

# The Life Beyond



**PAUL W. POWELL**

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**Tyler, Texas**

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*Dedicated To*

*Becky Buchanan  
Eldena Burnett  
Sandra Stanley*

*Whose  
Thorough Professionalism  
Good Attitudes  
and  
Hard Work  
Made Every Working Day Brighter*



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# Foreword

Since the summer of 1991 the Annuity Board of the Southern Baptist Convention has made it possible for me to conduct a ministry of writing for pastors. We used this ministry to equip the servants of God, to inspire their work, and to remind them of the plans and programs of the Annuity Board.

Now it has come time to pass the presidency to the next generation. My eight years as president-elect and president of the Annuity Board have been a source of great fulfillment.

Everyone who knows me knows that I am committed to evangelism, missions, and pastoral ministry. Seven years as president of the Annuity Board didn't change that. The presidency simply let me broaden my ministry. My successor, O. S. Hawkins, approaches his work with the same love for pulpit and pew.

Here is another gift for you. If there is a sermon or illustration you can use, God bless. If you find a person who needs a written witness, pass the book with a prayer that God will use it to win that man or woman to faith in Christ as Savior. That is my goal and my prayer.

Paul W. Powell  
Dallas, Texas  
September 1997



# Introduction

Frances Havergal, the great hymn writer, near the end of her life, asked a friend to read a passage from Isaiah. The friend read Isaiah 42:6, "I, the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand and will keep thee."

Frances said, "Did you hear that? We are called, we are held, and we are kept." Then she added, in confidence, "I believe I can go home on that." And she did.

Have you got something you can go home on? Observation tells us this life ends in death. Revelation tells us there is a life beyond. Curiosity makes us wonder, "What's the life beyond like?"

That's the subject this book of seven chapters addresses. One of my all-time favorite hymns goes like this:

*On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,  
And cast a wishful eye  
To Canaan's fair and happy land,  
Where my possessions lie.*

*I am bound for the promised land,  
I am bound for the promised land,  
O who will come and go with me?  
I am bound for the promised land.*

—Samuel Stennett

The purpose of this little book is to take a fresh look at "Canaan's fair and happy land" and the events

that will surround our going there.

Years ago there was an old country doctor who had his office above a drugstore. The staircase that led to his office was outside the building. Nailed to the wall at the bottom of the staircase was a sign that read, simply, "Dr. Williams Upstairs."

He treated everyone who came to him, regardless of their ability to pay. When he died, he had no relatives and he left no money for his burial. He had never asked for payment from anyone he had ever treated.

Friends and patients scraped together enough money to bury the good doctor, but they had no money for a tombstone. It appeared that his grave was going to be unmarked until someone came up with a wonderful suggestion.

They took his sign from the side of the drugstore and nailed it to a post over his grave. It made a lovely epitaph:

"Dr. Williams Upstairs"

That could just as easily be an epitaph for me . . . or for you if you are a believer in Jesus Christ. If it couldn't be, I encourage you to read carefully these pages about "the life to come." Then I bid you "come and go with me." I am bound for the promised land.

# 1

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## Understanding Death

*Hebrews 9:27*

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A *Dallas Morning News* article spoke of the high rolling, fast lane lifestyle of Donald Trump. As it described his accomplishments and tallied his assets, the article quoted him as saying, “Sometimes I think it was a mistake to have raced through it all so fast . . . but right now I’m genuinely enjoying myself. I work and I don’t worry.”

Not even about death? “No. I’m fatalistic and I protect myself as well as anybody can. I prepare for things. But ultimately we all end up going. I don’t believe in reincarnation, heaven, or hell — but we go someplace.”

“Do you know,” he said, “I cannot, for the life of me, figure out where.” (March 25, 1989)

Almost everyone, including doubters like Donald Trump, believe in life after death, but, to most people, the life beyond is a mystery.

The most complete statement in scripture about the life to come is 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17. These verses give us the best account of what is going to happen and how it will happen: “But I would not

have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, (sleep is the most common word for death in the New Testament) that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.

“For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him (this refers to the second coming).

“For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.

“For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first (This is the resurrection, and though the subject is not addressed here, we are bound to wonder what happens to people between death and the resurrection):

“Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (This points to heaven — the home of those who die with faith in the Lord. There is no mention of the fate of those who die outside of faith in Christ or of the judgment. Other passages tell us that we shall all be judged and that hell is the fate of those who die outside the faith).

In this chapter we are to consider the first event in the life to come — death. In the movie, “Forest Gump”, his wife, Jenny, died. As he stood by her grave he said, “Mama always said that dying was a part of life. I sure wish it wasn’t.”

I've stood beside enough open caskets and freshly dug graves and wept with grieving families to wish it weren't so. But, as Robert Alton Harris said, as he stepped into a San Quentin gas chamber, "You can be a king or a street sweeper, but everyone dances with the Grim Reaper," (quoting from the 1991 movie, "Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey").

And the Bible says, "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27).

As soon as we begin to live, we are old enough to die. Even those who live in the warmth of the gospel feel the chill of death. We are all engaged to marry death. The older we grow and the nearer the ceremony approaches, the more we need to prepare for it.

There are four questions about death we all want answered:

- What is death?
- Why did a living God make a dying man?
- What is our hope in the face of death?
- How can we prepare for death?

## **The Great Separation**

First, what is death? We begin with a definition. The Greek word translated "death" simply means "separation." Death is a separation of the soul from the body, by which life on earth is ended.

The biblical writer, James, describing a vibrant, living faith, put it like this, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:26).

And the apostle Peter describes his own death

like this: “I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance; Knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath shewed me” (2 Peter 1:13-14).

Peter here refers to his body as a tabernacle, a tent, an impermanent dwelling place, and to his death as “putting off” his tabernacle, i.e., laying his body aside.

And the gospels, describing the death of Jesus, record, “And Jesus cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost” (Mark 15:37). When Jesus died he was on the cross of Calvary, but at that moment he “gave up the ghost,” i.e., his spirit left his body. That’s what death is.

What happens to people at death? The body begins the process of decay — it returns to earth and the spirit goes to its eternal resting place. As Ecclesiastes 12:7 says, “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”

A poet unknown to me expressed it this way in a rhyme about an old man named Peas. Peas dies and they wrote this epitaph on his tombstone:

*Here lies the body of Old Man Peas  
Beneath the daisies and the trees  
But Peas ain't here, only the pod  
For Peas shelled out and has gone to God.*

## **The Living God and Dying Man**

Second, why did a living God make a dying man? We wonder about the origin of death.

In the garden of Eden there were two trees — the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. Man was forbidden from eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, not the Tree of Life. Apparently man was created mortal with the possibility of becoming immortal by eating of the Tree of Life and living forever.

It was only after man sinned that he was shut out of the garden, lest he eat of the Tree of Life and live forever. Perhaps one of the greatest of all tragedies would be for man to live forever in his present sinful state and in this sin infected world.

Notice the dialog of this experience. God speaks first. “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:16-17). They fully understood God’s command, for when Satan tempted Eve, she said, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die” (Gen. 3:2-3).

Satan counters, “Ye shall not surely die” (Gen. 3:4).

God speaks again, this time to pronounce judgment: “Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles

shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:17-19).

The apostle Paul sets all this in perspective when he writes: "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Rom. 5:12).

We are no more responsible for what Adam did than we are for what Julius Caesar did. But we are affected by what both of them did. What Adam did was bring sin and its most dreaded consequence into the world. Since then death has come upon the whole human race.

## **Victory in Jesus**

Third, what is our hope in the face of death? Christ has conquered death for us. In the Old Testament death was not regarded as the end of existence, but there was not much light concerning the life to come. It spoke of people going to Sheol, the pit, the grave, the place of darkness when they died. So we read that they mourned over the body of Jacob for 70 days and over Moses for 30 days.

There are, of course, a few glimpses of hope in the Old Testament. Job, out of deep sorrow, exclaims: "For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine

eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me" (Job 19:25-27).

Daniel declares, "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2).

David testifies, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Ps. 23:5-6).

However, real hope did not come until Jesus conquered death through his resurrection. Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 1:10 that Jesus has abolished (rendered powerless) death and brought life and immortality to light.

The author of Hebrews writes, "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:14-15).

Alexander Maclaren, the great English preacher, tells of when he accepted his first job in Glasgow. He was just sixteen and his home was about six miles from the big city. Between his home and Glasgow there was a deep ravine that was supposed to be haunted. Some really terrible things had reportedly happened in it, and he was afraid to go through it even in the

daytime. At night it was out of the question.

On Monday morning of his first work day his father walked him to work and in parting said, "Alec, come home as fast as you can when you get off Saturday night." Thinking of that deep ravine, Maclaren said he answered his father, "Father, I will be awfully tired Saturday night. I will come home early Sunday morning."

But his father was adamant, "No, Alec, you've never been away from home before, these five days are going to seem like a year to me. Come home Saturday night."

Reluctantly Alec answered, "All right, father, Saturday night." All week long Alec said he worried about the black ravine. When Saturday night came he was more scared than ever, but he wrapped up his belongings and went out to the end of the gulch. He said, "I whistled to keep my courage up, but when I looked down that inky blackness I knew I couldn't go. The tears came unbidden and then suddenly I heard footsteps in the ravine coming up my path. I started to run, but hesitated, for those footsteps were very familiar.

"Up out of the darkness into the pale light, as I watched, came the head and shoulders of the greatest man on earth. He was bound to have known I was scared, but he only said, 'Alec, I wanted to see you so badly that I came to meet you.' So shoulder to shoulder we went down into that valley and I was not afraid of anything that walked."

That is our assurance too. Because he lives, we shall live also.

## **If I Should Die Before I Wake**

Finally, how can we be ready for death? The apostle Paul spoke of his own approaching death, saying, "I am now ready to be offered" (2 Tim. 4:6). We may delay death, but ultimately we must face it. Since death is a fact of life, it makes sense that we, too, should be ready for it. Homer Rogers gave us some good insights years ago when he wrote:

*Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray thee Lord, my soul to keep;  
If I should die before I wake,  
I pray thee Lord, my soul to take.*

It was a comforting prayer, but it may be because it was a rhyming jingle, like all good nursery rhymes.

As we grew older we might have regarded that prayer as morbid. The very idea of teaching a small child to think about dying in his sleep.

Yet that prayer really grew out of the ancient wisdom of the church. Death is not a subject to be avoided, like something obscene. On the contrary, it is something to be faced realistically and while one is in the best of health.

One thing is absolutely certain. I am going to die some day. And I don't know which day. And, I can't really become experienced at it. If I goof it up, I can't go back and do it over. It is certainly one of the most

important events of my life.

So it would be well if I got ready for it in advance. Someone once found St. Francis working in a garden and asked him, "What would you do if you know that the world was coming to an end in ten minutes?" St. Francis said, "I'd try to finish this row."

Most of us are not that ready. So, just suppose you had more than ten minutes to get ready. Say you had ten days. What would you do? What should we do?

First, put your affairs in order. Make your will if you haven't already. Pay your debts or at least make arrangements to do so. Go through your desk and attend to all the loose ends of personal and business matters that you've left hanging. If you were to die a week from now, someone would have to do all that. So do it yourself. Gather together all your important papers, label them properly, tell somebody else where they are. The aim is that if you die your heirs would find all your affairs in order.

