

Heaven And Hell

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INTRODUCTION

More than a decade ago at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee one of the leading Lutheran scholars in America delivered a lecture on the task of the church in our time. In the lecture he said nothing about sin or salvation. During the question period after the lecture one of the coeds asked, "What about heaven and hell?" The lecturer, a member of a Lutheran Synod which in times gone by was known all over the world for its conservatism, replied that modern theologians are not much concerned about heaven and hell, since they believe that men "ought to be good for goodness' sake" and not because they want to go to heaven or because they are afraid of going to hell.

While the theology of this Lutheran scholar may leave something to be desired, his competence in the area of modern church history can not be questioned. What he says about modern theologians is true. At about that same time Father James Kavanaugh published his best-selling book *A Modern Priest Looks at his Outdated Church*. In that book this apostate priest had written, "I do not fear hell because I cannot fathom it. I do not seek heaven because it offers no image that I can grasp." And at the University of Chicago, when Dean Bernard Loomer was asked about the immortality of the soul and heaven and hell, he said that he was not interested in such things because he was a theologian and not a philosopher.

Many modern theologians have adopted the view that concern about the life to come makes religion what Karl Marx said it was, "the opiate of the people." They believe that the hope that things will be better after death keeps men from striving with might and main to make this world the best possible place in which to live. They have adopted the view expressed by Max Otto, a popular professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin, who wrote, "The type of religion which looks to a realm other than the world about us for criteria of the good life is not a religion in man's interest. Those who aid in furthering that religion, whether they recognize what it implies or not, are making such contribution as they can toward man's intellectual and moral defeat." (*Science and the Moral Life*, pp. 147f.)

Against that background it is refreshing to be invited to read an essay on heaven and hell. It is good to know that there are a few places left in this world where the topics of heaven and hell are still considered important.

THE BIBLICAL DEFINITION OF HEAVEN

The word "heaven" occurs in the Bible for the first time in the first verse of Genesis. The Hebrew word is evidently derived from a root form that means "high." It is the word "*shemayim*," a plural form, and many modern translations very properly translate, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Literally, we might translate, "In the beginning God created the higher regions." There is some linguistic evidence pointing to the fact that the Hebrew word for earth may be related to a word which means "low" so that we could translate the whole verse, "In the beginning God

created the higher regions and that which is low,” or “the spaces above us and that which is below us.”

In the first chapter of Genesis the word “heavens” has, so far as can be determined from the context, a spatial, this-worldly connotation. It is not here primarily the place where God lives, but rather the place where the birds fly (Ge 1:20). It is also the place into which God set the sun and the moon and the stars (Ge 1:14-16).

In verse eight of Genesis one, the name heaven (and in the original the plural form is used also here) is given by God to the firmament. Modern unbelieving scholars often seek to discredit the scientific accuracy of the Bible by saying that the writer of Genesis believed that there was a solid dome of brass or some other metal covering the earth. But the Hebrew word that is translated “firmament” simply means that which is stretched out. In the light of our present understanding of the universe we might think of the firmament as the space that surrounds our earth. When the text then speaks of waters below the firmament and the waters above the firmament, we may think of the waters on the surface of the earth as being below the firmament and the clouds as the waters above the firmament. Some students of the Bible believe that there were no clouds at the beginning but instead a rather extensive invisible water vapor barrier shielding the earth from radiation from outer space, creating a greenhouse effect, and thus giving it a uniform climate. Whatever the truth of the matter may be the text indicates clearly that the firmament is the space immediately above the earth and this firmament is given the name heaven. This is the place where the birds fly, for the text says, in the NASB translation, “Let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens (Ge 1:20).

Earlier in the same chapter we are told that God placed the sun and the moon and the stars in the “firmament” (*KJV*) or the “open expanse” (*NASB*) of the heavens (1:14). In this case the concept of heaven is widened to include all the reaches of outer space. In all of these passages heaven is treated as a part of this created world. It is a spatial, local term.

This description of heaven which we find in Genesis 1 may be a clue to what Paul means when he speaks of a “third heaven” in the account of his vision which he gives us in 2 Co 12. This phrase has always puzzled commentators but it may be that Paul thinks of the place where the birds fly as the first heaven, the place where we find the sun, moon, and stars as the second heaven, and then the third heaven is the place where God lives.

PARADISE

Paul in the passage calls the third heaven “paradise.” Here he uses the same word which Jesus used in his promise to the penitent thief, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise,” (Lk 23:43). The only other place where this particular word is used in the New Testament in the second chapter of the Revelation of John, where the apostle writes, “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Rev 2:7). The language used here is reminiscent of what is said about the garden of Eden in the first chapters of the Bible. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, this word “paradise” is used several times as a designation of the garden of Eden, and we have come to speak rather commonly of Adam and Eve living the first hours of their life in paradise.

“Paradise” is a Greek word borrowed from the Persian language, where it means an enclosure or a park or a garden. When Paul uses it as a designation of the place that he

visited in his vision, he uses it in a sense that the word had evidently acquired during intertestamental times, a place of blessedness and happiness somewhere above the earth. We shall say more of this when we consider the Biblical descriptions of what we usually understand by the words “heaven” or “paradise.”

