

THE NEW HEAVENS AND NEW EARTH

What we can know about what happens after death

The Transformation Series



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***This is dedicated to my mother, Nathaline Harrison McCartha.
Thank you for everything and for being such a great mom!***

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1. INTRODUCTION

“You know, Scott, you could have re-financed your mortgage and saved a couple hundred bucks each month!” That kind of information will be of absolutely no interest to me when my time comes to pass from this life into the next. In fact, most of the things now that we are anxious about or strive for will seem silly, even absurd, when we are just moments away from death. What will be in store for us next? My Grampy Hilborn used to often say, “Nothing is certain in this life except death and taxes!” I can’t help anyone with their taxes, but I do hope in this booklet to shed some light on what we can expect after death.

My first experience of death was with Snoopy. He was our family dog, a loveable Cocker Spaniel. Due to a freak accident while running into the corner of our wooden sandbox, his hind legs became paralyzed. My mom and dad took long trips with Snoopy to various veterinary specialists. My dad even built a little wooden cart with wheels so that Snoopy could pull himself along. But one day, when I came home from school in the second grade, my mom tearfully told me, “Snoopy has been put to sleep.” I ran into my bedroom, knelt on the floor beside my bunk bed, head in my pillow and sobbed. I couldn’t even catch my breath. I had never hurt like that or cried like that before. Snoopy’s death seemed like the end of the world to me.

My second experience with death was when I was in the sixth grade, with my Grammy Hilborn. I had heard muted conversations between my mom and dad that she was “sick.” Only years later would I understand about breast cancer. One night, I had gotten out of bed to go downstairs to ask my mom something but froze at the top of the steps, hearing mixed with the sound of my mom’s voice something I had never heard before. It was the sound of my dad crying. I tiptoed back into my bedroom.

Not long after, we made a trip to New England to visit my Grammy and Grampy. Still not really understanding, except that she was sick and confined to bed, my brother Mark and I visited with her a little while in her bedroom, but left to go play as quickly as we could. On the drive home though, something inside told me that I would not see her again. She died a few weeks later.

Our family flew to Portland, Maine for the funeral (my first plane ride). It was also my first funeral and I was not prepared. The whole thing seemed “unreal” and a little frightening. Some of the images are still clear in my mind. The room at the

funeral home where the casket was displayed was like something out of a movie. The furniture was very formal, the lights cast a weird yellow and pink rose-colored glow on the walls, and large arrangements of flowers were stacked in front of the casket. To this day, I dislike seeing the flower arrangements at funerals. The casket itself was highly polished brown wood, and raised up from the floor at about shoulder level to me. As I looked at Grammy, surrounded by the pleated, cream-colored satin cushioning, I remember thinking how pastel her face looked (with the makeup) and wondered what it must feel like to be in that casket.

The other thing I remember about that time in the funeral home was what my Grampy Hilborn said. He took out his handkerchief, wiped tears from his eyes, and said in anger, "I don't know why God takes the good and leaves the bad behind!"

Many years have passed. Especially as a pastor, I have heard lots of comments from grieving people, similar to what my Grampy said. Things such as, "God must have needed her more than we do," or "At least he is in a better place now," or "I'm glad he is out of his suffering," or "She must be one of God's little angels," or, "I bet he is there in heaven watching over us." It has always been a privilege for me to stand with people in their grief. In an odd way, I feel useful at funeral services because I know the Word of God really speaks to people at those times. But I have felt at a loss to know how to respond to the kind of comments like those mentioned above.

To try to correct those statements has never seemed to me to be appropriate, at least in the time of grief. Then, later on, except for the occasional sermon, I've rarely felt the time was right to bring up the issue. Who, after all, normally likes to talk about death? My students at the high school where I am a teacher actually are the ones who most often ask me direct questions about what happens after death. Directness is one of those qualities about teenagers I most enjoy. This booklet is my attempt to make plain what we can know about the "hereafter" from the teachings of Jesus and the Bible. I am directing this primarily to my congregation but with my students in mind too.

