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Heaven Is a Place on Earth

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Preface

This book is about the meaning *in* life. A slew of Christian books already address the meaning *of* life. Most of these rightly observe that we exist to love God through personal devotions and minister to others by sharing the gospel and making disciples of all nations. I wholeheartedly embrace these spiritual values. It is a privilege to ponder the Word of God, to pour out our heart to him in prayer, and to persuade other people to repent and follow our Savior. But this book is not about that.

Instead, I want to examine what these “meaning *of* life” books typically overlook. They are right to tell us that we were created for worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship, and discipleship, but they are wrong to stop there. Look at that list again. While it more or less covers our responsibilities as Christians, it says little about what it means to be human. Does our purpose for life consist entirely in these spiritual activities, or is there also some value in showing up for work, waxing our car, playing with our children, or taking a trip to the beach—just a few of the many things we do, not because we are Christian, but primarily because we are human?

It is these distinctly human activities that this book seeks to address. Rather than encourage you to stretch forward to further pietistic pursuits (an important topic that has its place), I am more

concerned here to renew our appreciation for the ordinary things we are already doing. In the process we will inevitably touch upon the meaning *of* life—that is, the purpose for our existence—but all the while our focus will be on the meaning *in* life—that is, the value within the normal, everyday activities that mark our human experience.

If I do my job well, you will come away from this book convinced of two important truths. First, God wants us to enjoy our earthly existence. We need not feel guilty for feeling at home in this world, for this planet is precisely where God wants us to be. As we learn from the opening pages of Genesis, it's good to be human and it's good to be here, on planet earth. Second, because this life matters to God, you will also be challenged to redirect every aspect of this existence to his honor and glory. No longer free to brush aside this earthly life as mere batting practice for our future, heavenly existence, we now recognize that whatever we do, regardless how seemingly small and insignificant, should be done with excellence “in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17).

Both truths only make sense within a full-orbed Christian worldview, which is why I spend some time in chapter 1 explaining what a worldview is, how it works, and what might comprise its foundational beliefs. Finally, I have concluded the book with discussion questions and case studies for each chapter in a section entitled “Expanding Your Worldview.” Those who use this material to facilitate small-group discussions will be able to contact me and download a free leader's guide and two bonus chapters (on the foundational beliefs of the Christian worldview) at www.heavenisaplaceonearth.com.

Acknowledgments

It is sometimes difficult to know how far back to extend one's thanks (witness the long and tiresome acceptance speeches at the Oscars), but I must begin with Joe Crawford and James Grier. I had attended twelve years of Christian school, four years of Christian college, one year of seminary, plus church services three times a week during that span and yet had never heard the life-changing truths of this book until I sat under their ministry at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary. I would also like to thank Doug Felch, who kindly permitted me to use his informative chart on the image of God, and Neal Plantinga, whose inspiring lectures and writings have further enlarged my understanding of the Christian worldview.

Besides these mentors, I am indebted to the editorial contributions of the gracious staff at Zondervan—Paul Engle, Jim Ruark, Tim Beals, Katya Covrett, and Greg Stielstra—and the many friends, such as Wendy Widder, Sharon Ross, Scott Morter, Jeff Lindell, Phil Wittmer, and Gary and Julie Childers, who gladly volunteered to read and comment on major portions of my manuscript. Their encouragement and insights have made this a better book.

Finally, I offer my most profound gratitude to my dear wife, Julie, who not only carefully (and critically!) read every page but, more important, daily implements its truth in our home, enabling me and our three children to enjoy firsthand the privilege of living within the liberty of the Christian worldview.

What You See Is What You Get

Give me but one firm spot on which to stand,
and I will move the earth.

ARCHIMEDES (3RD CENTURY B.C.)

I don't want to go to heaven. Not that I'm lobbying for the other place—I want no part of everlasting fire and unbearable, unquenchable torment. The reason why I first repented and asked Christ to forgive my sin was to avoid going to hell. I became a Christian to get out of hell, not because I wanted to get into heaven. Before you judge me, remember why *you* said the Sinner's Prayer.

The delights of heaven may be to die for, but isn't that precisely the problem? Everyone who makes it into heaven has to leave this life to get there. Granted, death is not the worst thing that can happen to a person, but it's pretty close. All things being equal, I'd rather continue the earthly existence that I currently enjoy.

