

I. Set Up: As we move through the early stages of this ministry year, we are “thinking renewal.” We want to be re-freshed and re-charged for life, and we believe that starts with being re-aligned with God and by God. All of this has us thinking about who we are. Mike re has been arguing that we need to focus on who God says we are. In the last two messages he has laid down the first two of four big ideas. We are highly valued and deeply fallen. Today we look at the third big idea. We are eternally designed.

II. Intro

A. A while back, I was in a conversation in which I mentioned that I was working on several sermons on identity. And the person said, “Oh, well you have to read *The Wingfeather Series* by Peterson. I said I had not heard of it. They said it was all about figuring out our true identity and that while it wasn’t marketed as a Christian book, it was certain the author was a Christ-follower. Well, later that week I asked one of my sons if he had ever heard of the *The Wingfeather Series*, and he said. “Yeah, he had read it a while back.” And I said, “I was told it has some helpful things to say about identity.” And he said, “yeah, it does.” So, I ordered it.

B. It’s a young adult fantasy fiction series, which is not what I was expecting at all.

1. It’s all about dragons and talking lizards and three young kids who are being terrorized by the Fangs of Dang who have come from the other side of the Dark Sea of Darkness.

2. I read the first in the series and - no spoiler alerts are needed if you are 12 and have not yet read *The Wingfeather Series*. I am not going to give it away. It is about identity and it is OK. Not great. The series would not make the first 100 books I might recommend on identity. But it does make the case that we often do not understand who we are and whose we are and what we have been called to.

III. So, we pivot back to this book instead. We are thinking about renewal. And because that involves returning to something good and right and true, we’ve been unpacking who (or what) the Bible says we are. Along those lines, I’ve argued:

A. That how we think about and understand ourselves is very important – it is shaping;

B. That we need to be able to prioritize the various roles we play – because we play many and while sometimes they overlap, sometimes they compete. Just as we need to order our loves, we need to order our many roles;

C. That this is particularly challenging at the moment because we are surrounded by some new and disruptive narratives suggesting new and disruptive approaches to identity.

D. And we have been in the first few chapters of Genesis where: I initially noted that we are creatures made in God’s image – from this I argued we are Highly Valued. And then we turned to Genesis 3, where I argued that although we are highly valued, we are also sinful, broken and cursed, which I said means we are Deeply Fallen.

IV. Today we take up the third of the four big truths that should shape you. We are Eternity Shaped. We live after we die. There is an everlasting aspect to you that you cannot forget.

A. Please understand, I am arguing that before you think of yourself as young or old, rich or poor, a school teacher, a business owner or a student. Before you allow your mood to be shaped by your latest performance review or your cholesterol count or your golf handicap or whatever else may be shaping you, that you see yourself in light of these four big, prevailing truths. Four big concepts we find in the Bible. Highly valued, deeply fallen, Eternity Shaped.

B. Today I want to argue that you have to think about eternity because eternity changes everything.

1. If what you see is all you get, then do want you want. Why not? If you are nothing more than a soft machine, a relatively advanced, carbon-based biped but there is no overarching meaning, no binding rules, no judgment, no heaven or hell, nothing transcendent at all. If there is no non-material reality, then it makes sense to pick between hedonism, nihilism and depression. And I'd go for the first.

a) Hedonism – which is about seeking pleasure. Eat, drink and be merry. If it feels good, do it. It doesn't ultimately work. The ancient Greeks figured that out. Joy is a by-product of a life rightly lived. If you chase joy (directly) by doing what makes you happy, it stops making you happy.

b) If what you like is chocolate cake and so you eat it all the time, pretty soon it loses its allure.

c) It's more complicated than I am suggesting, but you get the point. I'm simply noting, if this is all there is – and you are consistent – then life has no lasting meaning or value and you are left with a few options. Of those, hedonism is probably your best bet.

2. However, if what the Bible says is true. If what Jesus promises is true. If you are going to live forever, then that must shape everything.

