

# Heaven and Hell

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

**BAYLOR**  
UNIVERSITY

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ISSN 1535-8585

*Christian Reflection* is the ideal resource for discipleship training in the church. Multiple copies are obtainable for group study at \$2.50 per copy. Worship aids and lesson materials that enrich personal or group study are available free on the Web site.

*Christian Reflection* is published quarterly by The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. Contributors express their considered opinions in a responsible manner. The views expressed are not official views of The Center for Christian Ethics or of Baylor University.

The Center expresses its thanks to the individuals, churches, and organizations, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which provided financial support for this publication.

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## Additional Resources

These study guides are available by free download from our Web site *www.ChristianEthics.ws*. Each guide integrates Bible study, prayer, worship, and reflection on articles in this issue.

### LIVING UNDER VACANT SKIES

As our culture loses the thought of heaven “over us,” how does that shape the way we live? A world left without a vision of the transcendent is a world of struggles without victory and of sacrifice without purpose. To understand this is also to understand in a new way the task of the church.

### THE VIRTUE OF HOPE

If we are to pursue our moral demands seriously, we need a transcendent hope that is not based on human capacity for self-improvement. We have grounds in our faith for such a hope, both at the individual level and at the level of society.

### HEAVEN IS OUR HOME

Is our true home in heaven, and we are merely sojourners on earth? Or are we genuinely citizens of the earth? Where is our true home? The biblical message is that heaven is our true home, but heaven begins here on earth as the Holy Spirit transforms us into a community that manifests love.

### UNQUENCHABLE FIRE

We have many questions about hell. We can begin to answer these questions by studying the biblical passages about Sheol, Hades, and Gehenna.

### HELL AND GOD'S LOVE

The universe and our lives ultimately are bounded by God's unfathomable love and righteousness. How can we unravel the apparent incongruity between God's loving character and the existence of hell?

### THE ART OF THE FINAL JUDGMENT

Artists struggle to portray God's judgment in a spiritually discerning manner. How can their work avoid sinking into a kind of morbid voyeurism and superficial speculation about future calamities?

# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

Caring deeply about heaven and hell may seem passé, or just too embarrassing, for our popular culture relentlessly twists them into projections of our selfishness and limitless ambition, into distorted caricatures of the Christian concepts. Yet we should treat these transcendent realities carefully and seriously, for we are deeply shaped in our moral lives by what we hope for and what we fear.

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**W**e feel a certain ambivalence about the limits to our existence. “There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven,” C. S. Lewis observes in *The Problem of Pain*, “but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, we have ever desired anything else.”

Does caring deeply about heaven and hell seem outdated to us, or is it just too embarrassing? Our wider, ‘approved’ culture says dwelling on these transcendent realities is passé and encourages us instead to limit our hopes, and our fears, to things we can have some power over: a more tolerant society, an ever-increasing GNP, a technologically sustainable human future. Despite this, our “Touched By An Angel” popular culture is rampant with fascinating, self-serving forecasts about the boundaries of the world. We relentlessly twist heaven and hell into projections of our selfishness and limitless ambition, turning our hopes and fears into distorted caricatures of the Christian concepts. No wonder we are embarrassed to enter the popular fray.

As Christians we should treat heaven and hell seriously, for we are deeply shaped in our moral lives by what we hope for and what we fear.

When, in the biblical cosmology, God creates heaven and earth, “heaven” names that part of creation in which God alone exercises dominion, and which we do not know intimately until we are at last fully reconciled to God. If we lose this sense of heaven “over us,” A. J. Conyers worries in *Living Under Vacant Skies* (p. 9), it will be more than a change in how we picture the world in our minds. It will reshape the way we live. We will become centered on our own purposes and achievements, forgetting that the world is a gift. And we must face our moral struggles without hope that comes from God’s grace.

But will the hope for heaven undermine our moral seriousness? Or, as the saying goes, will it render us “so heavenly-minded that we are no earthly good”? John Hare, in *The Virtue of Hope* (p. 18), responds that if we are to pursue our moral demands seriously, then we need a *transcendent* hope that is *not* based on human capacity for self-improvement. In the vision in Revelation that “God has a name for each one of us, which will be given to us on a white stone when we enter the next life,” Hare finds a firm ground for our hope. We believe that God already knows, in that name, the person we can become, and calls us by it.

Susan Garrett, *Heaven is My Home* (p. 53), commends this biblical interpretation of our “heart-hunger:” that heaven is our true home, but heaven begins here on earth as the Holy Spirit transforms us into a community that manifests love.

We have many questions about hell: Why does it exist? Who are the ‘wicked’ that go there? Is hell itself eternal? Is it a place of everlasting or temporary suffering? To what can we compare hell’s torment? Anni Judkins, *Unquenchable Fire* (p. 24), shows how we might begin to answer these questions by studying the biblical passages about Sheol, Hades, and Gehenna.

The universe and our lives are bounded by God’s unfathomable love and righteousness. Jesus Christ is Lord and Judge even over hell. Ralph Wood recounts the ancient doctrine of the harrowing of hell in *The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail* (p. 31), and Doug Henry, in *My Maker Was the Primal Love* (p. 35), explores how even the existence of hell might be an expression of God’s love.

In the powerful opening vision of the book of Revelation, Jesus declares that he holds the keys of Death and of Hades (1:18). Art editor Heidi Hornik examines two powerful artistic expressions of this truth. For five centuries Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* (p. 46) has confronted powerful leaders of church and state with the thought that we are not the final judges of reality, Christ is. Auguste Rodin’s magnificent obsession was to reveal, through his remarkable sculpture *The Gates of Hell* (p. 50), the desperation of souls falling from Grace.

Because heaven and hell remain larger realities than we can comprehend, our descriptions of them strain and bump against the limits of human

language and imagination. The humor and pathos of our attempts to image these realities are explored by Julie Pennington-Russell in *Why Stand Gazing?* (p. 39) and by Jim Somerville in *Hell is a Bar in Adams-Morgan* (p. 43). The *Left Behind* series by LaHaye and Jenkins, with many millions in sales, stands as the most popular attempt to portray the limits of our existence. Not only do these books fail to communicate historic Christian truth, worries David Lyle Jeffrey in *Left Behind and Getting Ahead* (p. 70), they also unhealthily feed upon and encourage our insecurities about being “left behind,” both in the measure of God’s judgment and in our culture’s contests.

David Bridges leads us, in a service of worship (p. 64), to revere those deep things of God which are, in the words of Job, higher than heaven and deeper than Sheol. His prayers and readings are also suitable for personal and study-group devotion. We offer two recent hymns to enrich our worship. “Toward heav’n, alone, can songs be raised, / toward hell, we can but cry,” writes Terry York in *Forever Where Our Hope is Born* (p. 60), with music by David Bolin. John Bell, Graham Maule, and the Wild Goose Worship Group of the Iona Community celebrate the arrival of heaven through Jesus’ power and love in our lives in *Heaven Shall Not Wait* (p. 62). The other suggested hymns in the worship service appear in several hymnals.

Peter Kreeft explains why heaven and hell have figured so prominently in his many apologetic writings. Regardless of whether we are addressing our post-Christian culture or answering our children’s hard questions, Kreeft observes in Susan Dolan-Henderson’s interview *Nothing But the Truth* (p. 79), we owe to them the truth as we know it about the unspeakable bliss and unspeakable misery that frame our existence.

In *The History of Heaven and Hell* (p. 84), Rikk Watts reviews three books that not only trace the complex, fascinating story of the notions of heaven and hell, but also help us understand their relevance in the modern world.

Finally, lest we succumb to the notion that meditation on heaven and hell has led Christians only to a disembodied, otherworldly faith, we should note its rich influence on Christian art, music, and spirituality. For in these, reminds Matt Schobert in *Ecstasy, Symbol, and Rhetoric* (p. 90), we find “potent expressions of religious faith and theological truth that form, inform, and animate our ethical and moral lives.”✚



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# Living Under Vacant Skies

BY A . J . C O N Y E R S

Losing a sense of heaven “over us” is more than a shift in cosmological theory; it has to do with the way we live. A world without a vision of the transcendent is a world of struggles without victory and of sacrifice without purpose. To understand this is to understand in a new way the meaning of “gospel” and the task of the church.

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Occasionally someone calls attention to the incredible gap between what the church says it believes and what it actually proclaims with any passionate intensity. Early in the last century Scottish theologian John Baillie remarked upon the infrequency of preaching that “dwelt on the joys of the heavenly rest with anything like the old ardent love and impatient longing, or [spoke] of the world that now is as a place of sojourn or pilgrimage.”<sup>1</sup> More recently, an article on death in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, matter-of-factly asserts, “neither the mediaeval emphasis on fear of death nor the confident hopes of the early Christians are much in evidence today.” The writer continues, “Though few . . . explicitly repudiate belief in a future life, the virtual absence of references to it in modern hymns, prayers, and popular apologetic indicates how little part it plays in the contemporary Christian consciousness.”<sup>2</sup>

## ST. GEORGE’S CHURCHYARD—THEN AND NOW

Such a change of sentiment came home to me once as my family and I were enjoying a tour of Old Dorchester, a long-abandoned colonial village in South Carolina. We were there along with an assorted crowd of Brownies, Cub Scouts, visitors from out of state, and at least one public school teacher—a typical group of Americans—listening to the lecture of a young local historian.

As we walked among the antique remains of Old Dorchester, the histo-

rian “re-created” the town in our imaginations, taking us out onto the parade grounds and marketplace, where colonial militia met and drilled, and the merchants, buyers, and craftsmen mingled. The church at the center of town is now nothing more than a brick tower, forty feet high, in the midst of some woods—the ruins appearing much as they did when they were depicted on the cover of an 1875 issue of *Harpers*. We followed the historian down the grassy nave of the church, out into the churchyard, through the arched door still framed by the ancient brick tower. Outside we paused in a circle around a flat tombstone marking the grave of James Postell. The marble stone bore scars on its rounded edges, testimony of the time British soldiers used it as a chopping block while garrisoned there.

The historian pulled a bit of paper out of his pocket. “Imagine,” he said, “that we were there when James Postell was buried. As they lowered him into the ground, these are the words we would have heard from the 1768 *Book of Common Prayer*.” In grave tones, and with expansive gestures of mock seriousness, he began: “Man that is born of a woman, hath but a short time to live.” The young man adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses, cleared his throat and went on: “In the midst of life we are in death; of whom may we seek for succor, but of Thee, O Lord, who for our sins are justly displeased?” Waving a hand out to the crowd and holding up the bit of paper in the other, he went on, with thunder in his voice now: “Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts; shut not thy merciful ears to our prayers; but spare us . . . suffer us not at our last hour for many pains of death to fall from thee.”

And then he winked.

Why did he wink? It was because he knew very well that he shared a secret with us—all of us, whether from Ohio or the Carolinas, or Timbuktu. James Postell (may he rest in peace) would never in this world understand, but we did. The secret that we shared is simply that we no longer take “otherworldly” sentiments seriously. The brevity of life, the just judgment of present sinful life, and the fears lest we jeopardize an eternal state in the enjoyment of a temporal existence—all these topics are simply not a part of common polite, serious conversation. We understand the wink and the mock seriousness because we sense the world differently than did the contemporaries of James Postell.

However, we also recognize that this passage from the 1768 *Book of Common Prayer* was a very strong statement; we are somewhat disconcerted by it, even if we don’t know why. Even if we have largely lost those expressions, we sense that the church once had brought something altogether new into the world with its attitude toward life, death, and resurrection. We are the ones who have turned back to older habits of thought, as old as humankind. It is these ancient habits of mind and imagination, not our modernity, which are offended. But the very fact that we

almost all agree to be offended (or more often, amused) by these older expressions of faith shows how far we have moved from that view of life even in the church.

#### WEDDED BLISS AND THE ETERNAL HOPE

Contemporary wedding ceremonies illustrate this change as well. Once a couple from San Antonio, Ben and Cheryl, stood before me to take vows of holy matrimony. Much earlier we had talked about the ceremony, the style and arrangements, and the *words*. Ben and Cheryl were convinced that the older ceremonies had much more of a “weighty” and important sound to them.

We looked at the words of the traditional English-language ceremony:

Dearly beloved: We are gathered together here in the sight of God and in the face of this company [for an event that is not to be taken lightly, but entered into] reverently, discreetly, advisedly, and in the fear of God.

We also looked at an “updated” version. The differences, at first, were subtle and hardly objectionable, except perhaps for the breezier tone:

Dear Friends, we are here assembled in the presence of God to unite A \_\_\_ (groom’s name) and B \_\_\_ (bride’s name) in marriage. The Bible teaches that it is to be a permanent relationship of one man and one woman freely and totally committed to each other as companions for life.

That last statement is perhaps not too bad, notwithstanding the fact that monogamy is actually difficult to establish on purely biblical grounds and that “total commitment” may imply a kind of idolatry that the Bible certainly does not counsel. Nonetheless, it calls for the exclusive human commitment of the marriage couple and, in that, it is faithful to the intention of the Bible.

What is missing is undoubtedly the spirit of ultimate gravity that surrounds the older version, the feeling that these proceedings are not simply for the moment but are anchored in eternity and that something or someone stands in judgment of every earthly event, especially this occasion. The wedding thereby, on the one hand, is lifted up above the common grind, or else, on the other hand, joins the clutter of our everyday existence, with neither much fear nor much joy to distinguish it.

We liked the sound of this next passage:

I require and charge you both, as ye will answer in the dreadful Day of Judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you knows any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined together, ye do now confess it.

I have performed a hundred or so weddings in the course of nearly thirty years of ministry, and never once have these words ended the ceremony, even though that is what they clearly threaten. But there is something here very essential to everything that is going on in a wedding: it reminds us all that these words are not just for the moment, but that things spoken now are remembered at the Judgment Seat of God, and that human life and decisions loom greater than we ever thought. The fleeting moment is deceptive; these events are anchored in eternity.

Now, turning to our modern version, we read the parallel:

Marriage is a companionship which involves mutual commitment and responsibility. You will share alike in the responsibilities and the joys of life. When companions share a sorrow the sorrow is halved, and when they share a joy the joy is doubled.

The difference between these two statements is the difference between Mt. Sinai and Madison Avenue, or the difference between the “Ancient of Days” and “Days of Our Lives.” One speaks of immense ancient columns and steeples, and the other of numerous diplomas hung on the wall behind a psychiatrist’s couch.

Another more recent version runs as follows: “I require and charge you both, as you hope for joy and peace in the marriage state . . . .” The words, notice well, “as you hope for joy and peace in the marriage state” are precisely substituted in this ceremony for the words “as ye will answer in the dreadful Day of Judgment.” This parallel is extremely interesting. We would have to see almost immediately that whoever wrote this paraphrase found it either more tasteful or more convincing to refer to rewards in terms of this life and specifically excised the reference to final judgment.

Another difference between the older and the more contemporary versions of the wedding vows regards the relative practicability of the two. In the older version we find vows that are simple, few, and well defined: “Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance, in the holy estate of matrimony?” Turning to the requirements of the newer soul-care version, in contrast, we find them not only difficult to define, but probably utterly impossible to keep: “Will you commit yourself to her happiness and self-fulfillment as a person, and to her usefulness in God’s kingdom?” These last words help us to discover the real paradox of our situation. The more intently we focus on our present life (denying, by implication, the transcendent view of life) the more we set ourselves increasingly impossible tasks. A couple can, after all, live together if they have sworn to do so; and the more they feel their obligation, the more likely they will. But to commit oneself to the happiness and self-fulfillment of another (for all its this-worldly sound) is probably to set oneself a godlike agenda for life. One can be faithful to a spouse in terms

of sexual fidelity; millions of people have, in spite of the fact that, in this, many have failed. One can stand by a spouse in illness, disappointment, poverty, and grief; millions do it, many of them with admirable courage. And even with the high rate of divorce there are still many more who stay married “till death us do part.” All of these promises are well within the range of human possibility.

But when husbands and wives set for themselves the goal of making each other happy, or when one demands of the other that he or she be made happy by this marriage, then disappointment, resentment, frustration, and anger are almost inevitable. It follows that if one is not happy, he or she might well suspect that something is wrong with the marriage. After all, when marriage vows are stripped of their connection with an “eternal destiny” that has become difficult for modern sentiment to embrace, then it becomes a *quid pro quo* contract, a vow given now in view of the happiness promised in the course of time. Marriage is therefore no longer a promise, the issue of which is really decided in eternity. Instead, it is instituted for the purpose of making us happy, loved, fulfilled, and significant human beings in this present life.

#### HEAVEN AND THE MODERN CHURCH

If the church’s transcendent vision is weakened and diluted, as these examples indicate, then what we are seeing here is more than a doctrinal miscalculation or a temporary neglect that now needs to be addressed. Instead, it is a failure that points toward an essential resistance within the church to the very heart of its message.

In two fundamental teachings of Christianity, the teaching on creation and the doctrine of reconciliation, we can see why a transcendent vision, a certain longing for heaven, is essential to the life of the church.

*Creation is a good gift.* In much of pagan mythology creation is something wrested out of a primal chaos. The resulting order was sometimes good and sometimes tainted with a curse, the curse being experienced in the various problems attendant to liv-

ing in the world. For instance, in early Greek myths about creation, sexuality is seen as a curse; it is a mythic explanation of the problems arising because there are two different sexes in humanity. Zeus blighted human beings by dividing them in two, thus weakening their threat to the gods. In other words, the evil that occurs in the world is “in the system.”

In the biblical story of creation, God created all things “very good”

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In the teachings of Christianity on creation and reconciliation we can see why a transcendent vision, a certain longing for heaven, is essential to the life of the church.

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(Genesis 1:31). Evil is not explained by creation itself, but by the misuse and disorder of creation in the fall of Adam and Eve. Therefore, everything that has come from God is very good, just as God himself is good and has every good intention toward his creation. The Fall never entirely destroys that good; for it is clear that life still centers in that which is given by God.

Now this brings us to the dualism of biblical cosmology. The Bible usually depicts creation as “the heavens and the earth” or “heaven and earth.”

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The Bible depicts creation as “heaven and earth.” “Heaven” refers to the natural appearance of the heavens, but bears more than this literal meaning. It is that part of creation in which God alone exercises dominion, and which we do not know intimately until we are at last fully reconciled to God.

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In part this refers to the natural appearance of the heavens (or the sun, moon, and stars—all that is above us) and the earth (all that is below us). But these expressions bear more than this literal and direct meaning.

“Earth” is that part of creation that is within our power and under human dominion. “Heaven” is that part of creation in which God alone exercises

dominion, and which we do not know intimately until we are at last fully reconciled to God. Therefore, heaven is the part of creation that we can only receive, as opposed to that which we partially control, employ, and manipulate. It is the realm of grace, for it comes entirely as God’s gift and represents the fullness of all gifts. Among other things, heaven represents an aspect of reality that we can only know and respond to in terms of adoration; we can in no sense possess it. Therefore our response to things of this earth is properly thanksgiving, and our response to the matters of heaven, praise.

