

THE ROAD TO HEAVEN

A Traveler's Guide to Life's Narrow Way



Don Johnson

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THE ROAD TO HEAVEN

by Don Johnson

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For Kendra.

I am so glad we get to walk the narrow road together.

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Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

Matthew 7:13-14

INTRODUCTION

Our Situation



“Is This All There Is?”

You are unsatisfied with your life. Maybe you haven’t spent much time thinking about it, but deep down you know it’s true. In those rare moments of silence, when you find yourself away from the TV, unplugged from your iPod and on a quick break from work, family, and a long list of social duties, you notice it: a gnawing sense of emptiness and disappointment. In your heart you are trying to come to grips with the fact that life isn’t all it is cracked up to be. You want something more.

You are not alone. I am right there with you, as are many, many others. We live in the most affluent, technologically advanced culture the world has ever known, but as a people we are not truly content. Something is missing. As Ilya Shapiro explained in a tcsdaily.com article, he and many of his fellow Gen-xers have achieved a great deal of what the

world considers success, but, in the words of U2, they still haven't found what they are looking for.

[We have made it to the top of our professions] and although it makes us sound like spoiled brats (and me narcissistic for writing about it) – we're not happy. Or, rather, after a (relatively short) lifetime of playing by the rules, eating our greens, graduating from high school, then college, then grad school or whatever other apprenticeship takes up our early-to-mid-20s, and finally starting work in the real world we've come to realize that there's more to life than taking an anointed spot in the meritocracy.

We were told by our parents (and Billy Joel) that if we worked hard, if we behaved, we would achieve the good life. Well, we've achieved! Achieved!! ACHIEVED!!! and now... what?

David Brooks take note: Generation X has arrived, made its presence felt, looked around, and is wondering, "Is that all there is?"

It is a conversation I keep having, or talking around, with my friends and peers – the type of folks who 20 years ago would have been called yuppies (which label I at least am happy to wear now, if in a descriptive rather than ascriptive way). They – we – have everything we could ever want in this stage of life, but still we search for meaning.¹

Young adults are not the only ones looking for something more. Baby boomers are trying to fill a void in their lives as well. Gregg Easterbrook notes that while his generation's current standard of living far surpasses any of his

ancestors', the overall level of happiness has not increased at all: "Suppose your great-great grandparents, who lived four generations ago, materialized in the United States of the present day. Surely they would first be struck by the scale and clamor of present-day life, and might not like these things; neither do we, necessarily." But, "as [they] learned more of contemporary life, they would be dazzled. Unlimited food at affordable prices, never the slightest worry about shortages, unlimited variety – strawberries in March! – so much to eat that in the Western nations, overindulgence now plagues not just the well-off but the poor, the poor being more prone to obesity than the population as a whole."²

Easterbrook goes on to point out other aspects of contemporary life that would "strike our recent ancestors as nearly miraculous," such as the 77 year average life span (up from 41 at the beginning of the twentieth century), the defeat of "history's plagues – polio, smallpox, measles, rickets," the end of backbreaking physical toil for most wage earners, instantaneous global communication, same-day travel to distant cities, the end of formal discrimination, mass home-ownership, and incredible advances of freedom. "All told, except for the clamor and speed of society, and for the trends in popular music, your great-great-grandparents might say the contemporary United States is the realization of Utopia."³

But it isn't Utopia. Easterbrook concludes by saying that although everything is better, we are not happy.

Yet how many of us feel positive about our moment, or even believe that life is getting better? Today Americans tell pollsters that the country is going downhill; that their parents had it better; that they feel unbearably stressed out; that their children face a declining future. ...

The percentage of Americans who describe themselves as “happy” has not budged since the 1950s, though the typical person’s real income has more than doubled through that period. Happiness has not increased in Japan or Western Europe in the past half-century, either, though daily life in both those places has grown fantastically better, incorporating all the advances noted above plus the end of dictatorships and recovery from war... [Even in an era of abundance and social progress] the citizens of the United States and the European Union, almost all of whom live better than almost all of the men and women in history, entertain considerable discontent.⁴

We have everything we can think of to want, yet we are not satisfied. In this respect we are just like Solomon, one of the greatest kings of ancient Israel and writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. He achieved everything he could think of to achieve and got for himself everything he could think of to acquire, yet he was still left empty.

