

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH



Finding Hope, Courage,
and Passion Through a Fresh
Vision of Heaven

STEVE BERGER



BETHANY HOUSE PUBLISHERS

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Berger, Steve.

Between heaven and earth : finding hope, courage, and passion through a
fresh vision of heaven / Steve Berger.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: "Pastor Steve Berger describes and explains what he's learned
about heaven since his teenaged son's tragic death—and applies it to the here
and now"—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-7642-1167-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Heaven—Christianity. I. Title.

BT846.3.B437 2014

236'.24—dc23

2013039242

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Cover design by Levan Fisher Design

Author is represented by Wolgemuth & Associates.

14 15 16 17 18 19 20 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Sarah Berger is one remarkable woman. She is beautiful inside and out. She is as courageous a person as I've ever met. She is the epitome of a Proverbs 31 woman of God. I married beyond myself—by a long shot. I am eternally grateful for the unspeakable privilege of being her husband. I dedicate this book to you, my beloved Sarah.

My children, all four of them—Heather, Josiah, Cody, and Destiny—are the apples of my eye. When a young parent hopes and prays and then hopes and prays some more that his children will grow up to love Jesus and be faithful to Him, and then that prayer gets answered, it is the greatest joy a parent can have. I have that joy! Thank you, precious ones, for the honor of being your dad. I dedicate this book to all of you.

Finally, to all who know the tension between being a faithful servant while remaining here on earth, and the ache of anxiously waiting for the appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ and the revealing of His glorious heavenly Kingdom, this book is dedicated to you. Keep your heart in heaven and your hand in the harvest.

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Foreword

All of us live in a kind of half-world—suspended between this earth, which is so real to us, and heaven, which is so hard to imagine. Only those who have trudged on through unspeakable pain to gain a grander, holier sight of that Beyond can write as Steve Berger does. His is a real voice. Nothing phony. No platitudes. Reality. Terrible, wonderful, powerful reality. Reality is apparent in every line of this book. Yet Berger’s is not a voice simply marinating in self-pity. His is the voice of a victor, not a victim.

Among the most trite and irritating accusations hurled at Christians by secular accusers is that they are “so heavenly minded as to be no earthly good.” Berger answers those accusations by showing us that seeing over the wall into heaven actually makes us of more earthly good. The tragedy that befell the Bergers not only changed their view of death and heaven, but their entire approach to life and mission. They emerged victorious and dedicated, not just with heaven on their minds, but also with a renewed commitment to souls and lives here and now.

Their victory came out of terrible, heart-wrenching trial. There are those horrible moments—not many, thank God—in which everything seems to stand still and every pain-filled second lasts an eternity. When those seasons come, and they do to every life, time draws out like a blade. Pain, like the night, engulfs us, but we know we cannot just stop hurting. We must wade through the murky darkness as grief washes over us in waves. It's there at the rugged face of that *apparently* oh so solid, impenetrable wall of final separation that we long for a view, just a glance at the other side. We ache to see the afterward of our loved ones. If we could just see what they are experiencing, just know beyond a shadow of a doubt that they are . . . what? Safe, I suppose. Or perhaps happy or joyful or just alive.

Those who grieve without faith cannot hope to see over the wall. Faith is our stepladder that we may scale to get a peek, but just a peek, over it. Blessed are the writers who help us see over to the other side and show us how to rejoice even in our unimaginable suffering.

Every parent's nightmare is to bury a child. It is not the way things ought to be. It is different from every other grief because it is so horribly out of order. The Bergers went through that nightmare, and no attempt is made to hide the pain. Yet when you read the last page and close this book, I believe you will feel, as I did, a contradiction of emotions. I was sorry the Bergers passed through their hall of pain, but I was glad of the book it produced through them.

Here, then, is *Between Heaven and Earth*. Climb up, peek over the wall. Be healed, be inspired, and find the joy unspeakable of having your heart's eyes focused on heaven while having your hand faithfully working in the harvest.

—Dr. Mark Rutland
president, Oral Roberts University

Acknowledgments

My friend Wayne Hastings is an invaluable part of my life and ministry as well as the greater Grace Chapel staff and family. His patient endurance, detailed work ethic, and writing skills are a dream come true for me. I am indebted to him for his collaboration on this project. Profound thanks to you, Wayne!