I'd love to go to heaven—for a visit. It will be unspeakably exhilarating to stand in the presence of God and sing his praises—but to do nothing except this forever and ever? That's a lot of rounds of "Shine, Jesus, Shine." Perhaps you think I'm being unfair. Well, what

else do people do in heaven but worship God? As one preacher put it, “I don’t know what we’re going to do there, but I promise you it won’t be boring.” Thanks for the help. I want to believe you, but in the absence of any hard facts, I’m siding with Huckleberry Finn.

In a futile attempt to persuade a fidgety Huckleberry to behave, the stern Miss Watson warned her young charge about the hellish destiny of restless boys and the heavenly reward awaiting those who sit up straight and study their spelling books. According to Huckleberry, “Now she had got a start, and she went on and told me all about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was to go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever. So I didn’t think much of it. But I never said so. I asked her if she reckoned Tom Sawyer would go there, and she said, not by a considerable sight. I was glad about that, because I wanted him and me to be together.”¹

Huckleberry Finn is right: Heaven does sound boring. Who wants to go there? We are not cut out for the clouds. We don’t make very good angels. Humans weren’t made for heaven. As wonderful as it will be to praise God in his celestial glory, there is still one thing better—to kneel in the presence of God with the bodies he created us to have in the place he created us to live.

Heaven Is Not My Home, I’ll Just Be Passin’ Through

And this is precisely what God promises. Contrary to popular opinion, the Christian hope is not that someday all believers get to die and go to heaven. Indeed, the only reason anyone ever goes to heaven is sin. If Adam and Eve had never sinned, they would have continued to live on this planet, enjoying the beauty of creation as they walked in close fellowship with their Creator. However, as we will see in chapter 9, Adam’s sin brought death into the world. Now all people must die—an event that separates their souls from their bodies. Their bodies immediately begin to decay, but their souls continue to live, either in hell with the damned or in heaven with Jesus Christ.

But even those of us who make it to heaven have not yet achieved our perfect state. It must be extremely satisfying to join the other saints in heaven who continually stand in the presence of God. Yet even the saints who are there still long for something more. They long to be whole again, not merely to bow before God as a disembodied soul but to praise him as a fully restored person, possessing both a renewed spirit and body.

This is why our temporary stay in heaven—what theologians call the intermediate state—is not the primary focus of Scripture. There are only a few verses that even allude to it.² Scripture is relatively silent on our intermediate state in heaven because it is not the Christian hope. The Christian hope is not merely that our departed souls will rejoice in heaven, but that, as 1 Corinthians 15 explains, they will reunite with our resurrected bodies.

And where do bodies live?³ Not in heaven: That's more suitable for spiritual beings like angels and human souls. Bodies are meant to live on earth, on this planet.³ So the Christian hope is not merely that someday we and our loved ones will die and go to be with Jesus. Instead, the Christian hope is that our departure from this world is just the first leg of a journey that is round-trip. We will not remain forever with God in heaven, for God will bring heaven down to us. As John explains his vision in Revelation 21:1–4, he “saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” to earth, accompanied by the thrilling words, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them.” In short, Christians long for the fulfillment of Emmanuel, the divine name that means “God with us.” We don't hope merely for the day when we go to live with God, but ultimately for that final day when God comes to live with us.

Diamonds Are Forever

In their effort to focus attention on what matters most, well-meaning pastors and teachers often remind us that only two things last forever:

the Word of God and souls. Since nothing else is permanent, people who wish to make their lives count for eternity will concentrate their energies on evangelism. These leaders suggest that bringing people to Jesus is more than urgent—ultimately it is the only thing that really counts.

I am not convinced that permanence alone guarantees importance. (After all, the lake of fire seems to last forever, yet no one argues that we should live for that.) But even if it did, I think we should expand our list of things that last forever (that is, items that will exist in our final, everlasting state). Certainly the Word of God and souls head the list, but what about physical things, such as our bodies and even this planet? While our resurrection bodies and the new earth will be somewhat different from those we currently enjoy,⁴ they apparently will also be quite similar.