3. If this life is just a small piece of the equation – if the time we have on earth is the brief first act of a three act play, with act two being judgment and act three being heaven or hell, then by all means, focus on acts two and three. To do otherwise is to be a fool.

V. The last two weeks we were in the first two chapters of the Bible – Genesis 1 and 2. Today we jump to the last two - Revelation 21 and 22. I am going to start reading in Rev. 21:21, where we are getting a description of heaven – and read through Rev. 22:5. We are picking up mid-way through a description of heaven.

VI. V21: The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.

A. The book of Revelation is hard to make sense of. Part of what is going on is that John is being asked to describe what he is seeing and there are no words.

B. The Apostle John – the last remaining apostle. The other ten, who were older than him - have already been martyred. Various authorities have tried to put John to death a couple times but he has survived it. So he's been banished to an isolated island. At this point he is old and in exile. And one day during his devotional reading he is called up into heaven and told to take notes. The first part of what he writes down are the seven letters he is to send to the seven churches. But there is more. The problem is, some of it is highly symbolic and some of it – some of what he is expected to describe – are things he cannot really describe with the words he has at his disposal. What he is seeing is too good for words.

C. I am making four points today. I've already said Eternity Changes Everything. My second point is: Heaven is Better Than You Can Imagine. We get some of that here.

1. Ultimately what is great about heaven is God's presence. But it is also a land without sin. This world is broken. In Romans 8 Paul writes that "All of creation groans under the weight of sin." In heaven it does not and it is amazing. And we are getting a hint of that here.

D. We are told: The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl.

1. So, there is a fence – in other words, we are secure.
2. And the fence has gates, which in this amazing place are made of precious items, like pearls.
3. And along those same lines: The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass.
 - a) Gold is not transparent, but glass was valuable back then. John is combining them. What he says is, "the street was of gold 'as' or 'like' pure glass.

E. In 1720, Johnathan Edwards – the great Puritan pastor and architect of the Great Awakening - wrote a whole sermon on one word in this verse. The word was "like" – in this translation "as." The streets are of gold like glass.

1. What he tries to do in this sermon is get us to think about heaven. He is noting that that is what we are invited to do. We are invited to imagine. And he argues that we must imagine. We must fill our minds – our hearts – with the promise of the place Jesus has gone to prepare for us. We must look ahead to the opportunity to move from this land of the dying (which is what it is. When I do a funeral for a Christ-follower, I say: this is not the land of the living and they have not gone to the land of the dying. This is the land of the dying and they have gone to the land of the living. They have gone to the place where God is in fulness. They have gone to a place where everything works, where God's will is done, where the King of Kings and Lord of Lords rules and reigns – and it is perfect.

VII. Let me keep reading: V22: **I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.**

A. Jesus is the Lamb – even in heaven he is still the lamb. There is still a focus on and celebration of the Gospel.

VIII. ²³ The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.

A. There is no sun to light things up, but there is no darkness in heaven or shadows because, but the light is Christ. The radiance of his brilliance – lights it up.

B. I am inclined to say, do not take this literally, but I really think you should. That is, you should read it as literature.

IX. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.

A. It is filled with wealth and every good thing. All the riches of earth have been brought into heaven. Nothing of value is left behind.

X. ²⁵ On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶ The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. ²⁷ Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

XI. Rev. 22:1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

A. Increasingly I find myself thinking that Heaven is coming to earth. This passage seems to suggest that. Heaven is not some new place, it is earth remade – and perfect. The leaves of the tree are for healing what is broken on earth.

B. Or course we also note that with the tree and river we are returning back to the early chapters of Genesis – to the Garden before the curse.

XII. ³ No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.

XIII. As noted – I am making five points here.

A. One: Eternity changes everything, so we need to shine our headlights beyond the grave. We need to live today in light of forever. We need to see this life as Act one in a three act play. We need to stop thinking that what you see is all you get or that everything good has to happen now. There is nothing in this book that promises that. And much that promises the opposite.