Then sit down and write all those old friends you have been intending to write and haven't. The urgency of this was pointed out by Charles Hanson Towne when he wrote:

*Around the corner I have a friend  
In this great city that has no end;  
Yet days go by, and weeks rush on,  
And before I know it, a year is gone,  
And I never see my old friend's face,  
For life is a swift and terrible race.*

*He knows I like him just as well  
As in the days when I rang his bell  
And he rang mine.  
We were younger then,  
And now we are busy, tired men;  
Tired with trying to make a name  
Tired with playing a foolish game,  
'Tomorrow,' I say, 'I will call on Jim,  
Just to show that I'm thinking of him.'  
But tomorrow comes and tomorrow goes,  
And the distance between us grows and grows.  
Around the corner!— yet miles away ...  
'Here's a telegram, sir.  
Jim died today.'  
And that's what we get and deserve in the end  
Around the corner, a vanished friend.*

Then, forgive all the people you've been holding a grudge against and tell them so. Apologize to all those you've offended. Tell your spouse that you love him or her. Spend some time with the children.

When all your personal affairs are current and in order, give some attention to your soul. Examine your conscience carefully and confess all your sins to God, and do it sincerely. Spend some time in reading the Bible, in prayer and meditation. Go to church. Try to put all your desires and ambitions in the context of eternity and reevaluate them. Many of the things that have seemed so important will appear trivial and some of the things we've been ignoring or neglecting will loom large and critical in our new perspective. Christ

gave his life on the cross to make a way for us into his Father's kingdom. Keep that in mind. It matters.

On the last night I think I'd arrange to be the last one in the family to turn in. I'd go about the house saying 'good-bye' to those personal treasures I've loved and depended on, perhaps too much — my books, all my keepsakes and treasures. Their only purpose, really, was to remind me of the good experiences I've had in life.

Next, I'd tiptoe around the bedrooms of my loved ones and silently tell them good-bye. I'd remind myself that God loves them more than I do and that he's quite capable of taking care of them without my help. It's humiliating, but it's true. If I were to die my family would be inconvenienced and grieved for a short while, but their lives would go on, and they'd readjust, and within a few years I'd not be spoken of very often.

Then I'd say good-bye to my body and its sense. It's been fun to live in, but it's been inconvenient also. No more beef steaks and no more golf games. But no more headaches and sore feet either.

Then I'd spend some time looking forward in anticipation to the adventure of eternity. It would be like planning for a long vacation in a strange country from which you might never return. But we have a companion who has been there before and can show us the interesting things to do and see. For Jesus will be there.

Then, with an absolutely clear conscience, and with all your affairs in order, you sleep the sleep of

the just and wake up in the world in which the grass is greener and the sky is bluer. Family and friends are lovelier because it's much like being born all over again. All the bills are paid and all your affairs are in order.

Do this every few months. It gets easier every time you do it. Try it once a month, and finally once a week, and then every night when you go to sleep. Perhaps one day you can be like St. Francis, so ready that when your turn comes you've nothing to do to get ready.

This is not only the way to die, it's the only way to live. It's the Christian way — one day at a time.

Jesus taught us, "Except you be converted and become as little children, you shall in no cause enter the kingdom of heaven." And so, in our maturity, we return to the simple wisdom of children, and say each night as we retire:

*Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray thee Lord, my soul to keep;  
If I should die before I wake,  
I pray thee Lord, my soul to take.*



# 2

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## The Second Coming of Christ — Our Blessed Hope

*Titus 2:11-14*

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Today, like never before, there is a fascination on the part of believers and unbelievers alike with the life beyond. Unbelievers are continually conducting and publishing research on out-of-body and near-death experiences. People want to know what happens to us at death. They are interested in the life to come.

Believers have always had that fascination. It was in response to the interest of early Christians that the apostle Paul wrote, “I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep (believers who are dead), that you sorrow not, even as others which have no hope” (1 Thes. 4:13).

Then, the apostle Paul proceeded to outline the major events in God’s plan for the future.

The pivotal event in the life beyond is the second coming of Christ. So central is it that Paul referred to it as “our blessed hope” (Titus 2:11-14). In that passage

he wrote, "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ; Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works."

Why does Paul describe the second coming as our "blessed hope?" It is because the return of Christ will mark the consummation of the age and the inauguration of the eternal order. Our friends die daily. But the death of the body does not mean the death of hope. When Christ comes the dead will be raised and the living will be raptured. Then will come the judgment, and heaven, and hell. None of this will happen until Christ returns. That's why his coming is our blessed hope.

While the second coming of Christ is our hope, there is more confusion and more division surrounding it than any other Bible teaching. Historian Robert Clouse points out that this subject has been "one of the most divisive elements in recent Christian history."

Christians are generally agreed on the basics. When Christ returns the dead will be raised, the living will be transformed and raptured, the final judgment will come, and the eternal order will be established. But when we attempt to make a systematic approach

beyond that, there are always great differences and great disagreements.

Much of the disagreement centers around different interpretations of Revelation 20. In that chapter John uses the phrase, “a thousand years,” six times. Satan will be bound for a thousand years (v. 2), martyred believers will live and reign with Christ for a thousand years (v. 4), at the end of a thousand years Satan will be loosed from prison, defeated in the battle of Armageddon, and then cast into the lake of fire and brimstone. Then will come the great white throne judgment.

The Latin word for “thousand” is “millennium.” So, from this chapter have come three major views concerning the millennium.

First, post-millennialism: Post-millennialists believe that the church, by preaching the gospel, will usher in a utopian age of righteousness, justice, and peace on the earth. This will last for a thousand years. Then Christ will return, all the dead will be resurrected, and a general judgment will take place, followed by the eternal state.

Post-millennialism was very popular following World War I, “the war to end all wars.” Its greatest strength is that it affirms the world is good and that God is working out his plan to restore creation to its original perfect state. It is extremely optimistic and believes that it’s worthwhile to invest our energies in trying to improve the world.

Its greatest weakness is its failure to take seriously the biblical pessimism regarding man’s efforts apart

from God.

Next is pre-millennialism. Pre-millennialists hold that Christ will come before the millennium period. This age will grow increasingly worse until the end comes. The end will be marked by two comings and by three judgments.

First, Christ will come *for* his saints. He will soon descend from heaven and command Christians who have died to be resurrected and living Christians to be transformed and raptured (caught up) to meet him in the air. They will proceed in triumph to heaven, where believers will be judged.

This will be followed by seven years of tribulation on the earth. During this time a worldwide dictator known as the anti-Christ will arise and eventually rule the world. But, he will be defeated at the final battle when Christ returns a second time.

Second, Christ will come *with* his saints and set up his earthly kingdom. Then, Satan will be bound, the nations will be judged, the martyred dead from the tribulation period will be raised, and Christ will begin his thousand year reign on earth with Jerusalem as his capital.

At the end of the thousand years Satan will be loosed and the great battle of Armageddon will occur. Christ will win the final victory and Satan will be cast into the lake of fire. Then will follow the resurrection of the wicked and the great white throne judgment.

The strength of pre-millennialism is the earnestness with which its proponents have pursued the details of biblical prophecy. Its weakness is that

much of it is drawn exclusively from one chapter of the Bible and that its followers have an unwillingness to leave any mystery in the way God works with man.

It should be noted that there is much disagreement even among pre-millennialists over the exact order of coming events. Not long ago, the president of Criswell College resigned over a dispute about the time before Christ's second coming.

According to news reports, all involved agree that Christ's return will be preceded by a time of great tribulation, but church officials said Dr. Criswell believes that before the seven-year time of tribulation, the church will be taken to heaven in a process called the rapture; Dr. Richard Melick, the resigning president, believes that the rapture will occur afterwards. (*The Dallas Morning News*, July 6, 1996)

Finally, a-millennialism. A-millennialists do not believe in a literal thousand-year earthly reign of Christ following his return to earth. They view the book of Revelation as written in signs and symbols and not to be taken literally. It views the second coming as a single event rather than a series of events, i.e., the rapture, a period of tribulation, the return of Christ, etc. They believe when Christ returns the dead will be raised, believers will be transformed and glorified, meet Christ in the air, and then return to earth with Christ. At this point the final judgment will send those who have rejected Christ to hell, believers will enter into everlasting glory on the new earth, heaven and the new earth will then be one.

The greatest strength of a-millennialism is that it

was the consensus of the church for nearly 1,500 years — from the days of Augustine until the twentieth century. Its weakness is that it leaves many questions unanswered.

While believers sometimes hold tenaciously to their beliefs, the greatest strength of these millennial views is their common allegiance to Jesus Christ as the lord of history. God has a goal for his planet as well as individuals. Human life is neither aimless nor determined by evil powers that can destroy us. God is sovereign. History has meaning, and God is working through it to achieve the goals from which he has never deviated.

What do I believe? What is my millennial view? I sometimes joke that I am a pan-millennialist (“it’ll all pan out”) or that I am a pro-millennialist (“I’m for a thousand years peace anytime”). But C. S. Lewis said it best for me: “All that really matters is that you were at your post when the inspection came.”

It helps to remember that George W. Truett, perhaps Southern Baptists’ greatest preacher, was a post-millennialist. Billy Graham, our greatest evangelist, is a pre-millennialist. And, Hershel H. Hobbs, our greatest theologian, was an a-millennialist.

Thomas Jefferson once said, “Good people with good intentions and the same facts don’t always agree.”

While controversy swirls around the details of the second coming, there are some things clear. Christ obviously did not mean for us to have all the details of his purpose for the future. If he had, surely the

details would have been given in clearer fashion. That which Christians need to know, they do know: the Lord has promised to return to the earth; in connection with his return the dead will be raised and the living will be transformed; he will exercise final judgment upon the deeds of men and their response to the offer of his mercy through his redemptive work; he will begin an end to the present world order and establish the eternal order for the glory of those who are his and the degradation of those who are not his. This much is clear. On these four points most interpreters agree. These are the things I want to dwell on here.

- The certainty of his coming.
- The manner of his coming.
- The time of his coming.
- Our attitude toward his coming.

## **We Haven't Seen the Last of Him**

**First, the certainty of his coming.** One thing is certain, the world has not seen the last of Jesus Christ. He will come again. We have his word on it. In John 14, Jesus, seeking to comfort his disciples after he has announced his approaching death, tells them not to be troubled. In the father's house there is room aplenty for everyone and he is going to prepare a place for them. Then he states clearly, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:3).

We have an equally clear promise from the angel of the Lord. Jesus has been crucified, buried, and

raised from the dead. Now he is ascending into heaven. The angel speaks to the disciples who stand watching, "And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:10-11).

And, the apostle Paul adds his word of affirmation when he writes, "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thes. 4:15-17).

### **What a Day It Will Be**

**Second, the manner of his coming.** First, it will be a personal coming. The angel said, "This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts. 1:11). Some have thought that the promise of his return was fulfilled in the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Others have seen the fulfillment in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Still others find the Lord's promise to return to be

related to his coming to receive the believers at the point of death. When Stephen was stoned to death he saw the living Christ *standing* ready to receive him (Acts 7:55). The emphasis of scripture, however, is on a personal, visible, and triumphant return of Christ to the earth.

Second, it will be a sudden return. He will come as a thief in the night (2 Pet. 3:10). It will be as it was in the days of Noah, with people eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage (Matt. 24:37). People will be going about the normal activities of their lives with little thought of God's judgment or eternity.

