understand why there is a delay between death and the final resurrection? How does this speak to God's purposes in the world?
2. Go back over everything we've learned in this series on heaven. What has impacted you the most? Why?
3. What is one thing you've learned in this series that you didn't know before? How does that change how you live now?

Respond – What's my next step?

1. The reality that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord is a comforting one. But it's true for all who trust in Christ—even ones we struggle to love. Is there a person in your life who is a Christian, but you are not in right relationship with them? How does the promise of eternity with them convict you or move you to reconciliation?

Andy Davis writes: How much of God's glory do you want to experience in heaven? How large a measure of joy do you want in heaven? "With the measure you use it will be measured back to you"(Luke 6:38). Our self-denial now in favor of pursuing personal holiness and in service to the spread of the gospel will expand our capacity in heaven for delighting in and displaying the

glory of God. And every good work we collect through diligent and sacrificial labor will receive our Father's specific and eternal approval in heaven. Forever he will say, "Well done, you good and faithful servant." How much of that do you want? As William Carey said of missions, "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God!" What about you? Are you running a race with great energy, making a circuit like Pahom but for far better and eternally lasting real estate? Or are you like the guy in the recliner squandering hours...and days...and years?

1. In response to these questions, how are you living with this eternity in view? What needs to change?

Commentary: Chapter 15 from "The Glory Now Revealed"

CHAPTER 15 Applications How Much Heaven Do You Want?

In the fall of 1722, the teenaged Jonathan Edwards wrote down a set of spiritual resolutions that would govern the way he would live for the rest of his life. Resolution #22 arrests my attention:

Resolved, to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness, in the other world, as I possibly can, with all the power, might, vigor, and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of.¹

Based on all we have studied in this book, I commend this resolution to you as well. Edwards's foundational assumptions are breathtaking. One, there are gradations of happiness in heaven. (As we saw from our earlier study on his "Heaven Is a World of Love," "Every saint will be perfectly happy but not equally happy."²). Two, how we live our lives in this world affects our level of

¹ Edwards, *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol.16,754.

² Edwards, "Heaven Is a World of Love," 336.

happiness in heaven. And three, heavenly happiness is worth the most extreme mental and physical effort we can possibly exert in this world. I believe all three of those assumptions are biblical. I also believe that each Christian should embrace them and would find them immensely helpful both in this world and the next. I want to press these themes on our hearts now, to maximize our eternal experience of glory.

How Much Land Does a Man Need?

In 1886, Russian writer Leo Tolstoy wrote a short story entitled “How Much Land Does a Man Need?”³ It was a warning against the deadly danger of worldly greed. Here is my quick summary:

The story is set in Czarist Russia and focuses on a discontented man named Pahom. He believes that all his problems would be solved if he could just get enough land of his own. He makes a foolish boast: “If I had plenty of land, I wouldn't fear the devil himself!” But the devil hears him and determines his strategy: “I will give you land enough, and by that means get you into my power.”

The next several years, Pahom makes various efforts to gain more land. But no matter what he does, there is always some significant problem with the arrangement, resulting in more and more frustration for Pahom.

Finally, he hears from a traveling merchant of a distant land where the Bashkir tribe lives. They have huge amounts of rich land located alongside a river that they are apparently willing to sell for pennies per acre. Pahom asks many questions and becomes convinced it is true. He scrapes together all the money he has in the world, one thousand rubles, and travels hundreds of miles to the land of the Bashkirs.

Pahom introduces himself to the tribe and sits down with their leaders and their chieftain. He gives them gifts and drinks with them, and they tell him they like him very much. He then tells them he wants to buy some of their land, and they are delighted. When Pahom asks what the price is, he receives this cryptic answer: “Our price is always the same: one thousand rubles per day.” Pahom does not understand. “How many acres is that?” They reply, “We do not know. We sell it by the day. As much land as you can go round on your feet in a day will be yours, and the price is one thousand rubles per day.” “But in a day, a

³ Leo Tolstoy, *How Much Land Does a Man Need: And Other Stories*, trans. Ronald Wilks (London: Penguin Books, 1993)

man can walk round a huge tract of land!" Pahom says. The chieftain laughs. "It will all be yours. But there is one condition: if you don't return on the same day to the spot where you started, your money is lost, and you get nothing." Pahom then asks, "How will I mark the boundaries of my land?" They tell him to take a spade and dig holes as he goes, piling up the dirt as markers. Later, they will plow from hole to hole. But they remind him, "You must return before the sun sets to the place where you started." Pahom agrees.