For example, consider the post-resurrection body of Jesus. Although his spiritual body could pass through solid walls, he went out of his way to prove to his disciples that he was not a ghost but the actual, physical fellow they had known for three years. He invited them to touch his hands and feet, and when they still would not believe, he ate fish and perhaps some honey in front of them.⁵ Jesus wanted his friends to know that the resurrection did not obliterate his humanity but rather restored it from the ravages of sin and death that he had suffered on their behalf.

Because Jesus is “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep,”⁶ we may surmise that, like the resurrected Christ, our future life on the new earth will repair rather than remove our humanity. Isaiah says as much when, in words echoed by John in Revelation 21:24–26, he describes the new earth as a place of commerce, wealth, and flourishing human culture.⁷ Speaking of the New Jerusalem, Isaiah 60:11 declares that “your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that men may bring you the wealth of the nations—their kings led in triumphal procession.” We will examine this further in chapter 11, but for now note that rather than transforming us into quasi-angelic beings who have no use for gold,

houses, and vineyards,⁸ our final salvation redeems these human products from the corroding cancer of sin.⁹

The point is that not only our souls but also our bodies and the earth itself, together with our cultural contributions, appear to survive the transition from this world to the next. Thus, if we grant that permanence is at least one indicator of a thing's importance, it seems evangelical Christians should stretch beyond their usual (and justified) concern for "spiritual things" and develop a well-rounded view of the world. We need to become, in the best sense of the word, "worldly Christians."

Worldly Christianity

Besides this issue of permanence, the sheer breadth of life compels us to develop a Christian worldview. Evangelical Christians have rightly emphasized spiritual activities, encouraging one another to "have their devotions," attend church, and witness to their unsaved family and friends. Personal acts of piety like these are the heart of the Christian life. They are extremely important activities, and all of us Christians, if we are honest, know that we can do better.

Still, it seems that many evangelicals have oversimplified the Christian life, reducing it to nothing more than these personal acts of piety. When someone asks how we are doing spiritually, we immediately examine our prayer lives, perhaps answering the question according to whether or not we had our "quiet time" this morning. When a preacher exhorts us to "return to our first love" or to "stop being lukewarm Christians," we immediately know what he means. We need to beef up our devotions, expand our prayer list, and extend ourselves to more unsaved friends. These things may be the heart of the Christian life, but I wonder whether they aren't overemphasized in some evangelical circles.

Think about your typical day. You wake up early so you can have a quick breakfast with your *Daily Bread* or other favorite devotional.

After a hot shower, you're off to work, alternately praying and listening to the news as your car inches its way through the morning commute. Depending on your line of work, your day consists of meetings, phone calls, consultations with colleagues and clients, and tending to various other emergencies. Or it may consist of hammering wall studs and mounting drywall. On a good day you finish early enough to get a head start on the afternoon rush hour. As you breeze home, you savor the day's successes and fret about tomorrow's challenges while keeping one ear open for the traffic report. When you finally make it home, your evening may consist of reading the paper, a hasty meal, routine maintenance around the house, an hour or two of television or perhaps a trip to soccer practice. Somewhere during the late evening news you concede that you've had enough, and you head for bed, wondering how another promising day so quickly slipped away.

In this more or less typical day, look at how much time you spent on activities other than Bible reading, prayer, and evangelism. If Christianity speaks only to these personal acts of piety, then it does not address most of our lives at all. If *life* includes more than Bible reading, prayer, and evangelism, then the *Christian life* must include more as well.

It's a lot like sex. I propose that personal acts of piety are to the Christian life what sexual intimacy is to marriage. Sexual intimacy is one of the high points of marriage. For some, it's the main reason for getting married. But in the back of our minds we know that marriage involves much more than sex. After all, if a good marriage needs nothing more than sexual intimacy, why do the world's most beautiful people have so much trouble staying in love? Hollywood couples quickly discover that they need more from each other than just good lovin'. To survive, their marriage requires the more foundational glue of commitment, companionship, patience, encouragement, shared values, and sacrifice.

Just as intimacy is the climax but not the entirety of married life, so the Christian life culminates in—but is not exhausted by—personal acts of piety. Marriages succeed when both partners learn to

live together and support each other in every area: physically, emotionally, vocationally, and spiritually. In the same way, Christians succeed when they learn to honor God in every area of life.