HEAVEN AND SKY

Especially in the early chapters of the Bible heaven is simply a name for the sky. “Under heaven” is a term used to denote the earth. The flood account, for example, speaks of all the hills under the whole heaven (Ge 7:19). When God threatens to wipe out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven, he certainly means that they will be forgotten on the earth (Ex 17:14). Heaven is the place from which the rain comes as well as the dew (Ge 8:2:27:39). The fire that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah came out of heaven (Ge 19: 24), which very likely means simply that it rained down from the sky, and it may be that those cities were destroyed by some kind of volcanic eruption, although it is possible that the fire was miraculously created by God to fall down upon them.

A TOWER REACHING TO HEAVEN

This usage of the word “heaven” must be kept in mind when we treat the story of the tower of Babel. I do not remember how that story was taught to me when I was a boy in grade school. But I do know that I grew up believing that the people of Babel wanted to build a tower so high that they could step directly out of the last story into the heaven of eternal bliss and thus the building of the tower was an attempt on their part to get to heaven by their own works.

Actually the text is very clear. They did not build the tower because they wanted to go to heaven by means of it, but to “make a name” for themselves and to keep from being scattered. It was to be a rallying place and a symbol of togetherness. Evidently what they intended to build was a tower whose top would reach into the sky so that they could see it from far away. What they called a tower whose top would reach into heaven, we today call a “skyscraper.” In the same way, the children of Israel spoke of the cities of Palestine as being fortified with walls that reached up to heaven (Dt 1:28).

HEAVEN AS THE DWELLING-PLACE OF GOD

Very early, however, the word “heaven” was also used to denote the place where God is with His angels. Nowhere in the Old Testament do we find the later Jewish view of seven heavens, in the highest of which God dwelt with the most exalted angels. But Moses already spoke of heaven as the place where God lived. He told his people, for example, to pray, “Look down from thy holy habitation, from heaven, and bless thy people Israel” (Dt 26:15). Solomon speaks in those same terms in his prayer at the dedication of the temple. Several times in that prayer he speaks the words, “Then hear those in heaven, thy dwelling-place” (1 Ki 8:30,39,43,49). In later books of the Old Testament the Lord is often spoken of as “the God of heaven” (e.g. Ezr 1:2) or the God who is “in heaven” (Da 2:28).

Yet Solomon is aware that no place can contain God. In his dedicatory prayer he says, “The heaven and the heaven of heavens can not contain thee.” (1 Ki 8:27) And he is by no means the first to recognize this or to speak of it. Rahab, the harlot of Jericho, confessed, “The Lord your God, he is God in heaven above, and earth beneath” (Jos 2:11). She clearly recognized that the God of Israel is a God who is present everywhere, and in her simple faith expresses a truth which is more poetically set forth by the prophet

Isaiah when he writes “Thus saith the Lord, The heaven is my throne and the earth my footstool.”

And just as heaven is spoken of as God’s dwelling-place, so the Old Testament also speaks of heaven as the place where believers go when they leave this world. While such expressions are very rare in the Old Testament yet we are told that God wanted to take Elijah into heaven and that Elijah went to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Ki 2:1-11). This is, by the way, the only Old Testament passage that speaks expressly of any person’s going “to heaven.”

Yet it must be said that in most of the passages of the Old Testament in which the word “heaven” is used it refers to the visible sky above our heads.

“HEAVEN” IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: THE ABODE OF GOD

When we come to the New Testament the situation is reversed. Heaven there, still sometimes means the “sky,” but this usage is not predominant in the New Testament. When the Savior speaks of heaven and earth passing away, (Mt 5:18) He certainly has in mind the sky and everything we see there. He spoke also of the stars falling from heaven (Mt 24:29) and of the “clouds of heaven” (Mt 26:24).

While dozens of passages that use the word “heaven” in this way can be found, yet more often in the New Testament heaven is the place where God and the angels live and the place to which believers go when they die. Not only in the Lord’s Prayer, but also in many passages God is spoken of as our Father who is in heaven.

In fact, heaven becomes so closely identified with the place where God lives that the word “heaven” sometimes is used figuratively for God Himself. What Matthew regularly calls the kingdom of heaven is by the other evangelists usually called the kingdom of God. And when Luke says that the publican would not lift up so much as his eyes toward heaven (Lk 18:13), he surely has more than the sky in mind, and when Jesus looked up to heaven when He spoke the blessing before feeding the 5000 (Mt 14:19), that gesture was surely interpreted by those who saw it as an appeal to His heavenly Father. The Pharisees who demanded a sign from “heaven” (Mt 16:1) were certainly demanding, not a sign in the sky necessarily, but a miracle from God.

THE ABODE OF THE ANGELS

Heaven is also clearly described as the abode of the angels. “In heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven” (Mt 18:10). Jesus told the Sadducees that those who have died and have been resurrected to life will be like the “angels of God in heaven” (Mt 22:30, Mk 12:25). The angels who sang to the shepherds at Bethlehem left them to go “into heaven” (Lk 2:15). Just as God is called the “God of heaven” in some of the later books of the Old Testament, so the angels are called the “angels of heaven” in the New Testament (Mt 24:36). And just as God is called our Father “which is in heaven”, so the Savior speaks of the angels “which are in heaven” (Mk 13:32). In the parable of the lost sheep the Lord Jesus says that there will be joy in heaven over one sinner that repents (Lk 15:7) and in the following parable He makes clear that He is speaking of the rejoicing of the angels, for there He says that there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents (Lk 15:10).

Many similar passages could be cited but these should be sufficient to demonstrate that the word heaven is used in two senses in the Bible, once as a spatial term that denotes the sky and the reaches of space, and once as the dwelling-place of God and the angels.