B. Two: Heaven is better than we can imagine. Better than John can describe. Glorious in ways that more than make up for any hardship, any loss, any suffering. Perfect in every way.

XIV. Three: Therefore, we need to imagine heaven. We need to think about it. We need to set our minds on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God the father.

A. We need to start focusing on the fact that what is coming is better. I think it is one of the only ways we survive.¹ We need to start focusing on the fact that heaven is better than we can imagine.²

B. The book of Revelation was not written as a secret code book for us to crack so we can figure out when Jesus will return, it was written to people who were suffering to say: hang in there.³ It is bad and will get worse, but what awaits those who are faithful is so much beyond what you can imagine. This ends well. Live in light of the promises of what is coming. Invest your life in this future.

C. I mentioned Jonathan Edwards a moment ago. Some argue he is the smartest person ever born in North America. Maybe. In light of the sermon I mentioned – the sermon about thinking about heaven, he wrote himself all kinds of notes about heaven. We find these things scribbled in the margins of his Bible and of his sermons and in his journal. He was looking ahead as a way of keeping his perspective.

D. I am in a lot of conversations in which people say, “Oh my goodness. It’s bad. COVID. The debt. The oppression of the state. My rights. Oh my. Oh my. What is happening. The sky is falling. People are dying. Everything is out of control. It’s never been worse. I have to stay safe.

E. Stop it. What are you saying? What are you thinking? What are you reading? That is not who you are. Yes, sin is running amok. We are deeply fallen and we are living in a deeply fallen world, so get out there and be about making it better. Yes, there are lots of things going wrong. But, God has everything under control and he values you and death is not the end.

F. Write this down: death has no ultimate power over you. Jesus has conquered death. In Christ we are given eternal life.

G. You will live after you die. You have been designed for eternity. Death is a brief transition into a better world. Paul couldn’t wait.

1. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

H. Jesus has not promised you an easy life – on this side of the grave. He has promised you a great eternity. He has said, today is for serving. Right now you should focus on the needs of others. In this world It’s to invest what you have been given in my kingdom. It’s to store up treasure in the world to come.

I. If you are looking for easy and safe, do not look to Jesus. Try something else.

J. Point one: Eternity changes everything; Point two: Heaven is better than you can imagine. Point three: We are told to think about heaven.

XV. Point Four: If we focus on heaven we will do great earthly good.

A. I am making this point because others claim the opposite.

1. Karl Marx claimed that religion was the opiate of the people.

- a) If you read Marx you know he was not against every aspect of religion. He was not down on the “love thy neighbor” parts. He was against the way some rich used the idea of heaven to keep the poor in line. They abused it.
 - b) The ruling classes could say, “you are oppressed, but if you live a good life you can have a great afterlife.”
 - c) Marx said thinking about heaven makes earth worse.
2. Some environmentalists have started to speak out against heaven, because they think, “until we realize this world is all we got we will not treat it well. And we will treat others well.
 3. John Lennon argued against thinking about heaven, suggesting that if we imagine there is no heaven then we will all get along on earth.
- B. The claim is that the belief in heaven makes earth worse, and the related knock against Christians is that “we are too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good.”
1. I am inclined to say, “I wish,” because I do not find many Christians today spending much time thinking about heaven. Most seem to spend more time thinking about their next vacation than they do about heaven.
- C. But the more important point is to say, it doesn’t work that way. Indeed, they have it almost exactly wrong.
- D. It is not until you realize that you are going to live forever – and are accountable to God for what you do here – that you become of much earthly value.
1. As Nietzsche noted, those who really think what you see is all you get, do not end up caring about much other than getting what they want right now.
- E. As C.S. Lewis famously noted in *Mere Christianity*: “If you read history you will find that the Christians begin the most for the present world are just the ones that thought the most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot. in 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. And that Heaven and you'll get the earth "thrown in": aim
- F. In his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, professor Rodney Starks – a historian who taught at Baylor – argues that the reason Christianity grew so dramatically during the first three hundred years – during one one hundred year period it seems to have moved from being eight percent of the population to fifty – is because Christians lived in light of eternity during two devastating plagues.
1. One was in 165 AD and the second in 251. (Both lasted about 15 years. Please Lord, do not let COVID stick around for 15 years).
 2. We are not sure what the plagues were – some think smallpox, some think measles, but it appears that up to 25 percent of the people in the cities died.
 3. Those living at the time didn’t know what was happening, but they knew that you could catch the disease from someone who was sick, and so when the plague hit an area the rich (and many of the doctors) fled the cities.