And, it will be like the birth pangs of a woman (1 Thes. 5:3). A husband and wife may very well anticipate the coming of a child and even know the approximate time, but it is almost always a surprise when the birth pangs begin.

And, finally, it will be a triumphant return. Paul, in our text, speaks of it as "the glorious appearing" of our Lord. An old shoe shine man in the barber shop was a familiar figure with his Bible always lying close at hand when he was not reading it. One day a customer said to him, "I see you are reading the book of Revelation today. Do you understand it?" "Yes, sir, I know what it means." "You know what it means when Bible scholars have disagreed about it all these years! What do you think it means?" "It means that Jesus is gonna win." That's the bottom line of his coming.

He came the first time in humility; he will come the second time in glory. He came the first time to

suffer; he will come the second time to reign. He came the first time for salvation; he will come the second time in judgment (2 Thes. 1:7-9).

## **Don't Look for Signs—Look for the Savior**

**Third, the time of his coming.** No part of the second coming of Christ has created more interest than the time of his coming. And, from the earliest days of Christian history, people have tried to predict when that time would be. Did you know that church father Hippolytus (170-236 A.D.) predicted the world would end in 500 A.D., and that he based his predictions on the dimensions of Noah's ark.

More recently, David Koresh and his Branch Davidian group predicted the end of the world and the return of Christ. And, as the end of the second millennium approaches, there are those who believe that Christ will return with the year 2000 A.D.

Some even believe that they can hasten his coming. Have you ever heard of the quote, "Yeller's Sect?" When they read in the Bible that Christ will return with a shout, they interpret it to mean he will come back only if they shout loud enough. So they constantly scream out the Lord's name.

It is sufficient to say that all of these predictions have proven wrong up until this hour. As humorist Dave Barry put it, "Well, the doom sayers have goofed, but, hey, it's not the end of the world!"

Jesus tells us all we need to know about the time of his coming. He says, "But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no not the angels of heaven, but my

father only" (Matt. 24:36). That ought to settle it once and for all.

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples, and they were still anxious about earthly existence and the end of it. They asked, "Lord, will thou at this time restore again the kingdom of Israel?"

And he said to them, "It is not for you to know the time or the seasons which the father hath put in his own power" (Acts 1:6-7).

They were concerned about the end time, but the Lord was concerned about the meantime. So he said, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

We are to be mean-time Christians, not end-time Christians. Our concern is to be about witnessing and evangelism until that time comes, whenever that may be.

The interest in the time of his coming was first expressed by the apostles. Jesus spoke to them about the end of the world and the destruction of Jerusalem. After his discourse on the Mount of Olives the disciples came to him privately saying, "Tell us, when shall these things be? What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" (Matt. 24:3).

Then Jesus proceeded to talk to them about some things that would precede and some things that would accompany his return to the earth. He spoke of false Christs who would deceive people. He spoke of wars and rumors of wars. He spoke of famines, pestilence,

and earthquakes. He spoke of persecutions and betrayals. He spoke of a chilling indifference coming upon the world.

These events have occurred in every generation, and, it's impossible to pinpoint them. Besides, there is a difference of opinion as to whether these are signs of his coming or characteristics of the tribulation.

It is sufficient to say, we are not to look for signs, we are to look for the Savior. As Paul admonishes, we are to be living sober, righteous, and godly lives, "looking for the blessed hope . . ." (Titus 2:13-14). He is the focal point. He may come at any moment and we must be ready.

### **Watch Your Manners**

**Fourth, our attitude toward his coming.** The most important thing is our attitude. After a lengthy discourse concerning the return of Christ and the coming end of the world, Peter writes, "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be . . ." (2 Pet. 3:11).

First, we ought to be ready (Matt. 24:44). If Jesus will come as a thief in the night, if it will be as it was in the days of Noah, if it's like the birth pangs that come upon an expectant mother, it is incumbent upon us to be ready at all times.

Second, we are to be busy. In the book of Second Thessalonians some believers had quit work and were waiting for the return of Christ. The farmer had left his plow in the field, the carpenter had laid down his ruler, the merchant had closed his shop, and they had

become deadbeats, waiting and watching for the Lord to return. Regardless of what you may think, these were not church staff members. These were ordinary believers.

It was in that context that the apostle Paul said, “If a man does not work, neither should he eat.”

We are to be busy working until the Lord comes. In particular we are to be busy working at his kingdom’s work. The parable of the talents and the pounds illustrates the necessity of our being busy until the Lord comes again. Our clear instructions are to “occupy till I come” (Luke 19:13). The word “occupy” literally means “be busy about.” We are to be busy about his work until he comes again.

Third, we are to be holy (2 Peter 3:11 and Titus 2:11-13).

Fourth, we are to be at peace with God and with one another (2 Pet. 3:14).

Fifth, we are to be evangelistic — counting the delay of the Lord as an opportunity to be saved and to help others to be saved. In fact, one reason for his delay is to give us an opportunity to repent and turn to him (2 Pet. 3:9, 15).

Sixth, we should be growing (2 Pet. 3:18). We either grow in grace or in disgrace. All living things grow. Dig a hole and drop some rocks in it and come back six months later and they will not have grown. Dig a hole and drop some marbles in it, come back six months later, and they will not have grown. But, drop a seed in the ground and it will grow, because it has life in it. If we have the life of Christ in us, then we are

to grow to be more like the Savior.

David Lloyd George, visiting the United States in the early 1920s, told stories of World War I. One of them had to do with an experience he had with Lord Rothschild. While serving as Prime Minister of Great Britain, Lloyd George had trouble with Lord Rothschild over financial matters. They came to hate each other with what seemed to be an implacable hatred. They even attacked each other in Parliament in debate. The story of their enmity came to be one of the scandals of England.

When the first World War came and Lloyd George was made Chancellor of the Exchequer (the national treasury), the Allies were fighting with their backs to the wall. England needed money.

One day he said to his secretary, "Send for Rothschild." his secretary replied, "No, not him!"

"Yes, him! Tell him I want to see him. I need him desperately!"

His secretary still protested, and Lloyd George had a better thought. "No!" he said. "Come to think of it, I will do better than that. I will go to him. Ask him if he will see me."

He would. So Lloyd George went to his office at once. Here is the incident as he told it:

"When we faced each other I didn't know what he would do, but I reached out my hand and said to him: 'We've quarreled in our time, but now we are faced with a problem bigger than either of us. England needs us both! Let's forget the past. Will you?'

'Tell me what I can do to help England and you.

I'm ready.'"

That story points its own moral. The kingdom of God is bigger than any of us. As we look forward to Christ's return, we are going in the same direction. Why not go together?



# 3

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## The Resurrection of the Body

*Philippians 3:17-21*  
*1 Corinthians 15*

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Gayle Hogg, a former missionary and friend of mine, while in a bank one day, met a man who identified himself as a Methodist. When the man learned Gayle was a preacher, he said to him, "You know the Bible says we Methodists are going to be the first people in heaven."

Gayle, surprised by this, responded, "Oh, where does it say that?" The man replied, "Don't you remember, the Bible says 'the dead in Christ shall rise first.'"

I don't know who will be first in the resurrection, but I do know there will be one. The Bible declares, "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first" (1 Thes. 4:16).

Belief in the resurrection is unique and central to the Christian faith. The Greek word translated "resurrection" literally means "to cause to stand up

again." It refers to the raising up of the body from the grave, the returning of the body from the clutches of death, so that it shall stand up and live again.

We know that people die, we see that or read about it every day. And, when they die their body is taken to the cemetery where it is buried. From all appearances that is the end. It is the final good-bye. But, the scriptures declare that when the Lord comes again he will raise up the bodies of the dead so that they will be released from the powers of death and made to live, to stand again.

Not all people, of course, believe in the resurrection. Some believe in annihilation. They believe when a person dies they are dead like a dog is dead. To them there is nothing beyond this life. Others believe in the immortality of the soul. This belief goes back to the Greek philosophers. They believed in and taught that the spirit of man lives on after the death of the body.

And some believe in reincarnation. Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, believe after death a person returns to the earth as another creature such as a cow or a butterfly or in the form of a man, which in Buddhism is the highest form of life.

The belief in the resurrection is both unique to, and central in, Christianity. The cemetery is today, in a sense, the deadliest place in town. But one day it will be the liveliest place, for when Christ comes the bodies of the dead will be raised to new life and the spirits of those already with him shall re-inhabit their bodies and live in them throughout eternity.

Because of this great truth, we naturally want to know what our resurrection bodies will be like. The Bible answers that question for us in Philippians 3:17-21. This passage is an encouragement by the apostle Paul to the Philippian believers to walk after him. He warns them that there are some whom he identifies as enemies of the cross of Christ that they should not walk after.

He gives four characteristics of those people. Interestingly enough, he begins with their end. He writes, "Their final fate is destruction, their god is their appetite, they are proud of things they should be ashamed of, and the earth is the limit of their horizons." These are secularists and materialists who see nothing beyond this world.

In contrast, Paul says, "Our citizenship is in heaven where we look for the coming of our savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. When he comes he will change our vile (frail, weak, perishing) body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious (shining, supernatural) body, according to the working (power, energy) whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself."

Mark that phrase, "he will change our body that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body." That single verse suggests what we need to know about our own resurrection. It declares:

- The resurrection of Jesus is the proof of our own.
- The resurrection of Jesus is the pattern of our own.

- The resurrection of Jesus is the power of our own.

## **The Proof and the Promise**

First, the resurrection of Christ is the proof and the promise of our resurrection. The greatest treatise on the resurrection ever written is the fifteenth chapter of the book of First Corinthians. The chapter begins with a statement of the gospel. What is it? It is that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again. Then, having stated the centrality of the resurrection, Paul then sets out to substantiate it. He gives three evidences of it.

First, the testimony of scripture. No one should have been surprised about the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord, for it all happened “according to the scriptures.” The prophets of the Old Testament and even Jesus himself spoke of these events long before they happened.

When the disciples wanted a sign, Jesus said the only sign they would receive was that of Jonah. As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so the son of man would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matt. 12:39-40). And in many other passages he foretold his resurrection (Mark 8:31, Matt. 16:21, Luke 9:22). Jesus said to his disciples, “Destroy the temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19).

So, the first evidence is fulfilled prophecy. What shall we say of that kind of evidence? It is the highest possible evidence. To know the future is a prerogative

of God alone. To declare that the thing shall come to pass long before it is in being, and then to bring it to pass, this is nothing but the work of God.

Second, the testimony of eyewitnesses. Paul relates six times in which Jesus was “seen” after his resurrection. The Greek word translated “seen” means “to see with the naked eye” as opposed to a vision of a hallucination.

This, of course, is the highest kind of evidence. How do you prove anything legally or historically? By the number, agreement, and reliability of the witnesses. Suppose someone is killed. The first thing the police want to know is, “Did anyone see it?” On the basis of what people see, truth is established every day. Our local newspaper carried the story of a man who had been held in custody for 26 months, awaiting trial on a murder charge. But, he was being released because the police could not find eyewitnesses. (*The Dallas Morning News*, September 4, 1996.)

The early disciples had never seen a television, never ridden in a 747 jet and never owned a computer, but they did know that ordinarily dead men do not live again. And they knew the difference between a hallucination and a real person.