This is why Christians need to develop a well-rounded worldview. It is not enough to have a “soul-view” or a “piety-view.” We must learn to think Christianly about every aspect of our world. For instance, what should we think about brushing our teeth, making the bed, mowing the lawn, going to movies, buying a CD, playing softball, driving an SUV, watching the Simpsons, getting a job, starting a hobby, playing the stock market, weeding a garden, or taking music lessons? Or the Arab-Israeli conflict, global warming, abortion, genetic engineering, human cloning, the terrorism of September 11, drilling for oil in the Arctic wilderness, and mercy killing? In short, what should we think about all of the many big and small things we do or consider every day, choices that comprise our lives not so much because we are Christian but because we are human? Such questions only receive answers within a full-orbed Christian worldview.

What Is a Worldview?

Not everyone possesses a Christian worldview, but every person, whether or not they have ever heard of the term, has *a* worldview. The English term “worldview,” a translation of the German word *Weltanschauung* has been variously described as “perceptual frameworks,” “ways of seeing,” the “set of presuppositions . . . which we hold . . . about the basic make-up of the world,” and “the conceptual framework of one’s basic belief about things.”¹⁰

The common theme running through these definitions suggests that a worldview is a framework of fundamental concepts or beliefs about the world. In short, a worldview comprises the lens through which we see the world. This lens is more like contact lenses than eyeglasses, for like the former, we so take it for granted that we often aren’t consciously aware that we are wearing it.

While hassle-free living may be a key selling point for contacts, being hassle-free can be dangerous when it comes to worldviews. People who take their worldview for granted, never questioning its basic assumptions or wondering if a particular perspective is accurate, risk staking their lives on an unstable foundation. In time, when a major crisis thunders their way, they may discover, too late, that their worldview could not bear their weight.

To avoid such catastrophes, one goal of this book is to help us think more deeply about the worldview we currently own. Certainly we want to learn the content of the Christian worldview, but just as important, we must decipher the beliefs of our current perspective. Only by knowing both the truth and our present situation can we make the necessary adjustments to protect ourselves from the onslaughts of life.

The Structure of a Worldview

As a framework of basic beliefs about the world, it may help to picture our worldview as a series of concentric circles. Although every belief is related, at least indirectly, to every other belief in the web, the beliefs near the center form the core of our worldview while those on the fringes are more easily given up. Which beliefs are near the middle and which are on the margins depends largely on the ordering criteria we have in mind. Much as computer files may be sorted by date, size, or alphabetical order, so the beliefs in our worldview may be variously arranged according to their relative importance or level of certainty.

For example, a worldview arranged by importance may include on its margins such trivial notions as the widespread opinion that the New York Yankees will win the World Series (Fig. 1.1). This is a reasonable belief to hold, given the Yankees' recent track record and their ability to outbid any other team for the players they want. However, every now and then another team has a really good year and,

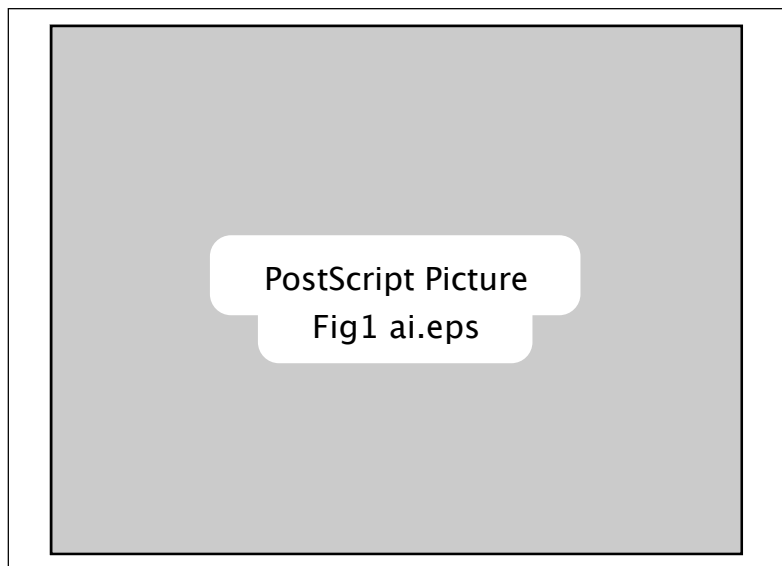
with a few lucky bounces, rises up to defeat the mighty sluggers from the Bronx.