4. And indeed, many family members left those who were sick. At some points in the second plague, 5,000 people per day were dying in a city of 1 million.

G. We know most of this from a Roman doctor named Galen who was one of the doctors who fled. But he notes that the Christians did not leave. Indeed, the Christians not only stayed to take care of their family members, they took care of those abandoned by others as well.

H. Stark notes that if someone was cared for, half would recover. He then does the math and notes that while many Christians caring for the sick would die, many would live, as would their family members, as would a lot of the people who they cared for. And he says, those who were cared for often became Christians.

I. Starks then does two things.

1. First, he argues that this is why Christianity spread so quickly. The number of Christians grew three times faster during these two plagues.

2. Second, he notes that this only makes sense. He explains that Galen fled because he lacked belief in life beyond death, while the Christians stayed because they were certain that this life was just a prelude to the one to come. “For Galen to remain in Rome to treat the afflicted would have required bravery far beyond that which was needed by Christians to do the same thing.”

3. Starks does not suggest that the Christians were more courageous, he was saying that it was rational for Christians to stay and rational for pagans to flee.

4. The Gospel gave ordinary people a reason to stay, because they were living in light of eternity, and you live very differently if you do so.

J. Starks argues that the most practical thing the Christians could do was to stay put. Not so the church would grow. No, but because they had an understanding of eternal life.

K. Aim at heaven and you get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither.

L. Heaven made them of earthly good. The knowledge of heaven made their heroes and healers.

XVI. Finally, number five: In light of eternity, there are no ordinary people.

A. Given that we are eternity shaped, we need to realize, as CS Lewis wrote In *The Weight of Glory*, that we need to be alert to others – who are also eternal.

1. It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbor.

2. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor’s glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken.

3. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.

XVII. OK, enough. I have given you a lot to think about.

- A. We are looking at four big ideas. I have given you the first three:
 - 1. We are highly valued
 - 2. We are deeply fallen
 - 3. We are eternity shaped
- B. And under the third point – we will get four next week – I have made five points:
 - 1. Eternity changes everything;
 - 2. Heaven is better than you can imagine.
 - 3. We are told to imagine heaven.
 - 4. If we do, we become the kind of people who will do great earthly good.
 - 5. In light of eternity, there are no ordinary people.

XVIII. May we live today in light of eternity.

¹ Men and women, if you focus only on this life, the pressure is too great. If you look at your spouse, children, work, a job, a political cause and insist that they satisfy you fully, you put too much pressure on them to sustain. You were made for more. In fact, you do not realize the greatness of your soul until you get great love and a great job and a wonderful life and you are not fulfilled, because you were made for more. Unless you are imagining heaven, you will not be able to enjoy them because you need more from them. What if you knew there was something else.

² Roman 8:18 – I consider the suffering of this time not worthy of the glories that shall be revealed in us. How does Paul get through it? He considered and compared it. Fear is imagining and embodying and thinking about it. This is so no nonsense.

³ There is a sense in which all theology is “task theology.” Nothing written just to be written. And some race past what it meant to the first readers to get a more 21st century take. Don’t go there. The first rule of Bible study is, what did the original writer intend for the original reader to understand.