Finally, the testimony of changed lives. Paul holds himself up as an example of one whose life was transformed by seeing the risen Christ. He reminds us of what he used to be (a persecutor), what he was then (an apostle), and what made the difference (seeing the resurrected Christ).

Not only was the apostle Paul changed, but so

were the other disciples. And there flowed from their conviction of the resurrection the entire Christian movement, which has been one of the most powerful forces for good the world has ever known. As someone has well said, "If Christianity is not true, then a lie has done more good in the world than the truth has."

If Christ was not raised from the dead, then we are hard put to find some other explanation for the radical change that took place in the lives of all who claimed to see Jesus alive after his resurrection.

Having sufficiently established the truth of the resurrection, Paul then raises a hypothetical "what if" question about the resurrection. What if Christ had not been raised from the dead? Then he answers his own question. First, if Christ had not been raised from the dead we would have no faith. His preaching would have been in vain and our faith would be in vain. He would have preached nothing and we would have believed nothing.

Second, without the resurrection we would have no forgiveness. Either your sins have been forgiven, or you are yet in your sins. If there was no resurrection, then there is no forgiveness.

And, finally, if there is no resurrection, then we would have no future. Those who died believing in Jesus would have perished. And we of all people would be the most miserable.

But, there is no "if" about it. For Paul declares emphatically, "Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept" (1 Cor. 15:20).

The word “firstfruits” is an agricultural term. It refers to the first heads of grain or the first produce of the fields that came in the late spring or early summer. To the Jews these were considered sacred, for they represented the beginning of the harvest and the promise of a greater harvest to come. If there were no first fruits there would be no general harvest later.

When Paul calls Jesus the “firstfruits” of them that slept, he is saying that Jesus is the beginning and the promise of the resurrection. So, if someone should ask you, “When is the resurrection going to begin?” tell them it’s already started. It started when Jesus was raised from the dead.

And, if they should ask, “How can we be sure?” tell them we can be sure because of Jesus’ resurrection. He is God’s pledge that a general resurrection will come in due time.

Before the resurrection of Jesus there was some hope of life after death. As the fame of Jesus spread, Herod feared that he was John the Baptist come back to life again (Mark 6:16). And, Martha, on the occasion of her brother’s death, said to Jesus, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day” (John 11:24).

But, we could never be sure until Jesus was raised from the dead. His resurrection was a necessity in order to give us complete victory over death and in order to give us assurance of the life to come. Without a bodily resurrection we could never be sure that people would live again.

My secretary, Eldena, shared with me a poem a

little boy recited in school. The teacher had asked each pupil to bring a poem. His went this way:

*Roses are red  
Violets are bluish  
If it weren't for Easter  
We'd all be Jewish.*

The New Testament declares that the resurrection of Jesus was a fact. It affirms that his physical body did not decay in the grave. It was made alive again, gloriously transformed by the power of God. And his resurrection is the proof and the promise of our resurrection to come.

Thus, Paul closes his treatise on the resurrection by saying, "Thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through our lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57).

### **The Pattern and the Plan**

Second, the resurrection of Jesus is a pattern for our resurrection. Because of our hope, we are bound to ask, "What will our resurrection bodies be like?" The scriptures tell us, in part, when Paul writes, "He will change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body" (Phil. 3:21). And John declares, "When he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

So our resurrection bodies will be like his. Now, we only need to know what his body was like and we shall know what ours will be like.

First, his was a *real* body. After the resurrection

Jesus was not a ghost as his disciples at first thought, but he was a real person (Luke 24:36-43). He said to the women in the garden, "Quit clinging to me. Let me go" as they tried to hold on to him (Matt. 28:9).

Thomas was the first skeptic of the resurrection. He said, "Unless I feel the nail prints in his hands and his pierced side, I will not believe." Then Jesus appeared in the upper room to the disciples and invited Thomas to feel for himself (John 20:27). And, he ate with them by the Sea of Galilee still later (John 21), all indicating that his was a real body.

In explaining our resurrection body, the apostle Paul wrote, "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body" (v. 44). He does not say it is sown a natural body and raised a ghost. He says it is raised a spiritual body.

Just as our present body is perfectly suited for our existence here on earth, so our resurrection body will be perfectly suited for the new life we have in eternity. It will be different, but it will be a real body.

In eternity we will not be disembodied spirits. We will be disembodied temporarily between our death and the resurrection, but when the resurrection day comes our spirits, which will already be with the Lord, will re-inhabit our bodies and we shall have real bodies throughout all eternity.

Second, it will be an *eternal* body. Our present bodies are weak, frail, and perishing. But our new resurrection body will be released from the limits of time and space as we know them today. It will not be just a restored body, a restitution, as was the case with

Lazarus, the daughter of Jarius, and the son of the widow of Nan. They were given their old body back and grew old, weak, and eventually died again.

But our new resurrection body will not be subject to the frailties, limitations, and weaknesses of these present bodies. Our present bodies are subject to the aging process. Our eyes grow dim, our steps unsteady, our hands shaky, our skin wrinkled, our hearing impaired. And it doesn't matter how well we diet or how much we exercise; ultimately the body decays and wastes away.

Dr. Bernie S. Siegel, M.D., wrote, "I've done research, and I hate to tell you, but everybody dies — lovers, joggers, vegetarians, and non-smokers. I'm telling you this so that some of you who jog at 5:00 a.m. and eat vegetables will occasionally sleep late and have an ice-cream cone." (*Peace, Love, and Healing*; Harper Collins)

We eventually become so weak we can't even transport ourselves to our burial place. Our friends have to come and take our body to the cemetery. But, in that new life we'll not be subject to any of that. That's why we can know that in heaven there will be no crying, no tears, no pain, and no death. Former things will have passed away.

Third, it will be a *recognizable* body. People wonder, "Will we know one another in heaven?" The answer is a resounding and an emphatic, "Yes!" There are many reasons why we know this:

- Logic says we will know one another. We know one another here, do we not? Well, we shall be

wiser than we are now. So we will know one another in heaven.

- Examples in the Bible help us to know this. Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the Mount of Transfiguration where God confirmed to them that Jesus was his son. As a part of that confirmation, Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus. Immediately, the disciples recognized them. They had never seen them before. Photographs were not available. Apparently there were no introductions, and Moses and Elijah wore no name-tags. It says to me that we shall not only know one another in heaven, but that we shall know everyone in heaven. Without benefit of photographs, name-tags, or introductions we shall know even as we are known. That is encouraging to those of us who are getting more and more forgetful.
- The greatest evidence that we will know one another in heaven is that the disciples knew Jesus after his resurrection. Did the disciples know him after the resurrection? They most certainly did. In every instance except two, when he purposefully blinded their eyes for teaching purposes, they recognized him (Mark 16:12-32). If they recognized him, and we shall be like him, then we shall recognize one another in heaven also.

A number of questions naturally arise about our resurrected life:

Will there be marriage in heaven? Jesus said there would not be. Marriage is essentially a physical relationship and that part of life will have passed away. It doesn't mean we won't know one another in heaven. It simply means the physical aspect of marriage will not exist.

I visited a Moravian village in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I asked to visit their cemetery, which they call "God's acre." It was established in 1771. In it, as is their custom, they bury the men in one section, the women in another, and the children in yet another.

And they bury people in the order in which they die, one next to the other without regard to family ties. And, they all have the same kind of headstone. A flat rock, about 18 inches square, with their name, date of birth and death, and epitaph on it.

The reason for burying people this way, instead of in families as we do, is their belief that there are no human families in heaven. We will all be one great big family. We will all be a part of the family of God.

Can you imagine the problem if there were marriages? What would God do about multiple marriages? It would necessitate polygamy in heaven.

Will there be children in heaven? If a child dies will they still be a child in heaven? Or will they have grown through the years? No one has the answer to that, but I like what Samuel Taylor Coolidge once wrote. He lost a child in death and wrote to a friend who sustained a similar loss. He wrote, "To my friend, in recollection of his son and mine, who by the grace

of God, have the privilege of being boys together throughout eternity.”

I like that! Besides, I find it hard to imagine a place where there would be no children.

Will we be conscious of vacant places in heaven? Will we be aware of loved ones who are not there. No one knows the answer to that either. But, we need to work now to get them there.

A lady came out of church following a sermon on the resurrection and asked, “What if I had died while I was pregnant?” I said, “I don’t know what would happen, but I can assure you this, you would not have morning sickness throughout eternity. There will be no sickness in heaven.”

What if a person is cremated? The Revelation says, concerning the end time, “And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and hell (the grave) delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works” (Rev. 20:13).

If God can bring the dead from the sea and the decomposed from the grave, then surely he can raise up bodies from the ashes of cremation.

## **The Great Power**

Third, the power that raised up Jesus will also raise up us.

The great power of this universe is not the power to destroy, but rather the power to create and transform. Any child can crush a bug to death. But all the king’s horses and all the king’s men can’t put

the bug back together again. Only God can bring life out of death.

The great God of this universe, who created man from the dust in the beginning, is able to raise him up from the dust in the end. That is our hope and our assurance.

In 1779 John Newton wrote his beautiful hymn, "Amazing Grace." The first three stanzas go:

*Amazing Grace! how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved.  
How precious did that grace appear  
The hour I first believed!*

*Thro' many dangers, toils, and snares,  
I have already come;  
'Tis grace that bro't me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.*

Newton wrote three other stanzas that have been dropped by most mainline denominations. They have a beautiful message also:

*The Lord has promis'd good to me,  
His word my hope secures;  
He will my shield and portion be,  
As long as life endures.*

*Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,  
And mortal life shall cease;  
I shall possess, within the veil,  
A life of joy and peace.*

*The earth shall soon dissolve in snow,  
The sun forbear to shine;  
But God who called me here below,  
Will be for ever mine.*

It was 80 years later that the final stanza we now sing was added. John P. Rees, in all probability, was the author of these four lines:

*When we've been there ten thousand years,  
Bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise  
Than when we first begun.*

That is our hope.



# 4

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## The Disembodied State: What Happens to People Between Death and the Resurrection?

*2 Cor. 5:1-9*

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According to a legend, a king once misunderstood his court jester to be making fun of him during a royal performance. In anger the monarch declared the court clown must die. Later, however, he realized his mistake. He had wrongly sentenced an innocent man to death. But worse still, the king sadly remembered that royal decrees could never be changed or canceled. Such was the custom of his time.

The jester was summoned again to the penitent monarch who said, "In consideration of your faithful service and my rash decree, I will grant your dying wish."

The jester thought for a moment and replied, "Does this mean I can choose how I will die?" The king agreed. "Very well, then, I choose die of old age!"

My guess is, given that choice, that's the wish

most of us would make. Joe Louis, the great heavyweight boxing champion used to say, "Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die."

But, death is a part of life and so we all have an interest in it. By observation, we know people die. By revelation, we believe in the resurrection of the dead. So, the question naturally arises, "What happens to people between death and the resurrection?"

Some believe that death reduces one to a state of silence, inactivity, and unconsciousness they call "soul sleep." The repeated use of the word "sleep" for death in the New Testament suggests this to them.

Martin Luther believed this. He believed at death a person goes to sleep and after a few hours of sleep he awakes without consciousness of time lapsed and without consciousness of what has happened to him in the interim of sleep. He held that the righteous dead will sleep until the Lord comes to knock on the grave and bid them wake up. The first righteous man who ever died will then arise and think he has slept scarcely an hour.

