

Heaven

Lesson 3 | Biblical Imaginations

Imagine there's no heaven. It's easy if you try. No hell below us. Above us only sky. Imagine all the people living for today.

Imagine there's no countries. It isn't hard to do. Nothing to kill or die for. And no religion too. Imagine all the people living life in peace.

You may say I'm a dreamer, But I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us. And the world will be as one.

Imagine no possessions. I wonder if you can. No need for greed or hunger. A brotherhood of man. Imagine all the people. Sharing all the world.

You may say I'm a dreamer, But I'm not the only one. I hope someday you'll join us. And the world will be as one.

This song, entitled Imagine, was written by the great John Lennon in 1971, two years after The Beatles broke up. Lennon, a self-proclaimed socialist, was an incredibly strong advocate for world peace. In this song, he promoted peace among all people where no possessions came between people, where no type of religion separated people, and not even countries divided people. He simply said, imagine that type of world. It's not hard to imagine something like that, right? Which is what one of the lyrics literally states.

I am by no means a socialist, my political opinions are quite the opposite of that of John Lennon, but I can imagine what he promoted.

Friends, using our imagination can be a good thing, right? When folks are building a home, they imagine what they want and it gets built that way. They have guardrails on that imagination road, one side is desire and the other side is budget. Both sides of the guardrail keeps them in the middle of the road to produce what their imagination is envisioning. For John Lennon, the guardrails that he gave was no religion, no possessions, no countries, nothing that separated people to where the middle of the road where his imagination ran was world peace with one people.

Now I'm not saying that's right, in fact I'm actually saying that's wrong, but the principle is still in place for us to understand why guardrails are necessary.

So when we use our imagination, having guardrails up is a necessity. For the couple wanting to build a home, if they didn't have the guardrail up of a budget, they would build a house that they couldn't afford. The guardrails are quite important to have in order to imagine in the proper way.

Tonight, I want to encourage you to imagine. Tonight is all about using our imagination when it comes to thinking about heaven. The rest of the series will be the building of the guardrails. But for tonight, I want us to see why it's a good thing to imagine. I want us to see why it's necessary to imagine.

Our imagination is last piece of the foundational puzzle that we have to lay before we can begin to learn of the amazing details of heaven. We have to ensure that we have biblical imaginations. Randy Alcorn, the author of the well-known *Heaven* book, says that we must have a "biblically inspired imagination."

Our goal for this evening is to ensure that our imaginations are not just working, but the goal is to ensure that they are working properly. We must ensure that our imaginations are working biblically.

Once we have the right understanding of how we can, and I would even push the issue so far to say that once we have the right understanding of how we are expected to use our imagination, we can begin to REALLY look forward to the future that God has for us. Once this puzzle piece is put into its proper place this evening, we will begin to navigate the road towards what the Bible teaches us about heaven.

Over the next couple of months, Lord willing and the creek don't rise, I will be teaching you every *objective* AND *explicit* truth that I can about heaven. Not only that, but we will also explore all the *subjective* areas where we will use sanctified speculation to infer the *implicit* truths of heaven. While you won't have the fullness and totality of what I will teach you through the whole series this evening, each week we will put a new section of guardrails up to help you not to fall off the mountain of orthodoxy. The Bible is the guardrail to help you to imagine in a biblical way. Where there is no guardrail, you will quickly find yourself in the danger zone

where you will begin to think and imagine things that are unbiblical. But, if our minds are informed by the Scriptures, we have the guardrails up on each side of the imagination road where we cannot fall off, then imagining what God has for us in the future is good, it's right, it's biblical, and that imagination will be life and hope giving.

So let's begin to think through how we can have a biblical imagination.

There are two sides, or two spectrums, to having an imagination where we will fall on one side or the other when considering heaven.

Our heavenly imaginations tend to be either hyper-imaginative or utterly unimaginative.

Let's define our terms and build upon them.

A hyper-imagination tends to be more fantasy prone than being more biblically influenced.

Folks who fall into this category reads into things way to easily to the point where they can be quite gullible. Or better said, the hyper-imaginative person **blurs the lines between fantasy and reality.**

An example of this would be something that maybe you have heard before, and if you believe this, please receive this not as an attack but maybe rather a helpful critique, an example would be those who believe that the locusts that are described in Revelation 9:1-11 are Apache helicopters. John says that the locusts were like horses prepared for Bible. Those who are hyper-imaginative would interpret that as the armored body of the helicopter. When John described the sound of their wings, the hyper-imaginative person would liken that sound to the loud roar of the helicopter rotors. When John spoke about the locusts having breastplates of iron, the hyper-imaginative person would say that symbolizes the armored plating of the helicopter. When John spoke about the defense mechanism of the locusts being their tails which were like scorpion tails, the hyper-imaginative person would say that represents the weapon system on the Apache helicopter.