This dualism of heaven and earth tells us two important things about the way we relate to creation. The first is that human action is response to creation, and it does not constitute reality. (We cannot really “become as gods.”) We might imagine that the whole cosmos responds to our wills, but in saner hours we know that is not the case.

Even if we affect a small part of the earth, our actions are fraught with all kinds of ambiguity. Our intentional efforts to do a good thing, for instance, always invite the possibility of unintended evil. We work hard to enrich human life and, destroying the environment, threaten the possibility of life itself. We give to the poor and undermine their self-reliance. We make a better product and destroy our neighbors’ livelihood. We are

everywhere faced with the sobering realization that we cannot create the world, or even re-create it; we can only respond to what God has given.

Biblical cosmology relates that fact to us on a cosmic scale. If even the visible creation stands always somewhat aloof from our exertions to make it bend to our wills, then how much more does that part of creation which lies beyond our senses. Creation includes that which responds to the will of God alone. And that is called “heaven.”

The second important insight that comes from this realization of heaven is that the world does not find its purpose in itself. It is, in Jürgen Moltmann’s term, “eccentric” because it centers outside of itself; it centers in God and thus finds reality in *relationship*. This insight applies to more than cosmology. It applies to everything; all things find their reality in God, not because they are illusory, but because they are created in relationship. In God “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Reality is relationship. John said it this way: “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

*Salvation comes by grace.* Now we can see that a world closed in upon itself and dependent on nothing outside itself (which is, in short, a non-transcendent world), must understand existence altogether differently from a world believing strongly in a transcendent order. For a world that is open to the mystery of heaven is, first of all, a world that believes in the possibility of grace. It is true that the confidence of a non-transcendent world comes from its self-reliance, but so does its despair. Curiously, a world that believes it is always subject to the mystery of heaven has less to say about self-reliance but shows decidedly more confidence. It is a world predisposed to expect help.

Children instinctively expect grace; so children’s stories often center on the gift that makes the ugly duckling a swan, the unwanted stepdaughter a princess, and the department-store Santa turn out to be real. Near disasters turn inside out and prove the triumph of good over evil. J. R. R. Tolkien called that fictional device “eucatastrophe,” a good catastrophe. Grace in a child’s story and grace in the real-life triumph over disaster, call forth the same sentiment, that life is overshadowed by a benevolent mystery.

As adults grow in their strength over the world, they lose that sense of grace that is so keenly felt by children. Children at first earn nothing and are given everything. Gradually they learn that their environment must be mastered, that elements of life must be earned; at some point it will be called “making a living.” It’s important for them to learn that lesson, for that is being “responsible.” It is a *response* to the gift of life.

At the same time it is natural that they should eventually lose sight of how much they are dependent on what is simply given, on what they can in no sense earn. They focus on “making a living” and forget that the object of making a living is life and that life is never earned; it is only given.

Jesus said “Unless you change and become like little children, you will

never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The meaning of these words becomes clear when we see that our immediate (childlike) perception of life as grace is, at every turn, submerged by our growing power over the world. As children we receive the world; as adults our focus narrows to that which we have constructed by our own effort. The huge gift is forgotten, while our minuscule response becomes a source of obsession, pride, anxiety, envy, guilt, and fear.

Our experience of the world moves us toward one or the other of opposing attitudes. Either life is a gift or it is a product of my will. The more we move toward that latter expression of life, the more the absolute necessity of grace eludes us. The world shrinks and becomes only a complex of responses to ourselves. We necessarily live between these polar attitudes, with always the distinct danger that we will lose sight of the former in pursuit of the latter.

#### THE EARTH'S "DARKLING PLAIN"

Here we can begin to see why the loss of a sense of heaven “over us” is more than a shift in cosmological theory, or in the way we picture the world in our minds.<sup>4</sup> Instead it has to do with the way we live in the light of heaven. During a solar eclipse, which I have witnessed twice, the earliest noticeable effect, long before total eclipse, is that the whole atmosphere is shrouded in an eerily dimming light. I think we witness a similar effect in the loss of a sense of transcendence, though our souls, like our eyes, accommodate the darkness at first too easily.

Long before the present stage of eclipse, the nineteenth-century poet Matthew Arnold thought of the retreating realm of faith as he listened to the ebb and flow of waves upon Dover Beach. There was a time, his verse suggests, when the “sea of Faith” was at high tide casting a bright mantle over all existence; but now one only hears “its melancholy, long withdrawing roar” and the shores of the earth are left “naked shingles.” The result is the loss of moral confidence in a world ruled by ultimate good and illuminated by grace:

And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.<sup>5</sup>

Arnold intuitively caught the essence of a world left without a vision of the transcendent: a world of struggles without victory and of sacrifice without purpose. To understand this is also to understand in a new way the meaning of *gospel*, and the task of the church.<sup>6</sup>

#### NOTES

1 John Baillie, *And the Life Everlasting* (Oxford University Press, 1936), 15.



2 Paul Badham, "Death," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, edited by Alan Richardson and John Bowden (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1983), 146.

3 This passage, originally from the *Alabama Book of Legal Forms*, is used widely because of its inclusion in J. R. Hobbs, *The Pastor's Manual* (Broadman Press, 1934), one of the most popular Baptist manuals in this century, having gone through thirty-six printings by 1970 and today still in print.

4 I hope it is apparent that the term "over us" is not intended in any astrophysical sense. I may as well say "outside," or "inside," if spatial relation were the only important point conveyed in the idea of a heaven over us. But if we mean by heaven a reality that supersedes and is exalted above every temporal thing, that creates a hierarchy of value in the world that is more than a succession to this life (else "outside" would do as well), and that is also something different from the world (else "inside" would be preferable), then the traditional language is not easily replaced. It is a reality "over us" in that it is the greater reality, the ultimate value, the final purpose, and the consummation of all things.

5 Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*.

6 This article is borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from my book, *The Eclipse of Heaven* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine Press, 1999). I thank the publisher for permission to use this material.

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# The Virtue of Hope

BY JOHN E. HARE

Hope in the final full actualization of the kingdom of God can sustain our commitment to improve life here on earth. C. S. Lewis said “It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one.” But the virtue of hope must be rooted in faith in God, not mere optimism about human beings’ capacity for self-improvement.

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**I**s it true that we Christians are so heavenly-minded that we are no earthly good? We are so fixated on heaven, the complaint goes, that we do not have the energy or commitment to improve life down here on earth. This is why Marxists see religious faith as “the opium of the people.” They think that Christians submit to the status quo as though a drug had tranquilized us. I think the opposite is true. Hope in the final full actualization of the kingdom of God sustains the commitment to improve life here on earth. C. S. Lewis said, “It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one.”

## BEYOND OPTIMISM

The virtue of hope cannot be based on the thought that we can pull ourselves up by our own moral bootstraps. This is obvious when we recall the tragic fruits of such optimism in recent history.

As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth century there was a great burst of confidence in human progress through education and technological know-how. While in England in 1895, American urban reformer Albert Shaw wrote:

The conditions and circumstances that surround the lives of the masses of the people in modern cities can be so adjusted to their needs as to result in the highest development of the race in body, mind and moral character. The so-called problems of the modern city are but the various phases of the one main question: How can the environment be most perfectly adapted to the welfare of urban populations? And science can meet and answer every one of these problems.

But as the twentieth century went on, it became clear that it was going to be the most brutal and bloody century of human history. And this was despite the increases of general education, extraordinary technical advance, and the wide spread of high culture. The Germans who gassed Jews in the concentration camps first had them perform Bach. I am not saying that all the people who believed in progress were ready to use such means. Many well-meaning citizens just before the outbreak of World War II authored the Humanist Manifesto, which says, "man is at last becoming aware that he alone is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams, that he has within himself the power for its achievement." But much of the misery of the twentieth century was caused by people who were optimistic that they could marshal techniques to produce this better world, whether by the removal of impure races, the forced collectivization of agriculture, and permanent revolution; or more gently by new moral education curricula at school, urban planning models, and guidelines for the mass media.

What we should have learned from the century we have just gone through is that moral improvement is *not* something we know how to produce. We know how, in several ways, to produce opportunity for such improvement, by removing a few of the obstacles to it. But some people will take this opportunity and others will not. You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. Plato asks in the *Meno*, the Western world's first discussion of whether virtue can be taught, whether virtue comes through good families or by good teaching; he ends with the suggestion that it comes by divine gift.

#### OUR GROUNDS FOR HOPE

What we need is hope that is *not* based on human capacity for self-improvement. We have grounds in our faith for such a hope, both at the individual level and at the level of society. In the book of Revelation we are given a helpful picture of hope at the individual level in the letter to the Church at Pergamum: "To everyone who conquers . . . I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it" (Revelation 2:17). God has a name for each one of us, which will be given to us on a white stone when we enter the next life. This name will be like the name "Peter" which Jesus

gave to Simon. The name means “rock,” and Jesus said, “On this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Peter was not yet a rock. He had still to go through the denials of Jesus and the flight. But Jesus saw him already as he would become, and the name expressed this. Hebrew names express what a thing is, and are not merely arbitrary like English names. This is true even of the Hebrew name of God, which orthodox Jews will therefore not utter or write. Calvin says in his commentary on Genesis that when Adam named the animals, he named them according to their essence, or what each one truly is, and in the Fall we lost those names when we lost the natural capacity for uncorrupted knowledge. So each one of us has our own essential name on a white stone, and we have the hope that we will be able to become what is named by that name. What is our ground for this hope? It is the faith that God already knows that name and calls us by it. Faith is, in this case, the title deed to what we hope for (“the substance” in Hebrews 11:1). A title deed to a piece of property underlies both present enjoyment of ownership and future possession. God knows us already as we are in Christ and gives us faith as an earnest of our inheritance.

Does God’s knowing us by this name make us proud or does it make us humble? The answer is a kind of mixture. Think of what it is like for a person to become an American citizen. When the judge declares her a citizen, there is already a new status, even though she may not yet experience any change. She does not yet understand American baseball or feel at home with American popular music. But not all realities can be experienced as soon as they occur. Some philosophers have claimed that all things which are real can be experienced by the senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, or smell—or at least by introspection. But this is too narrow a view of reality, and there is no good reason to adopt it. The new citizen really becomes American when the judge declares it, and then she experiences this change gradually. After some years, perhaps in a moment of national tragedy, she may experience an overwhelming sense of solidarity that she had not expected. It is like this with our new identity in Christ. It is already real by God’s declaration, and of this reality we can be proud (though we did not produce it). This is the doctrine of justification. But the new identity is also not yet completely real in our experience, and this shortfall should make us continually humble. We gradually grow into our name and get glimpses of it as we proceed. This is the doctrine of sanctification. God holds together all the fragments of what we are called to aim at, so that they become a coherent magnetic force, pulling us towards the magnetic center, which is God. Again, it is the faith in this center that is the title deed to what we hope for, namely that we will finally enter into the love which is among the three members of the Godhead.

We have the same kind of hope at the level of society. We are saved not merely as individuals, but as a body of which we are members, the

church. Here, too, God holds things together in a unity. But what God holds together are not just our own aspirations, but those of all the other members of this body. The world could, after all, be the kind of place in which one person can only flourish if others do not. Sometimes our world looks that way. One person can only have power, prestige, or wealth if others do not, or at least have less of each of these. But in God's kingdom, the economy is different. We do not compete in that kind of way. God holds us together into a kingdom in which each of us, just because of who we are, provides just the right context for the flourishing of each of the others. God's names for us create a poem or a symphony of names in which each contributes to the beauty of the whole. No phrase of this poem or symphony can be removed without damaging the fabric of the whole piece.

Sometimes we get glimpses of this kingdom, just as we get glimpses of our individual names. We hear about fire fighters climbing into a burning skyscraper, or couples who receive into their homes and families Somali teenagers from refugee camps. These are glimpses of a world in which justice and peace, or *shalom*, embrace. It is not merely that in such a world people get what they want, but what they want is good for them and for everyone else. The importance of these glimpses is that they enable us to aim our lives in a coherent direction. We have the sense of destination, that the good of the whole will

in the end prevail over whatever is set against it. Aristotle says, of the chief good for human beings, "if we know it, we are more likely, like archers who have a target to aim at, to hit the right mark." We need not only a sense of what a good final destination for the world would be, but a sense that we can reach it (even if not by our own devices); and we need not merely

the sense that reaching it is possible, but that we are going to reach it. This is not true with all our individual aspirations. A person can aim at a Ph.D. without already having assurance that she will get it. But she has the moral freedom to aim at a particular project like this because she identifies it as good for her, and she has the conviction that if something is good for her, it will also be good for others.

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We need this kind of hope because we see so many traces of the opposite of the good that we long for. I used to work as an ethics consultant at a hospital where I would spend one day a week. When I got to within about a mile of the place, I experienced a grayness falling over me, a sense of all the suffering and the moral compromise that I was about to encounter. Once I actually got there and started into the routine, I usually was

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The virtue of hope allows us to be honest and clear-eyed about the suffering and evil, but also to persevere and have courage. If we hear God's call, we can have the conviction that what we are doing makes sense for the good of the whole in the long run, even if we do not yet see how it is all going to work.

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able to shake the gloom. But I still have a vivid memory of what it felt like. It felt hope-less, like being lost in a fog at sea. The virtue of hope can sustain us through this kind of test, allowing us to be honest and clear-eyed about the suffering and evil, but also to persevere and have courage. If we hear God's call, we can have the conviction that what we are doing

makes sense for the good of the whole in the long run, even if we do not yet see how it is all going to work.

#### RESURRECTION FAITH

How is it that we can sustain the virtue of hope? Faith is again the vehicle. When I was writing my book *The Moral Gap*, I interviewed a survivor called Eva from the concentration camps of World War II. She told me that her experience had been that those people who went into the camps with a strong faith in God, came out (if they came out at all) with their faith stronger than when they went in. She did not claim to have an answer to the question of why God should have allowed his people to suffer in this way. Her report is in this way like that of Elie Wiesel, who went through the camps as a boy and saw his father killed. Wiesel was angry with God, but especially in his later writing he has said that he has grown closer to God through the anger. For Eva, it was her faith in God that kept her through the experience of the camps. She was Jewish, and my sense is that she did not have faith in an afterlife. But she did have the confidence that the good would in the end prevail, that it was, so to speak, more fundamental to the destination of the world than the evil in it.

This confidence is not based on optimism about human nature left to its own devices. People like Eva have ample evidence of the great evil that humans are capable of doing to each other. Perhaps if we were *already* morally good, we could bring in a kingdom of justice and peace by ourselves.

We would all be aiming at each other's welfare, and perhaps we would be able to care for each other through the effects of natural calamities like hurricanes and diseases. Perhaps Immanuel Kant is right that if we were all good we would all be happy. But my point is that the world as we know it is *not* like this. Serious moral evil is pervasive and we do not have the resources by ourselves to put a stop to it. This is why we need to have a hope that is more than optimism.

How can we have such a hope? One ground is the Resurrection, which we believe by faith. Christ gives us a pattern of how life in the kingdom is supposed to go. It is a life that shows what the kingdom is like. Jesus serves his disciples and he communes with his Father. More than this, his life shows how kingdom-people are to dwell in the world that does not yet live this kind of life. We are to love our enemies, forgive them when they harm us, and do good to them in return for the evil they do to us. Now it is true that this life did not prevail in Judaea of the first century. Christ was crucified, and the forces opposed to this kind of life had the triumph they expected. But then he rose again, "the first fruits of those who have died" (1 Corinthians 15:20). So our hope is like hope for the harvest, when the first fruits have already been gathered in. To someone who has the eyes to see, the merit of the rest of the crop is already clear, as it would be to an experienced vintner examining the early grapes from his vineyard.

Our status on earth is that of pilgrim. We are on the way. The status of pilgrim ends when we reach our destination. When we reach union with God, as individuals and as a body, we will no longer need the virtue of hope. We also will not need the virtue of faith, because we will see Christ face to face. We will still, however, love. This is why Paul says that of the three virtues—faith, hope, and love—the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

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# Unquenchable Fire

BY E. ANNI JUDKINS

Though the Bible is far from expansive on the subject of hell, it can guide us in answering some of our most insistent questions. But we are required to be careful and faithful readers to determine what Scripture really does say, instead of what we think it should say.

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**W**e are uncomfortable talking about hell. When we talk with Christians, it may be tolerable because we believe we are exempt from hell based on our response to God's faithfulness in Jesus Christ. The discussion turns a corner, however, when we begin thinking of loved ones, family members or close friends, who do not share our Christian faith. Their eternal fate causes us great anxiety. For years we may pray for their salvation and try to explain the gospel to them with little or no results. We cannot bear to consider their eternal separation from God, or from us.

Most Christians believe that hell will be a place of suffering and everlasting torment for those who have died without Christ. They believe that this teaching is from the Bible, though the Bible is far from expansive on this subject. Hell, as the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, is not mentioned in the Old Testament. The term "hell" derives from "Hades," a Greek term that appears only ten times in the New Testament. Yet to understand the meaning of Hades in those passages, we should first explore their background in the Hebrew beliefs about the afterlife expressed in the Old Testament.

## OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The Hebrew word "Sheol" is used sixty-five times to denote the place of the dead. An early belief was that all the dead descend to Sheol (Job 7:9), which is a region in the depths of the earth (Psalm 86:13) that is filled with darkness and gloom (Lamentations 3:6) and silence (Psalm 115:17).



Gates or bars prevent its prisoners from escaping (Isaiah 38:10; Job 17:16). Twenty times when Sheol is mentioned, death is mentioned in the same or previous verse in similar language; the two become practically synonymous.

Here we find no conception of life after death. Dead persons become mere 'shades' as they descend to Sheol, where they remain only until they fade from the memory of those still living. This explains why having children was so crucial; for in many instances they are the only ones who will continue to remember and thereby grant a bit of existence to their departed parents.

In later times belief in resurrection and eternal life grew. At the resurrection the soul would be raised from Sheol, the body would be raised from the grave, and the two would be reunited. God's judgment of the person would follow. Accordingly, Sheol became only a temporary abode, or a resting place, for all souls after death and before the resurrection (Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2).

By the New Testament period, the idea of eternal punishment in Sheol had emerged. Sheol had become an abode for the wicked dead only; the righteous dead went immediately to heaven (or paradise, which is the restored Garden of Eden).<sup>1</sup>

This developing concept of Sheol should not be confused with "Gehenna," a term that appears eleven times in the Old Testament and literally refers to the valley of Hinnom (or, valley of the son of Hinnom), which is located south of Jerusalem (Joshua 15:8; 18:16; Nehemiah 11:30). The valley of Hinnom was infamous as a place of Baal worship (Jeremiah 32:35), but more so as a place of child sacrifice to the god Molech. Though child sacrifice was an abomination to the God of Israel, both King Ahaz and his son, King Manasseh, reportedly made their sons "pass through fire" (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6). Later when Josiah became king and implemented his religious reforms, he defiled Gehenna so that child sacrifice could no longer be practiced there (2 Kings 23:10).