THE ABODE OF BELIEVERS

Since heaven is the place where God and the angels live, we are accustomed to thinking of heaven as the place to which believers go when they leave this world. It may, however, come to us as a surprise that also the New Testament as the Old very seldom says that believers go to heaven. Just as there is only one passage in the Old Testament that speaks of a believer going to heaven, so there is also only one passage in the New Testament that speaks specifically in those terms. It is found in the book of Revelation where John says that he saw the two witnesses who had been put to death for their testimony brought back to life and then he writes, "They ascended up to heaven in a cloud (Rev 11:12).

We may therefore well ask how it has come to pass that we speak of heaven as the place to which believers go when they die. There are a number of Biblical factors that are involved here.

The Bible teaches that Jesus ascended into heaven after His resurrection. He came down from heaven (Jn 3:13, 6:33,38,42) and He went back to heaven (Lk 24:51 Ac 1:11; 1 Pt 3:22; Heb 9:24). This Savior who has gone back to heaven gave us the promise, "I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am there ye may be also" (Jn 14:3). It is only natural that on the basis of these truths, we should speak of heaven as our home to which we hope to go when we leave this world of pain (*TLH* 619:1).

The Bible also speaks of treasures that are laid up for us in heaven. When the Lord Jesus commanded the rich young man to sell all that he had and to give it to the poor, He gave him the promise, "Thou shalt have treasure in heaven" (Mt 19:21). The Savior spoke also of treasures that we can lay up for ourselves in heaven where neither moth nor rust do corrupt and where thieves do not break through or steal (Mt 6:20). The book of Hebrews speaks of the better possessions that believers have in heaven and with which they can comfort themselves when persecutors deprive them of their worldly goods (Heb 10:34). The Savior promised His disciples a great reward "in heaven" (Lk 6:23). The apostle Paul spoke of a hope that is laid up for us "in heaven" (Col 1:5) and Peter says that there is an incorruptible and undefiled and unfading inheritance reserved "in heaven" for us (1 Pt 1:4). The apostle Paul speaks in slightly different terms when he writes, "We know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Co 5:1), and yet he appears to describe it not as a house to which we go, but one that comes to us when he continues, "For in this (tabernacle) we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is *from heaven*" (2 Co 5:2).

While the statement, "We will go to heaven when we die," is not a statement found in Scripture in just so many words, yet it is surely justified by the teachings of Scripture found in these passages.

HEAVEN HERE AND NOW

The Bible also speaks of a kingdom of heaven into which we enter. It is true that we enter this kingdom while we are still living here on this earth, and yet it is a kingdom to which we can also look forward when our life on this earth comes to an end. All believers can say with the apostle Paul, "The Lord shall deliver me from every evil work and will preserve me unto His heavenly kingdom" (2 Ti 4:18).

While we have already now been blessed with all spiritual gifts "in heavenly places" (Eph 1:3), yet we can also look forward to the day when the Lord Jesus will be

revealed from heaven (2 Th 1:7) and when we will be caught up to meet with Him in the air, to be forever with the Lord (1 Th 4:17). The statement of Paul that we will meet the Lord “in the air” is particularly interesting when we remember the original meaning of the word heaven in Genesis 1. Heaven is the place where the birds fly and when Jesus returns we will meet the Lord “in the air.”

OTHER WAYS OF DESCRIBING “HEAVEN”

We have thus seen that the statement that we will go to heaven when we die is in form not a common Biblical way of speaking. The Bible describes what happens to believers at death in a much more personal way. We have just referred to the passage in which Paul says, “So shall we ever be with the Lord.” How much warmer, and how much more significant and comforting it is to say that we shall be with our Lord forever than to say that we will go to heaven! In one of our hymns we sing:

Not for earth’s vain joys I crave
Nor, without Him, heaven’s pleasure.

To be with Jesus our Savior through all eternity is the fondest hope of the child of God and the realization of this truth guards us against a Mohammedan view of heaven which lays stress particularly on the enjoyment of the same sort of material pleasures in which men rejoice on this earth, complete with feasting and dancing girls. In the 56th chapter of the Koran, for example, Mohammed describes heaven as a garden of delights where the faithful will recline on couches, with immortal youths going around them “with goblets and ewers, and a cup from a spring...and such fruits as they shall choose, and such flesh of fowl as they desire, and wide-eyed houris as the likeness of hidden pearls.” Whatever other joys we may experience in heaven, for the Christian the greatest of all joys to which he looks with longing is to be with Jesus, our Lord and Savior, and to behold him in his infinite glory of which we will never tire and which we will never exhaust. Johann Scheffler gave voice to that view when he wrote,

All that makes the angels glad, In their garb of glory clad, Only fills me
with distress, If Thy presence does not bless.

Scheffler’s original German is even more emphatic. In that language he wrote;

*Aller Engel Glanz und Pracht Und was ihnen Freude Macht, Ist mir, suessser
Seelenkuss, Ohne dich nichts als Verdruss.*

To borrow from Solomon we might express Scheffler’s thought by saying that without Jesus even heaven would be vanity and vexation of spirit. This sentiment certainly strikes a responsive chord in the heart of every Christian. Matthias Loy may not have been thinking of the joys of heaven when he wrote his hymn “Jesus Thou art mine forever,” but he enunciated the same theme when he said,

All were drear to me and lonely If Thy presence gladdened not.