The Grace Chapel staff is the best church staff in the world. Love, commitment, passion, and excellence describe them all. I acknowledge your contribution to this book and to my life. God bless you for your dedication!

Thank you to Robert Wolgemuth and staff for their faithful representation at every turn, for every idea, and for catching the vision of this book. Thank you to the Bethany House team for all your humility, professionalism, and cooperation. You made the process wonderful.

Introduction

This world is a mess. It doesn't matter where you look, what you read, or the news channel you prefer, everywhere things seem to get worse and worse. Just a quick review is proof. Unemployment is at high levels, divorce rates continue to climb, families struggle, addiction and natural disasters bombard and paralyze people. We're afraid to go to the mall or even take our kids to school because of what might happen.

Many feel a level of despair. People are looking for answers, and many of them aren't finding any. The truth is Jesus is the answer, and when believers understand His eternal perspective and share it with others, needs are met, hope is given, and everything changes!

Ironically, the apostle Paul faced many of the same issues in the city of Philippi as we do today. Philippi was a big city, and its citizens had all the problems and concerns of anyone in such an environment. There was tremendous pressure from the outside as well as from the inside, not unlike the church today. The church faced the possibility of internal strife (Philippians

1:28–29) and disagreements (4:2–3) and a threat from outside rival teachers who taught a message different from the gospel of Christ (3:18).

There were all kinds of distractions and temptations that tried to pull believers away from the will of God.

For Paul, Philippi was a place with painful memories. In this city he was arrested and beaten. He was placed in stocks and humiliated in front of crowds of people. Even with these harsh circumstances, Paul chose to have an eternal, heavenly perspective and continued to meet people's needs and give them hope. A jailer, and then his whole household, came to Christ as a result of Paul's painful yet steadfast witness for Jesus.

In Philippians 1:11 Paul encourages the church to do the same thing. He wasn't interested in their simply going to church and passively sitting around. He wanted them to know the joy of producing fruit—seeing the Kingdom of God expand in their lives and through their lives. Paul's fruit came as he faithfully shared the gospel. He literally gave his life so others could hear about Jesus. In this intensely personal letter he encourages the people—citizens faced with many of the same issues we are faced with today—to step out into the harvest field, the world around them, and make a difference in someone's life for Jesus' sake.

This next fact might surprise you. As committed as Paul was to reaching people for Jesus, Paul was a man who lived a conflicted life; he was torn between heaven and earth. For him to remain alive meant benefit to many, many people, but beyond that, to be with Jesus in heaven was much better than anything he could possibly experience here on earth (Philippians 1:21–24). Paul's heart was passionately fixed on heaven while his hand was purposefully working to produce fruit. Paul's dilemma is the focus of this book's teaching. Over the next few

pages you'll discover, as Paul did, the joy of having your heart rooted and grounded in heaven. You're going to understand its glory and beauty. You'll read about the hope of heaven, your ultimate home. You'll see how heaven heals your hurts. You'll come to appreciate its promises and how a heavenly focus will lead you to a renewed faith, encouragement, and a life that is full.

You'll also learn why this heavenly mind-set matters today. There are wide-open opportunities to reach out to people in this broken world who are ready to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. You see, when your heart is in heaven, you begin

to see as Jesus saw. You'll see people who have deep hurts and unmet needs who are desperate for a Savior. You, like Paul, will be torn. You'll desire to be in heaven and be a part of all that God has for you there, but at the same time you'll see people who need your help here.

Heart in heaven, hand in the harvest. That's exactly what God wants from each of us.

I'm excited you are reading this book. It will give you Jesus' perspective in a world gone mad. It will help you set your heart where there is hope, and it will help you give hope to people who so desperately need it.

May God richly bless you.

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1



A Renewed Heavenly Vision

Heavenly Focus

Heaven became intensely personal to my wife, Sarah, and me in August of 2009 when a one-person car accident sent our son Josiah to heaven. I'm a pastor, so heaven wasn't a new concept or something I hadn't thought about previously. But, as you would expect, this one moment in time forever changed us. It has served to increase our passion for heaven and has changed our attitudes about how life should be lived while we're on earth.

Josiah—a strong, vibrant young man—was just about to begin his freshman year at the University of Tennessee. Like many young men and women his age, Josiah lived at full throttle. His entire life was ahead of him.