That night, Pahom is so excited he can't sleep for hours. He dreams of the wealthy life awaiting him after he gains such a huge tract of land. He reasons, "I can easily go thirty five miles in a day, especially since it is the summer and the days are long. Within a thirty-five-mile boundary, what a lot of land I will have!" He makes plans to buy a team of oxen, to rent some of the land out to tenant farmers, to sell some of the worst land for capital. Finally he dozes off... but has a weird dream of someone laughing just outside his tent. In the dream, it turns out to be the devil laughing at him. And in the final part of the dream, he sees himself lying dead on the ground.

When he can sleep no longer, he rouses the Bashkir leaders and tells them he is eager to start, even before the sun comes up. They ascend a high hill that overlooks the whole region. The chieftain places his cap on the ground as both his starting and ending place. And soon, Pahom is off to make his life's fortune.

He decides to travel east and goes at a brisk but steady pace. He can't believe how rich the soil is and how beautiful the countryside. When he had gone about three miles, he digs a hole and piles up the dirt. He looks back at the hill where he'd started, and it seems quite distant. The day is becoming hotter and hotter, and Pahom takes off his overcoat and boots so he can travel more easily. The land only gets richer and richer as he goes on. He decides to travel for three more miles before digging another hole and turning left, and the walking is still going very well. He is about to dig another hole and turn left to start back toward the starting hill when he notices a well-watered tract just beyond himself. It would be a shame to leave it out, so he pushes himself a little further to include it. He digs his hole and then turns left toward the hill. But it looks very distant, and the people on it look like tiny ants. By now it is well past noon and the sun seems to be going faster and faster across the sky. Pahom's legs are heavy, his lungs are burning, and he begins to be in significant pain. He decides to make the third leg much shorter, fearful that he has seriously overextended himself. All he wants to do now is get back to the hill as quickly as possible, but it is still quite

distant. Though walking is now a great difficulty, he quickens his pace. A paralyzing fear rises in his heart that he will lose everything because of his ambition. So he begins to run, racing the sun as it accelerates toward the horizon. His pants and shirt are soaked with sweat, his heart pounds in his chest like a blacksmith's hammer, and his legs feel like they are made of wood. He is increasingly fearful that he will die, but he presses on.

As he reaches the bottom of the hill at last, he can hear the Bashkirs cheering him on. But just at that moment, the sun dips below the horizon and the ground around him grows dark. He collapses in agony and grief to the ground, convinced he has lost everything. But the Bashkirs call to him from the top of the hill, saying they could still see the sun from up there. So he rouses himself for one massive final push up the hill. At the last possible moment, just before the sun dips below the horizon ending the day, he dives for the chieftain's cap and grasps it. The chieftain says, "What a fine fellow! He has gained much land!" But a stream of blood flows from Pahom's mouth, for he is dead!

The Bashkirs click their tongues to show pity. Then they pick up the spade he carried around the circuit and dig a grave for Pahom to lie in. Six feet from his head to his heels was all the land he needed.

Tolstoy's point is that we should beware this kind of worldly ambition. After I read that story, I realized it was a great sermon illustration for Jesus's warning "What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16:26).

How Much Heaven Do You Want?