Others believe in an intermediate state called purgatory. Purgatory, they believe, is a place prepared by God to purge those souls that are not yet pure enough for heaven and yet not bad enough for hell. Here people undergo the pain of intense longing for God and intense suffering until they have paid the debt of temporal punishment due to them because of their sins on earth. Purgatory, they believe, exists to

purify us for God's presence. It differs from hell in its duration and its intensity.

But, the Bible does not teach either of these. Between the death of the body and the resurrection of the body we are not asleep in the grave and we are not suffering in purgatory, but we are in a disembodied state.

The apostle Paul speaks clearly of the disembodied state in 2 Cor. 5:1-9. The setting of this passage in the epistle is important in understanding it. Paul has been discussing the difficulties of his work as an apostle (4:1-18). "We have," he said, "this treasure (the gospel, the responsibility of preaching) in earthen vessels," i.e., a perishable body (2 Cor. 4:7).

But he adds he did not despair in the turmoil of his missionary work although he found his physical body wearing out daily. For though he was losing ground physically, he was gaining ground spiritually. And more and more his interest came to be not in things that are seen, the temporal things, but in things that are unseen, the eternal things (v. 18).

It was this review of his physical weariness that caused him to think in terms of his hope for the future and to set out the passage that follows in chapter five.

He begins by comparing his body to a house or a tent, an impermanent dwelling place. Then he speaks of his death as being "dissolved." This is one of four words used in the New Testament to describe death. The word sleep is the most common word. It is used 13 times (see Mark 5:39, John 11:11, Acts 7:60, 1 Thes.

4:13). It suggests entering into quiet rest for the people of God.

Next is the word departure. The apostle Paul spoke of his own death, saying, "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand" (2 Tim. 4:6). The word "departure" means "to set free." It was used to describe unyoking an animal, unchaining a criminal, or unloosing a ship.

A third word is the word decease. When Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration they spoke of his death on the cross as his "decease" that would be accomplished in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). And Peter, explaining why he was writing his epistle, said the Lord had showed him he did not have long to live. He was writing, therefore, so that after his "decease" they would not forget the gospel which he had preached to them (2 Peter 1:12-15).

The Greek word translated "decease" means "exodus." It points back to the Old Testament experience of Moses leading Israel out of bondage and to the promised land and it means "to go out." We sometimes think we are in the land of the living on the way to the land of the dying. The opposite is true. We are in the land of the dying on our way to the land of the living. We are on our way out.

Paul uses the word "dissolve" (2 Cor. 5:1). It means to fold up, to lay aside, a tent. To enter into quiet rest, to be set free, to go out to the promised land, to lay aside this body and move on. That is death to the believer.

Paul then speaks of his assurance: “We know,” i.e., we have absolute and settled knowledge that if his earthly house (present body) is laid aside, he has a heavenly home that will endure forever. He was sure of this — the complete wearing out of the human body would not mean an end of existence.

Finally, Paul expresses his wish that he could move out of his earthly body and into his eternal body immediately, rather than be disembodied until the resurrection.

Then he changes analogies. He has been speaking of his body as a house. Now he speaks of it as clothing. And he refers to the disembodied state as being unclothed or naked. As our body without clothes on it is naked, so our spirit without its body will be like being naked.

While Paul’s desire was that he could put on his eternal body over his mortal one and bypass the disembodied state altogether, he knows this is not possible. His options are to either remain in this body or be disembodied for a time. And if he remains in his present body he will be absent from the Lord.

So, faced with this choice, he says he is willing to lay aside this body for a while and be disembodied so he can go to be with the Lord.

Paul says in essence that, while the disembodied state is not the most desirable, it is preferable to staying here, and it is necessary if we are to see the Lord before the resurrection.

What then will our disembodied state be like? Although the Bible does not provide detailed

information, it does provide teaching from which we can draw legitimate inferences.

For the believer, the disembodied state will be characterized by four things:

- We will be alive and conscious.
- We will be with the Lord.
- We will be in paradise.
- We will be at rest.

## **Alive and Awake**

First, in the disembodied state we will be alive and conscious. In Matthew 22:32 Jesus told the Sadducees that God is the God of the living, not the dead. His statement was made in reference to the words addressed to Moses at the burning bush, "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Jesus interpreted the statement to mean that God was saying, "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob died long ago, but they are still alive." There is no indication that a state of unconsciousness was meant.

Jesus said in John 11:26, "Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." He was not speaking of the experience of physical death. He was saying that physical death did not bring about a cessation of conscious existence and fellowship with Christ.

Perhaps the clearest teaching is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:22-23). The focus of the story is on the rich man but both men are alive and conscious. Lazarus was alive and conscious "in Abraham's bosom," and the rich man was alive and conscious in hell.

The rich man was conscious of his surroundings. He was aware of his condition; of his suffering; and of warning his brothers who yet needed to repent.

People sometimes wonder, "Are people in heaven aware of what goes on on earth?" They certainly are aware in hell. And a part of their torment is to see and be frustrated by being unable to do anything about what they know. But we do not know about heaven. We only know we could not know all things and still be happy.

### **At Home At Last**

Second, in the disembodied state we will be with the Lord. Solomon expressed this conviction first when he said, "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it" (Ecc. 12:7). Genesis tells us man got his body from the dust of the earth, but he got his life from God. At death each returns to the place it came from.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:14, Paul declares that when the Lord returns he will bring "with him" those who have fallen asleep.

And, in the story of Lazarus and the rich man, at death, the beggar was carried by the angel to Abraham's bosom. That is clearly a reference to being taken to the presence of God. No greater joy could be contemplated by a good Hebrew than to be clasped in the bosom of Abraham, the father of the race.

The apostle Paul tells us that to die is "to be with Christ" (Phil. 1:21-22). There is no need to add anything to that. The New Testament writers did not

speak of going to heaven so much as going to be with the Lord. It is not the other shore that charms us so much as Jesus on the shore. "Today shalt thou be with me" is what cheered the dying thief more than merely going to be "in paradise."

That is why, I believe, we are told so little in a detailed sense about the life in heaven and in glory. People often ask why we are not told more about it. I think there are two answers to that. One is that because of our sinful state any description we might be given would be misunderstood by us. It is so glorious that we can neither understand nor grasp it. The second reason is more important; that it is often idle curiosity that desires to know more. I will tell you what heaven is. It is "to be with Christ," and if that does not satisfy you, then you do not know Christ at all. "Whom have I in heaven but thee?" says the psalmist. I do not want anything else. Where thou art is heaven. Just to look at thee is sufficient. "To be with Christ" is more than enough, it is everything. "Whom have I in heaven but thee?"

And in our text Paul declares, "To be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8). He understood that at death he would give up his bodily existence and enter into the immediate presence of the Lord. He had the assurance that even death could not separate him from the Lord.

When the great Christian educator and writer, Oswald Chambers, died, his family sent a telegram to his friends. The telegram consisted of four words . . .

“Oswald in his presence.” Just four words, but they spoke tons and tons of truth. These four words tell the story of the death of every Christian.

### **The Third Heaven**

Third, in the disembodied state we will be in paradise. Jesus said to the penitent thief on the cross, “Today, shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). The word translated “paradise” is used three times in the New Testament. The first is this experience. The second is 2 Corinthians 12:4. Here Paul describes an experience in which he was caught up into the third heaven, “the paradise of God.” The Jews of the first century believed in three heavens. The first heaven was where the birds fly and the clouds float. The second heaven was where the sun and the moon and the stars are. The third heaven was where God is. We see the first by day, the second by night, and the third by faith.

The other passage is Revelation 2:7, where believers who overcome are assured that the living Christ will grant them the privilege of eating of the tree of life, “which is in the paradise of God.”

There has been much speculation about paradise, what and where it is. I shall know that in due time, but meanwhile what matters most is that he said, “Today shalt thou be with me.” I am not so concerned with what is there as I am interested in who is there. “Where I am, ye may be also.” It is who he is that makes heaven what it is.

## Fortunate Indeed

Fourth, in the disembodied state we are at rest. John, in the Revelation, writes, "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them" (Rev. 14:13).

The word "blessed" means "happy, fortunate, to be congratulated." Why is it so? Because they have entered into rest and have begun to receive their reward.

The rest used here does not refer to inactivity but to the joy of achievement and accomplishment (Heb. 4:10, Rev. 14:13). It means "to be refreshed after toil." Imagine a man coming home after a hard day's work. While his wife prepares supper he sits down in his easy chair to watch the six o'clock news. As he relaxes from his weariness he slips into sleep. There is nothing dreadful or fearful about that. It's a welcomed experience. That's a picture of the quiet rest of those who die in the Lord.

But it is not so for unbelievers. To understand the fate of the wicked, they must be contrasted with the righteous. If believers are with the Lord, unbelievers are separated from him. If believers are in paradise, unbelievers are in punishment. If believers are at rest, then unbelievers are in turmoil. They are without hope. As Jesus told the rich man, "There is a great gulf fixed between us." He clearly stated their destiny is fixed and it can not be changed to a better one.

As wonderful as the disembodied state might be for believers, it was still incomplete. It necessarily lacks one element of human perfection; this part will be supplied by the resurrection. That's why it was Paul's wish that he could bypass it and go straight to his eternal, spiritual body.

Leath Anderson tells about a woman in his church who had a saying she used every time someone ate at her house. She would say, "Save your fork, the best is yet to come." She grew old and ill and death was approaching. Her one request of her family was, "When I die and they fold my hands in the casket, have them put a fork in them." That's our hope — the best is yet to come.



# 5

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## The Great Judgment Day

*Rev. 20:11-19*

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Daniel Webster said, “The greatest thought that can occupy a man’s mind is his accountability to God.” While we don’t like to think about it, we must all one day sit down at the banquet of consequences. One of the faults of modern culture is we have over sentimentalized the love of God. We have made God into some doting grandfather who will overlook our wrong. But make no mistake about it, there are some things God hates and he intends to judge them — and us (Prov. 6:16-19). We think because sin does not matter to us, it does not matter to him. But the Bible tells us it matters eternally to God. And the scriptures speak clearly of his coming judgment on it.

Some judgment, of course, comes on sin here and now. It came on the world in Noah’s day in the form of a flood. It came on the house of David in the form of death, rebellion, and heartache. It came on the nation of Israel in the form of crop failure, invasions of locusts and worms, scorching heat and drought, blight and mildew. It came on Jerusalem in the form of utter destruction for its rejection and crucifixion of

the Messiah. It happened as Jesus prophesied, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate" (Matt. 23:38).

But we must not be fooled into thinking because judgment does not come on all sin now that it will not come at all later. There is a final judgment day coming. I read of an irreligious farmer in one of our western states who was proud of his irreligion. Whether the story is true or not I am not sure. He wrote a local newspaper and said: "Sir, I have tried an experiment this year with a field of mine. I plowed it on Sunday. I planted it on Sunday. I dressed it on Sunday. I reaped it on Sunday. And I stored it on Sunday.

"And what are the results? I have harvested more bushels per acre off that field than any other man in this county this October." He anxiously awaited the next issue to see the editor's reply. When he got it there was only this short note: "God does not always settle his accounts in October."

Judgment is coming. That one thing is clear from scripture. The scriptures say: "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). And, "He hath appointed a day, in which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

The apostle Paul, speaking of the life to come, said, "Wherefore we labor, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every

one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:9-10).