I suspect that apart from a couple of million die-hard (and some might add, spoiled) Yankee fans, New York's losses are not a crushing blow. Most Americans, even most New Yorkers, manage to get out of bed the next morning and go to work. The Yankees' defeats make for interesting conversation, but they do not dramatically alter anyone's life, including even the players themselves.

The Yankees' prowess is such a marginal belief that some may question whether it even deserves to be considered part of our worldview. But that's true of all beliefs on the fringes. They are so inconsequential that they can come and go and barely be missed.

Not so as we travel deeper into the center of our worldview. Related to our opinion of the Yankees, in increasing order of impor-

Figure 1.1: The Structure of a Worldview
—Sorted by Importance



tance, is our belief about free agency, the role of money in sports, and the role of sports in culture. Each topic drives us deeper into the heart of our worldview until we finally confront the more ultimate questions of life such as “what is the meaning of human culture?” and “how do I contribute?” Thus, even unimportant topics like the New York Yankees are connected to deeper pylons buried in the foundations of our worldview. If we follow the circles toward the center, we will eventually arrive at our most fundamental beliefs.

These most fundamental beliefs include the answers to life’s perennial questions: Who am I? Where am I? What’s wrong with me and with my world? and What’s the solution to this problem?¹¹ How we answer these questions will chart our course for life, for they describe our basic understanding of the world and our place in it. If we are wrong here, then we will ultimately fail at every other point. Regardless how successful we become in the eyes of others, we will live and die as failures, never having understood the meaning of life.

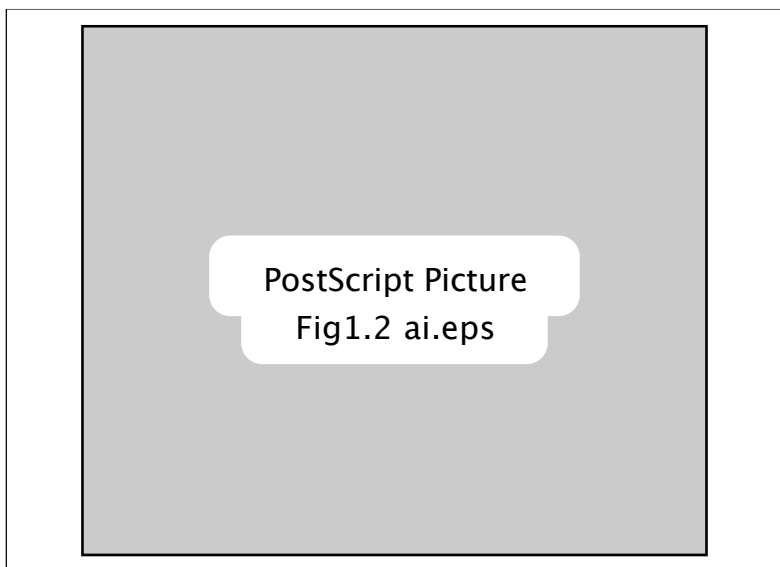
But these four questions, as important as they are, do not yet take us to the very heart of the Christian worldview. There are beliefs even more central, more definitive, than these. We will discuss them below, but first let’s consider how a worldview also can be arranged by level of certainty.

Our beliefs are more or less certain according to how we come to know them. In brief, the beliefs that are inferred from prior beliefs tend to be less certain than those that are accepted on their own merit. For instance, let’s say that as I’m writing this, I hear strange voices downstairs that lead me to believe that unexpected callers have dropped by to visit. The idea that visitors are present in my home is a marginal belief, for it may easily be wrong. When I head downstairs to greet our guests, I may find that the voices are coming from the television or radio, or perhaps my wife is practicing her celebrity impressions. In that case I would grin at my mistake and, with a plea to turn down the offending voices, return to my study to finish my work.