I will not be trying to write this booklet as a scholar, for two reasons. One, I'm not one! The other reason is that unlike the careful, deliberative, even cautious treatment scholars must give, I plan to write simply as a pastor to a congregation. This means I won't shy away from offering my own opinions and insights, even though on many points, I can only make an educated guess. But still, as a pastor, I know that people in my congregation want someone they trust to give them direction into what the Bible teaches about "what happens after death." So knowing that I know "only in part," I still plan to plunge ahead. N.T. Wright, one of the great New Testament scholars today, also an Anglican bishop, has written a statement about this which I really like in his book, *SURPRISED BY HOPE*. He says

that the things we read in the New Testament about life after death and resurrection should be taken as signposts pointing us into a bright mist. There are many things beyond that bright mist we simply cannot know now. But someone has gone into that mist, come back again, and beckons us on.

2. WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

Let's begin by first going to "the rest of the story." If we can catch a glimpse of the incredible future in store for us, then the sequence of events building to that future will make much more sense. Throughout this booklet, my intended audience is people who are self-consciously Christian. For any reading this who may not yet be a follower of Jesus, my hope is that you, too, will find in these words something to inspire you towards faith.

The future state for followers of Jesus Christ is NOT simply one of "going to heaven when we die." Many are surprised to learn that phrase is not even mentioned in the Bible. Our future state is to live and reign with Jesus in the "new heavens and new earth" pictured for us in the last two chapters of the book of Revelation. *"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away..."* (Revelation 21:1). Reading there we see a vision of living with resurrected bodies in the immediate presence of God, surrounded by his bright glory. A gorgeous city is described, in the midst of which flows a life-giving stream proceeding directly from the throne of God. Both sides of the fertile banks of the crystal-clear stream are planted with the tree of life (first seen in the Garden of Eden), constantly bearing fruit, the leaves of which are for "the healing of the nations." This scene should be taken fairly literally, in my opinion.

I remember a time while hiking in the Los Padres National Forest of California, in the vicinity of Mt. Pinos, at about 8,000 feet. It was one of those amazing days that even now, 15 years later, I can still picture in my mind. The sky was intensely blue, the bright sun and light breeze making it "not too hot and not too cold, but just right!" Walking that soft, pine-needle covered alpine trail winding along the crest of the mountain ridge seemed to me almost like walking through a park high above the earth. Hiking along, I saw directly in front of me a beautiful Ponderosa pine tree. I had always admired those trees and this one in particular was spectacular. Spontaneously, out loud, I said to God with joy, "Thank you for making that tree!" Immediately in response, God spoke to my heart and said, "You've never seen a pine tree." In a flash of insight, I knew what he meant. The pine tree standing before me, as beautiful as it was, could not compare to the pine trees I would see in the new heavens and new earth. Those would be so stunning, that by comparison, the beautiful tree in front of me would not even seem to be one!

A book I highly recommend for insight into what “the new heavens and new earth” might be like is the novel by C.S. Lewis, *THE GREAT DIVORCE*. This short novel describes a bus trip from hell to heaven and the adventures that occur to one man in particular. The influence of that novel, a careful thinking though the “renewed creation” written by the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:18-21, together with a realistic look at Revelation chapters 21-22, has convinced me that the new heavens and new earth will look a whole lot more like planet earth than we are accustomed to thinking—only 10,000 times more beautiful!

To compare this life to the next might be like the difference between looking at a beautiful painting of nature and actually living in that scene. On the wall next to my desk is a Thomas Kinkade painting, “The End of a Perfect Day.” I love this painting, given to me by my congregation in California. I often look at it and wish I could live there. A small stone cabin, smoke rising from its chimney, lies just next to a peaceful lake, with fir trees and snow-covered mountains in the distant background. It is evening, and ducks are swimming on the placid waters, next to a wooden dock, where a fishing boat is moored. A well-worn path beside the dock leads to the front porch of the cabin, brightly lit windows framing a green front door. I look at the scene wistfully—because it is only a painting. But the yearning that rises within me when I look at that painting is the longing for a reality which I believe will be more than fulfilled in the next life.