But the most graphic account of the judgment is found in Revelation 20:11-19. Here, as God pulled back the curtain of eternity and allowed John and us to peer into the future, he saw a "great white throne." That was a symbol of God's holiness and righteousness and sovereignty. It was from that throne that he judged the world. Three truths leap out at us about that day.

- The judgment will be universal.
- The judgment will be impartial.
- The judgment will be final.

## **The Small and the Great**

First, the judgment will be universal. John said, "And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; . . . and the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them . . ." (vs. 12-13).

John uses some unusual language here. He speaks of "death and hell" delivering up the dead which were in them. The Greek word for "death" is the ordinary word to describe the dead. The Greek word translated "hell" is the word "Hades." There are two words for hell used in the New Testament. "Gehenna" is one. It always refers to a place of suffering and torment, a place of fire. The word "Hades," however, simply refers to the unseen world, the place of departed souls without reference to punishment or reward.

John uses both words here for emphasis. It is his way of referring to all the dead — the dead from the sea and the dead from the grave.

Some people believe there will be three separate judgments that will occur at three different times for three different purposes and will involve three different groups of people.

They believe the first judgment will be the judgment seat of Christ. This will be a judgment of God's people. It will take place in heaven following the resurrection and the rapture. And it will be for the purpose of rewarding God's people. They see the words of the apostle Paul, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:10), as referring to this judgment.

They believe the second judgment will be the sheep and goat judgment. This will be a judgment on the nations. It will take place on earth following the tribulation and its purpose will be to determine which nations will continue in the world during the millennium. They see Jesus' words, "Before him shall be gathered all nations" (Matt. 25:32), as referring to this judgment.

And, then, they believe there will be the great white throne judgment described in The Revelation. They believe this judgment will take place in the air at the end of the thousand years while the earth is being purged by fire and the purpose of this judgment is to determine the punishment of the wicked of all ages.

Whether there will be one judgment or three

separate judgments, I do not know. And, neither does anyone else except the Lord. I personally believe these are all just different ways of looking at one judgment. But I do know this, regardless of how many judgments there are, or when and where they occur, the judgment will take place and, ultimately, we will all stand before him.

John's picture is graphic: from battlefields long since forgotten, from the icy waters of the seven seas, from cemeteries overgrown and unkempt, yes, even from hell itself, they shall come to stand before God. No one will be excluded. The small and the great will be there. Heads of state will be there; great conquerors will be there; religious leaders will be there; entertainers will be there; and you and I will be there.

In that day, the place of amusements will be empty, the wheels of industry will have ceased to turn, freeways will be clear, for we will all be there — before him.

On two occasions someone has asked me about those who have been cremated. What happens to them? John deals only with the dead from two places — the sea and the grave. But that covers all the bases. Those buried in the sea eventually consumed by the creatures of the deep. Those buried in the earth eventually return to dust. Those cremated turn to ashes. The God who formed man from dust in the beginning can re-form him whether it be from the depths of the ocean, the dust of the earth, or the ashes of cremation.

## The Books Don't Lie

Second, the judgment will be impartial. As men stand before God John says "the books (plural) were opened: and another book (singular) was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works" (vs. 12).

The first book referred to is the book of life. This is a record of the redeemed of all ages. It is often referred to in scripture. Moses spoke of it in his day. The children of Israel, guilty of idolatry, were about to be slain by the Lord. Moses interceded for them. He makes no excuses for their sins, but rather pleads, "Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written" (Ex. 32:31-32).

The apostle Paul spoke of it when writing to the church at Philippi. Two women in the church, Euodias and Syntyche, were having a dispute that was spilling over into the congregation. Paul urges the church to help these women "whose names are in the book of life" (Phil. 4:2-3).

And John speaks of it often in The Revelation (13:8, 17:8, 20:15, 21:27).

The "books" John refers to are the books of works, a record of our deeds, good and evil. We will be judged on the basis of what is recorded in these books.

It ought to be noted that the purpose of the judgment is not to determine our destiny. It is to

determine our reward in that destiny. Our destiny is determined by our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. Our reward is determined by our deeds.

Let me put it another way, our destiny is determined by what we do *with* Jesus — our faith; our reward is determined by what we do *for* Jesus — our works.

What things will be considered in the judgment? What factors will be taken into account?

- We will be judged by the law of God written in our hearts. All persons have an awareness of God and all persons have a knowledge of right and wrong. Therefore they are without excuses (Rom. 2:15-16), unless it is a child who has not yet reached the age of accountability. A little first-grader took something she shouldn't have from school one day. She was caught, and her dad explained to her what she did was wrong, that the Bible said, "Thou shalt not steal," and that God was displeased with her. By this time she was in tears and said, "But, daddy, I haven't read that part yet." Even if there are parts we have not read yet, we know right from wrong. God's law is written in our hearts and we are accountable, even if we haven't read it all.
- We will be judged by our knowledge. If we know our Lord's will and do not do it, we shall be punished severely. But if we do not know his will, though we are equally disobedient, we shall receive leniency. It was in this context that

Jesus said, “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required: and to him who men have committed much, of him they will ask the more” (Luke 12:48). Simply put, it is a great responsibility to own a Bible.

- We will be judged by our opportunities. It will be more tolerable in the judgment for people who have never had an opportunity to respond to Christ than for those who have had the opportunity and willfully rejected him (Matt. 11:21-22, 2 Peter 2:21).
- We will be judged by our words. By our words we shall be justified and by our words we shall be condemned (Matt. 12:37). We shall give an account for every “idle word” that we speak (Matt. 12:36). The word “idle” means “careless” or “useless.” And it refers to any harmful, demeaning words we say — whether profane or insulting or critical.
- We will be judged as we have judged others. The same standards and criteria we use in criticizing and condemning others will be used by the Lord to judge us (Matt. 7:1-2).
- We will be judged by our acts of kindness and generosity. Even “a cup of water” given in Christ’s name will not go unnoticed and unrewarded (Matt. 10:42, Heb. 6:10; Matt. 25:31-46). Someone said facetiously, “My greatest fear is that I will be standing behind Mother Teresa in the final judgment line and I’ll hear God tell her, ‘You know, you should have done

more.'" Our works count.

In short, our judgment will be related to our total life and works.

The very fact that there are so many factors that will be taken in to account in the judgment means that we will not all be judged the same and that there will be degrees of both rewards and punishment in eternity.

The whole idea of books is to emphasize that an accurate record has been kept. The judgment of God will not be based on a whim or on impulse. It will be absolutely fair and impartial.

One thing is sure, no one will be able to stand before God and say, "You didn't treat me fair . . . this was not what I deserved."

### **Swift, Sure and Impartial**

Third, the judgment will be final. John says that those whose names were not written in the Lamb's book of life were cast into the lake of fire, which is "the second death" (vs. 14).

The Bible speaks of two births and of two deaths. The first birth is the physical birth. Jesus spoke of the second birth when he said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). This second birth is a spiritual birth that comes through faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Just as there are two births, there are two deaths. The first death is physical death, the death of the body. The second death is spiritual death, the death of the soul.

Jesus spoke of that second death when he said,

“Fear not them which kill the body, and are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28).

The lake of fire and the second death speak of the finality of the judgment. On that day there will be no acquittals and no appeals, for there will be no higher court to appeal to. And, there will be no plea bargaining. Justice will be swift, sure, and impartial.

The end result of the judgment will be separation — the separation of the righteous and unrighteous (Matt. 13:24-50). Life here is a struggle to “hold together.” We observe this in the animal world: birds flock together, cattle herd together, fish school together. And, in our families we strive to stay together.

It’s a sad time when we must separate. A son goes into military service, a daughter goes to college, a child is married and families are separated. Our hearts are heavy. And, when we die we want to be buried with our family. We want to live together and we want to be buried together.

But there is coming a day of final separation. We sometimes sing, “When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be.” The tragedy is, not all people are going to heaven. And if our lord came tonight and divided us, what a crooked line it would be. Some families would be separated, for though we may be close on earth we may be far apart in eternity.

In a story that is likely fictitious, a woman facing a court appearance sought a lawyer. She found one and talked with him, but decided not to retain him.

Later, she changed her mind and sought to retain the same lawyer.

But when she went to him the second time he said, "I'm sorry, but I have just been appointed a judge and I cannot defend you. I must now judge you."

Today, Jesus is willing to be your advocate, your savior. One day, he will sit on the great white throne and be your judge. Trust him now and be ready for the great judgment day.

Some unknown poet poses the question we all need to answer:

*When the death angel knocks at the door  
And the great judgment day has come  
What then! What then!*

*When the choir has sung its last anthem  
And the preacher has prayed his last prayer  
When the people have heard the last sermon  
And the sound has died out in the air  
When the Bible lies closed on the pulpit  
And the pews are all empty of men  
And each one of us stands facing his record  
And the great book is opened, what then?*



# 6

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## Hell: The Fate of the Damned

*Luke 16:19-31*

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W. T. Conner was for years a teacher of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. The story is told of him that one day, in preparation for class, he was writing on the chalkboard. Several young men who arrived early were talking before class began. One of them told a joke about hell and they all had a good laugh. So the story goes, Dr. Conner turned around, wiped a tear from his cheek, and said, "Young men, I never joke about hell — people are going there."

It is sobering to consider that every person who has ever lived, every person now living, and every person who will ever live shall continue to live throughout all eternity either in heaven or hell.

Jesus made this clear when he said, "Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life;

and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (John 5:28-29).

To the amazement of many, the most explicit words in all of scripture, and certainly the most uncompromisingly dreadful words about hell, flow from the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ. The word "hell" appears fifty-two times in the King James Version, fifteen of those times it was used by Jesus. He said, "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both the soul and the body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

In the sermon on the mount he said, "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members shall perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell" (Matt. 5:29).

And after painting a verbal picture of the last judgment, in which he will divide men as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats, he said to the wicked, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41).

These teachings of Jesus on hell are unnerving. They mean that people apart from Jesus Christ are not just confused. They are lost and facing eternal judgment.

If, however, you read the best known theologians of recent years — Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Nels Ferre, Rudolph Bultmann, and Emil Brunner — you will discover that almost all of them eventually give way to either annihilationism (there is no life beyond death) or universalism (everyone will be saved in the end).

While these ideas are appealing, we are bound to ask, "What do these men really know about life after death? What data supports their judgment?" When I come to the all-important question of man's eternal destiny, I prefer Jesus Christ over these theologians as my guide and authority.

The most exhaustive teaching Jesus gave about hell is found in the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). The story introduces us to two men with quite contrasting lifestyles and destinies.

Jesus begins the story simply, "There was a certain rich man which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day." The Greek word translated "sumptuously" literally means "brilliantly." The use of this word does not suggest, however, a brilliance which is admirable, but merely the brilliance of display. I think the word might best be translated for us today as "flamboyantly."

Wearing the finest and most costly clothing, the clothing of royalty, daily entertaining friends with merry feast-making at a table glittering with the richest of vessels, the rich man lived a life of luxury displaying ostentatiously his wealth.

Now look at the other man. He was a beggar, a man of abject poverty, named Lazarus, who daily sat at the rich man's door. He would have been happy just to have the scraps from the rich man's table. His gnawing hunger was never satisfied and even the dogs, mangy, half-fed scavengers of the street, tormented him by licking the unbound sores that covered his body. There could be no greater contrast

in the material conditions of these two men.

