

Smoking or Non-Smoking: Part III

On January 18, 1989, Pastor Don Piper was involved in a terrible accident when an 18-wheeler plowed head-on into the little Ford Escort that he was driving on a long stretch of highway in Texas. When first responders found his mangled body trapped in the twisted wreck and examined his remains, they declared Don dead at the scene. About an hour and a half later, Pastor Dick Onerecker arrived at the scene and asked emergency personnel if he could be of any assistance. But, they told him that he was a little too late, that the man in the Ford Escort had passed away before he arrived. Nevertheless, this pastor felt called to pray for this “dead” man and so he approached the horrible wreckage and reached inside. He then touched Don’s still body and began to pray for him. He is not sure why he felt compelled to sing a hymn, but that is exactly what he did. And, it was then that he thought he heard something. It was quite faint, yet distinctive. It was the sound of someone humming—someone humming along with him the tune of that hymn. And then he realized that it was Don—the man that had been pronounced dead 90 minutes before this. And so, he yelled for the EMT’s to come and assist him—for this man, Don Piper, was now very much alive. Don was taken to a hospital and endured many pained-filled months of surgeries and rehab before he eventually recovered.

He later wrote a book entitled, *“90 Minutes in Heaven,”* in which he vividly describes what he experienced immediately after that head-on collision. He said: “My heart filled with the deepest joy I’ve ever experienced.” He was awed by the sights and sounds of praise to the Lord—for he is convinced that where he was, ***was in Heaven***. And, it was a place that he did want to leave. But, the next thing he remembered after feeling the very presence of God, was excruciating pain when he eventually woke up to find himself in a hospital bed with nurses and doctors trying their best to attend to him.

Now, Don only saw a little glimpse of the wonder of Heaven, yet he was over-awed. Can you imagine what a full view of Heaven will be? I happen to have a copy of Don Piper’s book, *“90 Minutes in Heaven.”* I read it several years ago. In fact, the copy that I have is autographed by Don Piper. He signed it after I shook hands with him right here in Louisa County after he gave a talk one Sunday several years back. What did he talk about? His book? Well, that is what I had come to hear him talk about. I wanted to hear him describe the wonders of Heaven just as he had gone about doing in his book. But, in his talk, he really didn’t promote his book at all. He spoke of God’s promise of eternal life. He spoke of the riches and reality of Heaven. He spoke mostly about the love of God in sending His Son “that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”¹ And, thus, when we die believing in Him, we will reside with God eternally in Heaven. He didn’t preach *his book*, he preached God’s Word—

he preached the Gospel. He preached the promise that is given to you and to me—and to all those who let Jesus into their hearts. During his recovery, Don struggled with the question as to why God would allow something like that to happen to him. But, the question wasn't why God allowed the accident. The question, in Don's mind, was why God allowed him to see a little piece of Heaven, only to send him back to the pain and suffering of this earth. You see, having just a little taste of Heaven—Don didn't want to leave, and he wanted to stay there forever. And then he said that he came to realize why God had allowed him that heavenly experience. God wanted him to give a witness to people—a testimony to the ***reality*** of Heaven.

That is a crucial testimony for us today as Christians. You see, the prophet Jeremiah pointed to this when he proclaimed God's words: "For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope." Jeremiah 29:11 (NLT2) And what is that hope? Paul answers this in his letter to the church in Thessalonica. Paul assures us: "And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope." 1 Thessalonians 4:13 (NLT2) The hope that Paul was talking about—the hope that all of God's children have when they close their eyes in death—is their hope of eternal life in Heaven—the *non-smoking section*. Remember "*hope*" expressed in these terms is not an uncertain hope. It is a hope based upon our faith in God and His promise of eternal life for those who believe in Jesus Christ. And that faith is sure, just as God's promises are sure. For the Scriptures assure us: "Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see." Hebrews 11:1 (NLT2)

