

Looking to heaven without looking past earth

In the Christian imagination, the two rightly go together.

by [Jonathan Tran](#) in the [September 2022](#) issue



(Illustration by Luisa Jung)

In the evangelicalism I grew up in, people talked about heaven a lot. We longed for the pearly gates. And why not? Heaven meant being with God forever. We shared the gospel in hopes that others would get saved and get in. “Got heaven?” we asked. We promised a dreamy world beyond this world’s nightmares. We read scripture, sang songs, and tried to be patient for that one day at the end of our days. We couldn’t wait for heaven.

Not so much now. Heaven seems to have dropped off the Christian radar, even in the evangelical world I still largely inhabit. It now feels more like a distant memory than a future hope. It doesn't come up in theology books. Hardly a word gets said about it at church. One might catch a glimpse of it in a sermon, but things quickly move on to what really matters, whatever that's taken to be. The mention of heaven always risked offending non-Christians. Now it seems to offend Christians too.

My evidence for a sea change on all things afterlife is largely anecdotal. But if it is true, how did heaven end up with such a bad rap?

Much of the problem lay with the evangelical idea of heaven itself. Heaven is rhetorically anti-world. Whatever we don't like about this world, heaven promises the opposite. Those who hunger here dine in heaven, finally arriving at that unending buffet. Those suffering now will dance later on streets paved with gold. Injustice will be met with justice, brokenness with wholeness, loneliness with intimacy. All these heavenly promises can't help but make this world feel rather glum.

Valorizing this world with the next required casting this world as decidedly meh—by surrendering much that makes the world good. Believing that the coming world entailed this world burning away, we set in motion a self-fulfilling prophecy. The world literally started to burn, with death-dealing global warming arising as too many Christians had already moved on to greener pastures. We ignored cries for justice, reasoning that only God's final justice would save us. We disregarded bodily life and health, looking past earthly bodies for heavenly ones.

We didn't know how to look to heaven without looking past earth. So we gave up both—and lost sight of how, in the Christian theological imagination, the two go together.

Now we've overcompensated for our mistakes. Now the world takes up all of our attention, fills out the Christian imagination. It's not that we've rejected heaven so much as that it no longer occurs to us. When the fate of the world is the crux of the story, the afterlife is an afterthought. Why think about justice later when we can pursue justice now? We don't want a new heaven and a new earth; we want a more heavenly version of this earth. We want our eschatologies realized, the apocalypse now; anything else would be a tease.

I've been party to this move. In my work as a theologian, I've worried out loud that overmuch attention to heaven is a convenient distraction from community, environment, and creation. In a recent book I called Christians to God's justice and mercy now, justice and mercy I claimed as natural to this world because they're natural to God.

I don't think I was entirely wrong, but clearly I was reacting to something. Nowadays I'm rethinking things again—and wondering if those embarrassing evangelicals weren't onto something we all need to recoup.

As I turn 50, I find myself longing for heaven like never before. Perhaps at 50 one has seen enough go wrong that one just wants things to be put right. I've lost enough people who I want to see again. The persistence and pain of injustice make final justice look pretty good. The world's many estrangements make God feel that much farther away, deepening a hunger for a proximity that this world can at best only approximate. At 50, one becomes more aware of what's past than what's to come, of life's countless disappointments, the pain of broken relationships, and the losses of a life, all of which heaven promises to redeem.

In *City of God*, a book almost entirely about the lessons heaven has for life on earth, Augustine says this about heaven: "There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. . . . For what other end do we set for ourselves than to reach that kingdom of which there is no end?" Recent decades have seen Christian theologians at pains to soften Augustine's dim view of this world, of what he called "the unhappiness of this life." They did so in good faith, in hopes of regaining territory Christians surrendered under the spell of too much heaven talk.

Now that the pendulum has swung the other way, perhaps it's time to return to Augustine's sense that we can only appreciate this world by appreciating its temporary nature, that the best way to love it isn't absolutely, that we see it best when we see through it to all that God promises beyond it, that we make the most of it by not making too much of it. Proper faith in the world means coming to terms with the fact that all things will be made well—but not here, not now. Some things are so broken that nothing in this world, neither the king's horses nor the king's men, can put them back together again.

Wanting the best for this world means wanting its proper end, its final rest in God. Longing for heaven is for Augustine the way of Christianity, journeying from this world to the next.