

Praise for *Unearthing Heaven*

“We, as followers of Jesus, so often lose sight of the end of the story and get wrapped up only in the present. The Body of Christ needs to be reawakened to the unshakeable HOPE we have in Jesus. *Unearthing Heaven* is a needed wave of grace as Mike O’Quin shares how we can live today with both the fear of God and great hope as we imagine ourselves standing before Jesus and hearing him say, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant!’ With the hope of an expected future, we all can find strength to endure the challenges and sacrifices of today in the name of Jesus.”

— **Jimmy Seibert**, author of *Passion and Purpose* and president of Antioch Ministries International

“The meaningful and regular consideration of one’s personal evaluation by Jesus Christ is a life-changer. Other than my own personal salvation, this consideration has done more to impact my life than anything else. Mike O’Quin has done the body of Christ a huge favor in writing about the topic. Though I have considered the topic before and have read several volumes on the topic, this one moved me in many new ways to strive to please my king, Jesus. I am confident you’ll be blessed, as I was, in reading this book.”

— **Dr. Bill F. Korver**, president of Carolina College of Biblical Studies

“The Judgment Seat of Christ is one of the least talked-about and least understood teachings of scripture among the church today. Yet it is one of the most liberating doctrines in the

Bible and should profoundly impact how we conduct our lives. Mike does a fantastic job in *Unearthing Heaven* of making the biblical teaching of God's judgment of believers accessible and inspirational. Every Christ-follower needs to pick up this book and think deeply about its claims!"

— **Mick Murray**, author of *The Father's Heart* and co-host of the *Ideology* podcast

"In the midst of a time with significant cultural change, the call to live in light of eternity is perhaps one of the most important messages for the believer. Mike O'Quin challenges us to re-evaluate our motivations and discover anew the power of living from an eternal vision. He lives this message in his own life, and from this place of authority, he will challenge you to do the same."

— **Drew Steadman**, executive director of Antioch U.S. and author of *The Gospel According to Culture*

"When I was a little boy I noticed my mother sitting in the chair where she prayed every morning. She was crying. I said, 'Mommy, what's wrong?' She looked at me and smiled. 'Honey, I'm just imagining the moment when I will get to see the face of Jesus.' Perhaps no moment has ever touched me so deeply. I've heard it said that when Christians focus too much on the afterlife we become irrelevant in this life. In this powerful book, Mike O'Quin shatters that ridiculous notion, showing us that when we have the courage and faith to live passionately for the moment we will see Jesus in all of his glory, *everything* changes."

— **Paul Richardson**, international director of Mustard Seed International and author of *A Certain Risk*

“Have you ever wondered what exactly Paul means when he, inspired by the Spirit, exhorts us to: ‘Set your heart on things above...’ and then in the next verse: ‘Set your mind on things above ...’ (Colossians 3:1,2)? I mean, how do we apply this command practically? Mike O’Quin helps us understand this command, and more importantly, he inspires to want to live it out. *Unearthing Heaven* motivates us to live for THAT DAY when we stand before Christ and give account of our lives, making this reality understandable and motivational. Thanks, Mike, for inspiring us, sobering us, and refreshing us with a fresh look at a belief that’s core to a Christian worldview.”

— **Ron Parrish**, author of *From Duty To Delight* and *Strengthening Your Spiritual Core*

“Our imaginations are powerful. They are the driving force behind fear, anxiety, jealousy, vengeance, and a host of other evils. But Mike O’Quin argues that those same powerful imaginations, when fixed upon what is of eternal value—such as the smile of Jesus when we meet Him face to face—will give us a fresh purpose and joy in living. I’ve witnessed Mike’s life—a life of purpose and joy that has touched the people of several nations. His life has been changed by this message, and yours will be too.”

— **Jim Baton**, author of *A Way Out of Hell* and *Hope is a Dangerous Place*

“Engaging my holy imagination about things like heaven and (gasp!) heavenly rewards has changed how I work, serve, and live, and Mike’s insights and clarity have brought fresh encouragement and hope during a difficult pandemic. I’m

reminded that nothing I do, no matter how seemingly purposeless or meaningless, is unseen by my Savior and this humbling, hopeful truth gives me new vision for the road ahead.”

— **Sarah Guerrero**, author of *Break Through* and *Let's Start With Love*

“Mike O'Quin makes me think and makes me laugh. This book on heaven's rewards inspires me towards a closer walk with Jesus and a healthier connecting between my faith and my works for Him.”