And Christian Keimann was therefore not at all alone in his opinion when he wrote,

Not for earth’s vain joys I crave
Nor, without Him, heaven’s pleasure (TLH 365:5).

To the Christian, therefore, to be to be with Jesus and to be with him forever, is much more meaningful than the much more general concept of going to heaven. To know him now as our Lord and Savior, our God and our brother, is in reality a foretaste of heaven, as the hymn writer says,

Yea, here on earth begins my heaven:

Who would not joyful be when given
A loving Savior ever near (*TLH* 362:1).

The apostle Peter speaks in such terms also when he says,
Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again to a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time, Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations, that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory (1 Pe 1:3-8).

If the joy we have in Christ now when we do not see him goes beyond all our powers to express in words, what will it be like to see him as he is with the prospect of never losing what the church fathers of the Middle Ages called the beatific vision, that blessed sight of a loving Savior.

LIKE JESUS

Not only does the Bible tell us that we shall be with him and see him, but also that we shall be like him. Paul told the Philippians that he shall change our lowly body that it might be like his glorious body (Php 3:21) and St. John says, “We know that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn 3:2). There are many passages in the Bible that tell us that God’s children will be glorified. We are told that just as we are called upon to suffer with him in this world and this life, so we shall also be glorified with him in the life to come.

We can only catch a brief concrete glance at what this means from what we read about the glorified resurrection body of Jesus. His body then was no longer bound by the physical laws of space and time. It could pass through the sealed tomb and locked doors. It could appear and disappear at will. It needed no time to go from place to place and could appear in hell, in heaven, or on earth, as the Savior chose. Whether we will share in all of those qualities we may not know and we may have no inkling of all the other things we will be able to do then, but we know enough to realize that the prospect is glorious.

LIKE THE ANGELS

The Bible also says that in heaven we will be like the angels. When the Sadducees questioned Jesus about the resurrection and heaped scorn on the whole concept with their story about the woman who had been married to seven brothers, you will remember that the Savior answered them by saying, “They which be accounted worthy to obtain that world and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage; neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels” (Lk 20:35.36).

What it means to be equal to the angels or to be like the angels we can not fully understand, for we know very little about what it is like to be an angel. We know that they also enjoy the beatific vision. Jesus says that they always behold the face of the Father in heaven (Mt 18:10). We know that they display some of the characteristics that we have noted in the glorified body of Jesus. Very likely this is what Paul has in mind

when he speaks of the resurrection body as a spiritual body, a concept that almost seems to us to be a contradiction in terms.

But we do know from the words of Jesus to the Sadducees that to be like or equal to the angels means not to marry or to be given in marriage. The ordinary family relationships we know here on this earth will not apply in heaven.

CONFIRMATION IN BLISS

Jesus also says that those who attain the resurrection will not die any more. From that we also conclude that we will never again be able to fall into sin, for the wages of sin is death, and where death can not come, there can also be no sin. For that reason we speak of a “confirmation” in bliss, by which we intend to convey the idea that a fall into sin will be impossible after men attain the glory of heaven. The ancient church father Origen insisted that there could be no virtue unless there was also a possibility of sinning. We come close to making the same mistake at times. When we are asked why God created man in such a way that he could sin, we sometimes argue that if man had not been able to sin, he would not have been a human being but a machine. The opponents of verbal inspiration use exactly the same argument when they insist that an inspiration that preserves the holy writers from making mistakes must be a mechanical inspiration.

Because of this view Origen held that angels and resurrected saints are subject to temptation and apostasy. If they succumb, they will be punished by reincarnation. If they do not make amends, they will be punished in hell. He believed also that condemned men and devils who repented could once more gain the glory of heaven. All this he taught in the interest of a free will, by which he meant the ability to choose between good and evil.

Against all such rationalistic and sometimes plausible arguments stands the clear word of the Savior, “Neither shall they die anymore.” For such people there can also not be a fall into sin. And this does not mean that they are prevented by God’s power from sinning. God will have written his law perfectly in their hearts and they will have no desire to do anything but the will of God, just as the angels, who desire only to do God’s will.

St. John describes this confirmation in bliss in figurative and symbolic terms when he says of the heavenly Jerusalem, “The gates of it shall not be shut at all by day; for there shall be no night there”(Re 21:25). The gates of an ancient city were shut whenever there was danger of attack by enemies. Such danger never even threatens the heavenly city and for that reason its gates will never need closing.

ETERNAL LIFE

The statement of Jesus that the believers in heaven will not die any more reminds of one of the most common expressions used in the Bible to describe what we have in mind when we speak of going to heaven. It is the expression “everlasting life.”

Life is a very difficult word to define, but perhaps the best definition is that life is the enjoyment of the blessings of God. This is a definition that does not force us to shift mental gears when we speak of the different kinds of life of which we learn in Scripture. Physical or temporal life is the enjoyment of the physical or temporal blessings of God. As we come closer and closer to death we are able to enjoy fewer and fewer of the blessings of which we become aware through our bodily senses, until finally all the senses fail us and we lie cold and still in the grave, cut off from all the beauties and the glories that God has given us to enjoy in his visible creation.

Spiritual life is the enjoyment of the spiritual blessing of God. When Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit they were no longer able to be happy and joyous in the presence of God. They no longer had a sense of his love, no longer rejoiced in his presence, but felt compelled to hide from his wrath in the bushes of the garden. They were spiritually dead and all their descendants come into the world likewise dead in trespasses and sins, and in large measure just as unaware of the misery of their condition as a cold and lifeless body in the grave. Only through the forgiveness of our sins which we have by faith in God's grace and the merits of Christ can we again rejoice in the presence of a God so holy that no evil will dwell with him. And in the enjoyment of his gracious love our new spiritual life consists.

