

CHAPTER 1

LONGING FOR HEAVEN

In 2005, there weren't many people on the planet whose futures seemed brighter than Tom Brady's. As an NFL quarterback, Brady had just won his third Super Bowl with the New England Patriots. He'd signed a new contract worth more than \$60 million. And he'd been chosen as America's most eligible bachelor by *Entertainment Tonight*.

Most would say he had a perfect life. Which is why many people were shocked when he seemed to question his own success in an interview with *CBS News*.

The interviewer, Steve Kroft, referenced several of Brady's recent accomplishments. Then he asked, "This whole experience—this whole upward trajectory—what have you learned about yourself? What kind of an effect does it have on you?"

Here's how Tom Brady responded:

Why do I have three Super Bowl rings, and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would

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say, “Hey man, this is what [it] is.” I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think: It’s gotta be more than this. I mean this can’t be what it’s all cracked up to be. I mean I’ve done it. I’m 27. And what else is there for me?

Taken aback, the interviewer asked, “What’s the answer?”

“I wish I knew,” said Brady. “I wish I knew.”¹

In the two decades since that interview, Tom Brady has continued to live the kind of life most people only dream about. He won a total of seven Super Bowls before finally retiring from the NFL at age forty-four. He experienced both marriage and divorce. He became a father. Recently he became part owner of the Las Vegas Raiders franchise.

I don’t know whether Tom Brady has found the answer he was searching for more than two decades ago. But I do know *what* he was searching for. That’s because I know what every person is searching for, down deep where it matters most—what every person was designed to long for and seek out.

It’s heaven. The answer is heaven.

We’re going to learn a lot about heaven in these pages, including many of the details Scripture provides about when we’ll arrive there, who we’ll find, and what we’ll do. But for now, I want to start with that central reality of yearning—that pull we feel toward something that is beyond our current experience. I want to show you that your longing for heaven reveals your desire for more, your desire for home, and your desire for God Himself.

LONGING FOR HEAVEN IS LONGING FOR MORE

Let’s go back to Tom Brady for a moment. He said there’s “gotta be more than this” to make life meaningful and purposeful and

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fulfilling, even when “this” includes everything most people believe is important.

He’s right! There does need to be “more” for each of us to be satisfied. That’s because we were created to experience more than we can in this current age. We were created for more beauty. More blessings. More laughter. More passion. More enjoyment. More contemplation. More love. More everything!

To be more specific (pun intended), we were created for perfection. “Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

The reason we feel so disillusioned and so impoverished even when life is going well is because humanity as a whole was cast out from the perfection we were designed to enjoy. These may be the saddest verses in all of Scripture:

Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”—therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:22–24)

Ever since that moment, humanity has been like the prodigal son attempting to find sustenance and satisfaction from pig slop. Deep in our history and deep in our hearts, we remember our Father’s house, and we miss it. We long for it. We even groan for it, as Paul described in Romans 8: “For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body” (verses 22–23).

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Peter Toon captured it well: “The most tragic strain in human existence lies in the fact that the pleasure which we find in the things of this life, however good that pleasure may be in itself, is always taken away from us. The things for which men strive hardly ever turn out to be as satisfying as they expected, and in the rare cases in which they do, sooner or later they are snatched away.”²

Another writer said it this way:

Here is the surprise: God made us this way. He made us to yearn—to always be hungry for something we can’t get, to always be missing something we can’t find, to always be disappointed with what we receive, to always have an insatiable emptiness that no thing can fill and an untamable restlessness that no discovery can still. Yearning itself is healthy—a kind of compass inside us, pointing to True North.³

We were made for more than this world—and that’s what heaven is. It’s “more.”

LONGING FOR HEAVEN IS LONGING FOR HOME

Imagine you’ve been on a long trip, and you’re almost to your house—just a few minutes away from the end of your journey. You’re feeling cramped from the airplane seats. You’re sore from heaving heavy luggage and feeling the straps of your bag dig into your shoulder. You’re tired and jet-lagged and maybe even a little cranky. When you arrive, you plan to toss your bags by the front door, kick off your shoes, and sit down in your favorite chair.

What’s the first word that will come out of your mouth when you finally get the weight off your feet? The first sound?

For me, it would probably be something like, “Aaaaaahhhhhhhhh.”

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There is a very real sense in which reaching heaven will be like that sound—like that feeling. Because when we get there, we will finally be arriving home. We will finally find ourselves in the place we've always belonged.