Or take the comparison between eating dried fruit to fresh fruit, as how this life might be compared to the next. Since I do a fair amount of backpacking, I eat a lot of dried fruit. It’s great. But compared to eating a ripe, Carolina yellow peach? Holding that warm round fruit next to your lips, the slightly fuzzy red and purple skin near your nose, inhaling its fresh sweetness, then biting through the smooth skin, into the just-firm-enough fruit, and feeling a zip of pleasure all the way down to your toes as you taste the peach nectar, juice running down your chin—my goodness, how could anyone compare that to a slice of dried peach? But the difference between this life and the next should be far more wonderful and exotic.

Will our pets be there? Scripture does not speak directly about this, but I do believe that animals will also be part of the new heavens and new earth. In Genesis chapter one we read that a covenant of sorts exists between humans and animals, Adam naming the animals and being given charge over them. Also, Noah and his family, you remember, were saved from the flood with the animals. I’m counting on Snoopy and Goldie and Jake and Sara and SandyBear, the loved dogs of my life, being there with me in the new heavens and new earth. What else might we find there? I expect to see fields of tall green corn, golden wheat waving in the wind, clear rocky streams full of fish, and evergreen forests, safe home to birds and

animals of all sorts, living peacefully with each other. Also mountains of splendor, cascading waterfalls, trees beyond description, and flowers of every sort and color—and much, much more. Anything God has already made and declared to be “good,” should we not anticipate to also be there in the new heavens and new earth, but even more and even “gooder?”

3. WHAT WILL WE BE DOING?

The order of Genesis 1:26-30 implies that human beings are made in the image of God so that we might be given the vocation of ruling and caring for the earth in concert with God. Surely something similar to this will also be realized and enlarged upon (especially since our initial stewardship was broken and dismantled by the fall of man) in the new heavens and new earth, but this time, on a cosmic scale. You may be aware that our Milky Way galaxy alone is estimated to contain 300,000,000,000 stars. Even so, the closest star to us (other than our sun) is still so far away that the light from that star, traveling at 186,000 miles per second, takes almost 3 years to reach us! (How fast is light? It is so fast that in one second, light can travel around the equator of the earth almost 8 times!) It is also estimated that our galaxy is just one of billions of other galaxies. Perhaps the universe is so vast because God has vast plans for it, incorporating a renewed stewardship for his new humanity in the new heavens and new earth.

Dallas Willard, Christian philosopher and author (and a personal mentor of mine), has coined a phrase describing God’s activity in our life now as that of “training for reigning.” In other words, what God has in mind for us in this present life is our development into a kind of person. His plan is that we become transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ, so that God can trust us to do what we want into eternity. This has great bearing in terms of understanding his final judgment of human beings. (Judgment, we will see, is not only an assessment of what we did with this life now, but what we are capable of for the future.)

God has intended all along to raise-up children who bear the family resemblance. He (apparently) has little desire to micro-manage our lives, once we become fully mature. This should make complete sense to those of us who are parents. Yes, we train and discipline our children. But at a certain point in their development, we do not expect, neither do we want, our children to have to ask us about every single decision they make. We want our children to have matured under our training to the point where they know and automatically choose to do the right and wise course of action. True, they may and probably will do some of the same foolish things we have done. But in Christ, even our sins can be used by God to train us. And from God’s point of view, it is certain that we will become trained into Christ’s likeness. *“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the*

likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:29).

It is my guess that the innate gifts and talents (and desires) we find within us, together with the skills we develop, are preparing us for certain aspects of our vocations in the new heavens and new earth. Not a one-to-one correspondence (for instance, a highway patrolman in this life, a cosmic cop in the next?) but instead a dove-tailing and merging of skills gained now with our future vocations. Does it disappoint you to realize we will be working in the new heavens and new earth? Actually, human beings were created to do work. It is not that we are “workaholics” because we feel the need to make a contribution, even in retirement. No, our desire to create, to build, to manage, to contribute, to “make a difference,” comes directly from the image of God implanted in us. Because of the fall of man though, our work became toil. In the coming age, our work will not be toil, but a joy, and will manifest the uniquely creative part of God’s image in us that will in turn, gloriously reflect his true fatherhood of us. In other words, for the very first time in our lives, we will be able to really say, “This is why I was born!”