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2:10-11)

He concludes, “So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind” (Ecclesiastes 2:17).

The Answer

I will expand on this proposition shortly, but for now let me summarize the biblical answer to our problem. The reason that nothing on earth satisfies our innermost longings is that we do not actually long for anything on earth. As C.S. Lewis argues,⁵ “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”⁶

That other world is Heaven.⁷ Heaven is what we are missing, what we are longing for. Our deepest problem on earth is that we do not belong here. We were created to live in the presence of God, and existing anywhere else will leave us unfulfilled. In the words of Randy Alcorn, we are homesick.

Nothing is more often misdiagnosed than our homesickness for Heaven. We think that what we want is sex, drugs, alcohol, a new job, a raise, a doctorate, a spouse, a large-screen television, a new car, a cabin in the woods, a condo in Hawaii. What we really want is the person we were made for, Jesus, and the place we were made for, Heaven. Nothing less can satisfy us.⁸

According to the Bible, humans were created to live with God. Adam and Eve were put in the Garden of Eden so they could do just that (Genesis 2). However, because of their disobedience, the first couple was expelled from their natural home and exiled from God (Genesis 3). They found themselves living on a planet gone awry. So do we.

The Bible gives us a clear allegorical picture of our situation in the story of the Israelites in Egypt. That famous tale starts with God promising Abraham that his descendants would be a great nation and be placed in a country of

their own, the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:2-7). The fulfillment of that vow seemed to be in jeopardy when Abraham's grandson Jacob was forced to move the entire family to Egypt because of famine (Genesis 41-47). For the next 400 years, the Israelites (the children of Israel, Abraham's grandson) lived in a land that was not their home. So do we. Just as the Israelites were aliens and strangers on foreign soil, longing for the country they were meant to live in, we are aliens and strangers on this fallen planet, longing for our true home. We will not be satisfied until we get there.

Of course that is not the full story. After all, if the main problem the Israelites faced was being away from home, they simply could have packed up and moved. However, they couldn't do that because they were slaves. As the number of Israelites grew over the years, successive rulers of Egypt forced them into slavery to keep them from becoming a threat (Exodus 1:8-11). The Israelites couldn't leave because they didn't have the power to overthrow the oppressive ruler. They needed help.

The Bible tells us that this is the human predicament as well. Not only is this planet not our home, but we are slaves to Satan. When Adam and Eve rebelled, the devil took control. Satan is called the prince of this world (John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11), the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4), the ruler of the kingdom of the air (Ephesians 2:2), and the ruler of darkness (Ephesians 6:12). During the temptation of Christ in the desert, Satan showed Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world" and said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to" (Luke 4:6). Scripture is clear that Satan has authority over this planet.

It is also clear that we are slaves in his evil kingdom. The Apostle Paul writes that everyone is "sold as a slave to sin" (Romans 7:14), a sentiment echoed by Jesus in John 8:34: "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin." Paul

also argues that “when you offer yourselves to someone you obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey – whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness (Romans 6:16). In a letter to Timothy, Paul tells his apprentice that the ungodly must be instructed “in the hope that that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will” (2 Timothy 2:25b-26).

So the allegorical picture of our situation looks like this: Egypt is Earth, the Egyptian ruler, Pharaoh, is Satan and the Promised Land, Canaan, is Heaven. Just like the Israelites, we find ourselves living as slaves in a foreign land; and just like the Israelites, we don’t seem to have the power or ability to find our way home. This is why we are not content.

Although our situation is dire, understanding the problem should actually bring some sense of relief to all those who have been struggling to find happiness. G.K. Chesterton writes how glad he was to discover the horrible truth of his predicament.

According to Christianity, we [are] the survivors of a wreck, the crew of a golden ship that had gone down before the beginning of the world....