However, some years later I was pondering the significance of Jonathan Edwards's resolution to exert himself maximally for heavenly happiness. As I did, Tolstoy's story of relentless ambition took on a new light. I wondered if many Christians are not ambitious enough when it comes to laying claim to heavenly territory. If the story were seen in the light of storing up treasure in heaven, I picture some Christians as spiritual Pahoms in Bashkir land, sleeping in their tents as the sun rises. The Bashkir chieftain has to send some folks to the tent to see if Pahom still wants some land or not. Pahom awakes, rubs the sleep from his eyes, and eventually saunters out of the tent, much of the morning spent. With great effort he drags out a recliner to the top of the hill and lies back in it, much to the amazement of the chieftain and his people. He enjoys the view of the rich, fertile countryside as he eats a late brunch. He dozes off after the meal, then awakens some time later. With the sun now past the midpoint in the sky, he finally stands up, yawns, stretches,

picks up the spade, and makes his way down the hill at a leisurely pace. Having traveled just a small distance, he digs his first hole. Then, exhausted from his brief exertion, he sits down to eat lunch. After lunch, he moves left a short distance and digs his second hole. Then, satisfied with his work, he disdains any further walking or digging and labors straight back up to the recliner and spends the rest of the day dozing.

If Jonathan Edwards were there, he would undoubtedly be screaming exhortations at such a Christian, pleading with him to expand his heavenly ambitions. He would beg all of us to “exert ourselves with all the power, might, vigor, and vehemence, yea violence, we are capable of” in acquiring heavenly real estate. He would want us to get up every day and do everything we do for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). He would want us to exert ourselves toward personal holiness, putting sin to death by the Spirit (Rom.8:13), thus expanding the dimensions of our heavenly pleasure. He would want us to be out trading with the talents of the gospel, seeking to multiply disciples with great zeal for their eternal good and God's eternal glory.

So I would rephrase Tolstoy's story title to this: “How Much Heaven Do You Want?” How much of God's glory do you want to experience in heaven? How large a measure of joy do you want in heaven? “With the measure you use it will be measured back to you”(Luke 6:38). Our self-denial now in favor of pursuing personal holiness and in service to the spread of the gospel will expand our capacity in heaven for delighting in and displaying the glory of God. And every good work we collect through diligent and sacrificial labor will receive our Father's specific and eternal approval in heaven. Forever he will say, “Well done, you good and faithful servant.” How much of that do you want? As William Carey said of missions, “Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God!”⁴ What about you? Are you running a race with great energy, making a circuit like Pahom but for far better and eternally lasting real estate? Or are you like the guy in the recliner squandering hours...and days...and years?

Benefits from Meditating on Heaven's Eternal History Lessons

Now that we have reached the end of our study together, how could a deep and scripturally saturated meditation on this concept of a dynamic heavenly review of earth's events affect the way we run our race and claim in God's name our portion of heavenly glory? Here are a few ways.

⁴ . "Friar Lane Baptist Chapel:Site of William Carey's Deathless Sermon."Carey Center, accessed April 15,2021.<https://www.wmcarcy.cdu /carcy/friarlane/friar.htm>.

1. *Total focus of all of our lives on the spread of the gospel.* We should picture the time when we will see that multitude greater than anyone could count from all people groups across all eras of human history standing in white robes worshiping their Savior (Rev.7:9). We should marshal our resources—our time, energy, money, spiritual gifts, opportunities—to do whatever we can to bring this about. Meditation on this heavenly theme will tend toward that end.

2. *Excitement that heaven is dynamic.* The more we think about this, the more exciting heaven will seem to us. Satan's depressing caricature of strumming harps eternally on a puffy white cloud will be driven forever from our minds. We will realize that heaven is far from boring, and that we will be eternally developing in our detailed and comprehensive knowledge of the glory of God.

3. *Redemption of our unique times.* We are commanded to “[redeem] the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:16 KJV). The more aware we are of the detailed and comprehensive review of history that awaits us, the more precious and unique every single moment will seem.

4. *Increasing awareness of God's sovereign rule.* The more we meditate on these themes, the more aware we will be of God's sovereignty over human history—both the tiniest details (sparrows falling to the ground) and the most massive epochs (the rise and fall of world empires). This in turn will help us be stable in an eternal perspective and therefore more useful to God.