On the final day before His crucifixion, Jesus may have been thinking about His own opportunity to return home, because He offered a detailed and beautiful prayer on behalf of His disciples who would remain in this world after His resurrection and ascension to heaven. And not just the disciples then following Jesus—our Lord offered specific prayers for all who would choose to follow Him throughout the centuries.

During that prayer, He spoke about the dissonance we feel in this present world and our longing for our true home:

“But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.” (John 17:13–16)

Later in that same prayer, Jesus added, “Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world” (verse 24).

One of the reasons you long for heaven is because you don't belong in this world. None of us belong here. Peter described followers of Jesus as “sojourners and pilgrims” (1 Peter 2:11). The author of Hebrews used the language of “strangers and pilgrims” (11:13). The apostle John instructed us, “Do not love the world or the things in the world” (1 John 2:15). Why? Because “the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever” (verse 17).

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When you feel out of place in this world—in your country or your community or even your home—don't be alarmed. Don't try to "fix" that feeling by adapting yourself to this world. Instead, allow your longing for heaven to guide you toward home.

LONGING FOR HEAVEN IS LONGING FOR GOD

The pull we feel toward heaven represents a longing for all the "more" we've been missing throughout our lives. It's a longing for a home we've never seen yet always needed. Finally, it's a longing for the God we were always meant to know, love, and serve.

King David described this longing in Psalm 27:

One thing I have desired of the LORD,
That will I seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the LORD
All the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the LORD,
And to inquire in His temple. (verse 4)

David didn't want more of this world. He wanted more of God's presence, which means he wanted more of God Himself. That is where our deepest satisfaction is found. Only in heaven and only with God will we finally and fully feel the completeness we were created to enjoy.

Now, you might say, "Dr. Jeremiah, I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I have an intimate connection with my heavenly Father." Yes, you do! And I rejoice with you in those blessings—truly, I do.

At the same time, everything you and I experience in our spiritual lives right now is clouded by the reality of sin. We are still tainted

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by the corruption of sin, which means we don't enjoy God's love and intimacy and fellowship in the way we were intended to enjoy it. That was even true for the apostle Paul: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Once again, don't allow yourself to become satisfied with your current connection to Jesus. You long to know Him better, so allow that longing to draw you closer to Him. Then, one day, revel and rejoice when you return home and see Him face-to-face.

Here is how Mark McMinn said it:

However messed up our abnormal world may be, the story is not over yet. The Christian story is ultimately a comedy and not a tragedy; it ends as it began. Someday, there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Birds will really sing. Lions and lambs will tumble and play in grass that is truly green. Our bodies won't be riddled with wrinkles, muscle spasms, and cancer. There will be pure joy and beauty and goodness. And God, who longs to be with us, will walk with us in the Garden.⁴

That may sound frightening or intimidating now—but it won't then. No ecstasy in this broken world will ever compare with our joy then, as we walk with God. We will be home. And it won't just be a story about a prodigal son or daughter who could never be good enough to earn God's favor. It will be a story about a loving God who delights in offering lavish, exuberant love. The depth of God's love will be seen everywhere.

Few songs capture our longing for heaven like "Over the Rainbow." It swept the world like a tornado when Judy Garland, playing Dorothy, sang it in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. In an early scene, Dorothy wonders aloud whether there really is a place out there where she can experience peace instead of trouble. "Do you suppose there is such a place, Toto? There must be. It's not a place you can get to by boat or

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train. It's far, far away. Behind the moon, beyond the rain.”⁵ Then she begins to sing, “Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high.”

Decades later, Israel “IZ” Kamakawiwo'ole—known as the “Voice of Hawaii”—revived the song for a new generation. His gentle, ukulele-laced version echoed the same hope for a place somewhere beyond our current reach that not only touches our deepest yearnings but satisfies them.

The songwriters—Yip Harburg and Harold Arlen, both sons of Jewish immigrants—wrote the lyrics in 1939 as war loomed over Europe.⁶ Though safe in America, they felt the ache for something more: peace, safety, and a place to belong. So they gave the world a lyrical appeal that still tugs at our hearts. They helped us picture a world somewhere over the rainbow, somehow above our own experiences, where the skies are blue and the dreams we dare to cling to really can come true.

Aren't you filled with that kind of longing when you read about heaven? When you think about heaven? When you try to imagine heaven? Don't you feel that echo inside you like a comforting lullaby your mother used to sing back when you were just a little baby? It's in our DNA to yearn for a better place—to ache for a home way up high where dreams really do come true.

There's only one place like that. It's heaven. And it's a longing that will be fulfilled!