The situation would be more disturbing should I find the television and radio off and no human in sight. “That’s odd,” I might think. “I was sure I heard voices. What’s wrong with me?” This is particularly upsetting because I have learned to rely on my sense of hearing to deliver accurate information about the world. I may be able to shrug off this isolated instance, but if it happens too frequently, I will probably check myself into a mental health facility. My belief that my mind and sensory equipment are functioning properly lies near the center of my worldview, and I can scarcely imagine living in a world in which I cannot trust them (Fig. 1.2).

But this belief, as certain as it is, does not yet take us to the core of the Christian worldview. There are beliefs even more fixed, more foundational, than this. We call these beliefs our ultimate commitments or presuppositions, for they lie at the very center of both

Figure 1.2: The Structure of a Worldview
—Sorted by Certainty



worldview diagrams. They are both the most important and most certain beliefs we hold. Can you guess what they are?¹²

I suggest that you pause for a moment, put this book aside, and think hard about what you believe. Start with any belief you are fairly sure about, and ask yourself why you believe that. Why do you believe that the sun will rise tomorrow, that your spouse loves you, or that you ate blueberry pancakes for breakfast? Whatever reason or belief comes to mind, ask yourself why you believe that. If the answer surfaces another belief, ask yourself why you believe that, and so on. Continue asking yourself these hard questions until you have pursued the chain all the way back to the beginning.

For instance, perhaps you believe the sun will rise tomorrow because you've seen it rise every day of your life. But what makes this event so predictable? One likely answer is natural law. Fine, but why do you believe that there are laws of nature? Where do they come from? And what causes whatever it is that generates these laws?

When you cannot go any further back, when you throw up your hands in exasperation and say, "I don't know why I believe this, I just do," you will have reached the very center of your worldview. This belief, whatever it is, is your ultimate faith commitment. It is the foundation of who you are and everything you believe. It is the one (or more) thing that you have staked your life on. It is your most basic presupposition, or starting point.

I don't mean to imply that your presupposition(s) comes without reasons. You may well have reasons for your ultimate belief, but unlike all other beliefs, these reasons are not why you believe it. You may be able to produce a good argument for this belief, but the fact is, you would continue to believe it even if you did not have the argument. To summarize: As your starting point, your presupposition is a belief that you argue *from*, not *to*. It is not a destination but a place to begin. What is your foundational belief(s)?

The Interpreter of Experience

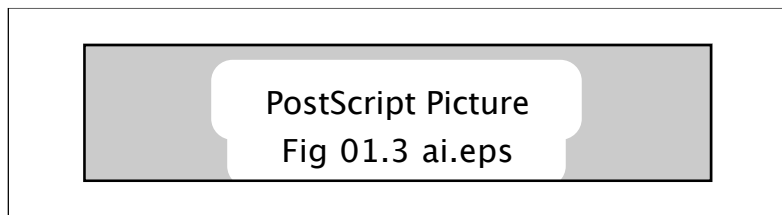
It is important to discover our ultimate beliefs, for these give rise to our worldview, which in turn serves as the lens through which we see the world (Fig. 1.3). Thus our presuppositions ultimately determine how we interpret reality. Where we start determines where we end up.¹³

The events of our lives do not convey obvious, objective messages that mean the same to everyone. Our experience does not come self-interpreted. Instead, the meaning of any event depends on the worldview that interprets it. And since worldviews vary from person to person, there may be any number of interpretations for the same event.

For instance, let's go back to the New York Yankees' recent domination in the world of baseball. How we interpret their success depends largely on our worldview, or where we are coming from. Yankee fans point with pride to a rich tradition of championship clubs and a well-stocked farm system, while disgruntled Red Sox partisans moan that the Yankees merely buy championships through free agency. Both sides have a point that resonates so loudly within their own worldviews that it squelches the other perspective.

Or consider the 2000 presidential election. How we interpret that debacle depends largely on whether we are a Democrat or a Republican. Democrats are apt to suggest that the Republicans stole the election. For their part, Republicans would concede that the election was

Figure 1.3: How a Worldview Mediates Experience



a mess, but would just as confidently assert that in the end, cooler heads prevailed and justice was served. Same event, two interpretations.