5. *Boldness in witness.* If the person we're witnessing to repents, we will have added one more brother or sister to the body of Christ for all eternity. If they persecute us, we will have added to our heavenly treasure trove. This perspective makes us increasingly fearless in the face of persecution, for Jesus wants us to “rejoice and be glad” when persecuted, knowing that “[our] reward is great in heaven” (Matt. 5:12).

6. *Less deceived about secret sin.* Like black mold, sin thrives in darkness. Satan deceives us that we are hidden when we are tempted. The more we think about the forth-coming heavenly review, the more aware we will be that “even the darkness is not dark” to God (Ps. 139:12) and that “there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known” (Matt. 10:26 NASB). *So, if you don't want to spend eternity remembering having done something, then don't do it!*

7. *Freedom from seeking earthly praise or rewards.* The more we realize that no good work we do on earth will ever be forgotten in heaven, the freer we will be from groveling for notice and praise now. We understand that God will celebrate even the hidden moments and obscure actions, and his praise is all we really want anyway (Rom.2:29).

8. *Freedom from crippling sorrow over earthly loss.* The more mindful we are of the heavenly perspective on history, the freer we will be from grieving like those who have no hope (1 Thess.4:13). We become increasingly confident that God has a reason for everything he does, and that in heaven we will

finally understand. Therefore, we can be free from bitterness against God and free from asking “Why, O Lord?!”

9. *Freedom from burdensome sentimentality.* Some people are more sentimental than others. Some parents weep at weddings in part because the tender years of childhood are clearly and forever ended. Some cling to souvenirs and photos of moments that will never happen again. As their children grow up and stop using previously precious toys, parents tearfully store them in the attic for their grandkids. Many people say that if there were a house fire and everyone was safely out, the one thing they would save would be family photos. But knowing that we will relive with heavenly perspective all the memories of life frees us up from clinging to the past. We can travel light as we move through this world. When my mother died recently, I found myself in the basement of her Cape Cod home with a little less than two hours to go through her vast repository of family photos. My siblings had already finished their selections, so it was down to me. This would be my last chance to grab these physical artifacts of my family's history. After I was done with my selection, the remainder would go to the dump. Yet I was not paralyzed by regret or frenzied by panic. The best and clearest reviews of my life await me in eternity. I made some selections, closed the boxes, and moved on.

10. *Deliverance from envy and boasting over fruitfulness.* It's easy for pastors like me to compare ministry success with other pastors ... the size of their congregations, the number of baptisms, the variety of creative ministries. But in heaven we will be perfectly loving, and love “does not envy or boast” (1 Cor. 13:4). Instead, we will be one in Christ and will take pure delight in other people's honors as though they were our own.

11. *Understanding of unequal earthly circumstances.* Embracing the concept of variable levels of glory and honor in heaven helps us make sense of inequities in earthly conditions and see the hand of God in them. Some Christians suffer extremely in this world, through poverty, persecution, disasters, and other painful providences. They are being prepared for places of high honor (Matt. 20:23) and radiant glory through their manifestly greater sufferings. I can honor them even here and now—while seeking to emulate their courage and alleviate their earthly suffering.

12. *Freedom from seeking revenge.* Knowing that we will be vindicated eternally in reference to any human enemies we had on earth—either by their having been converted through our patient witness (as Saul of Tarsus was eventually, in part because of Stephen's powerful example [Acts 7:60]) or by their being justly condemned—frees us from any attempt at revenge.

13. *Freedom from concern over Alzheimer's disease (or any memory loss).* Alzheimer's disease is one of the most dreaded maladies in this world, for it seems to rob a person of their identity as a human being. They do not recognize even the most cherished loved ones—such as a spouse who has been tending them for years. But knowing that we will spend eternity in

heaven with perfect memories frees us from any debilitating fear of this disease.

14. *Freedom from concern that our lives will be forgotten in years to come.* When the Lord takes us out of this world, it won't be long before our place remembers us no more (Ps. 103:16). But God will never forget even the smallest act done for his glorious kingdom, and all those acts will live in heavenly review for all eternity.