We cannot see Heaven now, but its existence is no less real. And that is what I'd like for you to think about this morning—***the reality of Heaven***. So many questions come to mind. Is Heaven a physical place, or some "*floating-on-a-cloud*" type of place, not much more than some nether-world? What is Heaven like? What will we experience there? We all have so many questions about Heaven, but oddly enough, they are questions that we rarely consider. The great Christian commentator, Ivor Powell, admitted as much when he said: "At the age of eighty-three, I asked myself what I knew about the home of God, and I was truly shocked to admit I knew very little. . . Increasing age and the fact that I shall soon be making my own pilgrimage [there], I have begotten within my soul an intense desire to explore this fascinating subject."²

The thing is, we don't have to speculate in answering the questions about Heaven. God's Word gives us the answers. So let's dig in and consider a few of the things the Bible tells us about Heaven. The Bible references the word "heaven" many times and uses it in different ways. So we need to know

what “**heaven**” that we are talking about. The word actually has three meanings and refers to three different places. For our purposes today, we’ll be considering the “**third heaven**”—which is a term that the Apostle Paul used.³ And if there is a “**third heaven**” that, of course, implies that there must be a “**first**” and a “**second**” heaven as well. So, what are the “**first**”, the “**second**” and the “**third**” heavens?⁴

Well, the “**first heaven**” was an ancient term that generally referred to what we point to today as the “atmosphere” around the earth. It’s where weather occurs, clouds blow around and birds fly. The “**second heaven**” is beyond that in what we refer to today as “**outer space**”—it’s where the moon, planets, sun, stars, galaxies and the physical universe beyond exists.⁵ The “**third heaven**” is the place that we have been alluding to as the “**non-smoking**” section. It’s that destination that Christians long for, and the one of particular interest to us. So, unless otherwise noted, when I speak of “**Heaven**,” it is, in biblical terms, technically the “**third heaven**” that I am talking about. So what is **this** Heaven like?

THE INHABITANTS OF HEAVEN: First of all, the main feature of Heaven is that it is the place where God the Father and His Son, Jesus, dwell—it their indescribably awesome home.⁶ While Hell indicates the absolute separation from God, in Heaven God is directly accessible. Heaven also has other occupants as well—it is occupied by angels.⁷ And, of greatest significance to us, the Book of Revelation and other Scriptures clearly state that Heaven is the place that true believers go when they die.⁸ And they will come from everywhere on this earth. Jesus tells us in Luke’s Gospel: “And people will come from all over the world—from east and west, north and south—to take their places in the Kingdom of God.” Luke 13:29 (NLT2) So, Heaven is a well populated place.

THE PHYSICAL NATURE OF HEAVEN: But, what is Heaven like as far as its surroundings go? Is it a shadowy place—a misty, cloud-like place of little substance? Or, does Heaven have definite “**hard-to-the-touch**” physical features? Well, Jesus tells us very clearly that Heaven is as real as it gets—in the truest physical sense. The things in Heaven have substance; they exist in a material state just as physically as things on earth. In John’s Gospel, Jesus says: “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.”² In my Father’s house are many rooms. [That sounds like something physically substantial.] If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” John 14:1-3 (ESV) So, there will be physical buildings with real rooms in Heaven. Apparently, furniture is present in them as indicated by the center-piece of all furniture—God’s own throne, as well as the numerous thrones of the God’s most honored saints.⁹ So, the things that make up the features of Heaven are anything but shadowy or insubstantial. Not only do the things in Heaven have material properties, the Bible describes the textures and colors of things in Heaven as being absolutely breath-

taking to behold. Brilliant colors and spectacular lights will be totally dazzling, with such incredible sights as a sea of pure crystal extending from God's throne.¹⁰ And Heaven is a true gardening paradise with the tree of life capping everything off as the most beautiful tree of all.¹¹ And the plants and trees, and you and me—we won't need any sunlight in Heaven.¹² Why?—because in Heaven *shekinah* glory of God illuminates all things with the radiance of His love.¹³ So, that is what Heaven is like from a physical standpoint.