These partisan roles were reversed during President Clinton's impeachment trial. Republicans adamantly declared that the president disgraced his office and deserved to be impeached. The Democrats conceded that the situation was a mess, and they certainly did not condone his behavior, yet they maintained that the country must distinguish between a person's private and public life. Same facts, two widely different interpretations.

This interpretive importance of worldviews holds for matters of religion, and perhaps especially there. True believers of every stripe support their faith with stories of miraculous intervention and answered prayer. For instance, many Christian churches designate entire portions of their worship services for "testimony time." Here the faithful encourage one another with recent accounts of healing, strength, and other successes that they perceive have come directly from the Almighty.

While these reports are often true, we should not forget that other religions have similar stories. Just south of Toledo, in an open field off Interstate 75, stands North America's largest mosque. Several years ago a tornado swept across the cornfields of western Ohio in its direction. For a long moment it looked as if God might register his displeasure with Islam by taking out the mosque. However, he apparently had second thoughts, for though the tornado destroyed several homes in the vicinity, it did not touch the mosque. Toledo's Muslims praised Allah for hearing their prayers and sparing their house of worship, while area Christians offered a decidedly different interpretation.

One religion's miracle is explained away by another. The difference is not the event itself, for its objective reality is the one thing both sides accept. The difference lies in our competing worldviews. Because Muslims and Christians possess markedly divergent worldviews, they are bound to produce different interpretations for the same event, especially when that event touches upon a crucial difference between them.

Because the events of life are open to such various interpretations, what matters most is not what happens to us but the worldview that interprets what happens to us. To rephrase a popular Christian aphorism, life is 10 percent what happens to you and 90 percent how you read what happens to you. Say you have an automobile accident on your way home from work. What does it mean? Is it fate? Did random chance draw your unlucky number? Is a stern God getting back at you for skipping last night's prayer meeting? Or is it merely an event allowed by a provident God who lovingly protected you from serious harm? In each case the facts are the same: Your car is totaled, your insurance premiums will undoubtedly rise, and you must go through the hassle of finding a way to get to work tomorrow. But though the facts are the same, different worldviews produce entirely different outlooks on the situation. Depending on your worldview, you are left cursing your karma, haunted by the unpredictable lottery of life, cowering in fear before a vindictive deity, or praising God for his fatherly care.

The secret to a satisfying life is not to avoid all unpleasant experiences—we can't—but rather to have a worldview that knows how to correctly read such experiences. A proper worldview can empower sturdy believers to endure any number of daunting challenges. Waves of disappointment and disaster that would certainly have swamped lesser vessels only make them more determined to hang on. It seems that their robust faith can endure almost anything.

Challenged by Experience

Almost anything. Worldviews are elastic structures that can bend and stretch to accommodate almost any experience. But they can bend only so far. An unexpected, entirely foreign experience may directly challenge the foundations of a worldview (Fig. 1.3). Straining to make sense of this new experience, the worldview contorts itself into a pretzel, stretching credulity before supplying a satisfying explanation. An experience may be so undeniably powerful that we would rather

exchange important pieces of our worldview than live in a universe that cannot account for what happened to us.

So a wife's broken cheekbones penetrate her excuses and self-loathing, forcing her to admit that her beast of a husband is not the loving provider she has defended to others. An earthquake turns a subdivision into toothpicks, prompting its survivors—many of them secularists—to thank God for their safety. A devout mother comforts her dying newborn, wondering why, if God does exist, he could be so cruel. A first grader learns that his parents are splitting up, and he vows that he will never trust an adult again.

It is not just bad experiences that can shatter a worldview. Sometimes good experiences change a worldview for the better. A black soldier risks his life to rescue his racist comrades, who in turn gratefully view the entire black population with new eyes of appreciation. A resplendent sunset viewed from a bluff overlooking the ocean causes an involuntary lump of gratitude to catch in the throat of a hardened skeptic. Its sheer beauty melts away his intellectual problems, and he realizes that he can't help but believe in God. A lifelong Muslim, confronted by the love she received from her missionary friend, forsakes her family's tradition and becomes a follower of the Christian God.