I had often called myself an optimist, to avoid the too evident blasphemy of pessimism. But all the optimism of the age had been false and disheartening for this reason, that it had always been trying to prove that we fit in to the world. The Christian optimism is based on the fact that we do *not* fit in to the world. I had tried to be happy by telling myself that man is an animal, like any other which sought its meat from God. But now I really was happy, for I had learnt

that man is a monstrosity. I had been right in feeling all things as odd, for I myself was at once worse and better than all things. The optimist's pleasure was prosaic, for it dwelt on the naturalness of everything; the Christian pleasure was poetic, for it dwelt on the unnaturalness of everything in the light of the supernatural. The modern philosopher had told me again and again that I was in the right place, and I had still felt depressed even in acquiescence. But I had heard that I was in the *wrong* place, and my soul sang for joy, like a bird in spring. The knowledge found out and illuminated forgotten chambers in the dark house of infancy. I knew now why grass had always seemed to me as queer as the green beard of a giant, and why I could feel homesick at home.⁹

Chesterton found great joy at realizing what he had been missing, and I think we should, too. However, as nice as it is to learn what our problem is, knowing the truth about our predicament will still lead to despair if there is not a solution to this mess. Is there any hope? Is there a way home? Yes. That is what this book is about.

The Gospel According to Exodus

The Israelites called out to God and asked Him to rescue them from their suffering (Exodus 2:23). In response, he enacted the great drama of redemption that we now know as the story of the Exodus. As I will explain, that story can be ours as well.

The historical account of the Israelites is not just an allegory in describing living in slavery to a foreign tyrant. It also describes salvation from that situation. The extraordinary tale of the Israelites' escape from slavery and journey to the Promised Land is a metaphorical roadmap of the path

to Heaven. The story of their redemption is meant to instruct us about what is necessary for our redemption. By learning how the Israelites arrived (or failed to arrive) at their home, we can learn how to reach ours.

Before we turn to the details of that saga, let me briefly describe the path this book will take. I will compare God's plan of salvation for us with that of his plan for the sojourning Israelites in each of three stages: the escape from Egypt, the wilderness wanderings and the entry into the Promised Land.

In Part 1, we will talk about what God did to get the slaves out of Egypt. First he sent a unique man to lead them. Then he demonstrated his power and authority over the gods of Egypt through many signs and wonders. Finally, he poured out his wrath on the land by sending the angel of death to kill all the firstborn. However, those who followed God's Passover directions were saved from destruction as he allowed for this punishment to fall on a lamb instead. We will see how Jesus fulfilled the events of that story during his ministry on earth so that we might be set free and escape slavery to sin and Satan.

After being set free from Egypt, the Children of Israel wandered for years in the wilderness before settling in the Promised Land. We will discuss several episodes from this period in Part 2, examining what God's path for the Israelites teaches about his path for us. Salvation is not a one-time event. Nor is it easy. The road to Heaven is a long and marked with very rough terrain. The Israelite's wilderness wanderings teach many valuable lessons about the nature of that expedition.

The third and final section is about what it takes to actually enter into the Promised Land. Many Israelites made it out of Egypt and across all or most of the wilderness only to fail before entering Canaan. Making it to Heaven requires persevering all the way to the end. We will examine what the

Israelites did wrong and offer some principles to implement so as to avoid their mistakes.

This book is not a commentary on Exodus. It does not provide comprehensive or exhaustive exegesis of any particular passages. I am not going to plumb the depths of every verse of scripture or extract every principle out of any single part of the story. I simply want to help us view more clearly the big picture of redemption as it is portrayed in the Exodus story.

Sometimes people talk as if God's plan of salvation is an engineering project or a business transaction. Using dry theological terms, they make redemption sound like a stale and impersonal mathematical equation. It is anything but. The way to Heaven is a journey, full of traps and pitfalls and deadly enemies. Indeed, it has much more in common with an action adventure movie than a scientific formula. I want to help us think outside some of those theological boxes. God invites each of us on an incredible adventure. I write this book to offer his insight into how to proceed successfully.

(If you have seen *The Ten Commandments* or attended Sunday School, you are probably at least somewhat familiar with this classic tale, and if not you are in for a treat. I will be summarizing the story and quoting extensively from the biblical text, but no matter how well you know the story, I highly recommend taking the time to read or reread Exodus as a companion to this book.)