His sudden passing has significantly shaped our lives. Our family clung to one another during those difficult times as never before, and Josiah's memorial service inspired not just a church

community but the wider middle Tennessee area as well. Most of all, Josiah's passing lit a fire under me to teach about heaven with a renewed passion.

Our son, unbeknownst to us, signed up as an organ donor. I'll elaborate more on the significance of this later in the book, but for now, simply understand that this one act deeply affected us. Why? Because it was a clear example to me that not only was Josiah serious about Jesus, but he also loved people enough

Josiah's passing lit a fire under me to teach about heaven with a renewed passion.

to (literally) give himself away. *His hands were open to people's needs because his heart was in the right place.*

Before going too far with Josiah's story, let me share a few things about myself. I became a Christian at age nineteen, and

I've been a pastor for nearly twenty-five years. In those years, heaven has been increasingly important and critical to my faith, teaching, and life. Heaven and our eventual joyous homecoming as Christians are great truths that should be something you and I long for. As a pastor, I get excited when I think about being with God and worshipping Him for eternity. How cool will it be to sit with Paul? Or talk with the apostle John about his time with Jesus and the divine inspiration for the book of Revelation? Or visit with other more contemporary heroes of the faith like Charles H. Spurgeon, C. S. Lewis, or A. W. Tozer? It will be a homecoming and family reunion experience like we can't even imagine.

Heaven is a real place for the believer, and it has at least some place in most everyone's life and thinking. But many think about it whimsically, or only when a life-altering event happens, and throughout everyday life it's tucked away neatly in a mental file folder.

Josiah's passing served as a tremendous shock and reboot in my desire for heaven. As I look back over the last several years I realize that God has gradually opened my eyes and deepened my understanding about heaven. I trace the beginning of these experiences to a moment about fifteen years ago when I received a phone call from my brother Patrick.

I dearly love my older brother and I always welcome his advice and mentoring. I was surprised to hear him weeping on the other end of the phone. He quickly filled me in on what was happening: "Man, I've got a book that I'm reading that is wearing me out. You need to get it." The book he was talking about was *My Dream of Heaven* by Rebecca Ruter Springer. I bought it and read it, and her story floored me. It still floors me today.

Springer's book talks about a spiritual experience she had. Written in 1895 and originally titled *Intra Muros*, it details Springer's very personal, detailed vision of heaven and gives a beautiful glimpse of the eternal home that awaits us. Billy Graham said that the book "captured biblical truths with emotional impressions."¹

While reading her story, I had one of those moments in my Christian life when the prospect and reality of heaven became markedly clearer. The book challenged me with concepts I'd never known, and provided practical insights that I could share with others who needed help and encouragement.

Fast-forward about seven or eight years, when I began developing a preaching series about heaven. God laid on my heart a desire to help my congregation know and understand the full blessing, joy, and hope that is theirs in heaven. As often happens in my ministry, though I was the one communicating and sharing these messages with the congregation, it seemed God was doing the most powerful work in *my* life. He expanded

my knowledge and hunger for heaven. And He also gave me an overwhelming desire to communicate it to all who would listen.

As a part of my research and preparation for that series, I read Randy Alcorn's book simply titled *Heaven*. It's a phenomenal book—probably the most comprehensive book that's been written on the topic. Through it, I learned and understood even more about our eternal home. Randy's book clearly supported a number of thoughts with which I wanted to challenge my congregation. As I studied and learned, I came to realize that

Christians often hold numerous misconceptions and unbiblical assumptions about heaven.

Christians often hold numerous misconceptions and unbiblical assumptions about heaven. For example, in heaven we will not merely be up in the sky, floating on a cloud, bored out of our minds and plucking a harp. Heaven is a place; there's exciting supernatural activity, worshipping God, ruling and reigning with Jesus, being reunited with our loved ones, and meeting saints we've only heard of. It's anything but boring.

Randy also points out that rarely do we hear pastors accurately describing heaven as the new earth, which contains trees and rivers, and where resurrected people live in resurrected bodies on a resurrected earth with a resurrected Savior. Many pastors tragically miss this point, and I didn't want to be one of those misinformed pastors with a misguided congregation. No way.