In each case, people recognized that their worldview could not adequately explain their new experience. At first they might tell themselves that their husband just had one too many drinks, the earthquake and sunset can be entirely explained by natural causes, God must want to bring something better from their baby's death, their parents will one day get back together, the black soldier is a rare "credit" to his race, or the missionary has some hidden agenda that her selfless spirit seeks to conceal. This stretching and contorting allows people to retain their worldview, but at great cost. In time, each person must decide which is more likely—that their experience is a fluke, an aberration from the normal way things are, or that in important ways their worldview is mistaken.

If they choose the former, they risk living in denial. Their worldview remains intact, but important pieces of it increasingly appear to be sheer fantasy. Their worldview no longer explains the world as it is, but only as they want it to be. Despite its obvious danger, this option is always available. How else to explain the Egyptian and Saudi parents who refuse to concede that their sons were the hijackers who crashed two planes into the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, 2001? In the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, they doggedly insist that their kind and gentle children would never commit such a heinous act. While any parent can commiserate with the emotional pain that would produce these denials, we also cannot help but pity those who through sheer force of will are able to pull the wool over their own eyes.

If these people select the latter option, then they are in for a rough ride. There is nothing more unsettling than having one's worldview shaken to the core. However, if they hang on through the sifting process, they should come out on the other side with a powerful worldview that can more plausibly account for their experience. For example, the events of September 11 shattered our fundamental belief that Americans were safe between our shores. Though it was painful to lose our security, America is a stronger country for facing up to and working through this problem. Our increased concern for world affairs, upgrade in our military and homeland security, and reflection upon the brevity and meaning of life have better prepared us to live in this new, dangerous world. No one would choose to endure the events of September 11, but neither can anyone deny that we are better for it.

The Patience of Job

A good example of the pain of worldview transformation is the biblical story of Job. Job's worldview informed him that a just God always blesses the righteous, and for most of his life, this worldview correctly

interpreted his experience. Job walked with God and received in return numerous children and great wealth. Then on one very bad day—one that he had every reason to expect would be similar to his previous days—Job lost his oxen, donkeys, sheep, camels, most of his servants, and all of his children. Very soon he also lost his health. Afflicted with festering sores across his entire body, Job retired to an ash heap to scrape away the pus. The only thing he kept was his nagging wife, and she was the one thing he wouldn't mind losing. In his agony and confusion Job cursed the day of his birth and pleaded with God to take his life.

Job's friends attempted to say the right words to make things better, but they were operating from within his old worldview, the one that assumed that God always rewards the righteous and punishes evildoers. Job's rash of new experiences easily discredited this assumption, so his friends could not help him. Job had moved, and they could not reach him from where they stood. Their counsel, so appropriate within their own worldviews, meant nothing to Job now. He responded in exasperation, "So how can you console me with your nonsense? Nothing is left of your answers but falsehood!"¹⁴

Poor Job didn't know what to believe. He knew he could never go back to the simple faith of his friends, but neither did he know where he would eventually land. His crisis of faith appeared headed for despair when God graciously responded to Job's request and granted him an interview. However, rather than allow Job to air his grievances, God did most of the talking. And when God spoke, notice what he said—or more important, what he did not say. God never mentioned what was on Job's mind—his dead children and his painful disease. He completely ignored Job's felt needs. Instead, he simply reminded Job that he is the Creator, that everything is under his control. And Job was satisfied.

Perhaps even more important than what God said is the simple fact that he showed up. The presence of God overwhelmed Job's cries for justice. It significantly expanded Job's worldview. No longer did he

worship a small, predictable God who on cue delivers rainbows to the righteous and storms to the wicked. Instead, Job experienced firsthand what he had suspected all along—that the true God is large enough to tolerate loose ends in this life. Job never received an answer to his complaints or a reason for his trial, but his face-to-face encounter with the living God convinced him that his life was still in good hands. He may not have understood what God was doing, but he now knew that he could trust him. In Job’s words, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”¹⁵

Like the story of Job, the purpose of this book is to expand our worldview by entering the presence of God. While most of us will not experience the divine storm that swept into Job’s world, we still have access to the same powerful words he heard. By studying this divine revelation we intend to answer the fundamental questions of life: Where am I? Who am I? Why am I here? What is wrong with me and this world? And what is the solution for this mess? We will sketch the contours of the Christian worldview, which will enable us to read our culture and interpret any fact or experience through the eyes of God.