— **Eric Bryant**, executive pastor of Gateway Church Austin and author of *Not Like Me*

Unearthing Heaven

Why Tomorrow's Reward Matters Today

Mike O'Quin Jr.



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PUBLISHING

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To Naomi

*Your tender heart towards the Lord
inspires your daddy deeply*

*My reward is with me,
and I will give to each person
according to what they have done.*

– Jesus Christ, Revelation 22:12

CONTENTS

Introduction • Missing Treasure Chest	1
One • Brushing Away Heaven’s Reward	9
Two • A House Tested	37
Three • A Raised Platform	53
Four • The Crown of Awkwardness	69
Five • The Crown of Glory	91
Six • The Crown of Life	101
Seven • The Crown of Righteousness	117
Eight • The Crown of Exultation	133
Nine • Struggle Meets Heaven	153
Ten • Rediscovering Heaven	167
Acknowledgments	199
About the Author	199
Other Books by Mike O’Quin Jr.	201
Recommended Resources For Further Study	205
Endnotes	207

INTRODUCTION

MISSING TREASURE CHEST

I'm standing in front of a room of about 60 people, preaching at an English-speaking international church service. This is a small fellowship of expatriates living in Indonesia, most of them missionaries serving cross-culturally or teachers at the international school where the church meets.

“How many of you have thought about your reward in heaven this week?”

No hands go up.

“How about this month?”

One hand gingerly lifts in the air.

“Okay, how about this year? How many of you have thought about your coming reward in heaven at some point this year?”

A few hands are now up, no more than five.

Most of these people are living overseas because they love Jesus and want to see His Kingdom advanced. They are risk-taking, Bible-loving believers, and yet only about 8% of them had thought at all about their reward in heaven in the last 365 days.

For the last few years as I've had opportunities to teach on the subject of heaven's rewards, I've taken the same informal poll. I would estimate that less than 10% of believers I've asked have given any thought to their reward in heaven in the previous

year. Whether I'm in the U.S. or overseas, I find that the topic of heaven's honor is barely a blip on our theological screens.

How about you—how would you have answered that question? When was the last time your imagination was stirred by your reward in heaven?

The Unthought-Of Day

Jesus often taught on the promise of reward of heaven, and the prospect pulsed among His first followers. A cursory reading of the New Testament will have you bumping frequently into the theme of heaven's honor as a primary life motivation.

I imagine my poll's result would be much different if we went back to the first-century church and sat among a group of persecuted believers crammed into someone's simple home. "How many of you have thought about your reward in heaven today?" we'd ask them. I bet every hand would shoot up.

The early church fathers and reformers pondered it often. Sometimes they debated over it because the theology of coming rewards was so central for them and crucial in understanding the Kingdom of God.

Martin Luther reportedly said, "I have two days in my calendar, this day and that Day."¹ "That Day" referred to the moment of standing before Christ and receiving his master's accolade for the way he had lived his life on earth.

The first century and early church would be aghast at our apathy toward the honor of heaven. Even leaders from more recent church history would be shaking their heads in bewilderment.

Heroes in the faith like Hudson Taylor, Amy Carmichael and Nikolaus Von Zinzendorf (more on him later) had "that Day"

planted vividly in their imaginations, and it deeply inspired them in their day-to-day lives. Charles Spurgeon, the renowned 19th-century English minister known as the “prince of preachers,” said this coming Day of honor put a pep in his step for his long race: “There is a crown for me. Then will I gird up my loins and quicken my pace, since the crown is so sure to those who run with patience.”²

Jim Elliot, a young man who was martyred in 1952 as he and four other missionaries were trying to reach the Huaorani people of Ecuador, famously wrote this in the margins of his journal four years earlier: “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”³

Influential author and evangelical apologist C.S. Lewis marveled at our indifference to what he called “the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels.”⁴ In his writings, Lewis cut against the common assumption that thinking about heaven too much makes us irrelevant on earth, an idea best summed up in the adage, “Don’t be so heavenly minded that you become no earthly good.” Lewis argues instead:

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.⁵

I’ll unpack a little more from Lewis’ writings on this subject later, because they are worth digging into, but for now I’m wondering: how did we go from richly imagining heaven’s rewards to barely thinking about them at all in just a few short

generations of Jesus-followers? Why are we so rarely stirred by the eternity-lighting smile waiting for us in heaven?