And in reality this new spiritual life is the beginning of everlasting life. Heaven is the continuation and the augmentation of the life that begins when we are born again of water and the Spirit. In biblical terms we not only shall have everlasting life sometime in the future, but we have it here and now. Jesus says, "He that believeth in me has everlasting life" (Jn 6:47) and "He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life" (Jn 5:24). And this new life we have in Him and through Him will never end. We have His promise, "I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die"(Jn 11:25, 26). In perfect harmony with that promise, the apostle John in the vision he describes in the twentieth chapter of Revelation saw the souls of the martyrs who had died for the faith living and reigning with Christ.

It is perfectly clear therefore that the hymn writer was not indulging in poetic hyperbole when he wrote, "Yea, here on earth begins my heaven"(TLH 362:1). The enjoyment of the spiritual blessings with which the Father has blessed us in heavenly places in Christ (Eph 1:3-6) which is ours now is in essence the same joy that will be ours when we live and reign with Christ in glory.

NO MORE CURSE

Only there that joy will no longer be diminished or dimmed by sin and all the consequences of sin with which we must struggle in this life. And so heaven is also described in the Bible as a place where there is no more curse (Rev 22:3) These descriptions are easier for us to understand because they operate with concepts with which we are familiar. They describe heaven in negative terms as the absence of those things that bring pain and discomfort and sorrow. Thus we are told that those who die in the Lord rest from their labors (Rev 14:13). Adam was condemned to wringing his daily bread from a cursed and reluctant earth by his toil. But in the life to come God's children will find rest. The book of Hebrews says, "There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God" (Heb 4:9). Heaven is a place where the meagerly productive toil and labor that is a result of the fall will come to an end.

The same is true of all the other consequences of sin. John describes heaven in such negative terms in the book of Revelation when he writes, "And God shall wipe all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain" (Rev 21:4). Earlier in the same book he had written, "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more neither shall the sun light on them nor any heat" (Rev 7:16). "The former things are passed away," he says (Rev 21:4).

REUNION WITH THOSE WE LOVE

Up to this point we have said nothing about the reunion with our loved ones in the glories of heaven. In our prayers at the announcement of a death we ask God to cheer the survivors with the hope of a blessed reunion in heaven. The Bible speaks in those terms also. When the Thessalonian believers manifested concern over the full salvation of those who died before the Savior's second coming, Paul urged them not to sorrow as those who had no hope. He assured them that when Christ comes again, He will bring with Him all those who sleep in Jesus, that is, all those who died in faith, and after the resurrection of their bodies, he says, "we will be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air." And together with them, we shall be ever with the Lord (1 Th 4:13-18).

The Old Testament believers gave voice to the same hope when they spoke of death as being "gathered to one's people." This clearly does not refer to the burial of the body in the family cemetery, for it is clearly distinguished from burial (cp. e.g. Gn 25:8,9). It must refer to a far more glorious reunion. Of this we are reminded also when we are told that Lazarus was carried into Abraham's bosom (Lk 16:22).

In this connection we are often asked, "Will we recognize one another in heaven?" This question can be answered very simply by pointing out that Jesus was recognized by His disciples after His resurrection, and that Peter and James and John recognized Moses and Elijah on the mount of transfiguration.

It is clear from those accounts that we retain our own identities in heaven. While our bodies are different kind of bodies, yet they are the same bodies we had on earth. For that reason we confess our faith in the resurrection of the flesh.

On the other hand Paul clearly implies in 1 Corinthians 15 (vv. 35-42) that the bodies we will have in the resurrection will be as different from the bodies we have now as the seed we plant is different from the plant that grows out of that seed. Someone who has never seen corn and other plants grow might find it very difficult to believe that an eight-foot cornstalk with a large ear grew from a tiny yellow bit of protoplasm. But those who have had experience in such matters will recognize the tiny green plant as corn when they see it, even if its color and its form is not at all like the kernel of corn that was planted. And even if we will need to be reintroduced, we will still be glad to see our old friends and relatives again.

This, however, raises a problem for many, because they ask, "If we find when we get to heaven that some of those we loved on earth are not there, how can we still speak of undimmed joy in such a case?" That question is very difficult for us to answer, and I do not know how I will be able to rejoice without sorrow if any of my children or my wife should be missing when we stand together at God's right hand. Such thoughts surely ought to move us never to become indifferent to their salvation during this time of grace. But as for what it will be like in heaven under such circumstances we can only remind ourselves that in God's presence there will be fullness of joy and at His right hand pleasures forevermore (Ps 16:11).

WHERE IS HEAVEN?

Another question which is often asked is "Where is heaven?" When I was a boy on the farm we had an unbelieving neighbor who once asked my father where heaven was. When my father said that he did not know, the unbeliever said, "It must be beyond the farthest star, mustn't it?" And my father agreed that this must be the case. I suppose that this is a common opinion, namely that heaven is a place beyond the reaches of outer space.

This view of heaven is very common in Reformed theology, which argues that since Christ is in heaven His body and blood must be as far from the earthly elements as heaven is distant from the earth. I suppose that many of us grew up as I did, visualizing the ascension of the Savior in such a way that we imagined that Jesus reached the cloud layer and then disappeared into it, and if the cloud had not come between Jesus and His disciples they could have continued to watch Him until He would have disappeared as a tiny speck in the sky.

