

TO INFINITY AND BEYOND

BY GUY HAMMOND

It was a warm September evening at Ponce Inlet, just south of Daytona Beach, Florida, and the fun family day at the beach for the Marino clan was coming to an end. Before heading home Walter Marino and his 12-year-old son Christopher went in for one more quick swim. Although Walter's son is autistic, he had always been an excellent swimmer and loved the water. As they swam farther from shore, a rip current suddenly swept them both out to sea. Regardless how hard they tried to swim toward shore, the current was just too strong. Their last chance to avoid being swept out into the open ocean came and went when they tried to lunge for a pair of buoys to hold on to – and missed. Family members on shore frantically called 911, but by the time rescuers arrived the pair could no longer be seen.

Walter knew that they were in trouble. Despite the danger however, Christopher was enjoying himself. Because the boy lacked a fear of death, common with those who have autism, he found comfort in the water; in fact, he giggled and laughed, as if this was an exciting time. It was this spirit that helped comfort the father, knowing that his son was not afraid. So as Christopher laughed, the father prayed while were pulled farther and farther from the Florida Inlet.

After four hours at sea without life vests, darkness fell, and the sound of the rescue helicopters and boats of U.S. Coast Guard, the Volusia County Beach Patrol and the sheriff's office grew faint until they were nonexistent. It became obvious that rescue operations had ceased for the night. Quickly things went from bad to worse. Jellyfish began to sting the pair, scaring the child and then terrifyingly, the currents picked up and Christopher began to drift from his father's reach. Because of the darkness, they couldn't see each other any longer, so Walter kept shouting out to his son, telling him to not be afraid and that he loved him.

While Christopher is almost nonverbal in his communication, he and his father began to use catch phrases from Disney movies which the boy loves in order to communicate. "To infinity," the father would yell, referencing one of Christopher's favorite lines from the movie 'Toy Story'. "And beyond," Christopher shouted back, pumping his fist in the air like the movie character Buzz Lightyear.

The call and response went on for a while, with Marino choosing different phrases and Christopher yelling back in response. But over the course of the next hour, Christopher's voice slowly continued to fade until his father couldn't hear the replies anymore. Another hour passed as Walter screamed and cried for his son, but he was gone. Terrified and heartbroken, the father wept as he resigned himself to the fact that his boy had been pulled under the water. At the time, Marino said, he thought about giving up, until he thought of his daughter Angela and his wife at home. "I just kept thinking about my little girl and wife and how I was not going to leave them without a brother and her father and a husband in the same day, it was the visual of them that kept me going" said Walter.

As he continued to drift about in the open ocean in complete darkness, Walter would float on his back and watch the bright stars above. He prayed and then wished on four shooting stars that flew by that his son was safe, and used constellations in the sky to know what direction to go to try to locate the child if help ever arrived.

As morning turned, Marino tried to stay alert for sounds that might mean help was near. Hours continued to pass, until finally, he heard a motor. He waved and screamed frantically. A group of fishermen saw him and pulled him aboard their boat. When the U.S. Coast Guard arrived, Marino asked about Christopher, but they said they had not found him. The Coast Guard crew asked if he wanted to go to the hospital, but the father decided to stay on the boat so the search for Christopher wouldn't be disrupted. So the Coast Guard vessel steamed on. For more than an hour the boat went full throttle and then suddenly, the boat was idling, and Marino was asked to come topside. "I took three steps up to the back of the deck, and the coast guard crew pointed to the helicopter flying overhead and said, 'You see that helicopter? It has your son on it, he has been saved, and he is fine.'"

Walter was so excited and grateful he began hugging and kissing all the Coast Guard crew, thanking them as he wept. Christopher had been found 3 miles away from where his father had been located.

The father and son were reunited at the emergency room at Halifax Medical Center in Daytona Beach, where they were treated for dehydration. "We were both very weak, tired and thirsty," Marino said. "But I reached out and held his hand and could tell from the same sparkle in his eye that he was going to be fine." "To Infinity, the father whispered to the boy, "and beyond" his son answered back. [1]

Surviving spiritual drift

There is a lot we can learn from twelve-year-old Christopher Marino as he floated aimlessly out in the Atlantic Ocean without a life vest. To the tremendous comfort of his father, the child was not afraid due to his autism. Now in this situation, the boy clearly did not understand the dire situation he was in. But there is something beautiful in the thought that, like Christopher, we as Christians would not give into fear even though we may find ourselves in spiritually shark-infested waters. We cannot live our lives overwhelmed and discouraged every time darkness falls and the sound of rescue grows faint. It's true that when the currents pick up and we are surrounded by darkness that we can have a difficult time seeing the light of Jesus, but it is also then that we need to keep shouting to one other the immortal words of Buzz Lightyear for strength and encouragement, "to infinity and beyond!" For the Christian, heaven is what it is all about, yet unfortunately, it is a place that most Christians spend little time considering, which is really too bad. Heaven is supposed to be a place we are eagerly preparing to go to.