According to tradition, after Josiah desecrated the altar at the valley of Hinnom, or Gehenna, it became a continually burning garbage dump for the city of Jerusalem. The prophet Jeremiah proclaimed that the valley of the son of Hinnom would become, in the time of God's judgment, the valley of Slaughter because of all the people who would be killed and cast into its fires (Jeremiah 7:30-34). As the idea of life after death continued to develop, Gehenna's fires became a metaphor for the place of punishment for the wicked, which might occur either at death or after the resurrection and final judgment.

So, originally Sheol was a place for all the dead, but it came to be understood as a place for the wicked dead. Gehenna, though it was literally a valley once notorious for child sacrifice, became a metaphor for fiery judgment for the wicked. As the New Testament era dawns, there is no

unanimity of opinion about what happens to the individual after death; all of these views, as well as others, are current.<sup>2</sup>

#### NEW TESTAMENT TEACHINGS

The early view of Sheol echoes through the Apostle Peter's sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:27,31). Peter declares that Jesus was not abandoned to Hades (Sheol) to "experience corruption," or to fade from existence. Here we find the concept that every individual who dies descends to Hades,

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Echoing the thought that Sheol had gates to prevent the dead from escaping, Jesus says that the gates of Hades (or death) will not have power over those disciples who belong to him. As Jesus has the keys to the gates of Hades, he is the one who determines which dead are captured in Hades.

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which is not a place of torment, but the natural abode of the dead.

Just as death and Sheol were companion terms in the Old Testament, they also appear together in the New Testament. In the book of Revelation, Hades is mentioned four times, and each time it is connected with death. Jesus declares that he has the keys of Death and of Hades

(1:18); presumably he acquired these when he descended into Hades and conquered it at his own death. Interestingly, in the other three passages in Revelation, both Death and Hades are personified. They ride on a pale green horse and are given authority to kill one-fourth of the earth's population (6:8). Death and Hades give up the dead that are in them, though there is no mention of whether these dead people are righteous or wicked (20:13); they are merely the dead who are now to be judged for their deeds. Finally, Hades and Death themselves are thrown into the lake of fire, which is the second death (20:14). All of these references seem to follow the earlier concept of Hades (Sheol), as the place where all individuals go after death.

When Peter recognizes that Jesus is the Messiah, he responds, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matthew 18:18). This echoes the Old Testament thought that Sheol had gates to prevent the shades from escaping. Jesus says that the gates of Hades (or death) will not have power over the church, which is to say, the gathered community of disciples who belong to him. Even as Jesus has the keys to the gates of Hades (Revelation 1:18), here he is the one who determines which dead are captured in Hades.

In Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus, angels carry Lazarus to Abraham's bosom (presumably meaning Paradise), while the rich man is

tormented in Hades (Luke 16:19-31). This separation of the wicked and righteous after death represents the later view of Hades (Sheol). Likewise in Jesus' warnings to the unrepentant cities, Hades is not a place for all of the dead, but only for those who do evil (Luke 10:13-15; Matthew 11:20-24). Jesus says that Capernaum will not be exalted, but rather "will be brought down to Hades" in judgment.

Thus, the New Testament offers no single account of Hades; in some passages it is an abode for all of the dead, and in other passages, a prison for the wicked.

The other Old Testament term, "Gehenna," occurs eleven times in Jesus' teachings recorded in the synoptic gospels, for a place of fire where God casts those who are judged to be wicked. Several of these refer to cutting off a member of one's body—an eye (Matthew 5:29; 18:9; Mark 9:47), hand (Matthew 5:30; Mark 9:43), or foot (Mark 9:45)—rather than for the whole body to be "thrown into hell (Gehenna)" and "go to the unquenchable fire." Jesus describes Gehenna as the "hell of fire" (Matthew 5:22; 18:9). We are not to fear anyone who can only kill the body, but the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell (Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:5). Jesus asks how the scribes and Pharisees will avoid the judgment of Gehenna, and he calls them the children of hell (Matthew 23:15).

In describing the tongue's capacity for wickedness and sinfulness, the book of James calls the tongue a fire whose flame is "set on fire by hell." This is the single reference to Gehenna outside of the synoptic gospels.

Other words or descriptive phrases used in the Bible for the abode of the dead inform our understanding of hell. In the Old Testament, we find the "pit" (Psalm 16:10), "Abaddon" (Psalm 88:11), the "grave" (Psalm 88:11), "death" (Psalm 6:6), "the depths of the earth" (Psalm 95:4), the "dust" (Job 21:26), and "the land of silence" (Psalms 94:17). Some descriptions in the New Testament are "under the earth" (Philippians 2:10), "the bottomless pit" or "the abyss" (used nine times in Revelation), "the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:10), "the outer darkness" (Matthew 8:12), "the deepest darkness" (Jude 13), and "Tartaros" (2 Peter 2:4). In addition to these terms, there are numerous other allusions.

In the New Testament, then, Hades is the "provisional place of the ungodly between death, resurrection, and final judgment" while Gehenna is the "eternal place of the wicked after final judgment."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately no distinction is drawn between Hades and Gehenna in most English translations of the New Testament; the two are conflated and rendered simply as "hell."<sup>4</sup>

#### ANSWERING OUR QUESTIONS ABOUT HELL

We have many questions about hell: Why does it exist? Who are the 'wicked' that go there? Is hell itself eternal? Is it a place of everlasting or temporary suffering? To what can we compare hell's torment? Many of us

gather answers from popular culture, in movies or novels. Perhaps we are instructed through sermons or theology classes. However, have we studied Scripture carefully and honestly, seeking to understand the nature of hell? Probably not, for hell is a subject that we do not enjoy contemplating.

To see how our conception of hell might be shaped by these biblical passages, consider perhaps our most insistent question: "What happens to

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the wicked after they die?" Christians today, for the most part, believe that hell is a place of everlasting torment for the wicked. They are in good company; Tertullian, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and John Wesley subscribed to this traditional view. Another stream of thought, however, arose as early as the first century. Beginning at least with Justin Martyr

(c.100-165), some Christians believed in a type of *conditional* immortality: though wicked individuals would be tormented after death, this torment would one day cease. Let's look at this debate between the theologians, whom I will call "traditionalists" and "conditionalists."

Traditionalists, who generally interpret the Bible more literally than the conditionalists, say that Scripture clearly teaches that the unrighteous are destined to "eternal conscious physical and spiritual torment."<sup>5</sup> Since most of the New Testament references to Hades and Gehenna come from the mouth of Jesus himself, these teachings hold even greater import.

For instance, they point to Matthew 25:31-46 in which Jesus says the "goats," those people whom he does not know, will experience eternal punishment in the "eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Traditionalists find confirmation of this in the prophet John's apocalyptic vision that the devil, the beast, and the false prophet will all be thrown into the lake of fire where "they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Revelation 20:10). Likewise, Death and Hades will be cast there, too, as well as those whose names are not written in the book of life (20:14-15). According to their reading, the torment in the lake of fire will be continual and is the fate of all the wicked. The type of pain experienced will be physical and emotional.

A number of Christians interpret these biblical passages differently, as supporting a conditionalist view of hell. They emphasize that we are not naturally immortal. (Some traditionalists, on the other hand, assume that

our souls are inherently immortal and thus are destined to exist somewhere, either in heaven or hell, forever.) Human beings are only mortal until, justified by faith, they acquire immortality as a gift of God. “For the wages of sin is death,” the Apostle Paul writes, “but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Conditionalists interpret Paul to be saying that the unregenerate will cease to exist (after the resurrection and the judgment), but the righteous will be gifted with eternal life.

Accordingly, for the conditionalists, hell is not “the beginning of an immortal life in torment but the end of a life of rebellion.”<sup>6</sup> When the Bible describes hell in terms of death, perishing, destruction, or corruption, it suggests that hell marks the end of a wicked person’s existence, not its continuation. This language speaks of the cessation of being, not of everlasting or perpetual existence. Conditionalists caution us not to read eternity into these terms, based on a mistaken preconception about the inherent immortality of the soul.

So, though traditionalists use Revelation 20:13-14 to support their belief in eternal torment, conditionalists use these same verses to maintain their claim that death and hell will one day cease. In the apocalyptic vision, Death and Hades give up their dead, and then they themselves are cast into the lake of fire. Conditionalists interpret this to mean that death and hell will be destroyed forever. Once hell is annihilated, no one can continue to exist there in a tormented state.

Other theologies of hell have been proposed, but the traditionalist and conditionalist views are the most widely accepted among Christians. Perhaps this is because each of them so strongly encourages the evangelical impetus of our faith. The possibility that some people, especially our loved ones, might perish in hell is a great impetus for sharing the gospel with others. From the traditionalist view, we share the good news of Jesus Christ with others so that they, by responding in faithfulness to God, will escape eternal torment in hell. Conditionalists agree that hell will be a time of torment for those who are not spared (though they disagree among themselves about how long this suffering will last). They differ from traditionalists only in regard to the duration, and sometimes the degree, of hell’s torment.

Certainly we must not rely only on this motivation for evangelism, for we will send the world a terribly erroneous message that salvation is little more than a ‘fire insurance policy,’ that we are saved in order to avoid hell and torment, rather than to live in relationship with a loving God.

As mentioned above, other theologies of hell compete with the traditionalist and conditionalist views. One says hell is merely metaphorical with no real existence; another, that the unrighteous are annihilated at death and they have no afterlife at all; still another says that hell is not a place of eternal torment, but of eternal separation from God. Between the

traditional view of hell as a place of eternal physical and emotional torment, and the view that we are annihilated at death and hell does not exist, there is much speculation and disagreement.

With so many questions about hell, we often wish the Bible would offer more details than it does about the afterlife. We must accept that Scripture generally does not speculate about the nature of hell, but rather emphasizes the certainty of God's judgment of wickedness and rebellion. On this point the traditionalist, conditionalist, and some other theologies of hell, converge in agreement.

#### NOTES

1 This concept is developed in Jewish writings in the period between the Old and New Testaments, especially 1 Enoch. Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), which is discussed later in this article, notably echoes this concept. For a brief survey, see Richard Bauckham, "Hades, Hell," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), III: 14.

2 The Sadducees and Pharisees disagreed sharply concerning the existence of resurrection, angels, and souls, with the Sadducees holding, generally, to what I have termed the earlier view and the Pharisees, the later (Acts 23:6-10).

3 Duane F. Watson, "Gehenna," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), II: 927.

4 As a further note, Satan is never associated with Hades (Sheol) or Gehenna in either testament. Biblical texts do not support the view that Satan is the ruler or lord of Hades. Rather, this notion derives from the Greek myth of Hades as the ruler of the underworld.

5 Evangelical Alliance, *The Nature of Hell* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Publishing, 2000), 69.

6 Clark H. Pinnock, "The Conditional View," in *Four Views on Hell*, ed. William V. Crockett (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 137. This is a good volume to explore four important views of hell: literal, metaphorical, purgatorial, and conditional. Each view is defended in an essay by one of four contributing authors and then critiqued by the other three contributors.



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# The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail

B Y R A L P H C . W O O D

The church's ancient claim is that Christ's victory is not confined to this present life alone. He is also the Judge and Lord over hell. The doctrine of the Harrowing of Hell enables us to affirm that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus—neither death nor demonic powers nor even the abyss of hell.

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**N**o serious consideration of hell should omit one of the church's most ancient claims in the Apostles Creed—that Christ was not only “crucified, dead, and buried,” but also that he “descended into hell.” As with many other indispensable Christian claims—the Trinity, for example—the doctrine of Christ's descent into hell is a careful theological extrapolation from the biblical narratives. The single slender thread of “evidence” is found in 1 Peter 3:19-20 and 4:6, where we learn that the crucified Christ “went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the day of Noah,” so that “the gospel was preached even to the dead.”

Almost from the beginning, the earliest Christians began to link these claims with many other biblical affirmations. The Psalmist exults in the assurance, for example, that “If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there” (139:8). So do we read in Matthew 16:18 of Christ's remarkable assurance to Peter that his confession of faith (“Thou art the Christ”) will become the foundation stone of the church, and that “the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” The Old Testament Sheol and the New Testament Hades were understood as the realm of the dead, not yet having been identified with hell as a place of punishment. But since death was the original penalty

for sin in the Garden of Eden, and since the Old Testament characterizes death as the loss of life-giving relationship to God, it seemed obvious for the church to link the realm of the dead with the retribution for evil. Nor was it unreasonable for the church to conclude that the incarnate God was not helplessly non-existent between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. For if death is the final enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26), and if God in Christ has indeed disarmed “the principalities and powers and made a public example

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The doctrine of Christ’s descent into hell also opens up the possibility of saving faith being given to the unnumbered dead who, even during the Christian era, have never heard the Gospel.

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of them” (Colossians 2:15), then surely on Holy Saturday Jesus broke down the doors of hell.

That Christ crashed the barriers of damnation and harrowed hell is a richly suggestive theological conception. Though largely unknown to modern urbanites, a harrow is a farming

instrument with tines that serve to drag stones from fields. Thus has the church traditionally held that Christ harrowed out of hell those Old Testament saints who are recorded in Hebrews 11 as having lived by a faith that anticipated the coming of Christ. This interpretation of the Roll Call of Saints passage also enabled the church to deal with the thorny problem of the implicit injustice done to all those who would seem to be damned by no other fault than having been born before Christ. The doctrine of Christ’s descent into hell also opens up the possibility of saving faith being given to the unnumbered dead who, even during the Christian era, have never heard the Gospel.

Hell is not a temporal but an eternal realm, the horrible spiritual state of God’s utter absence. Since Christ plunges into hell and preaches to the spirits of the dead, winnowing some of them from hell, it follows that others who have never been given the Good News can still be released from the post-earthly prison of death and damnation. For Christ’s victory is not confined to this present life alone. He is also the Judge and Lord over hell. Thus does the doctrine of the Harrowing of Hell enable us to affirm, with Paul in Romans 8:38-39, that absolutely *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus—neither death nor demonic powers nor even the abyss of hell. No one has stated this Pauline hope more clearly than the great Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar. Exactly in his descent into hell, writes von Balthasar, Christ “disturbs the absolute loneliness striven for by the sinner: the sinner, who wants to be ‘damned’ apart from God, finds God again in his loneliness, but God in the absolute weakness of love ... enters into solidarity with those damning themselves.”<sup>1</sup>



A radically different interpretation of Christ's descent into hell has been offered recently by the Presbyterian theologian Alan E. Lewis in a remarkable book, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*. He maintains that, if we take seriously the doctrine that Christ assumed our full humanity, then we must retrieve Luther and Calvin's insistence that Christ endured the unfathomable suffering that comes from total abandonment by God in death. Lewis rightly fears that we cheapen Easter if we do not attend to the hellish Sabbath in which God himself lay in the godforsakenness of the grave.

Christ's descent into death reminds us that the Cross was initially a dread defeat, a terrifying invalidation of his claim to have inaugurated a new way, and thus a tragic failure suffered by one who was either deceived or deceiving. If this were indeed his fate, so would it surely be ours: cold putrefaction and final oblivion. Even worse, the silence and emptiness of Holy Saturday signifies the chilling vindication of those who destroy Christ, whether then or now, as a usurper and pretender who cannot deliver on his promise to provide what Lewis calls:

. . . a whole new ordering of life, as intolerable to insurrectionists as to oppressors. It promises that forgiveness, freedom, love, and self-negation, in all their feeble ineffectiveness, will prove more powerful and creative than every system and every countersystem which subdivides the human race into rich and poor, comrades and enemies, insiders and outsiders, allies and adversaries.<sup>2</sup>

The day of Christ's descent into death and hell, in this reading of it, is the worst

day in history, the Evil Sabbath. It is the day when the play ended, the lights were put out, and all the demonic forces triumphed. Only when we have thus seen what hell really is—not chiefly our own much-deserved punishment, but rather Christ's utterly undeserved defeat—can we begin to celebrate the astonishing surprise of Easter. Rather than abandoning his

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Only when we see what hell really is—not chiefly our own much-deserved punishment, but rather Christ's utterly undeserved defeat—can we celebrate the astonishing surprise of Easter. As witnesses to his Resurrection, our Easter freedom is "that the self-promoters who destroy others cannot prove victorious in the end; for the way of life leads only down the path of risky, loving self-expenditure and humble servitude."

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crucified Son to Hades (Acts 2:31), the Father raised him. Easter vindicates both Jesus as the second person of the Trinity and also the faith for which he died. As contemporary witnesses to his Resurrection, we too have been liberated from the hell of sin and death. Lewis describes our Easter freedom as the faith “that the self-promoters who destroy others cannot prove victorious in the end; for the way of life leads only down the path of risky, loving self-expenditure and humble servitude.”<sup>3</sup>

Whether we read Christ’s descent into hell as a triumph or a defeat, it remains a crucial concern for all Christians. With his usual crispness and clarity, G. K. Chesterton sums up the enormous significance of the doctrine: “Christ descended into hell; Satan fell into it. One wanted to go up and went down; the other wanted to go down and went up. A god can be humble, a devil can only be humbled.”<sup>4</sup>

#### NOTES

1 *The von Balthasar Reader*, edited by Medard Kehl and Werner Loser (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), 153.

2 Alan E. Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 49.

3 *Ibid.*, 64.

4. G. K. Chesterton, *The Ball and the Cross* (London: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co., 1910), 279.

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# My Maker Was the Primal Love

B Y D O U G L A S V . H E N R Y

Dante depicts Hades as a creation of “the primal love,” or the Holy Spirit. Yet those who doubt the justice of everlasting punishment are all the less inclined to regard it as a measure of God’s love. Two thoughts can help us to unravel this apparent incongruity between God’s loving character and the existence of hell.

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A mischievous friend of mine once visited the classroom of a notoriously difficult professor just before the final exam. His contribution to the nervous students soon arriving was to scrawl on the board, “Abandon every hope, who enter here.” Most students chuckled at the notice, while some really did lose further hope.

Perhaps a few recognized it as the final phrase of the inscription above the gates of hell so vividly described in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Thus the poet conveys the total and irrevocable despair accompanying any soul so unfortunate as to cross Hades’ threshold, a despair that all who speak of hell surely recognize.

Yet in the full inscription Dante envisions important themes not as widely appreciated:

Through me the way into the suffering city,  
through me the way to the eternal pain,  
through me the way that runs among the lost.

Justice urged on my high artificer;  
my maker was divine authority,  
the highest wisdom, and the primal love.