In time the beggar died. There is no mention of a funeral for him. Indeed, in all probability he was not buried at all, for at that time in Jerusalem the bodies of unknown and unclaimed beggars who died were carried to Gehenna, the city dump, and left there to burn with the offal.

What about the rich man? He “also died, and was buried.” Exactly. It would be interesting to know what the funeral cost. How many people attended? What did the preacher say? The truth we must not miss, however, is the rich man with all his wealth could not bribe the grim reaper upon the pale horse. He died also. Rich man and poor man. They shared the common lot of man.

Now it is all over. Right? No! Jesus said it was by no means over. Death comes to all, but it does not end all. It did not end it for the rich man. It did not end it for the beggar. It does not end it for any man.

The scene now shifts from this life to the life beyond. The beggar is carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom. The “bosom of Abraham” is figurative speech for the happy state of the righteous dead. Abraham was the father of the Jewish race and the friend of God. To be in his bosom was to be in the presence of God.

What about this other man who died and was buried? He went to hell. The Greek word translated “hell” is “Hades.” It generally means “the unseen world, the place of departed souls, the grave” (Matt. 16:18, Acts 2:27). Here it is specifically the abode of

the unsaved dead, a place of torment and agony.

There, the rich man lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham afar off and Lazarus right next to the heart of the father of Israel. He cried out and said, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame."

Abraham responded, "My child, remember that you got your good things in your life and Lazarus likewise the evil things; but now here he is comforted while you are tormented. And through all this region a great chasm remains fixed between you and me, and those who wish to cross from this side to you are not able nor may they pass from your side to us."

Then he said, "In that case I beg you, father, Abraham, send him to my father's house for I have five brothers, that he may bear witness to them, that they at least may not come to this place of torment."

Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets. Let them give heed to them." The reply of Abraham was that the surviving brothers have the witness of scripture. They are entirely sufficient to bring men to repentance. That should be enough.

The rich man insisted, "No, father Abraham, if one from the dead will go to them, they will repent." He supposes that the testimony of one returning from the dead would have had a greater influence than the testimony of God himself. But Abraham knows better. Persons are not changed at heart by signs. Signs frighten or fascinate temporarily, but they soon fade.

They do not last.

So Abraham responds, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded even if one rises from the dead.”

Abraham knows that not even the miracle of someone returning from the dead to warn them would have any effect on those who shut their ears to the voice of God in scripture. The problem is not that they lack evidence; they simply ignored the evidence they have.

Some people say this is a parable, i.e., a story to illustrate a truth. Others say no, Jesus never used a proper name in any other parable. And here he calls the beggar by his proper name — Lazarus. And, they say, he is gracious enough not to name the man who went to hell.

Whether a parable or a real life event, this story teaches us four truths: (1) the conscious existence of all persons after death; (2) the reality and torment of hell; (3) that there is no second chance after death; and (4) if the dead could communicate with the living, they would urge us to repent and turn to God.

The two men in this story illustrate two different lives, two different deaths, and two different destinies. From them we learn about the nature of hell.

- Hell is a place of suffering.
- Hell is a place of remembering.
- Hell is a place of despair.

### **Fire! Fire!**

First, hell is a place of suffering. Three times in

this story the word “torment” is used (vs. 23, 24, 28). The Greek word translated “torment” means “agony, grief, anguish.”

It is clear from this experience that the rich man had sensory perception in hell. He could see, he could feel, he could hear, he could talk. He had all the faculties you and I now have . . . and he was in torment.

Hell is pictured here as a place of fire. The reality of eternal punishment is thus pictured by the worst type of suffering known to man. In other places it is called a lake that burns with fire and brimstone, a place of outer darkness, a place of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, a place prepared for the devil and for his angels, a place where men reap what they have sown.

Eleven of the fifteen times Jesus spoke of hell, he used the Greek word “Gehenna” to describe it. Gehenna referred to the Valley of Hinnom outside the southeast walls of Jerusalem. In ancient times Gehenna had been the place of worship for the heathen god Molech, which included burning babies alive. Because of their cries, it came to be known as the Valley of Lamentation — or the Valley of Hinnom. This horrible practice was abolished by King Josiah (2 Kings 23:10) and the place came to be used by Jewish people as the city dump, a place for garbage disposal, including the refuse of the city, the bodies of animals, and even the bodies of criminals who had no one to give them a burial. The fire was kept going continually for sanitary purposes. The Valley of Hinnom came to be used as a symbol of the awful reality of hell. And

the term “Gehenna of fire” was used to describe the place of punishment appointed to the unsaved after death.

“Are the fires of hell real?” someone asks. I do not know. So, when I speak of these things, I ought to use the language of God. If he speaks of fire, then we need to speak of fire. If he speaks of hell as separation, then we need to speak of it as separation. If he speaks of it as weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, then we need to speak of it as a place of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

I must trust his revelation concerning hell. If I substitute my speculation, I become evasive, anemic, and powerless. I cannot improve upon God’s language, however smart, shrewd, or erudite I may think I am. I cannot improve upon God and what God says, therefore, I must deliver the message as God has revealed it.

“How can there be a hell?” someone asks. When people say that to me, I sense immediately that such a one is starting out with the wrong assumptions about the biblical doctrine of hell. Hell is not a place that God created out of anger or frustration with man. It is not a place where a sadistic tyrant takes out his frustration on helpless creatures. Hell is a place where persons are allowed to live with the consequences of their own choices — dire as these may be. Understand this — it is your sin, not God, that separates you (Is. 59:2-3).

God does not want any person to perish. The very purposes in sending his son was that we might

be saved from the consequences of our sin. God has done all that he can to save us. Any person who goes to hell goes there against the will of God.

C. S. Lewis has said that in the end there are just two kinds of people — those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and enter into the joy of the Lord, and those to whom God says with tears, “Thy will be done,” and lets them walk into the dark.

The image of Jesus standing over the holy city captures this situation perfectly: “Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her young, but you would not!” There is a secret to God’s love and hell in a nutshell. Because of his love, the invitation is always open: “Come unto me ye blessed of the father.” But because he is love, it is possible that one may walk away from the light and wind up in outer darkness. He has done all the God of love can do — he has given us life, offered us forgiveness, sent his only begotten son, and then been patient.

How he longs to gather us into his joy the way a hen gathers her young. But the decision is ours. That is how seriously God takes our freedom and his love. Ours is a world where sin is allowed and salvation is not coerced. You see, precisely because God is love, not in spite of it, hell is possible.

### **My Son, Remember**

Second, hell is a place of remembering. When the rich man cried out to Abraham for help, Abraham replied, “Son, remember . . .” The rich man did not

take much to hell with him. He didn't take his kingly mansion. He didn't take his money. But he did take his memory.

Psychologists tell us that we never forget anything we have ever learned or experienced. You don't ever forget, you just don't recall. Can you imagine that? Nothing that gets into the brain ever gets out. When sufficiently stimulated, you have the power to recall the joys, the victories, the accomplishments, even the emotions of the past. Every fact you have ever learned and every experience you have ever had is permanently recorded in your brain. It needs only sufficient stimulation to bring it to mind.

Dr. Wilbur Penfield, Director of the Montreal Neurological Institute, said in a report to the Smithsonian Institution, "Your brain contains a permanent record of your past that is like a single continuous strip of movie film complete with sound track. This film library records your whole waking life, from childhood on. You can live again those scenes from your past, one at a time, when a surgeon applies a gentle electrical current to a certain point on the temporal cortex of your brain." The report goes on to say that as you relive the scenes from your past, you feel exactly the same emotions that you did during the original experience.

What did the rich man remember? He remembered his good life on earth. He remembered the poor he didn't help. He remembered his religious heritage. He remembered his brothers still on earth. He remembered his chances to be saved and he

remembered that he should have repented.

You will not take much to hell with you if you go. I hope you won't go. But if you do, you will take your memory, also. And remembering with remorse may well be the most awful part of hell. You will remember that you lived only for material things. You will remember your loved ones not there. You will remember that you heard the preacher's voice. You will remember the tugging of the Holy Spirit. You will remember the chances you had to be saved and let pass by. You will remember the goodness of God and that it should have led you to repentance.

### **This is Forever**

Third, hell is a place of despair. As time passes, the rich man starts to think. His first thoughts are of hope. He still thinks as he did on earth, where he kept himself alive with hope. When things got bad, he always found a way out. He felt pain, he took medicine. If he were hungry, he ate food. If he lost love, there was more love to be found. So he cast about in his mind for a plan to apply to the hope building in his chest.

But when he cries out for help, Abraham responds, "Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence" (v. 26).

Note the word "fixed." It is the key word in the whole story. Everything in eternity is fixed. In hell there is no growth, no change, no repentance, no hope.

As long as there is life there is hope, but when death comes, all hope is gone. The scriptures say, "When a wicked man dieth, his expectation shall perish: and the hope of unjust men perisheth" (Prov. 11:7). And the separation from God is permanent.

This life has an end. That one lasts forever. So if you are lost in pain, don't commit suicide as an escape — you will go to a place of pain without hope of escape. There will be no chance of repentance. It will be eternal separation — separation from God, separation from love, separation from hope, separation from love.

Perhaps the arresting thing in the story Jesus told is the final word. This man says, "Send someone to my brethren," and the answer that comes to him from the bosom of Abraham is, "They have Moses and the prophets; they would not hear if one rose from the dead."

The statement reveals that the scriptures are entirely sufficient to bring persons to repentance. If a life is not affected by the inspired word, then it will not be affected by the miraculous. A little later, a different man named Lazarus died, and Jesus raised him from the dead. We are told distinctly that following this miracle the religious leaders began to plot Jesus' death. When the time came that they put Jesus to death, he arose from the dead, but his resurrection has no appeal to persons who lack the moral sense that puts God first.

Now, what effect should this Bible teaching about the rich man and poor Lazarus have on us? First, it

should change our view of sin. Most believers do not take sin as seriously as God does. We imagine that because sin does not matter to us, it does not matter to him. Hell says that sin matters eternally to God. In his eyes, and in his actual plan, sin deserves eternal punishment in hell.

Second, it should encourage our witness. It should grip our souls and prompt us to holiness and compassion. It should tender our hearts toward the lost and encourage us to witness in word and in deed to a lost world.

General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, said, "If I had my way I would not give any of my workers a three-year training in a college, but I would put each of you twenty-four hours in hell — the best training for earnest preaching you could have."

And, finally, it should lead us to repentance. Some people are repulsed at sermons on hell because they think it is scare religion.

Vance Havner said his father was converted by preaching of a hair-raising sermon that scared him into the kingdom of God. Then he said, "Such preaching is discouraged these days but it is better to scare men into heaven than to lull them into hell. Better shocked than stupefied!"

I close with three thoughts: First, there are no atheists in hell. They changed their minds upon arrival. When the rich man cried out to Abraham, he was saying, in essence, "I believe! I believe now! Save me from this." He is not unique. Everyone in hell

believes.

Second, if you are not a Christian, and you have a loved one in hell, above everything else that suffering loved one wants you to make your decision for Christ now that you may avoid his place. Your loved one does not want you there. If you persist in rejecting Christ, and go into a Christless grave, your presence in hell will intensify his suffering.