A few months ago my family and I went on a much-needed vacation. For weeks before we left I felt excited and found it somewhat difficult to have to go about my normal life - still having to get up early and work and pay the bills and be responsible. As the departure date drew near, I thought more and more about this great place we were going to go and vacation at and I noticed that I had an extra spring in my step, I was little happier, and whatever problems I had somehow seemed lighter and not so much of a big deal because I knew an amazing event was about to take place in my life.

That's the kind of feeling we should have toward heaven as we live our daily lives; that somehow, the promise of this place makes the problems of this life seem smaller and less burdensome to carry.

What will heaven be like?

For whatever reason, the Holy Spirit did not presume to explain in significant detail this place we all long to go to some day; so the topic of heaven is filled largely with ambiguity. I admit to finding it all quite mystifying. But in a few occasions throughout scripture, the curtain is peeled back just slightly, giving us glimpses into this marvelous place. If you would indulge me for these last final paragraphs, I want us to go on a mental journey to see for ourselves what heaven will be like, as best as we are able.

The apostle Paul gave it his best shot in trying to explain heaven in 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18. *“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.”*

In Colossians 3: 1-2 Paul continues by directing us to what we should be focused on, and being the smart guy he is, gets really specific by separating our thoughts from our emotions. “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”

Our heart is where our emotions and desires lie. Our minds are where our thoughts, musings and fantasies lie. We are therefore called to set our thoughts and fantasies on heaven, as well as our hearts and our minds.

This world is not worthy

In Hebrews 11 the author goes through a list of heroic men and women who lived by faith, all of whom were willing to go through inordinate difficulty here on earth because they knew that something much, much better was waiting for them. “they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.” (Hebrews 11:13-16)

You see, you and I were never meant to lay down roots here and enjoy it so much that we never want to leave. As I get older, I’ll confess that while I do enjoy what the world offers, the truth is, even it’s best parts are starting to get a little old, and I find myself looking forward to something better than this.

What Heaven will NOT be

Heaven for me however is not only what it will be, but also what it *will not* be. As I write this, my lovely wife of 27 years, the absolute love of my life is undergoing a chemotherapy and radiation protocol. Only two months ago, on August 1, 2017, our world was turned completely upside down when she was diagnosed with stage 4 Glioblastoma and given only twelve to fourteen months to live. I am heartbroken beyond words. My four children are crushed. So yes, I am looking forward to this place where there will be no pain, tears, suffering, cancer, death, hurt, work, disappointment, mental illness, war, starvation, Alzheimer’s, sexual abuse, child molestation, crime, temptation, sin, loneliness, anxiety, homelessness, etc.

Stop and consider the three biggest difficulties you have encountered in life. I’m sure they’re doozy’s; things that you have suffered at the hands of others, and some self inflicted wounds too. Maybe you have endured something so horrific that you simply cannot bear to recall the events. Maybe your life looks like mine right now, as you watch someone you love suffer. We all have our stories, we all walk with the proverbial limp; we’ve all been chewed up and spit out somewhere along the journey of life, right?

I’ll acknowledge that having to live with homoerotic attractions and temptations as a Christian man yet refusing to act out and participate in that lifestyle because of my faith has been a real burden for me to carry at times. It’s difficult living beyond the margins of the heterosexual mainstream, being on the fringes of society, and sometimes even the church. But Jesus has been worth it, and I trust heaven will make it really, really worth it.

In Romans 8:18 Paul said, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." Let me tell you who heaven is for: it is a place that has been created by our Lord, not for those who have it all together and who seemingly live perfect lives, but rather for those who don't have it all together and who have really struggled through life, with their areas of weakness and brokenness, Heaven is for those who have really messed things up, but who in spite of those difficulties, have faithfully clung to Christ in love and have never quit. That is why heaven is the ultimate proof that you are more to God than your mistakes. Heaven is waiting for *you*!

Heaven is for the likes of Mary Magdalene, a supposed prostitute. Heaven is for a little liar, cheat and thief of a man called Zacchaeus. Heaven is for a coward and arrogant piece of work called Peter. Heaven is for a murderer and a man once consumed with hatred called Paul, and for a dying man on a cross whose greatest accomplishment in life was that he was a crook and was executed for it beside Jesus, but had the mind in his final moments to make things right with God. In other words, for people just like you and I.

Here sick

The story is told of a 5-year-old little girl who had never stayed the night with a friend before. She was nervous but gave it a try. She did fine during the daytime, but when it got dark she got nervous being in a strange place. Her friend's mother perceived this and said to her as she tucked her in "Honey, are you getting homesick?" With childlike innocence she replied, "No ma'am, I'm getting here sick!"

My problem often is that I am not 'here sick' enough. When trouble comes, when problems arise, when my heart and faith feel weak, when I feel alone or betrayed, when the stress and pressure of this life overwhelms me, I need to go on my own mental journey to see for myself what heaven will be like, this place God has made for infinity, and beyond.

[1] Simon, M. (2008, September 1). To Infinity and Beyond: A Sparkling Survival Story from CNN.COM. <http://www.cnn.com/2008/US/09/10/rescue.at.sea/index.html?eref>

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