Before me nothing but eternal things  
were made, and I endure eternally.  
Abandon every hope, who enter here.<sup>1</sup>

The thought that *justice* prompts God to fashion hell, taken for granted among Dante's thirteenth century readers, is controversial today. Bertrand Russell, who waggishly remarked that "Hell is neither so certain nor as hot as it used to be," thought belief in hell was a defect in "Christ's moral character" because no "person

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Divine punishment in this life, the proverb says, does not negate or preclude love. And if love prompts God's punishment of humans in general, love also prompts the punishment of humans in hell.

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who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment."<sup>2</sup> Many people squirm at a doctrine of hell that they regard as morally indefensible. For many, observes Jerry Walls, "hell is arguably the most severe aspect of the problem [of evil]."<sup>3</sup>

Sentiments like this call into question the notion of hell as an instrument of divine justice, and they render even more puzzling Dante's depiction of hell as a creation of "the primal love," by which he alludes to the Holy Spirit. Those who doubt the justice of everlasting punishment are all the less inclined to regard it as a measure of God's love. For "How is the existence of a benevolent and almighty God to be reconciled with even the possibility of someone's going to hell (whether this is thought to involve simple annihilation or the pain of everlasting separation from God)?"<sup>4</sup>

Can hell truly express God's love and righteousness? For how could God, who lovingly creates us in his image, fashion an apparent monstrosity like hell? Why would the One who, in Jesus Christ, died to bring about our reconciliation, allow for some people the destruction of "both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28)? Two thoughts can help us to unravel this apparent incongruity between God's loving character and the existence of hell.

First of all, we must never separate God's justice and love, for they are two aspects of a single divine character. God is not just, or righteous, in one moment and loving in another. Rather, each divine action is loving and just, whether God is commending creatures' righteousness or condemning their evil, for in this way "the LORD reproves the one he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights" (Proverbs 3:12). Divine punishment in this life, the proverb says, does not negate or preclude love. Though punishment and love are often pulled asunder in human relationships, never is God's punishment vindictive. And if love prompts God's punishment of humans in general, love also prompts the punishment of humans in hell.

But is this notion that justice and love together consign people to hell merely the counsel of a naive Pollyanna? At the very least, it suggests more puzzles. For instance, one purpose of love-prompted punishment is correction, but hell seemingly involves no hope of correction. And punishment, when it is just, is meted out in proportion to the offence, but *everlasting* punishment seems out of proportion to the finite though horrifying offences that creatures commit. Such puzzles make us question, yet again, whether justice and love built the gates of hell and all contained therein.

The second thought clarifies how God's love extends even to those consigned to hell. God's love always invites a free response of reciprocal, even if unequal, love from us. Freedom is an essential feature of love, for a loving response cannot be compelled, but only invited. For this reason, God allows us freely to love or fail to love in response to his initiative, and doggedly refrains from overriding our choices. Though our decisions often grieve God, to co-opt our free choices, even (or especially) when they run amuck, would be to forfeit the divine scheme. "Merely to override a human will . . . would be for [God] useless," C. S. Lewis has the devilish Screwtape acknowledge. "He cannot ravish. He can only woo. For His ignoble idea is to eat the cake and have it; the creatures are to be one with Him, but yet themselves; merely to cancel them, or assimilate them, will not serve."<sup>5</sup>

Our creaturely autonomy, which invests our lives with meaningfulness and moral significance, leaves the door of our hearts ajar to great evil, including our willful separation from God—for days, decades, or eternity. But in God's perfect understanding, the good of a universe in which we can lovingly and freely respond to "divine authority, the highest

wisdom, and the primal love" outweighs the evil wreaked by human sin.

So, even if hell offers no hope of correction, nonetheless it is love that makes hell possible. If we finally and everlastingly refuse God, he finally and everlastingly recognizes that refusal, and thereby justly condemns.

Much mystery remains. How does God nurture our creaturely freedom to respond to him, and then amply protect it from the distortions of culture and the devices of our own hearts? With Job, we risk reflection

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about things that we do not understand. We should acknowledge humbly the limits of our efforts to fathom God's reasons for creating a world in which hell has its role. Nevertheless, like Job, we may affirm confidently, "no purpose of [the LORD's] can be thwarted" (Job 42:1-3). As God's creation, hell marks no limit upon God's sovereignty and expresses, rather than thwarts, divine authority, highest wisdom, and primal love. The Lord whose justice, understanding, and love invite our worshipful commitment is the same One who founded hell. Whatever else may come, "the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets" (Revelation 10:7).

#### NOTES

1 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1980), III, 1-9.

2 Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 195 and 17.

3 Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 4.

4 Alfred J. Freddoso, ed., *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 3; quoted in Walls, 4.

5 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 46.

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# Why Stand Gazing?

BY JULIE PENNINGTON - RUSSELL

To aim our lives chiefly toward avoiding hell or gaining heaven is to have missed the point. Rather than fixate on our brownstone in heaven or the brimstone in hell, why not fix our lives on the Christ who says, "Let me breathe my life into you today so that you don't have to settle for this hellish half-life anymore."

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**M**y husband's parents live in the tiny farming town of Vega in the panhandle of Texas. Halfway between Vega and Amarillo, just a few yards from I-40, lies a massive patch of stink called the Classic Cattle Company. The smell emanating from the acres of cattle pens is so powerful it invades your body, becomes part of you. The only thing to do when approaching the cattle yards is to speed up and breathe through your mouth. During a recent visit with my in-laws, I found myself driving past the dreaded pens with our six-year-old daughter, Lucy. As the smell became more and more unbearable, Lucy, her nose buried in the crook of her arm, observed grimly, "Mom, this must be what hell smells like."

I laughed at the time, but later wondered at what point along the way did our six-year-old surmise that there is indeed a hell, and that it's a most unpleasant place? Truth is, hell rarely gets raised (no pun intended) in the daily flow of conversation at our house. Even heaven, a decidedly brighter subject, does not figure prominently in the talk around our dinner table. I rank myself in the company of those who don't dwell all that much on the hereafter. My ambivalence, I suppose, comes from exposure as a child to too many wild-eyed preachers in the vein of Elmer Gantry, and from endless parodies in literature and film of simple-minded, often Southern, religious folk whose preoccupation with the afterlife makes them appear downright bizarre.

But the subjects of heaven and hell are not so easily avoided. In the first place, not just Christianity, but virtually all world religions embrace some view of the afterlife and sketch out consequences for the evil and for the good. Our sense of justice demands it. It seems right that there be separate places after death for Hitler and for Mother Teresa.

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The subjects of heaven and hell are not easily avoided. Not just Christianity, but virtually all world religions embrace some view of the afterlife and sketch out consequences for the evil and for the good. Our sense of justice demands it. It seems right that there be separate places after death for Hitler and for Mother Teresa.

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Thoughts about heaven and hell are hard to escape, also, because the subject of death, which we are able to skirt almost completely in our twenties, crops up more frequently in our thirties, and hovers at our elbow as we enter mid-life. The older we get, the more we think about death. Many of us, in private moments, find ourselves imagining what lies on the far side of the grave.

Billy Collins, the nation's Poet Laureate, muses about death in "The Afterlife," which begins with these lines:

While you are preparing for sleep, brushing your teeth,  
or rifling through a magazine in bed,  
the dead of the day are setting out on their journey.

They are moving off in all imaginable directions,  
each according to his own private belief,  
and this is the secret that silent Lazarus would not reveal:  
that everyone is right, as it turns out.  
You go to the place you always thought you would go,  
the place you kept lit in an alcove in your head.

Some are being shot up a funnel of flashing colors  
into a zone of light, white as a January sun.  
Others are standing naked before a forbidding judge who sits  
with a golden ladder on one side, a coal chute on the other.<sup>1</sup>

This vision of the afterlife would not pass muster as Christian orthodoxy, but the poem does remind me of a biblical point: though we call up in our minds all of our best and worst images of what heaven and hell will be like, our speculations are only that. The afterlife is the one subject about which all the experts are in no condition to elaborate. Here the toddler



knows as much as the Rhodes scholar. The scholar may use more compelling adjectives, but when it comes to the hereafter, we are all pretty much guessing.

Is there life beyond death? Scripture paints a bold and unambiguous *Yes!* But on Scripture's canvas of heaven and hell, the images are veiled and undefined. What we behold is less like the *Mona Lisa* and more like the puzzling brokenness of Picasso's *Guernica*.

Reinhold Niebuhr says that we shouldn't concern ourselves too much with the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell, and he is so right. Enough for us now to be on the road with Christ, and to seek and cherish God, for heaven is only heaven because God is there, and exclusion from God's presence, even if you were reclining on a cloud while cherubs fed you Godiva, would still be hell.

The question might be asked of us that the two angels asked Jesus' followers after his ascension: "Why do you stand gazing up into heaven?" (Acts 1:11) For that matter, why stand gazing down into hell? To aim our lives chiefly toward avoiding hell or gaining heaven is to have missed the point. Christ says, "Let me breathe my life into you *today* so that you do not have to settle for this hellish half-life anymore."

Let's be honest about this: there is so much that you and I don't know about eternity. But eternity has come to our here and now in the person of Jesus Christ. Rather than fixate on our brownstone in heaven or the brimstone in hell, why not fix our lives on the one who is Lord of both? Christ recognized that we all

suffer from spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder. Left on our own, we find all kinds of secondary issues to wrap ourselves around. Perhaps that is why Jesus was always giving us such straightforward instructions: *Follow me. Don't be anxious. Love God. Love each other.* Christ apparently did not think it important to fill in all of the missing pieces about life after death. What he gave us was a calling so high and a love so expansive that everything else seems puny by comparison.

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We who live in the 'Not Yet' could do worse than to recall the wisdom of our sixteenth century Christian forebears. The summary of Scripture known as the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) asks the ageless question,

“What is my only comfort in life and in death?” The answer comes back:

My only comfort is that I am not my own,  
but belong, body and soul, in life and in death,  
to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

That will preach in any century.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from “The Afterlife” from *Questions About Angels*, by Billy Collins, © 1991.  
Reprinted by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.

<sup>2</sup> See his “Mystery and Meaning,” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. by Robert McAfee Brown (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1986), 237-249.

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# Hell is a Bar in Adams-Morgan

BY JIM SOMERVILLE

Our best source of authority, the Bible, is far from definitive on the subject of heaven and hell. Striving to explain realities bigger than our capacity to comprehend, it strains and bumps against the limits of human language and imagination. And in the end, Scripture resorts to metaphor.

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**H**ell is a bar in Adams-Morgan, the colorful ethnic neighborhood at the intersection of Columbia Road and 18<sup>th</sup> Street Northwest in Washington, D.C. Just above Hell and under the same management is a dance club called Heaven, where a six-foot bouncer in a pink leotard stands guard at the gate, wearing angel wings and a lopsided halo. It takes a good bit of courage to walk up the stairs and through the gate into Heaven, past that bouncer. It takes a good bit more to go down the basement stairs to Hell.

As your eyes adjust to the dim red lighting you see a banner over the bar that reads, “Welcome to Hell. Have a hell of a good time!” The walls are decorated with waxy masks and murals of grim reapers, skeletons, and doomsday scenes. A few tattered chairs and tables, complete with cigarette burns, are pushed to one side of the room. The mostly male patrons shoot pool and cackle above the gritty music blaring from the speakers.

It is the owner’s vision of hell—and heaven—based on the most hackneyed clichés of each. But who’s to say that hell is *not* a bar in Adams-Morgan, or that heaven is *not* a dance club? Our best source of authority on the subject, the Bible, is far from definitive. When it speaks of heaven and hell it strives to explain realities bigger than our capacity to comprehend. It

strains and bumps against the limits of human language and imagination. And in the end, like that bar in Adams-Morgan, it resorts to metaphor.

In the book of Revelation, for example, John sees a vision of heaven, which he describes as follows: "There in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald"

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What we long to know in all of this is something about the real heaven and the real hell and what we find, to our great disappointment, is that they can't be known. Our end, like our beginning, belongs to God.

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(4:2b-3). The heavenly city he describes in chapter 21 has foundations made of twelve different kinds of jewels and the streets are "pure gold, clear as glass." Obviously, there are not enough words, or not enough of the right kind of words, to describe what John saw. In the end

he holds out a handful of precious stones and blurts, "There! It was something like that!"

The same is true of hell. When Jesus refers to hell in the Gospels he frequently speaks of Gehenna, a valley just south of Jerusalem that was notorious as a place of child sacrifice in ancient times. In Jesus' time it was the garbage dump of Jerusalem, a place where columns of black smoke would rise constantly from burning refuse, rotting flesh, and human waste, a place where "their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched" (Mark 9:48). You can imagine his nodding in the direction of such a place when he says to his disciples, "If your right eye causes you to sin, poke it out. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Better to go through life blind and maimed than end up in hell" (Matthew 5:30, paraphrase). And all who heard him would agree.

But is hell *really* a burning trash dump, or is heaven *really* a jewel-encrusted city? It's hard to know. While the biblical writers seem to be in general agreement that hell is a place of punishment for the wicked and heaven is a place of reward for the righteous, the particulars are varied and confusing. And Jesus, who should know better than anyone else, offers precious little help on the matter. While in one place he refers to hell as Gehenna, in another he refers to it as Hades. One is a putrid garbage heap while the other, apparently, is a place of flaming torment (Luke 16:23-24). Things are no better when he speaks of heaven. He assures his disciples that in his father's house there are many "mansions" (KJV), but tells the thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise," referring to a Jewish notion that the Garden of Eden was preserved in heaven as a reward for the righteous (Luke 23:43). So which is it, Jesus? Is hell a dump

or an inferno; is heaven a mansion or a garden?

What we long to know in all of this is something about the *real* heaven and the *real* hell and what we find, to our great disappointment, is that they can't be known. Our end, like our beginning, belongs to God. And if Jesus knows he isn't telling. He seems content to leave the details, like the details of the final judgment, in the hands of the father (Mark 13:32). And so, like the owner of that bar in Adams-Morgan, we resort to metaphor. We decorate our concept of hell with fire and brimstone, demons with pitchforks, and the screams of the damned. We decorate our concept of heaven with angels with halos, heavenly choirs, and streets of gold. We stretch our minds toward those unknowable realities. But in the end all we have is the best, and the worst, we can imagine.

The temptation is to leave it there, in the realm of imagination, but here is the frightening truth: as surely as God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither is God's imagination our imagination. If burning in hell forever is the worst we can imagine, it is altogether possible that God can imagine worse, and altogether probable that the worst God can imagine would never cross our minds. But the corollary is also true: if heavenly mansions and streets of gold are the best we can imagine, it is altogether possible that God can imagine something better.

And altogether probable that he already has.

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**This photo is available in the print version of  
Heaven and Hell.**

With complex images of death, judgment, heaven, and hell, Michelangelo confronts us politically as well as personally. We are not the final judges of reality. Christ is.

*Michelangelo Buonarotti (1475-1564), LAST JUDGMENT, detail, 1536-41, Fresco, 48' x 44'.  
Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome.*

# Confronted

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

**A**mong the least comfortable scenes for artists to paint, or us to consider, is the evaluation of men and women at the Last Judgment. “Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn,” warns Matthew, “and they will see ‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (24:30-31).

Michelangelo’s fresco, *Last Judgment*, combines images of death, final judgment, heaven, and hell, to depict the mystery surrounding Christ’s second coming to judge the world and the confusion among humans that it engenders. In its important location, the fresco is a political as well as a personal confrontation, as we shall see.

Pope Clement VII de Medici (1523-34) first approached Michelangelo in 1534 to replace the Sistine Chapel altar fresco, Perugino’s *Assumption of the Virgin*, with a “resurrection” scene. Perhaps he wanted a depiction of the resurrection of souls or of the last judgment. Clement died later that year and his successor, Pope Paul III Farnese (1534-49), supervised the project. Michelangelo produced for the new altar wall in the Pope’s private chapel one of the most magnificent scenes of the final judging of individuals for their placement in heaven or hell. *Last Judgment* replaced not only the Perugino fresco behind the altar, but also the scenes of the *Nativity* and the *Finding of Moses* on either side. Michelangelo’s figures are over life-size and his composition fills almost the entire west wall of the chapel, which is an unusual placement because traditionally a last judgment image would be placed on the east, entrance wall of any church building.

Several major works that he studied often as a child in Florence influenced Michelangelo: the medieval *Last Judgment* mosaic in the Baptistery, Orcagna’s frescoes in Santa Croce, Florence, and Nardo di Cione’s *Hell* in Santa Maria Novella. The artist also studied Giotto’s *Last Judgment* in Scrovegni (Arena) Chapel in Padua and was influenced by Dante’s great poem, *Inferno*.

Being dragged from their graves, in the lower left, people are led upwards to receive their judgment by Christ “on the clouds of heaven.” The

angels below Christ blow their “loud trumpet call” in the center of the composition. Hell is depicted on the lower right side of the fresco. Charon, the transporter of the dead to Hades in ancient Greek stories, herds the damned out of his boat with an oar. Snakes entwine several figures, while others are swallowed up in the murky area below.

**This photo is available in the print version  
of Heaven and Hell.**

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*Michelangelo Buonarotti (1475-1564), LAST JUDGMENT, detail of the lower section.*

The beardless Christ is located in the central area of the painting that is best lit by the natural light of the chapel windows. Often considered a “damning” figure, he draws up the dead with his left arm and casts down those consigned to hell with his right arm. Christ’s proportions and exaggerated gestures reflect *La Maniera*, the Mannerist style, which flourished between the High Renaissance and Baroque styles of art. Mary is seated on the favored right side of Christ. Michelangelo’s self-portrait is believed to be located on the flayed skin of the martyred apostle Bartholomew, held by the figure in the lower right who now looks up in terror at his Judge.

*Last Judgment* was recently cleaned and restored to its glorious color and power. The rich ultramarine blue is recovered in the sky and on various pieces of drapery throughout the colossal painting. The nude figures are restored to their original appearance; Michelangelo’s assistant, Daniele da Volterra, had covered them during the intense scrutiny of Roman Catholic art prompted by the Council of Trent (1545-63). Christians in the sixteenth century frequently challenged the nudity within the composition. For instance, Pietro Aretino, a contemporary of Michelangelo, criticized the fresco for being merely a display of skill and not a decorous handling of the holy subject. Despite this, engravings of the fresco were published frequently, and at least one inquisitor remarked that there was nothing that was not “spiritual” about the nudes of Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment*.



The original audience for this fresco, given its prominent location in the Pope's private chapel, was the theologically well-educated, powerful leadership of the government and church. Yet Michelangelo confronts them with images of confusion and concern, presented in a complex manner. They are not the final judges of reality. Christ is.