When Josiah went to heaven, everything was taken to a whole new personal level. Since then, not a day has gone by when Sarah and I haven't talked about eternity and the things we've read in the Scriptures about heaven. We can't help but make it a focus of our study, and more important, our lives. When we have the opportunity to speak at an event, we're going to talk about

heaven. When we hear about a tragic occurrence, our desire is to help people understand the beauty and fullness of heaven and how we need to live with an eternal perspective so we can find hope and healing in the midst of the tragedy.

Over the next few chapters I hope to give you some new perspectives and help you see heaven in a solidly biblical, yet perhaps unique way. I want to share my passion and help you develop a similar passion. At the same time, I hope to help you find the joy and purpose that comes from living here and now with this new perspective. We're on this journey together, and I can't wait to walk through it with you.

A New Understanding

When Vanderbilt Medical Center was on the other end of the phone, we knew it wasn't good news.

In Nashville and the surrounding area, Vanderbilt is the place where the difficult cases go. I've received a fair share of calls summoning Sarah and me to Vanderbilt, but always to comfort and help people in our congregation and other friends. This time, however, it was our turn to be comforted by others. After receiving that call and racing to the hospital, we spent hours on our faces in prayer for a miracle, but God had other plans. Three days after the accident, on Josiah's nineteenth birthday, we released our son to heaven.

In the immediate whirlwind surrounding Josiah's passing, we cried, we remembered, we prayed, and we grieved. We were surrounded by well-meaning people who did their best to comfort and help us in the midst of our pain.

As we walked through the grief after Josiah passed, all Sarah and I could think to do was pray and look for truth in our

Bibles. What we heard during that time (and what we continue to hear) from God is that the church doesn't know how to deal with "death" biblically. We deal with it culturally, we deal with it traditionally, but we don't deal with it biblically. We learned that lesson from experience. We were just as guilty; there was a gulf in our thinking as well.

Right after Josiah passed we received hundreds of cards, books, and messages from people. The point of many of those messages was that we'd "lost" something. We'd hear, "We're sorry you *lost* Josiah." But what we came to realize is that we didn't lose him! We know exactly where our son went (and still is)! Have we stopped being sad completely? *No*. Do we miss him? *Without question*. We've spent many days and nights in

We've spent many days and nights in tears of sorrow, but ultimately we haven't lost sight of where Josiah is: alive and in the arms of God.

tears of sorrow, but ultimately we haven't lost sight of where Josiah is: alive and in the arms of God.

Jesus conquered death (Hebrews 2:14), yet many well-meaning Christians still focus on loss and dying. This breaks my heart, and it's only one example of the misunderstandings about heaven. I'm committed to helping people get it right

by relating to those who are in the depths of grief the hope, comfort, and healing God's Word assures.

Paul writes, "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth" (Colossians 3:1–2). It's time to become heavenly minded and understand exactly what that means. It's time to talk biblically about heaven because we're missing opportunities to receive and share hope, to extend our hands to help others in

need. It is not just those who are grieving that need a heavenly perspective; it's *every believer* (we'll look at this more in later chapters). Unfortunately, many Christians have moved away from the foundational hope that Jesus came to give us—the reality of eternal life with Him in heaven.

Josiah's Story

Josiah couldn't wait to begin his new phase of life at the University of Tennessee, and one day—as his departure approached and with a twinkle in his eye—he said to us, “I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I am so ready to be outta here!”

Sarah and I didn't share his exuberance about the upcoming change at quite the same level, but we were excited for him and prayed expectantly that God would show him direction and wisdom in this time of transition. We wanted to do what we could to encourage and help him, and above all, what was right before the Lord.

We sure didn't know it at the time, but the Lord was preparing us for a different type of separation. His Holy Spirit was preparing us for that call from Vanderbilt and the events that followed.

Even today we don't know many details of the accident, and we don't feel we need to know. What we do know is that it happened on a winding country road in the fog and less than fifteen minutes from our home. It was a one-car accident, and remarkably, his body was in perfect condition—not one stitch, nothing broken . . . except he suffered a serious and fatal brain injury.

For three days, we prayed the Lazarus prayer found in John 11:1–44. In that passage, the story of Lazarus is recounted with the moving pleadings of Mary and Martha to have Jesus resurrect

their brother. Miraculously, He did, and that's what we were desperate for as well. We pleaded, "*Please*, Lord, bring our son back to us. Resurrect him, Lord." But that didn't happen.