Third, hell is not for you. It was prepared for the devil and for his angels. And if you will come to Christ, you will never go to hell.

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## Heaven: A Better Place For Us

*Hebrews 11:39-40*

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Harry Swinsburg is a real saint. He and his wife, Dorothy, pioneered our Southern Baptist mission work in Colombia, South America. After 26 years in that field they moved to Spain, where they completed 40 years of missionary service.

In retirement Harry continued his missionary involvement. He and a group of men from his church went to Mexico to build a church. They returned home early due to the death of a close friend. As they drove home, one of the men asked, "Harry, are you afraid to die?" He replied, "No, but I am afraid of living too long."

Apparently he did. Dorothy, his wife, died and in time he was forced to live with one of his daughters. One day he said to her, "I think I want to go home." She replied, "But, Papa, you are home."

He, pointing upward, then said, "No, I mean home." She replied, "But, Papa, your mansion's not ready yet." Harry replied, "I'll take it like it is."

God's people of all ages have had the hope of a

mansion above and at times even longed for it. Jesus spoke of our heavenly home: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:2-3).

The same hands that built plows and furniture in Joseph's carpenter shop have also built a home for us in heaven. The writer of the book of Hebrews spoke of that heavenly home when he said concerning the saints of old, "And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect" (Heb. 11:39-40).

The context of these words is a recounting of the struggles and trials, victories and defeats, of the heroes of the faith. These were people who staked their lives on the promises of God. But they all died without fully realizing their salvation. The promises were not fulfilled in their lifetime.

But their faith was not in vain. God merely deferred their reward in order that they, along with us, may be perfected together. In short, he has reserved the fullness of his promises, including heaven, until we can all share it together. We will all experience it at the same time.

I want to key on the phrase: "God has provided some better thing for us." What does this have reference to? What is that "better thing" God has

provided? It is salvation in its fullness, which consummates in heaven. What does that entail? What will heaven be like?

- In heaven we will have a better home.
- In heaven we will have a better body.
- In heaven we will have a better understanding.
- In heaven we will have a better communion.

### **This World is Not My Home**

First, in heaven we will have a better home. When I was a boy, the only time I ever went to church was in the summertime, when we went to the country to visit my grandparents who lived deep in the piney woods of east Texas.

They attended the Greenwood Missionary Baptist Church, a small one-room building with homemade wooden slat pews. The men sat on one side, the women and children on the other, and the young people who were courting in the middle.

We cooled ourselves with funeral home fans and lighted the building with Coleman lanterns hanging from the ceiling. When those country preachers got through preaching, if they could talk above a whisper and weren't walking on three inches of their britches legs, the people felt they hadn't preached a lick.

We always made our visit when the church had its "big meeting." For two weeks each summer they had revival services every night, a "singing school" in the morning, and they closed with dinner "on the grounds." Music was an important part of worship

and for the singing school they usually had a representative of the Stamps-Baxter Music Company present to teach the people the latest Stamps-Baxter songs.

Life was hard, the land was poor, and heaven was real to those country people. One of the songs we learned and I have loved since those days went like this:

*This world is not my home; I'm just a-passing through.  
My treasures are laid up, somewhere beyond the blue.  
The angels beckon me from heaven's open door.  
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.*

It was not until later that I realized that the idea behind that song came straight out of scripture. One of the places it is taught is in the Hebrews passage. The author told of Abraham's summons from God to leave his home and go to a land he would give him. He went to and lived in the land of Canaan, but he never possessed it.

Abraham acknowledged, through all his travels, that he was a stranger and a pilgrim — not just in Canaan, but on the earth (vs. 13). The writer expressed his hopes this way, "He looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (vs. 10).

Abraham lived in tents. The only foundations they had were stakes driven in the sand. They were temporary at best. But, by faith, he looked for a permanent home, a heavenly one.

We, like Abraham, are pilgrims on earth (1 Peter 1:1, 2:11; Phil. 3:20). This world is not our home. We're just passing through. And God has prepared "some better thing" for us. He has prepared for us a home in heaven.

John, in The Revelation, wrote: "And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2). This is the city Abraham looked for. And the first and most important thing he tells us about it is, that God will be there. He will dwell among his people and will be their God. Then he says, "God shall wipe away all tears from our eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain" (vs. 4).

The city will have walls of jasper (vs. 18), foundations of precious stones, streets of gold, and gates of pearl (vs. 19-21).

John has a lot to say about the gates of heaven. In addition to being made of pearl, he says there will be twelve of them — three on the east, three on the north, three on the south, and three on the west. This reminds us of Jesus' words: "And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29).

And the gates will never be shut for there will be "no night there" (Rev. 21:25). This is John's way of saying nothing that frightens, nothing that hurts will be there. It will be a place of safety and security.

Think of it — in heaven there will be no sea —

nothing that separates; no tears — nothing that saddens; no death — nothing that grieves; no pain — nothing that hurts; and no night — nothing that frightens.

In that little Missionary Baptist Church we sang:

*How beautiful heaven must be  
Sweet home of the ransomed and free  
Bright hope for the end of life's journey  
How beautiful heaven must be.*

Heaven is a better home than we have here.

### **No Sighing, No Crying, No Dying**

Second, in heaven we will have a better body. The apostle Paul wrote, "In this (our present body) we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house (our new body) which is from heaven" (2 Cor. 5:2).

The Greek word translated "groan" means "to sigh," "to grieve." It is used three times in the New Testament. It was used to describe the reaction of our Lord when he saw Mary weeping over the death of her brother, Lazarus (John 11:33). Stephen, in his sermon to the Sanhedrin, quotes the Lord saying to Moses that he had heard the groaning of his people and was ready to deliver them (Acts 7:34).

And the apostle Paul used it to describe how sin has cursed both physical nature and human nature. And both groan under its weight.

Storms, famine, pestilence, volcanoes,

earthquakes are the sighs and groans of nature. And we groan from sickness and death. Cancer, heart attacks, diabetes and the like are all around us.

But God has prepared “some better thing” for us. His redemption will ultimately deliver both physical nature and human nature from the curse of sin (Rom. 8:21-23). In heaven there will be no sighing, no crying, and no dying.

Think about it for a moment — no blind eyes and no broken hearts in heaven. No twisted limbs and no twisted lives up there. No nursing homes and no funeral homes above. The groans will be gone forever.

Carl Sandburg, in his book, *The Prairie Years*, tells of the hardships endured by the early pioneers in Illinois who were contemporaries of Abraham Lincoln. Life was hard and death was common. Nancy Hanks, Lincoln’s mother, lost one child and later died herself. It was said that a fourth of all babies died within their first year.

Sandburg said the one bright spot in their otherwise bleak lives came when they gathered in their crude log churches each Lord’s day to worship. They sang and prayed and usually a circuit riding Baptist or Methodist minister was there to preach to them. As they worshipped, they could look out the windows of their little church and see new mounds of dirt — the graves of their loved ones who had died, and they would sing:

*There’s a land that is fairer than day  
And by faith we can see if afar*

*For the Father waits over the way  
To prepare us a dwelling place there.*

*In the sweet by and by,  
We shall meet on that beautiful shore;  
In the sweet by and by,  
We shall meet on that beautiful shore.*

—Sanford F. Bennett

## **Question and Answer Time**

Third, in heaven we will have a better understanding. I visited with a young mother who had lost a seven-year-old son to a long and painful battle with cancer. She showed me a picture of little Michael. He was a beautiful child who loved life and loved everyone. His mother and father prayed and prayed for his healing, and earnestly believed it would come.

But they saw their little son lose his hair; they saw his body shrivel up like a skeleton and then become so bloated he could hardly see out of his eyes. When doctors exhausted all they could do, she and her husband took him to Mexico for alternative treatments. He died in Mexico.

She said the hardest thing she ever had to do was cancel his ticket, get on the airplane and leave his body to be shipped home in a box later.

She wanted to know: “Why did this happen? Why didn’t God answer my prayers? Does God not keep his promises?” I listened and I cried with her, but I had no answers.

She is not the first to question God. Gideon cried, "Oh my Lord, if the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?" (Jud. 6:13).

Israel was being troubled by their enemies. They prayed but deliverance did not come. They knew of God's miraculous dealing in the past — how he'd parted the waters of the Red Sea, how he'd sent manna from heaven, but no miracles were happening in their day. Where was God now? Why didn't he deliver them?

In the made for television movie, "Escape from Sobibor," a group of Jews in a Nazi death camp were planning an escape. The escape, planned for a Jewish holiday, involved killing a number of the SS guards and creating such confusion that the entire camp might escape. The leader of the plot, a Russian soldier who was Jewish, said, "They kill us on holidays and it will be okay if we kill them on a holiday. God will forgive us." A fellow Jew responded, "Some of us wonder if we can forgive God."

Some of us who have walked the road of sickness and death, who have seen loved ones waste away in pain, who have cried to God and received no answer, have wondered the same thing. Then we remember that God has provided "some better thing" for us. In heaven we will understand the whys of life.

Paul wrote, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Cor.

13:12). This verse is a teaching in contrasts. Note that the words “now” and “then” are used twice in it. “Now” refers to this present age; “then” refers to heaven.

The word “glass” refers to a mirror. In ancient days the mirrors were not made of glass with quicksilver on the back. They were made of polished metal. Instead of getting a clear reflection, they gave one that was distorted at best. Paul is saying that our present knowledge is partial and incomplete, but in heaven it will be direct and comprehensive.

In heaven God will explain the mysteries of life to us if, in fact, they still are a problem to us. When my daughter-in-law, Shaun, died of liver cancer at the age of 35, a friend shared with me a quote from C. S. Lewis. He said, “In heaven, we won’t ask ‘Why?’ Instead we will say, ‘Of course!’” I like that. I think in heaven we shall understand so completely that we won’t question anymore.

## **Walk Through the Cemetery**

Fourth, in heaven we will have a better communion. No matter who you are, you are a part of a dissolving family. In time, all of us realize: Father, gone! Sister, gone! Grandfather and grandmother, gone!

In Newport, Rhode Island, there is a short street that has five cemeteries on it. Its name is “Farewell Street.” Eventually all of us move to Farewell Street. We and our loved ones all die.

But God has prepared “some better thing” for us.

He has prepared a land where we will be with our loved ones forever. When S. H. (Sam) James, longtime black pastor in San Antonio, died, his three preacher brothers conducted his funeral service. One of them told the story of a little black girl in Alabama, who rode the bus to school every day. Hers was the last house on the bus route, and so she was always the last one off. In the wintertime it was already dark by the time the bus reached her home. As the bus approached her house one winter evening, she said to the driver, "If you'd like, you can let me off here on the main road and I'll walk across the field to my house. That way you won't have to drive all the way down the lane. I see the lights are on and I know my parents are home."

The driver said, "I don't mind making the drive, honey. If I let you out here, you'll have to walk through the cemetery to get home." She said, "I don't mind walking through the cemetery because the lights are on and I know everyone's home."

When you and I are summoned to make our "walk through the cemetery," it is comforting to know the lights are on and our loved ones are home.

I like the song:

*On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,  
And cast a wishful eye  
To Canaan's fair and happy land,  
Where my possessions lie.*

*I am bound for the promised land,  
I am bound for the promised land;*

*O who will come and go with me?  
I am bound for the promised land.*  
—Samuel Stennett

I am! And I hope you will come and go with me.