While there is probably no particular harm in such a view, yet it hardly does justice to the words of the Bible dealing with the ascension. Jesus did not go far away when He ascended. Shortly before that event He gave His disciples the promise, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." Moreover, St. Paul says that the Savior ascended up far above all heavens that He might fill all things (Eph 4:10), in other words, that He might be present everywhere. In answer to the Reformed argument that Jesus' body could not be present in the Lord's Supper because it was seated at the right hand of God, Luther correctly replied that the right hand of God is everywhere. It would probably therefore be more in keeping with the Biblical imagery if we would visualize Jesus as rising only a short distance above the heads of His disciples with the cloud coming there to render Him invisible. Thus, when He ascended He was still near them.

It is thus perhaps more in keeping with the words of the Bible to think of heaven not as a place far beyond the stars but simply as another realm of existence or another dimension of being. We are told, for example, that the holy angels always behold the face of the Father in heaven. Yet we know that the angels are with us here on earth. Wherever an angel goes, He can still see the face of God; the beatific vision never comes to an end for him. He is always in heaven even when he is here with us on earth.

And when we die we will also not need to travel long distances to behold the face of God. He is here in this room with us and all that is necessary is that we acquire the kind of eyesight that makes Him visible to us. In that instant we will be in heaven and see Him as He is. The curtain that hid Him from our eyes will be lifted and perhaps behind us the curtain will go down cutting us off from all the miseries and uncertainties that plagued us here.

This raises the question of whether the souls in heaven are conscious of what is transpiring on earth. The passage in Isaiah which is often cited in this connection does not really say that Abraham is ignorant of us (Is 63:16), but only that even if Abraham would be ignorant of us and Israel would not acknowledge us, God will always be our Father and our Redeemer. The Bible simply does not answer this question. Even the words of John about the saints in glory (Re 6:10) who ask how long it will be before God punishes the wicked world do not definitely prove that the saints are aware of specific events taking place on earth. Those words may indicate nothing more than that the departed saints know that the day of Judgment has not yet come. The Bible gives us no answer to this question.

We do, however, have some information in Scripture concerning the location of heaven after the end of the world. The passages involved are not always easy to interpret or understand. But basic to an understanding of them is our view of what will happen to this world in the fire of the last Judgment.

We know that when the last day comes, this world and everything in it will be burned up, and that heaven and earth will pass away and perish. Some Lutheran

theologians have concluded from this that the whole created world will once more be turned into the nothingness from which it came. We must grant that this is a possible way to understand those biblical statements.

However, it must be pointed out that the words “perish” or to “be destroyed” do not necessarily mean to go out of existence. Peter says that the world which God created perished in the waters of the flood (2 Pe 3:6). It clearly, however, was not annihilated.

Moreover, there are several passages in the Bible that seem to indicate that the fire of the last day will not annihilate but rather purify the earth and restore it to its original perfection. Perhaps the clearest of these passages is found in Romans, chapter eight, where the apostle Paul says that the created world will be set free from the bondage of corruption to participate in the glorious liberty of the children of God (Ro 8:21). Some orthodox Lutheran commentators have even concluded from this that there will be animals in heaven, but who can speak of such things with any kind of certainty?

A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH

These words, however, may be very significant when we read of the passages that speak of a new heaven and a new earth. Peter, after telling his readers that this world will be burned up, speaks of such a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness (2 Pe 3:13). Already the prophet Isaiah records the words of God in which He says, “The new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me”(Is 66:22). It should be pointed out that in all these passages the word heaven is used as it was used in the first chapter of Genesis. The new heaven is a new sky above this new earth.

The most detailed description of this new heaven and new earth we find in the last two chapters of the Bible, where we have also a detailed description of the place where God’s people will live through all eternity. John first tells us that he had a vision of a new heaven and a new earth in which there was no more sea. But then he continues.

I, John, saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven (out of the new sky), prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them and be their God. And God shall wipe all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new (Rev 21: 2-5a).

John then describes the holy city where God dwells with His people. He speaks of its glory and the twelve gates of pearl that are never shut, and of its twelve jeweled foundations and its streets of gold, transparent as glass. Once more then he returns to speak of the presence of God there, and he writes,

I saw no temple therein; for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it; and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honor into it. And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day; for there shall be no night there. And they shall bring the glory and honor of the nations into it (Rev 21:22-26).

John's concluding words in this description of heaven take us back to the beginning of time before the fall into sin, and these last words of his remind us of the description of the garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve lost the right to eat of the tree of life by their disobedience to God's command. He says,

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it: and his servants shall serve him; and they shall see his face; and his name shall be on their foreheads. And there shall be no night there: and they need no candle, neither light of the sun for the Lord God giveth them light; and they shall reign forever and ever (Rev 22: 1-5).

What more can we say to add anything to that picture of endless bliss and glory? We can only join in the prayer of St. Bernard,

Jesus, in mercy bring us
To that dear land of rest.

ONE SURE HOPE

And how shall we be sure of getting there and sharing in that glory? John has also answered that question for us in a description of an earlier vision which he had, in which he saw countless multitudes clothed in white with palms in their hands standing before the throne of God and of the lamb. Of those people he was told,

These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters; and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes (Rev 7:14-17).