Now beloved, please understand that I am not making a mockery of those who fall into this way of interpretation. In fact, I was raised in a very dispensational church that taught these types of things and interpretations. But this is nothing less than reading things into our imaginations that removes biblical guardrails.

Not only this, but a hyper-imaginative person **blurs the line between objective and subjective.**

Beloved, this is where we get all of the heaven tourism books that we discussed last week. The child that is very imaginative will tell us that without a doubt he visited heaven and saw Jesus' rainbow-colored unicorn that was His pet. Could there be a rainbow-colored unicorn in heaven? Possibly. But that's the world of subjectivity, it's not testable and it cannot be backed up with truth.

Now, none of us want to live in this world. We don't want to fall into this type of error. So what do we do? We do what we always do – swing too far into the other direction.

The other side of the spectrum is that of being utterly un-imaginative.

Let's define that. **The non-imagination rejects trying to imagine heaven in totality.**

Let's really think about this. Why would a Christian say that we shouldn't try to imagine heaven? Many would cite two different Scriptures and I want us to look at those.

1 Corinthians 2:9. Let's turn our Bibles there. Many many times this verse is used as a defense by the un-imaginative. Let's look at it.

But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man. The things which God has prepared for those who love Him."

If you were part of my "Misquoted" series the weeks leading up to Christmas, I taught basic interpretation skills when approaching the Bible. I took specific and well known texts that were are....misquoted. The main premise of the series was to teach you how to read everything in context.

With that in mind, 1 Corinthians 2:9 is a case study for us. When reading that verse, it would immediately seem like we are talking about heaven. And because no eye has seen and no ear has heard, that means that we really have no grounds to try and imagine. Some would even say that if we tried to imagine heaven, we would be flirting with sin. To that, I would say if that's what the text means, then I would say you're right. But I would also say, look at the next verse, verse 10. *10 But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit.* So by that logic, no man has seen or heard about heaven (verse 9), but God actually has revealed heaven to us by His Spirit! Not exhaustively, but accurately.

BUT, applying context context context, I would say let's reread the verse because I don't think it's even talking about heaven in the first place.

Let's go back to verse 6 and read through verse 10.

6 However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. 7 But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God [c]ordained before the ages for our glory, 8 which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9 But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him." 10 But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.

Beloved, what is Paul talking about in these verses? Paul is talking about God given wisdom from heaven! God's truth is not gained by seeing, it is not gained by hearing, God's wisdom and His truth is given to us by the Spirit. God has revealed these things to us!

Ok, so you got me there, pastor! But what about **Deuteronomy 29:29**?! Ok, let's go there and check it out.

29 "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

Alright, so the secret things, those things belong to God. Things that we will never know about nor understand here on earth, those things belong to God. He doesn't want us to know about everything. BUT, the things that He does want us to know, he tells us about. He reveals those things to us and God then tells us that those things belong not only to us but to us and our children FOREVER!

Another category of the un-imaginative sounds something like this—**heaven is beyond our imagination!**

What does this convey? What does this imply? Well, it implies that we cannot imagine heaven. It dumps an ice bucket onto everything that God HAS revealed to us about heaven. As Randy Alcorn says, "If we can't envision it, we can't look forward to it. If Heaven is unimaginable, why even try?"¹ Or we can say it another way, I cannot look forward to something that I cannot imagine.

Friends, I look forward to one day visiting the Grand Canyon. Why? Because I can envision it in my mind and think of all the vastness to it, to bigness, it stretches my imagination but, I imagine it. I have read about it, I have heard about it, I have seen pictures of it, and that fuels my imagination. The guardrails were put into place, I know where to stay with my imagination, but that imagination still runs wild.

Let me explain it from a different perspective.

The very first time that I was able to snorkel with my wife, Jamie, was when we went on our honeymoon almost 20 years ago. She had heard about snorkeling, she read of testimonies of others about snorkeling, she got all the info from about it, but she never had experienced it. So she could only imagine what it would be like. Once she got into the water and was able to look below with a mask on, that imagination became sight.

