

How to Live With Heaven in Mind

Heaven became intensely personal to my wife, Sarah, and me in August of 2009 when a one-person car accident sent our son, Josiah, to heaven. I'm a pastor, so heaven wasn't a new concept or something I hadn't thought about previously.

But as you would expect, this one moment in time forever changed us. It has served to increase our passion for heaven and has changed our attitudes about how life should be lived while we're on earth.

Josiah—a strong, vibrant young man—was just about to begin his freshman year at the University of Tennessee. Like many young men and women his age, Josiah lived at full throttle. His entire life was ahead of him.

His sudden passing has significantly shaped our lives. Our family clung to one another during those difficult times as never before, and Josiah's memorial service inspired not just a church community but the wider middle Tennessee area as well. Most of all, Josiah's passing lit a fire under me to teach about heaven with a renewed passion.

Our son, unbeknownst to us, signed up as an organ donor. I'll elaborate more on the significance of this later in the book, but for now, simply understand that this one act deeply affected us. Why? Because it was a clear example to me that not only was Josiah serious about Jesus, but he also loved people enough to (literally) give himself away. *His hands were open to people's needs because his heart was in the right place.*

Before going too far with Josiah's story, let me share a few things about myself. I became a Christian at age 29, and I've been a pastor for nearly 25 years. In those years, heaven has

been increasingly important and critical to my faith, teaching and life.

Heaven and our eventual joyous homecoming as Christians are great truths that should be something you and I long for. As a pastor, I get excited when I think about being with God and worshipping Him for eternity. How cool will it be to sit with Paul? Or talk with the apostle John about his time with Jesus and the divine inspiration for the book of Revelation? Or visit with other more contemporary heroes of the faith like Charles H. Spurgeon, C. S. Lewis or A. W. Tozer? It will be a homecoming and family reunion experience like we can't even imagine.

Heaven is a real place for the believer, and it has at least some place in most everyone's life and thinking. But many think about it whimsically, or only when a life-altering event happens, and throughout everyday life, it's tucked away neatly in a mental file folder.

Josiah's passing served as a tremendous shock and reboot in my desire for heaven. As I look back over the last several years, I realize that God has gradually opened my eyes and deepened my understanding about heaven. I trace the beginning of these experiences to a moment about 15 years ago when I received a phone call from my brother Patrick.

I dearly love my older brother and I always welcome his advice and mentoring.

I was surprised to hear him weeping on the other end of the phone. He quickly filled me in on what was happening: "Man, I've got a book that I'm reading that is wearing me out. You need to get it." The book he was talking about was *My Dream of Heaven* by Rebecca Ruter Springer. I bought it and read it, and her story floored me. It still floors me today.

Springer's book talks about a spiritual experience she had. Written in 1895 and originally titled *Intra Muros*, it details

Springer's very personal, detailed vision of heaven and gives a beautiful glimpse of the eternal home that awaits us. Billy Graham said that the book "captured biblical truths with emotional impressions."

While reading her story, I had one of those moments in my Christian life when the prospect and reality of heaven became markedly clearer. The book challenged me with concepts I'd never known, and provided practical insights that I could share with others who needed help and encouragement.

Fast-forward about seven or eight years, when I began developing a preaching series about heaven. God laid on my heart a desire to help my congregation know and understand the full blessing, joy and hope that is theirs in heaven. As often happens in my ministry, though I was the one communicating and sharing these messages with the congregation, it seemed God was doing the most powerful work in *my* life. He expanded my knowledge and hunger for heaven. And He also gave me an overwhelming desire to communicate it to all who would listen.

As a part of my research and preparation for that series, I read Randy Alcorn's book simply titled *Heaven*. It's a phenomenal book—probably the most comprehensive book that's been written on the topic. Through it, I learned and understood even more about our eternal home. Randy's book clearly supported a number of thoughts with which I wanted to challenge my congregation.

As I studied and learned, I came to realize that Christians often hold numerous misconceptions and unbiblical assumptions about heaven. For example, in heaven we will not merely be up in the sky, floating on a cloud, bored out of our minds and plucking a harp. Heaven is a place; there's exciting supernatural activity, worshipping God, ruling and reigning with Jesus, being reunited with our loved ones, and meeting saints we've only heard of.

It's anything but boring.

*Excerpted from Between Heaven and Earth. **Steve Berger** is the senior pastor to more than 4,000 people at Grace Chapel, Leipers Fork, Tennessee. Steve is also a part of the teaching faculty for the National Worship Leader Conference and regularly contributes to several publications.*