As twenty-first century viewers, we should consider not only the historical context in which Michelangelo, his patron the Pope, and the sixteenth-century viewers would see the work, but also our personal concerns about the last judgment, heaven, and hell. *Last Judgment* disturbs us to ask, "Where might I be during the final reckoning imaged in this painting?"

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**This photo is available in the print version of  
Heaven and Hell.**

Though Auguste Rodin struggled over twenty years to express through sculpture the desperation of souls that are falling from Grace, he never finished his magnificent obsession.

*Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), THE GATES OF HELL, 1880-1900, Bronze, 250-3/4 x 158 x 33-3/8 in. Posthumous cast authorized by Musée Rodin, 1981. Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University; gift of the B. Gerald Cantor Collection. Photograph by Frank Wing.*

# Falling

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Auguste Rodin accepted his first major commission, *The Gates of Hell*, when he was forty years old. This sculpture was to be the doorway for the École des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Though the museum of decorative arts was not built, Rodin struggled over twenty years to depict the damned as they approach the entrance into hell. He never finished. The sculpture was cast in bronze after the artist's death, using plaster casts taken from his clay models.

*The Gates of Hell*, like Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, lays out its meaning through a turbulent and multi-figured design. The identities of many figures in the composition are not immediately apparent. Instead Rodin challenges us to make sense of the whole work by dissecting its elements and recalling its artistic influences.<sup>†</sup>

*The Three Shades* at the very top, for example, derives from Greek thought about Hades. The figures represent the shadowy, dead persons who gradually fade from existence as they are forgotten by the living. Each is presented without a right hand, her creative hand; in this way Rodin symbolizes the powerlessness of the dead.

*Ugolino and his Sons* on the lower left side of the door, and *Paolo and Francesca*, also on the left, are characters from Dante's powerful poem, *Inferno*. Unlike Dante's story, however, Rodin gives no heaven or purgatory for these figures--only hell. They writhe and grab each other in desperation as they try to prevent their inevitable destruction.

Rodin created *The Gates of Hell* in the tradition of the Renaissance master Lorenzo Ghiberti, whose bronze doors adorn the Florentine Baptistery. Ghiberti's doors, which Michelangelo nicknamed the "Gates of Paradise," were the focus of Rodin's visit to Florence in 1875-76. While there, he also studied the sculpture of Michelangelo. The muscular and sullen forms in Michelangelo's work influenced Rodin in the most copied parts of this sculpture, including *The Thinker*, as he has come to be known. Intended to be the figure of Dante, sitting with his right arm on the left knee in deep contemplation, *The Thinker* is the dominant visual focal point of *The Gates of Hell*.

The sculpture is divided into three compositional areas: the two doors and the tympanum, or horizontal area above them. The tympanum reveals

the damned, on the right, as a sea of arms, legs, faces, skulls, and twisted torsos. The helplessness of these judged souls is powerful and complicated. (The left side remains more of a mystery to interpreters. A kneeling faun holds a body above her head, perhaps on its way to join the damned on the other side.) Although Rodin does not inscribe above his doors the famous quote from Dante, “Abandon every hope, who enter here,” these figures in the tympanum graphically embody that sentiment.

This photo is available in the print version  
of Heaven and Hell.

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*Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), THE GATES OF HELL, detail of the tympanum.*

The doors portray a blend of mythological figures (centaurs, fauns), biblical personages (John the Baptist, a martyr), and everyday characters (*The Helmet-maker's Wife*, a crouching woman, a crying girl, a young mother).

*The Gates of Hell* displays human suffering in images drawn from the Bible, literature, and the artist's personal experiences. Even though in his culture, and our own, many people say that reason is incompatible with belief, Rodin invites us to approach these gates through personal introspection as symbolized by the timeless figure of *The Thinker*. Like Michelangelo over 400 years earlier, the sculptor warns us how difficult and confusing it is to envision the desperation of souls that are falling from grace.

#### NOTE

† John L. Tancock, *The Sculpture of Auguste Rodin* (Philadelphia: David R. Godine and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1976), 89-129. See also Albert E. Elsen, *Rodin's Gates of Hell* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960).

# Heaven is My Home

BY SUSAN R. GARRETT

We may not talk about heaven because we place so much value on life here and now. And yet, even if we do not say that we long for “heaven,” do we not long for a deeper sense of the divine presence in our lives here on earth? We are heart-hungry for heaven on earth.

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*Exodus 34:29-35*  
*2 Corinthians 3:17-18*  
*Revelation 21:1-5*  
*Mark 9:1-10*

**H**ave you ever been homesick? Have you ever had that aching, empty feeling of being in one place and longing for another? Have you ever craved the company of people who are far away? If you have, then you know that when you are homesick, nothing around you can fill up that empty place inside.

My grandma had Alzheimer’s disease. During her last years of living in her own home, sometimes she would grow restless when late afternoon rolled around. “I need to go home now,” I remember her saying once. “But you *are* home,” we told her. It was no use. I can still picture her sitting in her chair, leaning slightly forward with her purse in her lap, ready for someone to pick her up and “take her home.” Like Geraldine Page’s character in the movie, *The Trip to Bountiful*, she was seeking a home long gone, a home of her childhood or early married years. No present place on earth could satisfy her longing.

In earlier eras Christians sometimes spoke of longing for heaven in just this way. Heaven was not a place that they thought about only at funerals, but a destination that they anticipated eagerly all their lives, a place where they would truly be “home.” Elizabeth Yates wrote an award-winning biography of Amos Fortune, who was brought over from Africa as a slave,

learned a trade, bought his own freedom and that of several others, and lived out his days as an upstanding resident of the town of Jaffrey, New Hampshire. When Amos turned ninety, Yates writes, "As the days went on and he was aware of strength running from him gently like sap from a fallen tree, he felt heart-hungry for heaven. Sometimes it was like a hurt within him the longing was so intense." So, knowing that the end was near, one day Amos went to the deacon of the church to write his will.

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There are many reasons why so few of us are "talkin' 'bout heaven." For one thing, we are not ready to write off our lives in this world as if they were worthless. We don't want "pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by;" we want happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction here and now.

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After providing for his wife and daughter, he left \$100 for a silver communion service for the church and \$243 for the Jaffrey town school. As he walked home that day, Yates writes, "He was happy. He felt light of heart and a buoyancy came into his footsteps. 'You can come any time now,' he said, looking skyward, 'for I'm ready.'"<sup>1</sup>

He was "heart-hungry for heaven." How many of

us would use that kind of language today? Oh, it still crops up in country western and gospel music, as in the song "Angel Band": "O, come, angel band, come and around me stand; bear me away on your snow-white wings to my immortal home." Or, think of the old spiritual: "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home!" But against the backdrop of everyday conversation, such talk seems old-fashioned. Most of us just do not talk about heaven that way anymore. Heaven has lost its hold on our imagination. Even theologians and clergy seldom speak of it.

I suppose there are many reasons why so few of us are, as another spiritual says, "talkin' 'bout heaven." For one thing, we are convinced that life on this earth, in these bodies, ought to mean something; we are not ready to write off our lives in this world as if they were worthless. We don't want "pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by;" we want happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction here and now. A few years ago, the television reporter John Stossel hosted a special entitled "The Mystery of Happiness: Who Has It . . . How to Get It." Stossel claims that in earlier times, no one took it for granted that "the pursuit of happiness" was our God-given right. This world was looked upon as a "veil of tears;" heaven was the only place where most people expected to find anything like happiness or contentment. But today, in America and some other developed countries, where at least some persons can forget about suffering for much of the

time, we take it for granted that we ought to be happy here and now.

Of course there are the notable exceptions. A few years ago, a man named Marshall Applewhite convinced thirty-eight other members of a group calling itself “Heaven’s Gate” that their existence would be meaningful only if they abandoned their earthly bodies, or “shells” as they called them, in order to join the “higher beings” who, they believed, were living on a spacecraft hidden in the wake of the Hale-Bopp comet. When these thirty-nine people killed themselves, we all commented on the tragic waste of human lives, lives that *should have meant something* to those who lived them. One reason we do not talk about heaven is because we place so much value on life here and now.

And yet, even if we do not say that we long for “heaven,” isn’t it true that many of us are longing for a deeper sense of the divine presence in our lives here on earth? We are most certainly heart-hungry for *God*. Surely it is this hunger for God that is causing so many persons to embark on spiritual quests, to join new religious movements, to call up the Psychic Friends Network, or to buy the books of the latest spirituality-expert featured as a guest on *Oprah*. Surely it is this hunger for God that fuels the remarkable sales of books about angels and causes many millions of persons to tune in each week to the television show *Touched By An Angel*, which regularly assures us of God’s love for us. Persons are hungry for the good news that God is present with us, loving us, and working for good in our earthly lives. We may not be heart-hungry for heaven, but we do indeed long for *heaven on earth*.

In the movie *Michael*, John Travolta plays an archangel who is heart-hungry, not for heaven, but for earth.<sup>2</sup> The movie’s theme song, by Randy Newman, sums up the angel’s desire: “Though this world is dear to me, heaven is my home; this is where I long to be, but heaven is my home.” Michael’s character in the film represents the very opposite of the Heaven’s Gate cult members. The cult members sought to “storm heaven’s gate” by living harsh, Spartan lives here on earth and finally robbing themselves of bodily life. But in the movie, Michael *leaves* heaven so that he can relish and savor earthly pleasures. In one scene Michael is watching a little dog, Sparky, roll in the grass, and he says, “Now *that’s* my nature. I’m a grass roller! But I’m doomed to live in one place and crave the pleasures of another. This is my last blast—twenty-six, that’s all we get . . . only so many visits allowed. I’m gonna miss everything so much!” Notice the delightful twist on the theme of homesickness: Michael’s home is heaven, but he is not homesick for his home; rather, he thinks about how he *will* be homesick for earth.

Of course, we are not angels; we are humans. So where is our home? Is it in heaven, or is it on earth? Now, this question poses a dilemma. If we say that our true home is heaven, then we might be tempted to suppose

that we are just biding our time here on earth. We might be tempted to suppose that we, like Michael, are beings “trapped in one world but craving the pleasures of another.” But if we say that earth is our true home, then we might find ourselves asking, “Is this all there is? These bodies that grow old and can be injured or killed in the blink of an eye? These jobs or schools, and friends or spouses that sometimes excite and challenge us, but often do not? These unceasing worries we suffer about money, health, our children, or relationships? Is this all there is? What then is the point of it all?” So, here is our dilemma: the census-takers are at the door and we do not know what to say to them. Is our true home heaven, and we are merely sojourners on earth, strangers in a strange land? Or are we genuinely citizens of the earth? Where is our true home?

Try this for an answer: heaven is our home, but heaven *begins here on earth*. In the book of Revelation, the prophet John envisions heaven coming down to earth. Commenting on this passage, author and pastor Eugene Peterson writes, “Many people want to go to heaven the way they want to go to Florida—they think the weather will be an improvement and the people decent. But the biblical heaven is not a nice environment far removed from the stress of hard city life. It is the invasion of the city by the City. We enter heaven not by escaping what we don’t like, but by the sanctification of the place in which God has placed us.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, we enter heaven when this place and these physical things are made holy: this place where we live and play and study and earn our daily bread, this building where we come together to worship God, and these hands, bodies, and minds that we may use in so many ways. But who or what could ever make this physical world and these mortal bodies holy?

The apostle Paul helps us to answer this question. He teaches us that we who believe in Jesus Christ participate in two realms at once. On the one hand, in this earthly life we participate in the human or mortal realm, which is full of joys, wonders, and pleasures, but also full of pain, suffering, and death. So many of the recent self-proclaimed authorities on angels assure us that the angels will smooth out every rough place in our road, that they will make us happy all the days of our lives. One popular author even calls angels “happiness trainers.” But Paul offers no such quick fix to the problems of earthly life. Rather, he contends that because we still live in the human realm, because we remain mortal, the Christian life is one in which suffering certainly is present. Indeed, Paul says that Christians may suffer even *more* than those who are not Christians, because the forces in this world that oppose goodness and justice recognize Christians as their enemies and so will wage war against Christians all the more vigorously! Being a Christian doesn’t mean that one will escape from suffering. We live in the human realm, which brings us tremendous joy but also tremendous pain.



On the other hand, Paul teaches, we who believe in Jesus Christ already have one foot in the heavenly realm, along with full assurance that we shall one day enter that realm completely. Meanwhile, as we await full entry into the heavenly realm, we live in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. And “walking in the Spirit” enables us finally to rise above all the suffering and limitations that our physical, mortal condition brings. The Holy Spirit is *God present with us*—present with us in our times of transcendent joy, and also in our times of deepest despair; in our times of being together with those whom we cherish, and also in the times when we ache with homesickness for people and places that we love. The Holy Spirit is God present with us when we are in the strength of our bodies and in the health and vigor of youth, and also when we are physically limited or impaired, by whatever cause. The Holy Spirit is God present with us when we gather together in worship and praise of God, and also when we are solitary, alone before God, especially in those moments when words fail us, in moments of our deepest grief, guilt, shame, depression, or anger. In all these times the Spirit of God is with us, searching our minds and hearts, and bringing all our concerns before the Throne of Grace. The Spirit of God is with us, assuring us of God’s unceasing love for each one of us. The Holy Spirit bridges the gap between heaven and earth, brings heaven down to earth, and thus enables us to taste heaven even as we walk on the earth.

Moreover, this Spirit of God is a transforming presence, Paul teaches. It transforms places on earth into islands, or outposts, of heaven. You remember that when Moses had been speaking with God, Moses’ face glowed. It was as if the fullness of God’s glory had overflowed and spilled on-

to Moses. You also recall the accounts of the Transfiguration of Jesus, when he appeared with Moses and Elijah. Jesus’ face “shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Matthew 17:2). In that event, Jesus, even more than Moses, was reflecting the brightness of God’s presence and glory. And through Jesus, Paul teaches, God is shining also in *our* hearts, to give us “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 4:6). Our beholding of that

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Is our true home in heaven, and we are merely sojourners on earth, strangers in a strange land? Or are we genuinely citizens of the earth? Where is our true home? Try this for an answer: heaven is our home, but heaven begins here on earth. In other words, we enter heaven when this physical world and these mortal bodies are made holy.

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light transforms us. “The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom,” Paul writes. “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

Am I walking in the light of the Lord? Am I allowing the Spirit to carry out its work of transformation in my life? We have to ask this question

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Many popular spiritual teachers today focus only on the individual, posing the questions: How can I be healed? How can I achieve peace? and How can my life be better? But the greatest mark of the Holy Spirit’s transforming presence is not my communion with the divine, as important as that may be. Rather, it is love manifested in community.

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not only of ourselves as individuals, but also of ourselves as a church. Are we, all together, keeping our eyes focused on Jesus, the glory? Are we, all together, praying unceasingly that Jesus will carry out his transforming work on our relationships? So many popular spiritual teachers today focus only on the individual, posing the questions: How can *I* be healed? How can *I* achieve peace? and How can *my* life be better? But the greatest

mark of the Spirit’s transforming presence, Paul teaches, is not *my* communion with the divine, as important as that may be. Rather, the greatest mark of the Spirit’s presence is *love manifested in community*. As a Christian community, as a church, we are called by Christ to pour out his love by honoring and serving the weak, rather than holding onto any privileges or prestige that set us apart. How are we and the other members of the church honoring and serving the weak, both those within the Christian body, and those outside of it?

The Holy Spirit’s work of transformation begins here and now, by enabling fellowship in which all are brothers and sisters, joined to one another in solidarity and love. Such a fellowship reflects the image of Christ, who gave up his godly status and bound *himself* to *us* in solidarity and love. And such a fellowship serves as an “island” or “outpost” of heaven here on earth. It is a place where the sacred meets and invades the everyday. It is a place where people can behold the divine glory, as it is manifested in human flesh and transformed relationships. *Here heaven has come down to earth.*

The home we long for is heaven, which is a place where the peace of God, the love of God, and the justice of God prevail. We are heart-hungry

for this heaven; we are homesick, longing to be in this place. The good news of the Gospel is that we do not need to wait for someone to pick us up and take us home. Heaven is our home, but heaven begins here and now, today.

#### **NOTES**

1Elizabeth Yates, *Amos Fortune: Free Man* (New York: Puffin Books, 1950), 174-180.

2*Michael*, produced by Turner Home Video and directed by Nora Ephron, 106 minutes, 1996.

3Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 174.

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# Forever Where Our Hope is Born

BY TERRY W. YORK

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Forever where our hope is born,  
our singing and our songs;  
forever where our hope finds rest,  
forever with the Lord!

We cannot find a voice or song  
(no song could bear the load),  
for being where all hope is dead;  
no longer with the Lord.

Toward heav'n, alone, can songs be raised,  
toward hell, we can but cry.  
We send ahead our prayers and songs,  
communion with the Lord.

Arriving where our hope was born,  
we'll join past prayers and songs.  
We'll see the One to Whom we've sung,  
forever with the Lord!

# Forever Where Our Hope is Born

TERRY W. YORK

C. DAVID BOLIN

For - ev - er where our hope is born, our  
 We can not find a voice or song (no  
 T'ward heav'n, a - lone, can songs be raised, t'ward  
 Ar - riv - ing where our hope was born, we'll

sing - ing and our songs; for - ev - er where our  
 song could bear the load), for be - ing where all  
 hell, we can but cry. We send a - head our  
 join past prayers and songs. We'll see the One to

hope finds rest, for - ev - er with the Lord!  
 hope is dead; no lon - ger with the Lord.  
 prayers and songs, com - mu - nion with the Lord.  
 Whom we've sung, for - ev - er with the Lord!

# Heaven Shall Not Wait

JOHN L. BELL  
Words and Music

1. Heav'n shall not wait for the poor to lose their  
 2. wait for the rich to share their  
 3. wait for the dawn of great i -  
 4. wait for our le - gal - ized o -  
 5. wait for tri - um - phant hal - le -

pa - tience, the scorned to smile, the de -  
 for - tunes, the proud to fall, the e -  
 de - as, thoughts of com - pas - sion di -  
 be - dience, de - fined by stat - ute, to  
 lu - jahs, when earth has passed and we

spised to find a friend: Je - sus is  
 lite to tend the least: Je - sus is  
 vorced from cries of pain: Je - sus is  
 strict con - ven - tions bound: Je - sus is  
 reach an - oth - er shore: Je - sus is

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Tune: HEAVEN SHALL NOT WAIT  
 12.11.12.11.

Lord; he has cham - pioned the un - want - ed;  
 Lord; he has shown the mas - ters' priv - 'lege  
 Lord; he has mar - ried word and ac - tion;  
 Lord; he has hall - marked true al - le - giance  
 Lord in our pres - ent im - per - fec - tion;

in him in - jus - tice con - fronts its time - ly  
 to kneel and wash ser - vants' feet be - fore they  
 his cross and com - pa - ny make his pur - pose  
 good - ness ap - pears where his grace is sought and  
 his pow'r and love are for now and then for

1.-4. 5.  
 end.  
 feast.  
 plain. 2.-5. Heav'n shall not ev - er - more.  
 found.