The past couple of years, a couple of my sons and I have become scuba certified. Last summer, I went diving with both of them and another brother here in the church. It was a different world being 50 feet below the surface. For many years, I had a limited knowledge of what the reefs looked like up close, what they felt like,

¹ Randy Alcorn. Heaven. Pp17.

and what that world offered because all I could see and experience was the surface of the water. That is until I put the tank on my back and the regulator in my mouth and I plunged in and dove down. While I was diving, I was able to see a giant green moray eel swimming around, I was able to look inside of a sunken ship on the ocean floor, I was able to get face to face with a goliath grouper, a fish the size of a Volkswagen who would easily put half my body into his mouth. I was even able to put my arms around an anchor that is reported to have been in that exact spot since the 1700s.

Being 40-50-60 feet below the surface of the water provided breathtaking views and experiences. Every time I think about diving, I get excited and I tell Jamie all about it. My boys and I tell her about the incredible things that we saw and experienced. While Jamie stays on the surface of the water looking down, she can see certain things, she can hear about our experiences, and she can even read about what we saw down there. All of those things provide the guardrails for Jamie to imagine what's far below the surface of the water. And because of the guardrails, she knows that if she were to ever scuba dive, she's not going to expect to see a person driving a car down there. She's not going to imagine that. She's not going to imagine a colony of people living down there. Her guardrails are not going to allow for something silly like that. But, can she still imagine? Yes! And beloved, you should imagine too.

God has given us everything that He wants us to know about heaven, and that information are the guardrails, and therefore you should imagine it!

So to recap, the two spectrums of imagination is that of being fantasy prone and not of refusing to imagine all together. Both approaches to imagining heaven is inadequate and dangerous. What we need is to have what I alluded to earlier, we need to have a Biblically inspired imagination. Our desire is to fall somewhere between being hyper-imaginative and un-imaginative, right. We want to imagine, but not be gullible in our approach to imagining. We don't want to fall into the fantastical arena, but we don't want to swing too far to where we don't even imagine heaven at all. We need balance.

So with the remainder of our time left, I want to give you some examples of what it might look like if we don't have a proper balance when it comes to having a biblical imagination.

What are some misconceptions that we may have if our biblical imagination is not so biblical? **Where could an unbiblical imagination lead us?**

It could lead us to a joyless future.

Alcorn in the first chapter of his book on heaven spoke about a pastor friend of his that confessed a lack of joy when he thought about the future. I want to read you their conversation. Randy Alcorn writes this—

A pastor once confessed to me, "Whenever I think about Heaven, it makes me depressed. I'd rather just cease to exist when I die."

"Why?" I asked.

[he said] "I can't stand the thought of that endless tedium. To floast around in the clouds with nothing to do but strum a harp... it's all so terribly boring. Heaven doesn't sound much better than Hell. I'd rather be annihilated than spent eternity in a place like that."²

Another author spoke of something similar when he wrote the following—

"Nearly every Christian I have spoken with has some idea that eternity is an unending church service.... We have settled on an image of the never-ending sing-along in the sky, one great hymn after another, forever and ever, amen. And our heart sinks. Forever and ever? That's it? That's the good news? And then we sigh and feel guilty that we are not more 'spiritual.' We lose heart, and we turn once more to the present to find what life we can."³

Beloved, if the guardrails that we put up show us that we are going to be floating around in the sky, playing a harp like Hollywood portrays, then I agree with the pastor who wants to just be annihilated. If heaven is just one long church service, laying prostate before God for millions and millions of years worshiping God, then

² Ibid. pp6.

³ Ibid. pp6.

I'm not intrigued. That sounds so terrible, I KNOW! But I am saying what many of you are thinking. It just doesn't sound enjoyable. Do I want to sing Great is Thy Faithfulness to God for eternity? Yes! Do I want to fall prostrate before God and worship the Lord? Yes! But I also want to experience everything else that the Bible tells me about heaven.

Again, proper guardrails will help me to imagine so that my future produces joy in me now.

Next, **it could lead us to being no earthly good.**

I'm sure that you've heard the phrase that somebody is so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good. Friends, if you think this way, you have flown off the biblical imagination road all together. To be heavenly minded is to be every bit of earthly good. Let me show you.

Turn your Bibles with me to **Colossians 3**. Let's read the first two verses there.

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.