We firmly believe God answers prayers of faith if they are part of His plan. We knew God could raise our son, and we knew He could heal and restore the whole situation. This was absolutely what we and all our friends and family wanted, but that was not God's plan. Although His answer was not what we wanted, we had to submit ourselves to His sovereign plan, knowing that His plan was better than ours. We had to face the painful reality that our prayers would not be answered the way we wanted. We had to come to grips with God's perfect will and seek His comfort and grace. In His mercy, God has since taught us that Josiah's passing wasn't an end, but simply a continuation of His remarkable plan for our son and for us.

The Donor Revelation

On the morning of the second day of our Vanderbilt vigil, faith was high, prayer was nonstop, and worship was passionate. Many from our church staff and congregation had gathered at the medical center, and Vanderbilt was gracious to give us the space we needed.

Sarah and I awoke that day, literally crawling off the floor of one of Vanderbilt's conference rooms. People whom we loved surrounded us and we deeply felt their compassion, prayers, and support, and we did not relent from asking God for a miracle.

However, we also thought it would be prudent to talk with the Donor Services office because we had so many pressing questions about what to do should God take Josiah to heaven. So, just forty-eight hours after the accident, we began moving

toward a decision of donating Josiah's organs, because we knew that's what he'd want us to do. In his almost nineteen years of life, it was clear that Josiah held a deep desire and concern for others. His compassion and love were a challenge in my own life.

So that night, the wonderful people from Vanderbilt's Donor Services met with us. In our minds—and we'd been bracing ourselves for this—there was a chance that we would soon be giving them permission to harvest Josiah's unharmed organs. Trust me, it's not an experience or decision you ever want to have to make. After sitting down, the head of Donor Services opened the file folder he had with him and pulled out a piece of paper. He handed Sarah the document and said, "As you can see, your son is a donor." We were stunned. I thought we were sitting down to make the hardest decision of our lives, but the decision had already been made. Going into that meeting we were convinced that Josiah would want to be a donor, but it was going to be very difficult to follow through on that conviction, especially just two days removed from the accident.

When the man from Donor Services held up that paper and let us know that Josiah had made that decision after his eighteenth birthday, Sarah and I looked at each other and knew that Josiah's wishes would be honored. Our burden of making that decision had been lifted.

Josiah's decision not only relieved a tremendous burden from us, it clearly showed us that our son's heart was in heaven long before he arrived there that fateful night. As I wrote earlier, Josiah loved Jesus and he loved people. His selfless decision clearly reflected his heart and his attitude.

On the afternoon of August 14, 2009, the exact day of Josiah's nineteenth birthday and three days after he entered Vanderbilt

hospital, we talked with the chief neurosurgeon. He confirmed Josiah's condition and informed us that there were people waiting, as we spoke, for his organs to save their lives.

Reflecting on the emotion of that decision—a mere seventy-two hours after our perfectly healthy, strong, life-in-front-of-him son bounded out the door to meet some friends—still overwhelms me.

On his nineteenth birthday, we honored Josiah's decision.

Hard-Pressed Living

As I've spent time thinking back over the meeting with Donor Services and the resulting organ donation, Josiah's actions challenge me with an example of how we should live our lives as be-

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in heaven long before
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lievers. Because his heart was in heaven, he lived every day with an eternal perspective.

As Dee Brestin wrote, a heart in heaven means that we “understand the importance of valuing the eternal over the transitory.”² It means putting our focus on the

things of God that have eternal value rather than the things of this earth that can easily rust, perish, or be destroyed instantly in a tornado or other disaster.

But as Josiah showed me, when our hearts are focused on heaven and we live with this eternal perspective, it's only natural that our hands are in the harvest—helping people who are desperate for a personal encounter with the love of God.

In John 4:35 Jesus says, “Do you not say, ‘There are still four months and then comes the harvest’? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!”

Unlike those of us living in the twenty-first century, Jesus' disciples knew exactly what He was saying. They knew the significance of the harvest season—it was a time to roll up your sleeves and work. There was finally an opportunity to bring in the crops whose seeds had been sown and cultivated months ago. It was a time of hard labor and celebration. It was a time of reward. When Jesus called for eyes to be lifted up, He wanted His followers to see those around them; Jesus wanted them “harvested” into His Kingdom. He wanted them helped, served, and made aware of His saving grace.