THE THINGS WE WILL EXPERIENCE IN HEAVEN: But, what will Heaven be like for us? What will we experience there? Well, Revelation 7 assures us that we will never, ever be hungry or thirsty there. There will be crystal clear springs of life-giving water to drink from. And, there's a river there in Heaven that puts the most scenic rivers on this planet to shame. Along the river banks will grow a tree of life bearing multiple kinds of delicious fruits that will yield a fresh crop each month.¹⁴ The climate is better than anything you've ever known here on earth—no scorching sun or bitter weather.¹⁵ And, we won't need any "Patient-First" or any "Doc in the Box" facilities, or hospitals, or operating rooms, or cancer centers, or hospice care, or funeral homes. In Heaven, there will be no physical pains whatsoever. Heaven will be a place of absolute joy—for "[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." Revelation 21:4 (NLT2)

So the bottom line is this—Heaven, the place where we, as faithful Christians now go when we die, it is a place of indescribable grandeur and glory prepared especially for God's people. Anyone who goes there will never be disappointed. The only limitation in describing Heaven comes from the limitations of our human language which is not sufficient to articulate the breath-taking nature of heavenly things.¹⁶

Now that is what the "*third heaven*" is like. So, now that you know what it's like, wouldn't you like to go there? Jesus tells us, in a very interesting way, how you can get into this *non-smoking section*. In Matthew 6, Jesus says: ¹⁹ "Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be." Matthew 6:19-21 (NLT2) Now, what did He mean by that? Well, we can fairly easily understand that storing up material wealth here on earth doesn't help us one bit in getting into Heaven. If the only way that you seek your treasures are through your weekly pay-checks, or by gambling on making a big score by hitting the lottery, those treasures will do you no good. Even non-believers acknowledge the fact that when you die, you can't take your worldly possessions and wealth with you. So, how do we deal with Jesus' directive that we are to "*store up our treasures in heaven*"?

After all, here we are on earth—how are we supposed to get any treasures transported up to Heaven? And what are these “*treasures*” that Jesus is talking about?

There is a saying by C. S. Lewis that helps us begin to understand the answer. Lewis once wrote: “Aim at Heaven and you get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither.”¹⁷ You see, when you aim at Heaven, you can only do that in one way—and that is by pleasing God. There is nothing that pleases God so much as a sinner coming to the understanding that he or she needs to repent of their sins, ***be born again***—and in so doing, submit their lives to Jesus Christ. For Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.” John 3:3 (NLT2) And when a sinner does these things, not only is God pleased, but the Scriptures tell us that the rest of heaven is overjoyed by that as well.¹⁸ That’s what it means to begin ***“storing up treasure in Heaven”***—because that is the way that a repentant sinner starts to build a new relationship with God. He or she does this in several ways—through prayer, through the reading of God’s Word, through showing the love of God to others—and most of all, by allowing the Holy Spirit to transform your heart. All of these things are done with an aim to please God. And so, that is why Jesus says: “Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be.” When the desire of your heart is to please God, your treasure room in Heaven grows and grows. But, if your aim is for the so-called “*treasures*” of this world, your treasure house in Heaven will be bare and quite bankrupt. And if you die like that, then you will have no treasure in Heaven at all. For as we saw last week in Jesus’ ***Parable of the Wedding Banquet***, there will be no party-crashers in Heaven. Paul affirms this when he wrote:¹⁹ When you follow your own wrong inclinations [i.e. pursue worldly treasures], your lives will produce these evil results: impure thoughts, eagerness for lustful pleasure,²⁰ idolatry, spiritism (that is, encouraging the activity of demons), hatred and fighting, jealousy and anger, constant effort to get the best for yourself, complaints and criticisms, the feeling that everyone else is wrong except those in your own little group—and there will be wrong doctrine,²¹ envy, murder, drunkenness, wild parties, and all that sort of thing. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God. Galatians 5:19-21 (TLB) In other words, those who pursue those treasures will not be allowed entry into the ***non-smoking section—the place called Heaven***. Rather, the Apostle John relates to us the words of Jesus when He said:⁷ Everyone who conquers will inherit all these blessings, and I will be his God and he will be my son.⁸ But cowards who turn back from following me, and those who are unfaithful to me, and the corrupt, and murderers, and the immoral, and those conversing with demons, and idol worshipers and all liars—their doom is in the Lake that burns with fire and sulphur. This is the Second Death.” Revelation 21:7-8 (TLB) And, that is the ***smoking section—the place called Hell***. It is the place that they won’t want to be—and believe me, they