Paul literally is telling us to not think about earth, right? He is saying because you have been saved by the Lord, think about heaven because that is where the Lord is.

So doesn't that really portray the idea that if I am heavenly minded then I won't be of any earthly good? Well, if we just stopped reading right there, most certainly we can conclude that. But let's keep reading the rest of the chapter here.

If I am heavenly minded, then what else will happen to me?

Verse 5 – I will put to death my sinful tendencies.

Verse 8 and 9 – I will put off the old man which consists of anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language, and lying to others.

Verse 10 and following – I am putting on the new man that is renewed in the knowledge of God.

Verse 12 – I am now acting in mercy, kindness, humility, and meekness towards others. I am patient with others.

Verse 13 – I am now able to bear with one another and I can forgive others.

Look at verse 16, a heavenly minded Christian is one who has the word of Christ dwelling richly within them. And what will that produce?

Verse 18 – a submissive wife

Verse 19 – a loving husband

Verse 20 – a obedient child

You see beloved, to be heavenly minded is to absolutely become of earthly good. Too many people are quite the opposite. Too many folks are so earthly minded that they of no heavenly OR earthly good.

C.S. Lewis wrote in his classic, *Mere Christianity*, *“If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next [world]. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth “thrown in”: aim at earth and you will get neither.”*⁴

Beloved, being heavenly minded will make me to be every bit of earthly good.

Finally, where can an unbiblical imagination lead me?

It can lead me to imagine unbiblically.

This is a little redundant, I realize that. But, it should still be said. If my biblical guard rails have not been put into place, then my unbiblical imagination will send me deeper into unbiblical thinking and belief. If my mind has not been shaped and influenced by God’s Word, then I can quickly fly off the road.

⁴ Ibid. pp 21.

What are some examples of unbiblical imaginations?

Well, we could imagine that heaven is boring. We've already alluded to that a moment ago, but it's worth saying again from a different angle. Friends, if we imagine a heaven that is boring, then what does that say about God? It says that God is boring. Is God boring? NO! Therefore, heaven cannot be boring!

We could imagine that we will be disembodied spirits just floating around. Is that what the resurrection teaches us? No, absolutely not. Does the Bible teach that we will not have glorified bodies in the future? Yes!

We could imagine that once we get to heaven we won't remember anything from here on earth. Boy how terrible that would be! I wouldn't remember my wife or my children. I wouldn't remember the great joys of being your pastor for this last decade! If we imagine that we lose our identities, then we are Hinduists and not Christians!

Another example of having an unbiblical imagination is envisioning heaven as a place that is such a spiritual that it has no resemblance of that of earthly culture. Imagining heaven as such a spiritual realm that it is so other would lead you to think that there are no cities, no gardens, no music, no sports, no art, no work, no buildings, no play. There is zero resemblance. But friends, that isn't what the Bible teaches about heaven. But an uninformed mind will lead to uninformed imaginations.

The great pastor and evangelical leader, Francis Schaeffer, taught us how we must always start with God's revealed truth before anything else because it was that truth that would fuel our imagination. He is once quoted as saying this, "The Christian is the really free man – he is free to have imagination. This too is our heritage. The Christian is the one whose imagination should fly beyond the stars."⁵ Friends, our imagination should not fly away from the truth or beyond the truth, rather our imagination should fly upon the truth.

⁵ Ibid. pp 22.

So beloved, in conclusion, we are to have a biblically inspired imagination. One that imagines heaven but does so correctly. One that is informed, one that produces joy, one that will lead me to living for incredible earthly good, one that rejoices in the truth and one that rejoices in doing the truth.

All of this is attributed to God's goodness who is able to work these things in us. With that in mind, turn your Bible to **Ephesians 3:20**.

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us.

In our thoughts and imaginations of our future, our praise should be directed to the Lord. Our biblical imaginations are only produced in us because of the power of God that is at work within us. So to Him, who is able to do not only exceedingly above all, just not abundantly above all, but exceedingly abundantly above all. Above all what? All that we ask or think. That word think in the original language is the Greek word **νοιέω**. This word means to perceive with the mind, to think, to understand, to ponder, to consider...OR we can say, now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or IMAGINE.

Beloved, as our minds rejoice in the truth, may it shape our imaginations of heaven. As we move forward through our series and we build new guardrails each week, may our imaginations soar. And as our imaginations soar, may our hearts rejoice, week in, week out, as our hearts long for our future home.

Let's pray.