# Worship Service

BY DAVID M. BRIDGES

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## *Prelude*

### *Solo:*

“Ain’t Got Time to Die”

Lord, I keep so busy praisin’ my Jesus  
Keep so busy praisin’ my Jesus  
Keep so busy praisin’ my Jesus  
Ain’t got time to die.  
‘Cause when I’m healin’ de sick (I’m praisin’ my Jesus)  
When I’m healin’ de sick (I’m praisin’ my Jesus)  
When I’m healin’ de sick (I’m praisin’ my Jesus)  
Ain’t got time to die.  
‘Cause it takes all o’ ma time (to praise my Jesus)  
All o’ ma time (to praise my Lord)  
If I don’t praise him de rocks gonter cry out  
Glory an’ honor, glory an’ honor  
Ain’t got time to die.

*African-American Spiritual*

### *The Summons to Worship:*<sup>1</sup>

Leader:

Brethren, we have met to worship, and adore the Lord our God; will you pray with all your power, while we try to preach the word?

**Men:**

**All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down,**

**Leader & Men:**

**Brethren, pray and holy manna will be showered all around.**

Leader:

Sisters, will you join and help us? Moses’ sister aided him; will you help the trembling mourners who are struggling hard with sin?



**Women:**

**Tell them all about the Savior, tell them that he will be found,**

**Leader & Women:**

**Sisters pray and holy manna will be showered all around.**

Leader:

See poor sinners all around you slumbering on the brink of woe:

Death is coming, hell is moving, can you bear to let them go?

**All:**

**See our fathers and our mothers, and our children sinking down;**

**we will pray and holy manna will be showered all around.**

*Hymn:*

“God is Working His Purpose Out”

*Solo:*

“On Jordan’s Stormy Banks I Stand”

(first stanza only, slowly)

*The Old Testament Reading:* Psalm 85 and Psalm 86:1-5

*Prayer of Confession:*<sup>2</sup>

Leader:

Come, you sinners poor and needy, weak and wounded,  
sick and sore:

**People:**

**Jesus ready stands to save us, full of pity, love and power.**

Leader:

Come, you thirsty, come and welcome, God’s free bounty glorify;

**People:**

**True belief and true repentance, every grace that brings us nigh.**

Leader:

Come you weary, heavy-laden, lost and ruined by the fall;

**People:**

**If we tarry, ‘til we better, we will never come at all.**

Leader:

Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream;

**People:**

**All the fitness God requires is to feel our own great need.**

*Anthem:*

“Broad is the Road”<sup>3</sup>

Broad is the road that leads to death,  
And thousands walk together there;  
But wisdom shows a narrower path,  
With here and there a traveller.

“Deny thyself, and take thy cross,”  
Is the Redeemer’s great command;  
Nature must count her gold but dross,  
If she would gain this heav’nly land.

The fearful soul that tires and faints,  
And walks the ways of God no more,  
Is but esteemed almost a saint,  
And makes his own destruction sure.

Lord, let not all my hopes be vain  
Create my heart entirely new;  
Which hypocrites could ne’er attain,  
Which false apostates never knew.

*Isaac Watts, arr. by Robert Shaw and Alice Parker*

*Hymn:*

“We’ll Understand It Better, By and By”

We are tossed and driven on the restless sea of time;  
Somber skies and howling tempests oft succeed a bright sunshine;  
In that land of perfect day, when the mists have rolled away,  
We will understand it better by and by.

*Refrain:* By and by, when the morning comes,  
When the saints of God are gathered home,  
We’ll tell the story how we’ve overcome,  
For we’ll understand it better by and by.

We are often destitute of the things that life demands,  
Want of food and want of shelter, thirsty hills and barren lands;  
We are trusting in the Lord, and according to God’s Word,  
We will understand it better by and by. *Refrain*

Trials dark on every hand, and we cannot understand  
All the ways that God could lead us to that blessed promised land;  
But He guides us with His eye, and we'll follow till we die,  
For we'll understand it better by and by. *Refrain*

Temptations, hidden snares often take us unawares,  
And our hearts are made to bleed for a thoughtless word or deed;  
And we wonder why the test when we try to do our best,  
But we'll understand it better by and by. *Refrain*

*Charles Albert Tindley*

*The Psalter Reading:*<sup>4</sup> Psalm 46

*Hymn:*

“Forever Where Our Hope is Born”

*Terry W. York (text and tune pp. 60-61 this volume)*

*Prayers of the Congregation:*

After a joy or concern, the congregation may respond:

Leader: Lord, for this joy,      or:      Lord, for this concern,  
**People: We give you thanks.      Hear our prayers.**

*Pastoral Prayer*

*The Gospel Reading:* Luke 16:19-31

*Anthem:*

“Poor Man Laz’rus”<sup>5</sup>

*African-American Spiritual, arr. Jester Hairston*

*Sermon*

*Solo:*

“Heaven Shall Not Wait”<sup>6</sup>

*John L. Bell (text and tune pp. 62-63 this volume)*

*Hymn:*

“Come We That Love the Lord”

*Offering*

*Doxology*

*Litany of Thanksgiving:*<sup>7</sup>

Leader:

Sing the wondrous love of Jesus, sing his mercy and his grace;  
In the mansions bright and blessed, he'll prepare for us a place.

**People:**

**When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be!**

Leader:

While we walk the pilgrim pathway, clouds will overspread the sky;  
But when traveling days are over, not a shadow, not a sigh.

**People:**

**When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be!**

Leader:

Let us then be true and faithful, trusting, serving every day,  
Just one glimpse of God's great glory will the toils of life repay.

**People:**

**When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be!**

*Closing Prayer:*<sup>8</sup>

“I am the resurrection and the life,” says the Lord. “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

*Hymn:*

“My Life Flows on in Endless Song”

My life flows on in endless song;  
above earth's lamentation,  
I hear the sweet, though far off hymn  
that hails a new creation.  
Through all the tumult and the strife  
I hear the music ringing.  
It finds an echo in my soul—  
how can I keep from singing?

What though my joys and comforts die,  
 the Lord my Savior liveth.  
 What though the darkness gather round,  
 songs in the night He giveth.  
 No storm can shake my inmost calm  
 while to that refuge clinging.  
 Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,  
 how can I keep from singing?

I lift mine eyes; the cloud grows thin;  
 I see the blue above it;  
 and day by day this pathway smooths  
 since first I learned to love it.  
 The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,  
 a fountain ever springing.  
 All things are mine since I am His—  
 how can I keep from singing?

*Anonymous 19<sup>th</sup> C. American*  
*Tune: ENDLESS SONG*

*Benediction.*<sup>9</sup>

For neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present,  
 nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything  
 else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in  
 Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from “Brethren, We Have Met to Worship” by George Atkins, 1819.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from “Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy” by Joseph Hart, 1759.

<sup>3</sup> © Lawson-Gould Music Publishers. Available by calling 1-800-327-7643 (catalog #910).

<sup>4</sup> This psalm may be read responsively by whole verse, or the congregation may sing or speak a response after verses 3, 7, and 11. (The word “Selah,” which may mean “amen” or “so be it,” appears after these verses and may be used as a spoken response.)

<sup>5</sup> © Bourne Music Publishers. Available at [www.bournemusic.com](http://www.bournemusic.com) (catalog #103936).

<sup>6</sup> © GIA Publications, Inc. Available by calling 1-800-442-1358 or at [www.giamusic.com](http://www.giamusic.com) (catalog G-3646).

<sup>7</sup> Adapted from “When We All Get to Heaven” by Eliza E. Hewitt, 1898.

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from John 11:25-26.

<sup>9</sup> Adapted from Romans 8:38-39.

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# Left Behind and Getting Ahead

BY DAVID LYLE JEFFREY

The *Left Behind* series, even in its ambiguous title, preys upon our worries about whether we really are saved and about being “behind” the general culture, “out of touch” with standards of fashion. The success of this kind of fictionalized Christianity should make us fear that the appetites of the church have become too much like the appetites of the world.

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There’s no time to change your mind.  
The Son has come, and you’ve been left behind.  
(Larry Norman, “I Wish We’d All Been Ready,” 1969)

**I**f commercial success is a reliable measure of God’s blessing, or if it faithfully authenticates a prophetic proclamation, then the millions upon millions of sales for the multi-volume *Left Behind* series are none too many for their enthusiastic readers. Five of the nine volumes already released (*Apollyon*; *Assassins*; *The Indwelling*; *The Mark*; and *Desecration*) stand at or near the top of best-seller lists from the *New York Times* to *Publisher’s Weekly*, making this, the publisher is happy to say, “the fastest selling fiction series ever.” It might even seem that the joint efforts of prophecy scholar and pastor Tim LaHaye and his amanuensis Jerry B. Jenkins have risen to such unprecedented heights of success that the galaxy of great world literature (most of which, of course, sold rather poorly in their author’s lifetimes) has been forever altered. Despite their 60 to 600 year head start, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan, and Tolkien had better look to their laurels.

Can the market ever be wrong? Certainly not when it comes to what will make money. That is why we say that the customer is always right. And “right” for selling the Jenkins and LaHaye series implies providing certitude in matters of compelling interest to almost everyone. “The Future is Clear,” reads the publisher’s headline advertisement. These novels are to be understood by us as more than mere fiction; they are presented as a futurology of biblically warranted authority. Who could resist the guarantee of a failsafe crystal ball, especially when the markets are wobbly, the culture was undecided, and the world a mess? Above all, who could resist such unimpeachable assurance that he or she will be exempt from the worst of the approaching divine judgments on a sinful world, yet able to have a preview of each catastrophe and, just possibly, a ring-side seat?

It is clear enough that Jenkins and LaHaye, like Hal Lindsey and many another of their ilk, are superb marketers. They study the trends, particularly in their target population, with precision and savvy. They know what sells. As various polls have made clear, North American evangelicals are interested above all in health, wealth, and the end of the world as we know it. What super-vitamins and investment letters do for us in respect of our insecurities about health and future prosperity, the many apocalypticists do for our sense of spiritual marginalization and resulting social insecurities. We Christians may be the object of derision and neglect by the moguls of political fashion now, but isn’t it great to know that it is we ourselves who will have the very last laugh?

One of the most brilliant strokes of market engineering and product design in the *Left Behind* series is the way in which, even in its ambiguous title, it preys upon the worries some evangelicals intermittently exhibit about whether they really are saved. Am I really a child of grace, or should I go

forward at the next altar call, maybe even get baptized again? As one of my neighbors (thrice baptized) is reported to have said, “You can’t be too clean.” But I wonder if the general title does not also prey subconsciously at least on our worry about being “behind” the general culture, “out of touch” with the standards of fashion. Are we using the right technology? Is our sound system state of the art? Do our pop idols have arrangements

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and backup vocals as good as theirs, etc.? As a typically frowzy and rumped professor I admit to arguably inexpert speculation here: My forbearing spouse has to frog-march me into the haberdashers once a year before I get picked up as vagrant. (Actually, I sort of like the free soup.) Nonetheless, “left behind” sounds a lot like a general domestic witticism of one of my daughters when she was the most “with-it” teen in her youth group and embarrassed to sit with her Dad in church.

Well, if there is anyone left among those reading this article who have yet to read even one of the Jenkins-LaHaye novels, please be assured that there is nothing frowzy to be embarrassed by in these books. You will soon discover that the characters lack for no advantage in name-brand fashion, and that they are way ahead of the game in high tech innovations and snappy hardware. Indeed, their success in foiling the Antichrist depends to some considerable degree on their superior mastery of technology hardly yet available to the general customer. Here too are exciting previews of what is to come—enough to gratify the weekend technolatriy of our video game tastes even as we are instructed in a historically peculiar theological view of the “last days.”

In the world of Jenkins and LaHaye, the once discrete categories of theology and technology are so tightly connected as to seem almost a new kind of hypostatic union. Altogether typically, the narrator re-introduces the hero on the first page of the latest volume, *Desecration*, in this way: “Engaged in the riskiest endeavor of his life, Rayford had cast his lot with God and the miracle of technology.” Crisis after crisis resolves through alternating divine prompts and Internet prompts. When the prophet speaks, he is miraculously heard simultaneously in English and in Hebrew, but he needs lots of fresh batteries to run his programs. Throughout the novels, technology dazzles: from the stage-setting *Left Behind* forward, there is a connection between God’s action in history and human mastery of electronic wizardry which is indispensable to the turbulent and page-turning plot.

While the technological element and high degree of consciousness about material culture has taken an unusual, perhaps even unique, turn in the *Left Behind* novels, their basic futurism and predictive character conforms, it should be acknowledged, to a problematic but venerable lineage. A brief overview of this genealogy is instructive.

While not much apocalyptic speculation appears in the writings left to us by the early church, writers such as Justin Martyr and St. Irenaeus were well aware that a wide range of interpretations of Revelation, some clearly contrary to others, had emerged among people who belonged equally to “the pure and pious faith, and are true Christians.” Still more creative predictive teaching about the apocalypse, such as that by the late second century heretic Montanus, soon began to appear. As it proliferated, this type of teaching became increasingly arbitrary and eclectic about biblical



exegesis. The desire to predict a firm date for Christ's return also began surprisingly early: Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 225), for example, confidently predicted that Christ would establish his kingdom in 496 A.D.

Cautions against this kind of pronouncement, even by some of the most authoritative voices in Christian history, have had little effect on enthusiasts. Even John Bunyan, for example, first and most luminous Baptist writer of spiritual fiction, openly lamented "the forwardness of some who have predicted the time of the downfall of the Antichrist, to the shame of them and their brethren," and feared that "the wrong that such by their boldness have done to the church of God" would prove irreparable (*Of Antichrist, and His Ruin* [1692]). As a lot, apocalypticists have not shared Bunyan's fear or sense of shame about the making of bold predictions.

Consequently, in the history of Christendom the expected date of Christ's Second Coming has proved to be a highly moveable feast. Just to list a few of the highlights: the Glorious Return was predicted for the years 1000, 1200, 1233, 1260, 1266, 1300, 1333, 1400, 1600, 1642, 1660, 1776, 1843, 1988, 1992, 2000, and so on, all with a high order of certainty and correlation to current events as well as a political identification of the Antichrist. The Roman emperors Nero (d. 68 A.D.) and Justinian (d. 565), Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Sicily (d. 1250), Napoleon, Pope Boniface VIII, Martin Luther, Pope Leo II, Hitler, President Ronald Reagan, USSR President Michael Gorbachev, Saddam Hussein, and Pope John Paul II are only a few of those who have qualified for extensive treatments of their role as Antichrist, each possessed of all certitude and seriousness.

The Antichrist of Jenkins and LaHaye, one Nicolae Carpathia, "a mortal incendiary, flaunting his temporary power" (*Desecration*, p. 162), is an evidently fictitious but nonetheless quite contemporary figure. As former Secretary-General of the United Nations and self-appointed Potentate of the Global Community, Carpathia represents the European Union and World Government rather than any specific living individual. His sidekick, Leon Fortunato, once a liberal Protestant theologian and now Most High Reverend Father of Carpathianism, is a pompous, sycophantic, and mostly comical figure who comes in the end to possess real (though limited) demonic powers. When nonetheless afflicted with the plague of boils, he furiously scratches his backside in public whilst trying to make speeches upholding the civic religion of Antichrist. It must be acknowledged that this type of camp-humor also has its precedents in the history of apocalyptic literature—one thinks of the Beelzebubs of some medieval plays on the Last Judgment, of certain characters in Dante's *Inferno*, and of one "Hell" panel in a Bosch triptych painting, also about the Last Days. But the general attempt at contemporary literary realism in our authors' *Desecration* causes this sort of gesture to run more to bathos than to belly laugh. As with the toppling-over backwards of the cigar-smoking security officer of the Global Community, implausibly named Figueroa, such gestures toward

farce sit uneasily with the seriousness for which the authors are striving.

Just how serious are Jenkins and LaHaye about the theology they represent? Despite the fact that this “last days” fiction has proven to be precisely the correct market calculus for gaining the attention of socially and politically insular North American Christians, I am sure that the authors are earnest in their adherence to the historically eccentric biblical

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We might say of this long list of Christian futurologists that some speculation, at some point, is likely to be right about some things. But they have all, equally, been wrong about the identity of the Antichrist and the date of the Second Coming, and to that extent have misled the faithful.

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exegesis their novels seek to advance. In that, too, they are traditional. Likewise sincere was Joachim da Fiore (d. 1202), whose three-stage (past-present-future) apocalyptic historiography was later secularized (without its 1260 A.D. parousia) by Hegel and Marx. So too was Melchior Hoffman, whose prediction (in 1530) of an imminent literal millennial reign of Christ on earth

fired the imagination of the Anabaptists in Germany and ended with one of his followers proclaiming himself the “New Enoch” and Münster the New Jerusalem. The disciple, Jan Matthys (“Enoch”), taught that while the rest of the world would be destroyed, Anabaptists would survive in their “city of refuge.” After a short political triumph (and the introduction of polygamy) the Münster Anabaptists actually died like flies when the bishop’s forces, in a scene premonitory of the Branch Davidian fiasco, broke in and slaughtered them wholesale.

But we need not go quite so deeply into fringe sources for examples of misplaced theological seriousness. So also serious was John Bale, the Protestant playwright, in his elaboration of the seven ages of world history to be followed by a new heaven of renewed faith and a new earth of faith’s full application. John Foxe, author of the famous *Book of Martyrs* (1563), wrote a commentary on the Apocalypse in which the first six ages are successive millennia, followed by a seventh some time before 2000 A.D. Milton believed that England, not Jerusalem, would be the seat of Christ’s millennial empire, while the radical Puritan Gerrard Winstanley believed that the Puritan revolution of 1642 itself marked the beginning of the millennium. Later, with equal seriousness, Samuel Sherwood (*The Church’s Flight into the Wilderness* [1776]) asserted that the American Revolution had performed the same inaugural function. Cotton Mather believed that the millennial kingdom would come in America, not England. And who would doubt that William Miller, father of the Seventh-Day Adventists,

was serious when he wrote in 1838 his enormously popular *Evidence from Scripture and History of the Second Coming of Christ, About the Year 1843?*

Nor is it possible to claim that only the poor and uneducated have been susceptible of becoming serious adherents to futuristic theological speculation. The educated and privileged have also lined up—and by the millions. Thus, side by side on the historical shelf we find the accounts of Joanna Southcott, the Devonshire Milkmaid prophetess (1750-1814), and the *Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times* (1798) of Richard Brothers, the Royal Navy officer who founded the British Israelite movement, and who claimed direct descent from James the brother of the Lord. Brothers, though confined for a time as a dangerous lunatic and later sent to prison as a general menace, counted among his converts Richard Brassey Halhed, a reasonably eminent oriental scholar and Member of Parliament. Sir William Alexander, author of the colorful *Dooms-day, or the Great Day of the Lord's Judgment* (1637), was Earl of Stirling, Governor of Nova Scotia in 1621, and Secretary of State in Scotland in 1626. And what are we to make of the fact that the great physicist Sir Isaac Newton wrote a mind-bending commentary on Daniel (published 1733), which purported to show by numerical analysis a necessary date for the Second Coming? Likewise, Robert Hugh Benson's *The Lord of the World* (1907) and Vladimir Soloviev's "Short Story of the Antichrist" (1900, in which the Antichrist is an Anglican clergyman) are hardly the products of uneducated or underprivileged minds.