won't want to stay there—but stay there they must, for all of eternity. But, for those who, *in this life*, store up their treasure in Heaven—Heaven is where they will reside. And they will never want to leave it. This truth is brought to us in a very sad, yet uplifting story.

The 16th day of April 2007, started out as any other day on the campus of Virginia Tech. Students pulled themselves out of bed, some from a night of studying, perhaps others from a night of partying. They threw on their clothes, grabbed some breakfast and headed out for what was assumed to be just another ordinary day in Blacksburg. But, that day was anything but ordinary—because as the day progressed, a deranged and evil gunman—a student from their own midst—embarked on a killing spree that left 32 people dead and many others seriously wounded, before this madman turned his gun on himself and took his own life. One of those students was Rachael Hill, an 18-year old freshman from Richmond. Rachael was a member of Grove Avenue Baptist Church and a graduate of Grove Avenue Christian School. At her funeral, eight of her friends attested to her strong faith in God. One of her former classmates at Grove Avenue Christian School, Christina Neulen, spoke of her saying: “She was smart and beautiful and so full of love for everyone and for the Lord.” And she said that burying her friend was the hardest thing she had ever had to do, and then added: “But I turned her over into the loving embrace of her Savior, and I know He’ll take much better care of her than I ever could.”

But, I think that the words of her mother—while heart-wrenchingly sad—remind us of one of the most encouraging and inspirational things that we need to remember about those who have passed on, and now reside with Christ in Heaven. Her mother said: “I’m waiting to see my best friend again. I know she is with the Lord.” And then she paused and said tearfully, “If she had the choice of coming back or staying [in Heaven], I think she’d stay.”¹⁹

You see, Rachael Hill’s life didn’t end on that tragic day at Virginia Tech. The only thing that ended was her temporary stay on this earth. But, she is just as much alive today, even more so, than you or I. She is alive because she put her faith in Jesus and the riches He has in store for those who follow Him. What Paul said to the churches in Corinth and Ephesus, he could have well said to Rachael: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: Though He was rich, for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty **you might become rich.**” 2 Corinthians 8:9 (HCSB) “So overflowing is His kindness toward us that He took away all our sins through the blood of His Son, by whom we are saved; ⁸ and He has showered down upon us the **richness of His grace.**” Ephesians 1:7-8 (TLB)

By all accounts, while Rachael was here in this world, she laid up her treasure in Heaven. And there, with God, she now resides in the *richness of His love*. Just as Hell is a place that you wouldn’t

want to be, Heaven is the place that you'd never want to leave. Rachael's mother was so very right on that point, just as Don Piper—the author of *"90 Minutes in Heaven"* would attest to as well.

And now for you, the question remains—where are you storing up your treasure? Where are your loved-ones storing up their treasure? Here on this earth where a moth can eat it away, rust can destroy it, thieves steal it away? The problem is earthly treasures never last. These same people who hoard earthly treasures seem to think that they can do the very same thing with their lives. But, just as those material treasures will crumble away, your earthly life will one day end. Maybe it won't be moths, rust or thieves that take it away. But there are always other things that will: cancer debilitates, heart attacks eliminate, disease terminates, gunshots kill, cars crash, planes fall, boats sink—and the list goes on. Jesus said, "If you love your life down here—you will lose it. If you despise your life down here—you will exchange it for eternal glory." **John 12:25 (TLB)** Those who think they can store up their treasures in this world—they are the real losers.