It might seem as though a heart focused on heaven and hands focused on the harvest can't coexist. It might seem like an either/or option, but we're called to live in this holy tension. Paul wrote in Philippians 1:23–24, “I am hard-pressed between the two [heaven and earth], having a desire to depart and be with Christ, *which is far better*. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you” (emphasis mine).

These powerful verses form the essence and inspirational key for this book.

Yes, I want desperately to be with Jesus in heaven, *and yes*, I see and want to meet the needs of others here and now.

Paul's life is a great example of this hard-pressed living between heaven and earth.

He was eager to be with Jesus, convinced that being in the physical presence of Christ was far better than life on earth. But it was actually this heavenly perspective that drove him to minister, serve, and be excited about staying.

We think it would do the opposite. In our natural, earthly influenced mind, we think, *Paul was so heavenly minded that he must have been no earthly good*. But that's not the case. In

*When our hearts are
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fact, it was just the opposite. He was so heavenly minded that it propelled him to be of tremendous earthly good. Over two thousand years later, people are still learning and experiencing massive life changes because of Paul's letters and example. His heavenly, hard-pressed mind-set left a legacy of earthly good.

William Barclay wrote about the word *depart* used in the letter to the Philippians:

The word [Paul] uses is *senechomai*, the word which would be used of a traveler in a narrow passage, with a wall of rock on either side, unable to turn off in any direction and able only to go straight on. For himself, he wanted to depart and to be with Christ; for the sake of his friends, and of what he could do with them and for them, he wanted to be left in this life. . . . Paul's desire to live is not for his own sake, but for the sake of those whom he can continue to help.³

That's hard-pressed living!

Life Change

After Josiah passed, we found a letter he wrote to himself during a summer break three years earlier. It describes a breakthrough he had with the Lord during a time of prayer. In the letter, he wrote that he wanted to influence people for God when he returned to high school in the fall. He wanted to love people and show them his deep appreciation for them. God heard Josiah's cry and answered his prayer. In fact, God is still answering that prayer. God was and is faithful to that cry of Josiah's heart.

Josiah's decision to become an organ donor immediately rescued five lives. And we've learned that a total of seventy-seven people ultimately benefited from his decision. We know that the

man who received his heart was fifty-five at the time, with five grandchildren. Today, he's alive and in good health. We know the people who received his kidneys and have been told, "Josiah saved their lives." Through them, Josiah's work on earth (his hand in the harvest) continues.

A tremendous amount of spiritual work happened in the span of three days in the halls of Vanderbilt Medical Center as God radically touched many of Josiah's friends. We witnessed them trusting God and crying out to Him, all while loving and serving our family and one another. And that work hasn't stopped.

As I write this, we have finished building two of four homes housing orphaned boys in the Dominican Republic. Collectively they are called "Josiah's House." In his time on earth, we often marveled at Josiah's heart for children, particularly orphans and underprivileged kids, and we began this project in his honor after he passed. We know that this project is bringing him tremendous joy as he looks down from heaven.

Josiah's decision to become an organ donor immediately rescued five lives.

So don't be afraid or apprehensive about how a heavenly perspective will change you. From my experience, it will only serve to grow your faith and help you rely totally and absolutely on God.



Sarah and I could not have navigated the tough waters without the faith and trust in God that's rooted in a heavenly perspective. There isn't a day that passes where we don't think about our son, and—make no mistake—some days are incredibly trying. Yet ultimately, we rest in our God's comfort, peace, and love.

We did not receive the miracle we asked for, but God is faithful. And because Josiah lived with a heavenly perspective, his generous spirit brought life and hope to people he'd never even met.

This is a life-changing book. I know that because having my eyes opened to hard-pressed living has changed *my* life and the lives of those around me. It will challenge you to live life with a perspective and mission radically different from what the world offers. It will encourage you and help you discover how you can live your life to its fullest and richest.

In the next few chapters we'll dive more deeply into what a heavenly perspective means, and we'll let Scripture guide our journey. We'll see the glory of heaven beautifully revealed and we'll discover the biblical call for hands in the harvest. And once you develop that perspective, you'll naturally be hard-pressed between the two, and discover a new and marvelous way to live your Christian life.