By faith in the atoning blood of Christ we have found the forgiveness that God proclaims to all men in the Gospel. Thus we have washed our robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. And therefore we can be certain that Jerusalem the golden will be our dwelling place to all eternity.

HELL

But not all men have that faith and for them there is no such hope but only a certain fearful looking for of judgment (He 10:27). For that reason it becomes necessary also to speak of the reality of hell. We would prefer not to speak of that at all. Most people would rather not think of it. And yet it is a reality and it can be said also that the horrors of hell help to enhance the glories of heaven and to make us appreciate all the more the marvelous truth that we have a Savior who has delivered us from the power of darkness and has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel.

The Hebrew Old Testament word for hell is "Sheol," a word which is variously translated as "hell," or "the pit," or "the grave." The word is often defined as the "state of death," without any specific reference to heaven or hell. Against the Jehovah's Witnesses we must, however, assert that the "state of death" is not "annihilation." According to the

Old Testament both believers and unbelievers go to Sheol, and since dead exist somewhere, Sheol is the place where all the dead are. The concept of Sheol is not very clear in the Old Testament, but if we view it as a name for the next world, and thus a name for the place to which the dead go, in other words, as a broad term which includes both heaven and hell, we will have few difficulties with the passages in which the word is used. The Old Testament clearly teaches that when people die, their souls return to God, that the wicked will be punished, and that God's people can look forward to joy at the right hand of God.

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

In the New Testament God's revelation concerning hell becomes clearer. Hell is clearly pictured as a place of punishment. In the story of the rich man and poor Lazarus hell is vividly pictured as a place of fire and flame where the damned suffer excruciating thirst. Those who find the concept of eternal punishment distasteful, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, are accustomed to arguing that this passage can not be used to demonstrate the existence of a place of eternal torment since it is a parable. In reply, it may be said first of all that the Bible never says that this is a parable, and it may well be an account of an event with which Jesus was acquainted because of His omniscience.

The story also does not fit the pattern of parables. The characters in parables have no names. Instead they speak of "a certain man," "a good Samaritan," "a Pharisee," "a publican," "a sower," etc. But the poor man here has a name. Moreover, parables deal with commonly occurring events in everyday life. Sowing seed, baking bread, selling pearls, picking grapes, inheriting money, celebrating weddings, catching fish: these are the stuff of parables. For that reason parables are often defined as earthly stories with a heavenly meaning. The so-called parable of the rich man and Lazarus hardly fits that pattern. It is more a heavenly story, or a next world story with an earthly meaning.

Finally, even if the story is a parable, this would not give us grounds for saying that it is pure fantasy. Parables regularly deal with things that really happen. Parables are not fables in which plants and animals are personified. Thus we certainly can view the "parable," so-called, of the rich man and Lazarus as a description of things that actually happen in real life.

SUFFERING IN HELL

While the Bible gives us no other such concrete description of hell, it leaves no doubt that hell is a place of pain, suffering, and torment. In Revelation, John describes the fate of the man who received the mark of the beast by saying,

The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation: and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever; and they have no rest day nor night (Re 14:10-11).

The Lord Jesus Himself gives us some insight into the horrors of hell when He says,

If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee; for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell (Mt 5:29-30).

FIRE

The place of torment is often described as a place of fire and brimstone, of burning sulfur. In the book of Revelation hell is called the lake of fire. Jesus calls it “a furnace of fire” (Mt 13:42). The Lutheran dogmaticians discuss the question whether this is actual physical fire, or whether the word fire denotes a spiritual phenomenon. The Jehovah’s Witnesses ridicule the whole idea by asking, “Who ever heard of a fire that never goes out but keeps on burning forever?” Human reason says that eventually a real, physical and chemical reaction such as takes place in fire would use up all the available fuel. Such questions, however, ought not to occupy our thoughts and they do not concern us. God says it is fire, and God says that it will burn forever. John the Baptist in his sermon to the Pharisees spoke of it as an unquenchable fire (Mt 3:12). The Old Testament prophet Isaiah said of those who transgressed against God that their fire will never be quenched (Is 66:24). Whether it is physical or spiritual fire is really immaterial. Either way, it is a place to which we do not want to go and from which we pray to be delivered.

Physical fire produces light, yet hell is often described as a place of darkness. Jesus calls it outer darkness, where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 8:12; 22:13). Jude says that unbelievers will be consigned to “the blackness of darkness forever” (Jude 13). Peter speaks of it as a “mist of darkness” (2 Pe 2:17). Heaven is regularly described as a place of light and the light of heaven comes not from the sun or the moon but is the radiance of the glory of God. Hell on the other hand, is a place of darkness into which the brightness of glory does not penetrate.

SEPARATION FROM GOD

We are thus by this language reminded that in hell man is forsaken by God, just as Jesus was forsaken by His heavenly Father when He was cursed for us. Paul speaks in those terms of eternal damnation in his second letter to the Thessalonians (1:7-9) where he writes,

The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.

In this respect, too, hell is the direct opposite of heaven. The greatest joy we will know there is that we shall be like Him and see Him as He is. The lost souls in hell, however, will be forever excluded from the presence of God, and instead of being glorified in the likeness of Christ, they will be an abhorring unto all flesh, as Isaiah says (Is 66:24). This truth is proclaimed also by the Lord Jesus in His prophecy concerning the last day, when He will say to those on His left hand, “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mt 25:41).