I can say from my own early spiritual formation that this impactful truth was nowhere to be found. From age 10 when I tearfully said yes to Jesus at a Christian summer camp altar call, through my teenage years when God drew me back to Himself after some junior high drifting, to getting involved and discipled in a lively youth group at a Bible-believing church during high school, I can't remember ever thinking about what waits for me on the other side of salvation.

When it was time to go to college, I chose a Christian school, figuring that kind of environment would help me keep growing spiritually. I moved from Mississippi to Texas to attend Baylor University, jumped into student ministries on campus and joined a vibrant local church.

It wasn't until that freshman year in college that I first encountered the life-transforming truth of what the Bible calls the "Judgment Seat of Christ." It was so impactful that I can even remember the room where I was sitting when I learned about it for the first time. Small room. Blue walls. A row of folding chairs lined up in front of a small television screen that was set on a rolling cart. The class met on Sunday mornings as a breakout session after the large group gathering of the college group, which was so large it had its own worship service. I chose a class with an intriguing title, something about living for eternity, which was led by Jamie Lash. He was a Bible teacher at Dallas Baptist University who would make the drive from Dallas to Waco every week to lead the small group at Highland Baptist Church.

Jamie gave an introduction to the class in front of the TV, popped a VHS cassette tape in the VCR, and played a video from

Rick Howard, a man with whom he would later write a book on this subject, entitled *This Was Your Life!*

In the first part of the video, Rick Howard vividly described a dream he had about the Judgment Seat of Christ, an experience that changed the course of his life. Throughout his gripping teaching and explanation of Bible passages on the theme, I could sense the presence of God; it was both beautiful and its sobering.

Jamie popped the VHS tape out of the player and there was holy, stunned silence. We were all gripped by an intense desire to live for God more wholeheartedly, some of us kneeling on the floor and crying out to God for His grace to do so. Up to that point, I had never known that my life would be evaluated in any way...I thought I had sidestepped all that when I came to Christ.

Jamie led us in prayer and taught us more over the next several weeks, each class building floor-by-floor on this life-changing truth. That truth rocked my world, and I'm praying that it will rock yours too in the pages to come.

Looking back, I wonder how I could have gone that long, from age 10 to 18, without once encountering this potent truth about the Judgment Seat of Christ. My spiritual formation and theology had been shaped in the southern United States, a bastion of evangelical Christianity known as the "Bible Belt," yet I can't recall any teaching or emphasis on rewards in heaven or God's evaluation of us there, a very strong theme in the Bible.

I thought a lot about getting saved, and what that meant for me and how I needed to share the Good News with others, but I hardly gave a thought about what waits on the other side of that salvation, namely heaven. If my brand of fervent, evangelical

Protestant Christianity were a restaurant, reward in heaven wouldn't even be on the menu.

Since first encountering this impactful truth as a late teen in that little breakout class, I'm sad to say that I have rarely heard it taught. And if my non-scientific and anecdotal polling is correct, most of us are not gripped by this coming day of heaven's honor—even people who are sent to the mission field as Christ's ambassadors.

What gives?

In this book I'd like to take you on a journey. First, I want to tackle that question, venturing three guesses why the teaching of that Day is so rare in our day. Let's get the objections out of the way right up front.

Then we will unpack the two metaphors the Apostle Paul used to help us understand the power of that Day, to give you some theological grounding for that hope. He actually presented the Judgment Seat of Christ in a way to stir longing in us and not dread.

Then we'll talk about our awkwardness over receiving honor from God and look at the four different crowns of the New Testament, each one championing a different Kingdom value. These crowns are meant to motivate you deeply (I realize crown-wearing doesn't do much for us these days...we'll work on that).

Next stop is to see how a vivid imagining of standing before Jesus at the Judgment Seat of Christ, with a big smile on His beaming face, can help us overcome addictive sins and common life struggles.

Finally, I'll argue that we have heaven all wrong, and that re-imagining it in a more biblical way will blow away the nonchalance in our minds and fire up our souls with longing.

Believe it or not, your latent desire for eternity is actually the truest thing about you, and tapping into it will make you feel like you've just discovered a hidden treasure chest of life motivation.

I hope you'll keep an open mind on this journey. We all get stuck for good reasons, our mindsets going back to familiar ruts again and again. I pray that my simple and conversational book will awaken a desire in you for that Day, so much so that you will consider living your life in light of a more vivid and rewarding eternity.

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