15. *Ability to see intractable problems like poverty and racism in light of eternity.* These evils stubbornly resist all efforts at transformation. The hearts of unconverted sinners are evil and beyond cure (Jer.17:9), and the grief caused by both poverty and racism in every generation is incalculable. Heaven will be perfectly free from poverty and racism. More than that, we will remember these sins that caused so much grief in every generation, how all human efforts to solve them utterly failed, and that God solved them for his own glory only by the perfection of salvation in Christ. This heavenly hope does not make us fatalists who do nothing but rather energetic servants of that future kingdom who seek to alleviate these evils as much as possible, knowing they will finally be solved in heaven.

16. *Deeper desire to learn history now.* Studying Christian biographies is one of the most efficient uses of our time. They are inspirational, educational, and transformational. Given that we are going to spend eternity with these Christian heroes, it would behoove us in this world to learn as much as we can about them, so that we can "consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith" (Heb.13:7).

17. *Freedom from needing to know the results of our faithfulness.* Paul said, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow" (1 Cor.3:6 NIV). God often hides from us the full effects of our lives of service to him. The more we realize that heaven will reveal the full effects of the spiritual seeds we planted, the freer we will be from needing to know now. It is good for us to realize that we can't handle that full revelation now, because we are so arrogant. But God will show it to us in eternity.

18. *Reminder to cherish ordinary Christians and their good works.* If God will elevate some of the most obscure servants and their most hidden works and say that they, like the poor widow, "put in more than all the others" (Luke 21:3 NIV), then we should learn not to despise anyone's service to the Lord. We will realize that, as C. S. Lewis said,

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.⁵

⁵ C.S.Lewis, *The Weight of Glory, and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949). 15.

There are similarly no ordinary good works. The more we realize this dynamic, the humbler we will be toward other servants of Christ, and the more likely we will be to notice their works and thank and encourage them for each one.

19. *Honor to women.* History books are filled with the decisions and actions of men, while the lives and works of women—wives, mothers, singles—are often overlooked. If God cherishes the obscure works of ordinary people and assesses them to have put in more than all the others, this will especially be true of women. Heaven will be filled with the honors of women who labored and toiled in obscurity but whose self-sacrificial works effectively shaped and molded history.

20. *Renewal of our strength.* This meditation on heaven has consistently lifted my weary soul above my immediate circumstances, above any turbulent clouds of doubt and sorrow and seemingly insurmountable obstacles. This foretaste of heavenly glory is part of the down payment of my full inheritance delivered to me in a stipend check by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:14). And it has proven to have great power to renew my zeal for service to Christ.

Finally Answering the Vanity of Ecclesiastes

As we draw this study to a close, I want to highlight one of the greatest insights I've had concerning the power of meditating on heaven and the resurrection from the dead. It has to do with the word vanity, which appears again and again in the book of Ecclesiastes. Indeed, the theme of that book is asserted from the very beginning, then unfolded in great detail throughout the book: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Eccles. 1:2). He says it again later in that first chapter: "I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind" (v. 14). This word translated "vanity" is also translated as "meaningless" (NIV) and "futile" (CSB).

The great fear of all energetic workers in this world is the sense that everything we do on earth is ultimately worthless. The phrase "a striving after wind" captures it well—constantly pursuing something that cannot be grasped, that really is effectively empty. To waste your life building something that ultimately will crumble and fall back into the dust from which we all came.

The great man who wrote Ecclesiastes, the wise King Solo-mon, walked through the many efforts he made to find meaning and purpose in his labors "under the sun." Especially galling to him was the concept that all his great projects—the houses and gardens and vineyards and parks that beautified his

capital city-would have to be left behind when he died, and who knew whether his successor would be a wise man or a fool (2:18-19)? Death stood over all his works and mocked them all as dust in the wind. And once he was dead, it wouldn't be long before no one remembered what he had done at all. ... all physical trace of it would be gone, and no one alive would even remember that he had ever lived:

A living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun. (9:4-6)

That is the greatest daily application of this heavenly meditation. It means we can all be filled with a buoyant hope in our service to Christ day after day. Everything we do for the glory of God, whether great or small, famous or obscure, will be remembered in heaven and will shine for all eternity.