WEEPING AND GNASHING OF TEETH

Many times, too, the Savior speaks of the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth which will take place in hell. Weeping and wailing is surely indicative of sorrow and grief. We may well imagine that the sorrow stems from their realization that they are forever deprived of the pleasures and joy to be found in the presence of God. Gnashing of teeth is often understood to be an indication of suffering and pain. Yet the context never indicates that this is so. In every passage of the Bible where we have enough context to make clear the significance of the gnashing of teeth, it is not pain by anger and hatred that is expressed by this gesture (cp. Ps 35:16; 37:12, 112:10; Job 16:9, Lam 2:16; Ac

7:54). The hatred and rebellion directed against God by unbelieving men, which so often is hidden under a show of religion and a veneer of civil righteousness, will manifest itself there openly.

ETERNAL DEATH

This is also what is meant by eternal death, which is a common way of describing the condition of the lost in hell. As we have seen, life is the enjoyment of the blessings of God. Death, conversely, is separation from the blessings of God. Eternal death, also called the second death, is separation from the eternal blessings of the Lord.

Because men are so prone to identify death with non-existence, with unconsciousness, it is well to point out that this is a mistake. According to Scripture Adam died on the day he ate of the forbidden fruit. Terrified and hiding in the bushes of the garden he was separated from all the spiritual blessings that had been his in that joyful communion with God in which he was created. From that day on also all of Adam's descendants were born dead in trespasses and sin, and physical death and eternal death is only a matter of course unless the mercy of God intervenes to make it possible for us once more to enjoy the presence of God, and to love Him. All this is impossible in eternal death.

And just as eternal death is not eternal non-existence or unconsciousness, so the words "destroy" and "perish," which are used so often to denote what happens to men in hell, do not denote annihilation. We have already noted that the Bible says that the world was destroyed or perished in the flood, yet it did not go out of existence. A ship is destroyed when it can no longer serve the purpose for which it was built. So also those whose bodies and souls are destroyed in hell have no more opportunity for salvation, but they continue to exist in misery and pain forever and ever.

That forever and ever is one of the most terrifying aspects of hell. If only there were some hope that after a thousand years, or a million years, or a billion years the pain and sorrow would come to an end! But no such hope exists, and the only way to escape from that terror is to pretend that it does not exist, or to imagine vainly that it does not threaten us, or to find assurance in the truth that even though we deserve such punishment, the Lord Jesus has already endured it for us and that through Him we have been redeemed from death and the power of the devil. Only this last will turn out to be no vain hope and self-deception, for we have God's own Word for it.

DEGREES OF PUNISHMENT

A few words should perhaps also be said about degrees of punishment in hell. That there will be a difference in the suffering of the damned is clearly taught by Jesus. He says, "That servant; which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask for more" (Lk 12:47,48). He also told the people of Capernaum and Chorazin and Bethsaida that it would be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon and Sodom on the day of Judgment that it would be for them. (Mt 11:20-24).

We may wonder how this is possible and this question, too, we do not need to answer since it is enough to know that with God all things are possible. Yet even in this life it is possible to imagine two men in the same hospital suffering from the same stage of the same kind of cancer, and yet the one suffers less than the other because he has

received a more powerful narcotic than his companion in suffering. And if the pain of hell consists to a large extent in the realization of what has been lost in the beatific vision, the man who had many opportunities will have all the more reason to regret his folly.

DEGREES OF GLORY

This fact gives us occasion to return once more to the subject of heaven. Will there be degrees of glory there as there are degrees of punishment in hell? The teaching of Scripture is not as clear on the situation in heaven in this regard as it is on that in hell. Paul may indicate such degrees of glory when he writes in connection with the resurrection of the dead,

There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differeth from another in glory. So also in the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:41-42).

Yet it must not be forgotten that Paul in this section is treating the difference between the body that is buried and the body that will be raised on that last day.

Of one thing, however, we can be sure. If there are degrees of glory in heaven and one believer will receive more honor there than another, perhaps because he has led many to righteousness (Da 12:3), this will not reduce our joy. For in heaven there is no jealousy, but perfect love, and even here on earth we rejoice over the honor that comes to those we love. So it will be in heaven in fuller measure, and nothing will mar the joy that will be ours there.

MODERN RESEARCHES

We can not conclude without at least a brief reference to some of the studies that have been made of people who were apparently dead but recovered. The publicized work of Kubler-Ross and others would seem to indicate that all those who die, whether they are Christians or heathen, believers or unbelievers, have pleasant sensations after death and often feel themselves drawn to a bright light at the end of a tunnel. Such studies have been used to cast doubt on the existence of hell. Entirely aside from the fact that the Scriptures tell us that the devil can appear as an angel of light, it might be mentioned that Dr. Maurice Rawlings in *Beyond Death's Door*, a book published this past September, says that his studies of this subject indicates that in about half of such cases the people involved had unpleasant visions of hell. Rawlings was quoted by the Los Angeles Times news service (*Milwaukee Journal*, Sept 23, 1978) as saying, "The main reason nobody has reported any Hell experiences is that many were not interviewed right after they were revived." He said that he believed that people have a tendency to forget bad experiences and impressions, and this is in part accounts for the optimism of earlier researchers.

Whatever the case may be, we know that the Bible teaches that there is a heaven and that there is a hell and that we can escape the one and find the other only by washing our robes and making them white in the blood of the Lamb. May God be merciful to us all and bring us soon to that land of rest where He will wipe all tears from our eyes. Amen.