Charitably, we might go so far as to say of this long and variegated list of futurologists that some speculation, at some point, is likely to be right about some things. But they have all, equally, been wrong about the identity of the Antichrist and the date of the Second Coming, and to that extent have misled the faithful. Either that, or there are far more people who have already been left behind than Jenkins and LaHaye suspect.

What is most distinctive about the *Left Behind* novels is not, in the light of this history, their authors' apparent certainty that we are even now at the end of the world, nor their gnostic encoding of Scripture whereby only their own "secret knowledge" tells the full salvation story. (Those features are typical of the genre.) It is rather that, for all the interior sermonizing of their proto-evangelist Tsion ben-Judah, the Jewish convert, and the sliced-in dispensationalist Bible teaching he provides by encrypted code on the Web to a billion followers (as well as to you and me, gentle reader), the *Left Behind* novels are so spiritually shallow. In their focus on material culture and earthly conflict they become tepid in characterizing the depth and inwardness of spiritual life that ought to pertain among believers.

In earlier apocalyptic writings, hell and heaven often feature very largely indeed, as many more than Dante will bear witness. But these biblically described extremes of consequence have tended to invite a profound seriousness of interior reflection in traditional apocalyptic, as well as in the more careful contemporary Christian apocalyptic fiction of someone like

Michael O'Brien in *Father Elijah* (1996). What we might say of Jenkins and LaHaye's sci-fi fictionalized eschatology is that "they have entirely altered the point of view for determining what seriousness is" (to borrow a phrase from Kierkegaard). Alas, Jenkins and La Haye have plenty of current company in this shift of focus toward a spectator-driven, exteriorized newsmanship. All rational and naturalistic resistance notwithstanding, apocalypticism flourishes equally in the *National Enquirer*, in occultish lore, and among televangelical and populist preachers almost precisely to the degree that each invites a kind of morbid voyeurism about the here and now and superficial speculation about future calamities.

That too, I fear, is at least part of the appeal in dispensationalism itself, and it may be as much a cause as an effect of dispensationalism's preoccupation with calamity as well as its failure to distinguish between prophecy and apocalypticism. Dispensationalists typically describe their apocalyptic speculation, whether as exegesis or, as here, in fiction, as if it were "biblical prophecy." But in the Bible, the prophets usually see God working through history to establish his kingdom, and they are vehement in their denunciation of their fellow-citizens' idolatry of the material culture as well as of their appetite for sorcerer-like prognostication. Their primary purpose is to call a disobedient "elect" to contrition and repentance. As a consequence, the biblical prophets weren't so good at making a profit—at least not in the marketplace. They were rather, by virtue of their agreement to proclaim God's judgment on sin and injustice, in the market as in the court, career calamities almost to a person. Condemnation of sin and calls to repentance, biblically at least, have not been big sellers.

On the other hand, apocalypticism typically grows out of a conviction that most contemporary persons and institutions are irredeemably corrupt, fit only for destruction. It calls out for God's judgment upon the general culture, or perhaps vindication for its subculture. To this extent it expresses despair, and in some of the historical examples I have cited, a barely muted paranoia. But it is also inspired by unshakable faith that God will, in the end, put everything right for the virtuous few, the faithful remnant.

In classic dispensationalism, the virtuous remnant is two-fold. At the time of the Rapture true believers are exempted from the Great Tribulation; Christians are caught up into heaven. After the Rapture God fulfills his plan to redeem a faithful remnant among his chosen people Israel. In the new and more generous dispensationalism of LaHaye, all those left behind get a second chance. That's cool. In fact, the Gentiles saved after the Rapture become key players in the redemption of the Jews. This provides the rationale for their plot, and for some of the most entertaining interaction and theological speculation in the novels. It also effectively reduces the Second Coming to a kind of wake-up call to the unsaved.

Despite early marginalization, dispensationalism has won a growing popular following in the United States; in some evangelical and Pentecostal

churches it is now represented as the unequivocal literal sense of the biblical texts. While dispensationalism has limited support even in evangelical seminaries, its many “prophetic” apocalypticists provide, whether in preaching investment advice (e.g., “Investment Strategies for the End of Time”—i.e., “Buy Gold”) or producing popular fiction and film, many marketable commodities. It is not only dispensationalists, nor Christians only, who have made mogul millionaires out of the likes of Jenkins and LaHaye.

But such is today’s dominant idea of “successful ministry.” We hire market consultants for churches, we consult advertising agencies, we find out “what sells.” If you are one of those who doubts that in spiritual matters the market is the measure of all things, or worries that the scandal of the Gospel has been, through “the miracle of modern technology,” transformed into one more species of sensationalism, then you probably don’t want to invest in all nine volumes of the *Left Behind* series, the eighteen-volume *Left Behind for Kids*, or the instructional video, *Are You Left Behind? Left Behind: the Board Game*, now available on the Web for half price, is a possible party diversion for those who haven’t much of a grip on their weekend sanctification anyway, but even so I haven’t myself ordered it.

Further, if you are inclined to suspect that a culture which entertains itself with vicarious violence may become inured to the truly serious nature of violence, then you may well wonder if turning the high theological register of biblical revelation into harum-scarum entertainment doesn’t trivialize and thus enervate response in this area also. Most of all, if you are the sort of Christian who fears to challenge the admonition of Jesus,

that “about that day and hour, no one knows” (Matthew 24:36), or who thinks that a badly written scene in which the Antichrist, drunk with power and as stupid as the pig he straddles to slaughter in the Holy of Holies, wallowing in its blood and laughing, borders on intemperance and irreverence of a sort a Christian novelist should

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This kind of fictionalized Christianity makes me queasy. There seems to be little enough appetite left for God’s holiness, for quiet self-effacement before a God whose Holy Word requires of us at the least a more careful constraint.

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probably eschew, then you should pass on the most recent volume, *Desecration*, in particular. It seems to me that this title advertises accurately something more than its authors probably intended.

On the other hand, if you can relate to a frantic scene in which two men knock down demonic scorpion locusts with tennis racquets while one tries to effect a conversion in the other (*Apollyon*), or find plausible or heroic a character who, in the heat of evacuating Jewish converts from Jerusalem so

as to prevent their imminent slaughter is all the while thinking “he hadn’t had this much fun since he was a schoolkid and his pet snake found his sister’s room” (*Desecration*, p. 241), then perhaps these novels are just your cup of tea.

Not mine. This kind of thing makes me queasy. Sometimes it makes me weep. Sometimes, but not in the sense the authors intend, it causes me to tremble. If being in the fear of the Lord is not a foolish thing (Proverbs 1:7), if being afraid of sins of presumption (Psalm 19:12) is not just an introvert’s timidity, then we should fear that the appetites of the church apparently have become too much like the appetites of the world. And that there seems to be little enough appetite left for God’s holiness, for quiet self-effacement before a God whose Holy Word requires of us at the least a more careful constraint upon how we represent it with our own words.

In that matter, of course, we all come short of the glory of God. I need as much as anyone the constraint of faithful interpreters of Scripture across the ages, as well as now, in my own approach to even the most perspicuous of biblical texts. The Book of Revelation in particular is not, I would suggest, nearly so perspicuous a text as these novels make it seem. Like Irenaeus of old, I find widely divergent and mutually contradictory accounts, even among those who, like Jenkins and LaHaye, I regard as “true Christians.” But I am concerned that their account is one of the most contradictory to the preponderant sense of faithful interpreters down through the ages on many points. Worse, it seems to me that their work is actually contrary in its tone and spirit to the tone and spirit of Scripture, and that it runs the grave risk of putting words in the mouth of Scripture. By these novels, at least the ones I have read, I thus find myself in a manner quite opposite to John Wesley, with my heart grown strangely cool.

All around me I see that this kind of fictionalized Christianity sells like hotcakes. LaHaye, having dumped Jenkins to increase his take (there are, of course, lawsuits in the offing), has been offered an advance of \$45 million by a secular publishing house for four new novels. This is better business than your average love-offering. In the idiom of the marketplace, one has to agree that Jenkins and LaHaye, in an unprecedented way, are really “getting ahead.” But where are they leading us?

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# Nothing But the Truth

A C O N V E R S A T I O N   W I T H  
P E T E R   J .   K R E E F T

Regardless of whether we are addressing our post-Christian culture or answering our children's hard questions, we owe to them nothing but the truth as we know it about heaven and hell, the unspeakable bliss and unspeakable misery that frame our existence.

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**A**mong the more than 35 books written by Peter J. Kreeft (pronounced "Krayft") are some of the most insightful Christian writings today about heaven and hell. In the winsome dialogues *Socrates Meets Jesus* (Intervarsity Press, 1987, 2002) and *Between Heaven and Hell* (Intervarsity Press, 1982), in which he imagines an afterlife meeting of C. S. Lewis, John F. Kennedy and Aldous Huxley (all of whom died within hours of each other), and through more direct teaching like *Catholic Christianity: A Complete Catechism of Catholic Beliefs Based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Ignatius Press, 2001), Kreeft presents the gospel with imagination.

**Susan Dolan-Henderson: Do people today take heaven and hell seriously? Though the wider, "approved" culture says dwelling on these transcendent realities is passé, we see all around us the neo-pagan concern with angels. Opinion polls say most people believe in some sort of afterlife. Maybe people are searching for something?**

Peter Kreeft: People in every age are always people. Human nature is unchangeable. Heaven and hell as realities touch human nature as nothing else does, the one being the total fulfillment of human nature and the other being the total failure of it. Human souls also, at least unconsciously, know this innately, though they may cover it up. Therefore people today do take heaven and hell seriously, 'deep down.' However, Christendom is dead. We no longer have a Christian society to help us to know the truth and the

good and the beautiful. Our materialistic culture considers working for peace and justice (i.e. solving the problems of the physical pains that are caused by war and poverty) more important than thinking about the alternatives of heaven or hell—that is, unlimited, unending, unimaginable, and unutterable ecstasy or misery. That’s like considering efficient garbage collection more important than sex. I suspect that the current interest in angels is partly a reaction, from our deep, unconscious wisdom, against our culture’s screwing down the manhole covers over our heads and denying the supernatural, and partly a fad as tame and shallow and inauthentic as the little gold crosses worn on little gold chains around little necks. One reason for suspecting this is that almost never do you hear, in any contemporary account of meeting or seeing an angel, the very first reaction that is always present in Scripture whenever a real angel is met, namely fear. The angel almost always has to say “fear not” first. But modern ‘angels’ are too nice (like all those ‘nice’ Christians) for that.

**Why have you been so concerned with heaven and hell in your writings?**

I am concerned about heaven and hell for one reason only: I know I am human, and will die, and will live forever either in unspeakable bliss or in unspeakable misery. If this is not true, Christianity, the Church, Christ, and the Bible are all liars. If it true, how could concern for heaven or hell be a personal quirk? Is it an unusual personal quirk for a soldier on a battlefield to wonder whether he and his buddy are going to be killed or not?

**Plato believed in the afterlife because of justice, that the wicked must be punished and the righteous rewarded after this life. Is it all right for Christians to believe in heaven because of the promise of a reward? Or should we obey God without that?**

One good reason for believing in heaven is Plato’s (and Kant’s): justice must have the last word, and it does not have the last word in this life, it seems; therefore, there must be “the rest of the story,” if the story is a story of justice. There is a difference between believing that heaven exists and hoping to go there, however. Philosophical arguments (like the one above) constitute good reasons for the first; Christ’s cross is the basis for the second. It is certainly better to obey God out of love than out of fear or desire for reward. God taught his chosen people first that they must “be holy for the Lord your God is holy,” and only later did he reveal the rewards after death clearly. But God, being love, stoops to conquer and accepts even selfish fear (fear of punishment) as a step on the way to unselfish fear (awe, piety, just response to God’s nature). Like the father of a toddler, God is “easy to please but hard to satisfy.” The beginning of C.S. Lewis’ great sermon, “The Weight of Glory,” is the best thing I’ve ever read on this question of motives. Pascal also has a very wise saying in the *Pensees* on this. He says that we love ourselves by nature, not by choice, so God made it possible for us to love him by joining himself to our nature, so



that in loving God we love ourselves. As Aquinas says, grace perfects nature rather than destroying it. The contrast between eros (desire for one's own good) and agape (desire for the other's good) is not as total as most people think—rather like the contrast between the body and soul.

**How literally should we take the Biblical stories and images of hell?**

All language about hell, heaven, and God are, I think, to be taken nonliterally, for we cannot see them, so the language taken from the realm of visible things (for example, fire, light, or fatherhood) is analogical. Of course it is true, authoritative, infallible, terribly important, and revealing. But it is not literal. If there were literal, physical fire in hell, it would not be so bad, for the physical pain would distract the damned from their greater, spiritual, interior torment, as tearing our hair out or batting our head against the wall distracts us from terrible misery even in this world.

**In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis's fictional account of heaven and hell, a theologian who was an Anglican bishop is in hell. Can we go to hell for mistaken theology?**

Chapter 6 of *The Great Divorce* is indeed memorable. One cannot go to hell for mistaken theology, but one can certainly go to hell for apostasy, or abandonment of faith in God, which is what happens to the bishop. There is a great little episode in the television sitcom "Happy Days" where Fonzie instructs Spike about the difference between a mistake and a sin. Spike wants to be cool like Fonzie, so he steals money from Al's diner's cash register. Fonzie demands he put it back. Spike says, "All right, Fonz, I made a mistake." Fonzie pulls him up short: "No, Spike. You didn't make a mistake. Two and two is six is a mistake. What you did was a crime."

**In postmodernity, although starting with modernity, many people in our culture have lost touch with any meaning in life larger than their own goals and purposes. This is one reason that heaven and**

**hell are not important for many people. What aberrant responses to this loss of transcendent meaning do you see?**

Yes, postmodernity is only the extension of modernity. The attack on reason is part of the same rebellion as the worship of reason. Both stem from the loss of our true telos or end. And then you ask me what aberrant responses to this loss do I see. I answer: all of them. All human wrongs are substitutes for the real end, the real happiness. Aquinas writes: "Man can-

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God, being love, stoops to conquer and accepts even selfish fear (fear of punishment) as a step on the way to unselfish fear (awe, piety, just response to God's nature). Like the father of a toddler, God is "easy to please but hard to satisfy."

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not live without joy. Therefore it is necessary that one deprived of true, spiritual joy go over to carnal pleasures.” When the John knocks on the whorehouse door, he is really looking for a cathedral. It’s the restless heart. It’s all in Augustine, all in Augustine.

**And ignoring our true telos distorts our culture—for instance, our religion and science?**

Absent the supernatural, religion in America has tended to become a servant of pop psychology. By contrast, science (even as practiced by atheistic scientists who argue against religion) challenges religious truth in a far more healthy way than its supposed friends do; for the scientist is more devoted to objective truth than “personal fulfillment,” which is usually little more than a euphemism for money, sex, and freedom from pain. Knowledge of the truth is the aim of sci-

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Each of us is so unique that there is some aspect of God that you alone can appreciate. One of your blissful jobs in eternity will be to communicate that to others (and they to communicate theirs to you) by means whereof all earthly art is a pale imitation.

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ence. I find that science majors are far more open to religion than humanities majors today. You can’t be a successful practicing scientist and be a subjectivist, or a deconstructionist. “It feels right to me” is not used as the *nihil obstat* or *imprimatur* for scientific hypotheses, only for “re-ligious” ideas.

**What do you think about theology, which is supposedly about God, and its loss of transcendence? Most theology today stresses God’s immanence and relationship to us. Some theologians speak of “the hole in God” that we have to fill in, rather than it being a hole within ourselves that can only be filled by God.**

Theology, like science, is paradoxical if it is true to the whole of reality. Thus to deny either God’s transcendence or God’s immanence is like denying that light is a particle or that it is a wave. God can be totally immanent only because he is totally transcendent, as the subject can know any object because it is not an object, and as light can illumine all colors because it transcends all color, and as the act of existence can actualize any and all essences because it is not any essence but transcends essence. I suspect those theologians mean by “the hole in God” what C. S. Lewis means by almost the same image in *The Problem of Pain*, the “Heaven” chapter (which is just about the best thing I have ever read on it): that each of us is so unique that there is some aspect of God, some facet of the “immortal diamond,” that you and you alone can appreciate; and that one of your blissful jobs in eternity will be to communicate that to others (and they to communicate

theirs to you) by means whereof all earthly art is a pale imitation. In one sense it is healthier to say we exist to fill holes (not lacks) in God than to say God exists to fill holes (lacks) in us. God does not exist for our sake. God exists for his own sake. We exist for God's sake.

**How can we train our children toward healthy Christian thinking about the outcome of our lives? For instance, my son Liam was about 18 months old when my mother died a few years ago; my father died in 1984. My parents had many problems. When Liam asks if they went to heaven, I cannot say "Yes" with certainty. How would you answer that?**

The answer to all questions about what to say to our children is one word: truth. Just tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth as you see it and believe it. Why should children receive any less than the jury at a trial? I am very big on honesty, so I would not even pretend to small children that you are certain that so-and-so is going to heaven when you are not. I would say, "I think so," or "I hope so," and surround this answer with a lot of love, both for the child and for so-and-so. You were honest with your son ("I don't know"). I think we should be careful, however, not to share our personal doubts and frustrations with children. We all have doubts, and when asked we should answer honestly about them; but I hope your faith is sound and sure enough so that you can communicate to your son the absolute certainty that God loves you. Sometimes that certainty is even more impressive when accompanied by confession of doubts that have been overcome, especially when we are talking to someone a little older; but sometimes the doubts make it more confusing, especially to small children, who think "either/or" rather than "both/and." But always, always honesty.

**What have I missed?**

You end with a good question: What have I missed? I think the answer is usually: almost everything; but that's okay—you've started. The greatest theologian in history, Thomas Aquinas, did not finish the greatest theology book in history because, he confessed, "compared with what I have seen, all I have written is straw." If the *Summa Theologiae* is straw, our best is dust. Yet God created man from dust, and He can take ours and make palaces of it.