But, you have a choice. You can chose to store your treasures in one of those rooms, in the purest *non-smoking section* ever, that Jesus longs to prepare for you. Where's your treasure stored? The answer to that question has consequences—and those consequences are eternal. We never know how long our temporary stay on this earth will be. But, what we do know is that once it's over, our treasure-storing days will be passed. Let the desire of your heart be to the pleasure of God. If you will do just that, Jesus will be waiting in a place of endless treasures prepared especially for you—and you will never want to leave from His presence again.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church
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Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor
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¹ John 3:16 (NIV) "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

² Randy Alcorn, *Heaven*, Tyndale House: Carol Stream, Ill. (2004), p. 43

³ 2 Corinthians 12:2 (HCSB) I know a man in Christ who was caught up into the *third heaven* 14 years ago. Whether he was in the body or out of the body, I don't know, God knows.

⁴ N. Woychuk, "Part 5: Is Heaven A Place?," – *Bibliotheca Sacra* 109, No. 433 (Jan. 1952), *WORDsearch* CROSS e-book: 73.

⁵ Deuteronomy 17:3 (NLT2) For instance, they might serve other gods or worship the sun, the moon, or any of the stars—the forces of heaven—which I have strictly forbidden.

⁶ Psalm 102:19 (NLT2) Tell them the LORD looked down from his heavenly sanctuary. He looked down to earth from heaven. Isaiah 63:15 (TEV) LORD, look upon us from heaven, where you live in your holiness and glory. Deuteronomy 26:15 (NLT2) Now look down from your holy dwelling place in heaven and bless your people Israel. .

Acts 7:55-56 (NLT2) But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. John 6:41 (NLT2) [Jesus said] "I am the bread that came down from heaven." Colossians 4:1 (NLT2) ¹ Masters, be just and fair to your slaves. Remember that you also have a Master—in heaven.

⁷ Matthew 18:10 (NLT2) For I tell you that in heaven their angels are always in the presence of my heavenly Father.

1 Peter 3:22 (NLT2) Now Christ has gone to heaven. He is seated in the place of honor next to God, and all the angels and authorities and powers accept his authority. Galatians 1:8 (NLT2) Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you.

⁸ 1 Peter 1:4 (NLT2) And we have a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. Philippians 3:20 (NLT2) But we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior.

⁹ Revelation 4:4 (TEV) In a circle around the throne were twenty-four other thrones, on which were seated twenty-four elders dressed in white and wearing crowns of gold.

¹⁰ Revelation 4:2-6 (ESV) ² At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. ³ And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. ⁴ Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵ From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, ⁶ and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

¹¹ Revelation 2:7 (NLT2) To everyone who is victorious I will give fruit from the tree of life in the paradise of God.

¹² Revelation 21:23 (NLT2) And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light.

¹³ N Woychuk, "Part 5 Is Heaven A Place?," – *Bibliotheca Sacra* 109, no. 433 (Jan), WORDsearch CROSS e-book: 74.

¹⁴ Revelation 22:2 (NLT2) It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations.

¹⁵ Revelation 7:16-17 (NLT2) ¹⁶ They will never again be hungry or thirsty; they will never be scorched by the heat of the sun. ¹⁷ For the Lamb on the throne will be their Shepherd. He will lead them to springs of life-giving water. And God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

¹⁶ Samuel Wakefield, *A Complete System of Christian Theology: A Concise, Comprehensive, and Systematic View of the Evidences, Doctrines, Morals, and Institutions of Christianity*, (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1862), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 632.

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, Edythe Draper, *Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 305.

¹⁸ Luke 15:7 (NIV) ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

¹⁹"Funerals remember Va. Tech students for their strong faith," May 3, 2007, <https://www.christianexaminer.com>.