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# The History of Heaven and Hell

BY R I K K W A T T S

How relevant to the modern world are heaven and hell? Our longing for justice, which derives in part from an increasing sense of human dignity, almost demands a final accounting. Likewise our deepest longings to be loved and to love, also tied to our awareness of human dignity, make it difficult to accept that a less than perfect world is all there is.

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**W**here do the Christian notions of heaven and hell come from? How relevant are they in the modern world? The three books reviewed here concentrate, each in their own way, on the first question; but in doing so they offer clues for answering the second.

Alan Bernstein is a medievalist who set out to write an introductory essay and ended up with a book, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds* (Cornell University Press, 1993; 392 pp., \$21.50 paperback). His fundamental thesis is that the Christian notion of hell as “a divinely sanctioned place of eternal torment for the wicked” is a late development among views of after-death existence (p. 3). In a partially thematic, partially chronological treatment, Bernstein briefly examines ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian ideas before concentrating on Greco-Roman, Jewish, and finally Christian perspectives.

Initially, the afterlife was neutral; the righteous and wicked shared the same shadowy fate. (In the Greek tradition, only particularly wicked heroes suffered.) But this created problems: why should the righteous dwell together with the wicked? Already hinted at in very early Egypt (in stories

about Osiris, the god of the dead) and the Homeric period (in worship of Demeter, a goddess of agriculture), a bifurcation emerges wherein the moral or enlightened quality of one's life determines one's fate (e.g. the writings of Plato and Plutarch, and the book of Daniel). Later, religiously skeptical Roman authors, like Cicero and Lucian, use this notion to strengthen the state or to foster virtue; in their thought, the opponent of civic virtue becomes a candidate for hell, and hell becomes a sublimated desire for vengeance (p. 202). This utilitarian approach is foreign to Jewish and Christian thinkers for whom the destiny of the wicked was a question of God's justice. But it was the very question of justice, when set alongside the mercy of a God who himself was a victim, that raised serious questions for Christians. Is hell annihilation or eternal suffering? And if the latter, is there any escape? Hence the tension between the early theologians Origen (185-232 A.D.), who believed in the reforming character of hell such that even death itself will be reconciled (Colossians 1:20), and Augustine (354-430 A.D.), for whom perfection implied immutability, who could allow no further character change in those persons consigned to heaven or hell after the final judgment. This tension is with us still.

Bernstein covers a vast field and we are greatly in his debt. But his strength is also his weakness. In the biblical materials, where I have some expertise, there are significant problems, including a number of exegetically dubious discussions and the failure to appreciate the occasional nature of Paul's writings: does Paul's relative silence really mean that he "doesn't have a clear idea of hell"

(p. 207), or just that he feels no need to develop this topic in his letters? Consequently one feels uneasy in trusting Bernstein's detail in other places. There are also problems with the larger thesis. While the arrangement and argument implies a development

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from neutral to moral conceptions of hell, Bernstein allows that the ideas are "historically concurrent" (p. 107). The reality appears more complex than the book's linear organization suggests.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the largely descriptive nature of the book, it raises important questions. What drives our ideas of discipline in the afterlife? To put it crudely, is it self-focused and utilitarian, or grounded in a reality beyond us? To what extent is a more ordered human society, dependent as it is on a more defined notion of justice (which is a moral abstraction) and a growing sense of human dignity (which is an experience),

responsible for the notion of settling accounts in the afterlife? Does hell become more horrid as human beings become more significant, and with it torments that are increasingly suited to the crime (as in the second century Gnostic writing, *Apocalypse of Peter*)? We will return to these later.

One of Bernstein's points, that our environment influences our perception of hell, is closely detailed in Piero Camporesi's *The Fear of Hell: Images of Damnation and Salvation in Early Modern Europe* (translated by Lucinda Byatt; University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991; 221 pp., \$49.50 hardcover). Perhaps in keeping with its subject matter, Camporesi's style and content is flamboyantly Baroque. (In spite of the title, his material is limited to Jesuit preaching in seventeenth century Italy.) Offering an almost overwhelming compendium of lurid images, Camporesi shows how the geography and punishments of hell mapped the great changes of that century. Under Dante's hand the "Aristotelian compass and a Thomastic square" had transformed the medieval hell into a "rigorously geometric and minutely controlled" Florentine city of graded inhabitants. But when faced with emergent and unrestrained Baroque sensuality, the fire and ice disappeared and hell became a cesspool resembling the worst of primitive working conditions where overcrowded inhabitants were pressed into a seething mass of reeking, violating promiscuity and shameful diseases, which was a horrifying prospect for an elite audience. (Hell is indeed "other people.") Such horrors could not long be endured, and gradually the dandies and skeptics turned to satire to blunt its sting. Finally, with the restraint and refinement of the eighteenth century, hell too became more refined, and under the influence of Galilean science was even removed to the Sun (because it was located in the center of the universe in Galileo's world system). But when this more civilized version of hell lost its power to morally reform people, the universal fire and the scandalous mix of the noble and the plebe returned. Our conception of hell is far more closely linked to our present experience than we might otherwise consider.

Although most of his previous work likewise concentrated on hell, Jeffery Burton Russell makes a radical change in direction in *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton University Press, 1997; 256 pp., \$15.95 paperback). Professor of History and Religious Studies at the University of California, he offers a loving and profoundly stimulating foray into conceptualizations of heaven. This title is also misleading since the focus is on the Christian heaven, with some other traditions, such as Jewish and Greek, being mentioned only as contributing influences. But the title thought, "Singing Silence," captures perfectly the mystery and apparent antinomies that immediately arise when our finite minds attempt to grapple with the foundation of all human existence. This is because, for Russell, to understand heaven is about our existential longing to understand the self, others, the cosmos, and God (p. 3).

The problems facing serious reflection on heaven are many: Is heaven here among us, or beyond? Is it attained primarily through the intellect (as Thomas Aquinas taught) or through love, or will (as in Bernard of Clairvaux)? Is it primarily individual or communal? Is God ultimately unknowable, or can the intellect grasp some things? Is it the beatific vision of God through a penetrating awareness of God's outward acts (as in the Eastern tradition), or is it an unmediated experience of his essential being (as understood in the West)? Is it experienced immediately on death or only after the final judgment? To what extent are we united with God (which is called "divinization" in spiritual theology, especially in the Eastern tradition) and yet maintain our individuality? If body and soul are separated at death, how and at what point is our human unity maintained or restored? Can we speak of embodied and conscious existence in a place which is at once no place and all places, and where all is the eternal present? How does one reconcile the theological need for abstraction with the everyday desire for physical images? Faced with such profound questions, modern "concrete" language is utterly inadequate. Instead, because reality is at bottom personal and moral, any

serious talk about heaven must necessarily be metaphorical and allegorical, because only such language can express our ideas of fundamental reality.

Taking a roughly chronological approach, Russell first examines the Christian heaven's Greek and Jewish antecedents. Platonic dualism, Aristotelian physics, and Ptolemaic geography envisaged the individual soul's upward flight from the discarded body into a hierarchy of outer spheres (air, ether, planets, stars,

and finally the *primum mobile*). To the Jewish mind, however, both body and creation are good; so, heaven often is conceived as coming to a restored earth inhabited by resurrected and embodied persons. While the Greek notion of upward movement was largely accepted, it was the attempt to reconcile Greek immortality of the soul with Jewish bodily resurrection that would set Christian thinkers their greatest problem.

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Greek views envisaged the soul's upward flight from the discarded body. To the Jewish mind, however, both body and creation are good, with heaven conceived as coming to a restored earth inhabited by resurrected and embodied persons. Reconciling Greek immortality of the soul with Jewish bodily resurrection would be Christian thinkers' greatest problem.

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Holding to their Jewish origins, the earliest Christians envisage a communal salvation where heaven, already breaking in with the presence of the kingdom, will not be completed until the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem/Zion and a transformed Garden of Eden. Against the Gnostics who denigrated the body, the bodily and transforming resurrection of Jesus provides the pattern for the saints. But the ambiguity of the Greek words for soul, spirit, body, and flesh foreshadowed complexities to come.

Russell then outlines the Christian struggle to give the Jewish idea of heaven a metaphysical basis in the world of Greek rationality. Western Christianity, in a parting of ways with the Eastern Church, thinks philosophy is not up to the task of reconciling the Jewish and Greek notions of heaven, while monasticism envisions a more ascetic heavenly existence. Later, monastic decline and the growth of cities, universities, and ecclesiastical hierarchy underlie the tension between the late medieval scholastic (or university) and mystical visions of heaven. This tension reflects more a matter of emphasis than strict dichotomy, for the scholastics understood that reason goes only so far, and many mystics were skilled in scholastic thought. Through all these chapters we also see clearly the struggle to give some kind of concrete expression to the ineffable, whether through vision, heavenly journey, or mystical poetry. Arguably the best of all, the chapters on Dante are a fitting climax “because beyond Dante no merely human word has gone” (p. 151). Given Russell’s deeply sympathetic treatment, we are inclined to agree, though I would have liked some analysis of Dante’s combining Aquinas and Bernard.

The history of heaven is a complex topic, and credibly describing the good is far more difficult than dealing with lurid evil. Nevertheless, Russell’s deep sensitivity and love for his subject make him an able guide. He concludes, “Heaven is whatever and whenever God wants it to be. More deeply, heaven is where God is, in the rose of fire that keeps opening dynamically in one eternal moment. We have loved the stars too much to fear the night. So shall every love every love more enkindle, until the cosmos coruscates with loving light, living more and ever more” (p. 189).

How relevant to the modern world are the Christian notions of heaven and hell? Our longing for justice, which derives in part from an increasing sense of human dignity, almost demands a final accounting. Our deepest longings to be loved and to love, also tied to our awareness of human dignity, make it difficult to accept that a less than perfect world is all there is. Thus, the history of heaven and hell reflect our deepest existential longings about the nature of reality. To say this in another way, we might ask: Is ours merely a utilitarian existence, focused only on this present life, where to undergird our moral actions we employ the belief in eternal punishment or reward beyond this life? Or is there a greater, ineffable, and necessarily personal God who undergirds and shapes our present actions? Perhaps just



as our immediate experience shapes our conceptions of the 'furniture' of heaven and hell, so our deepest longings are profoundly linked to their very being.

But heaven and hell have disappeared from the modern public consciousness; our longings for justice and love have been reduced in a technological world merely to our own material accomplishments. With the emergence of modern democracies, the delights of heaven and the justice of hell have been ushered into the present. But what happens when that democratic order is challenged and its justice and plenty are threatened? Of course, we might devote our lives in the hope of creating a better world for our friends. But for our enemies? And what if that hope is delayed, as was the Marxist hope of the Soviet Union? In the end the question that presses from these three books seems to me to be: How realistic and how true to our humanity is the hope for a better world in the here and now, if there is no hope of heaven beyond? Perhaps it is ultimately the hope of the latter that is intimately linked to the transformation of the former (Romans 8:18-23).

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# Ecstasy, Symbol, and Rhetoric

BY F. MATTHEW SCHOBERT, JR.

Lest we succumb to the notion that meditating on heaven and hell will lead only to a disembodied, otherworldly faith, we should gaze upon Hans Memling's painting, *The Last Judgement*, intone the hymnody of the American revivalists, peruse Dante's poetic and philosophical portrayals of hell, purgatory, and heaven in *Divine Comedy*, or embrace evangelical Christianity's emphatic spirituality of conversion and obedience to Christ.

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**T**he history of Christian art and spirituality is replete with the fruits of serious reflection upon the ineffable glories of heaven and the incomprehensible agonies of hell. Lest we unwittingly succumb to the notion that serious and prolonged meditation upon heaven and hell will lead only to a disembodied, otherworldly faith, vacated by the vivifying life of the Holy Spirit, we should gaze upon Hans Memling's triptych painting, *The Last Judgement*, intone the hymnody of the American revivalists, peruse Dante's poetic and philosophical portrayals of hell, purgatory, and heaven in *Divine Comedy*, or embrace evangelical Christianity's emphatic spirituality of conversion and obedience to Christ. Far from being abstract theological expressions grounded in a doctrinal belief system, yet disassociated from the pressing demands of the everyday ethical and moral life of the faithful, these examples of art and spirituality illustrate an intimate connection between eschatological reflection and personal formation. The content of Christian art and spirituality ranges far and wide, encompassing stories,

events, and characters from Scripture and church history. Theological insight, as expressed through spirituality and the arts, springs forth from a delightfully rich and varied tapestry of ecclesiastical contexts and traditions, each of which imprints its own distinctiveness upon the creative powers of its writers and philosophers, poets and musicians, and painters and sculptors. These skilled artisans, all gifted in exploring and expressing the richness of the Christian faith, are nurtured in their respective crafts by the compelling hope of a full life in communion with God and by the abhorrent fear of a desolate existence separated from the presence of God.

*The Story of Christian Spirituality: Two Thousand Years, From East to West* (Fortress Press, 2001; 384 pp., \$35.00 hardback), edited by Gordon Mursell, presents a generous overview of the spiritual heritage of Christianity. The contributors to this volume situate the genesis of Christian spirituality in its original Jewish context at the time of Jesus' ministry. Tracing the unfolding of its intellectual and practical developments over the course of the following two millennia of church history, the authors traverse the spiritual landscapes of the early church, the medieval period, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the modern era, and the twentieth century.

Christian spirituality, as documented throughout this volume, incorporates multiple facets. A vital faith maintains discernable tensions between the corresponding attributes of contemplative prayer and social action, individual devotion and corporate worship, and participation in the sacraments and study of the Scriptures. Ideally, Christian spirituality labors to preserve balance between these spiritual practices, fostering a robust life of religious discipline. The early church exemplifies this goal. One of the hallmarks of its spirituality was the insistence that "Christianity, if not lived out as an ethical way of

life, became falsified, and lost its mystical quality" (43). For the early church, the Christian life pulsed with prayer to God and socially-active compassion to others, personal piety and communal fellowship, Holy Communion and biblical exhortation. This period testifies to the har-

monization of personal and corporate spiritual maturation with ethical living. It also established the theoretical and practical foundations for future developments in Christian spirituality. For example, this era bequeaths to its descendants the intellectual and theological traditions of the apologists; the lives of the martyrs; devotion to saints, icons, religious symbols,

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A vital faith maintains discernable tensions between contemplative prayer and social action, individual devotion and corporate worship, and participation in the sacraments and study of the Scriptures.

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and relics; Christian mysticism, monasticism, and asceticism; and the development of Christian liturgy, poetry, and hymnody.

Spirituality, however, not only consists of prayer, piety, personal devotion, corporate worship, religious rituals, and acts of social justice. It also expresses itself artistically. Herman J. Selderhuis, writing on "The Protestant Tradition in Europe" in Mursell's volume, has in mind literature, music, and the arts when he affirms that "spirituality longs for expression; it cannot remain hidden" (p. 192). Bradley Holt expands briefly upon this sentiment in his chapter, "Spiritualities of the Twentieth Century." Yet, while the spiritual writings of theologians, saints, clergy, and laity fill the pages of this volume, it allots little attention to music and the visual arts. Two other books published by Fortress Press, however, fill this void.

Andrew Wilson-Dickson's *The Story of Christian Music* (Fortress Press, 1996; 256 pp., \$35.00 hardback), like Mursell's volume, makes use of a historical approach in presenting the development of Christian music from its birth in connection with Hebrew music and psalms through the succeeding periods of church history to the close of the twentieth century. Recognizing that music is often at the center of intense debate and bitter strife within and across many Christian communities, Wilson-Dickson introduces two thematic components in the first section of his text that repeatedly resurface in conjunction with following discussions of musical developments.

First, Wilson-Dickson identifies three dimensions which music possesses: the ecstatic, the symbolic, and the rhetorical. Ecstasy denotes music's ability to elicit physical responses, which are primarily rhythmic and include clapping, swaying, or dancing. Early Christian writers, who perceived in the composition of integrated, synchronous patterns of music a correlation to the divine order of creation, noted music's symbolic nature. In this way music served to facilitate not only the contemplation of God and creation, but also other deep mysteries of the faith. Rhetoric refers to that capacity by which music communicates emotion, evokes feeling, and induces persuasion. This threefold framework pervades Wilson-Dickson's commentaries on the diverse musical traditions. For example, he notes that African-American spirituals overflow with ecstatic emphases, that the Eastern Churches extol music's symbolic power, and that the Protestant Reformers capitalized on music's rhetorical capacities to further their movements. Second, he speaks to the tension between the emergence of Christian music as art and the continuance of Christian music as worship. Does ornate music of exceptionally high composition become essentially a concert for the musically elite? Does music that identifies with the majority of congregants need to sacrifice quality? Without becoming embroiled in this debate, Wilson-Dickson suggests that the art of music should be as diverse as its cultural settings, so long as its intention is to sound forth truth.

While Mursell and Wilson-Dickson narrate the stories of Christian spirituality and music in a more didactic manner, Helen de Borchgrave,

in *A Journey into Christian Art* (Fortress Press, 2000; 223 pp., \$35.00 hard-back), adopts a markedly different writing style. She writes, not as to one who is reading a book or listening to a lecture, but, as the title indicates, to one undertaking a journey. The composition of de Borchgrave's book impresses upon the reader the sense of strolling through an art museum guided by a skilled docent who describes, points out, comments upon, and critiques selected gallery pieces from the expansive lineage of Christian art. De Borchgrave accents the feel of a walking tour with poignant statements and questions directed to the reader, as though one were in her very presence. In her explications, she clearly communicates Christian art's purposefulness. It is "not art for art's sake, but art for inspiration and instruction—symbolism to underline Christian doctrine" (p. 10). The intent of visual art, which music shares, is to "stir the imagination, encourage contemplation, and stimulate wonder and praise" (p. 8). Although de Borchgrave does not appeal to an interpretative model, such as the one used by Wilson-Dickson in assessing music, we can perceive the dimensions of ecstasy, symbol, and rhetoric in many instances of the illustrated artwork that fills the pages of this book. One piece in particular, *The Crucifixion*, from Matthias Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece, confronts us with all three dimensions simultaneously. Beholding the torturous portrayal of the crucified body causes one to grimace physically, its ecstatic quality; compels one to contemplate the mystery of the Son of God's abandonment to death, its symbolic quality; and overwhelms one with emotions of compassion for the suffering Christ, its rhetorical quality.

These texts share a common weakness, which is also their common strength. To accomplish a historical pilgrimage through more than two millennia of Christian art and spirituality, they must sacrifice depth of material in the service of breadth. This creates the sensation of encountering a series of highlights in Christian spirituality, music, or art that foregoes opportunities for prolonged excursions into any of these subjects or their creators. The volumes, nevertheless, form a well-rounded collection of material, thrusting us into the vast, layered world of Christian spirituality—a world where ecstasy, symbol, and rhetoric come together to produce potent expressions of religious faith and theological truth that form, inform, and animate our ethical and moral lives.



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