4. WHAT WILL OUR RELATIONSHIPS BE LIKE?

Jesus said that we will not be married in the resurrection (see Matthew 22:30). For some this may seem a sad thing, for others, maybe relief! That marriage will not be present though does not mean our committed relationships and friendships will disappear. I will always be the son of Nathaline Harrison and Sam Hilborn. Nathan Hilborn and Katie Hilborn will always be my children (under God). Our relationships and friendships (including mine with my wife Anne) will continue into the life of eternity, provided that those relationships have been redeemed in Jesus. And why not? Scripture teaches us that God appointed our birth at the exact time and place he chose (Acts 17:26; Ephesians 1:4-5). Scripture also teaches that our salvation has always been a matter of God’s sovereign choosing and activity. We have been saved by grace, through faith—and faith itself as a gift of God (see Romans 8:28-30; Ephesians 2:8-10). In other words, everything about our lives as believers has always been under the guidance of God, even when we were “dead in our trespasses and sins.”

This does not mean, of course, that all our choices have been according to God’s will. Far from it. Many, maybe even most, of our volitional choices over the years have been utterly self-centered. But our God is a god who works all things (including our sins, apathy, back-sliding, and rebellion) to fit into his wise purposes. *“In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will”* (Ephesians 1:11). The point I’m probably taking too long to get to is this: our human friends

and loving companions should certainly continue on with us into our next life, given God's careful arranging of things for us already in this present age. We must always remember that God deeply loves us. Of course we cannot know many of the details we are curious about now. But in the same way we enjoy surprising our own children with gifts in ways they were not expecting, we should count on our heavenly Father to do so even more spectacularly!

One of my students asked this question about relationships in heaven: "What about those people who can't get along with each other now?" Not too seriously, I replied, "Well, maybe that is one good reason why heaven will be such a big place!" Truthfully, not much is directly said about our relationships in the new heavens and new earth, but much is certainly implied. Remember the Sermon on the Mount? We should assume that those qualities of life Jesus taught that can begin to characterize our lives now as we learn to draw life from the "kingdom of the heavens," will surely be present in the next life—in fullness. The capstone of life in the kingdom of God now and then is love. The person whose life is pervaded with God's kind of love (*agape*) is a person who finds the ability to let go of fear, anger, contempt, and lust in his relationships. He is able to speak simply and honestly, without forcing his will on others or trying to manipulate them. He is able to be kind. He is modest about his accomplishments. He is able to treat people well, even those who are against him. He spends little or no time trying to criticize or "straighten-out" others. He enjoys helping and is able to do for others the very things he himself would like done for him.

It makes perfect sense to me then, that those qualities in relationships will be enlarged a thousand-fold in the new heavens and new earth, for at least four reasons. First, we will be prepared to live in that kind of love. The long night of suffering we experienced during this phase of our existence will have trained our character to prefer living life in concert with the Spirit of God, who always directs us in love. Even now, we ache to be more consistent in the love which Christ inspires within our hearts. Among our greatest frustrations are our failures in relation to trusting God and loving others.

Second, sin as a power will no longer be present, either in or around us. Not only will there be no sin, there will be no temptations to sin, or a devil to deceive, create doubt, and ramp-up the temptations. There will be no reason we will try to "secure ourselves," the usual cause of interpersonal conflict, because in the visible presence of God, that will be obviously absurd. The "world" as we know it now, that demonically-inspired organization of human effort to secure ourselves independently of God, will have disappeared. For those familiar with the book of Revelation, "Babylon" will have fallen and will be no more.

The third reason is that we will “know even as we are known.” This statement from the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 applies to our eventual “knowing” of God, but it will certainly also be true of one another in the next life. How much ill-will, hurt feelings, and broken relationships have come about simply because we do not understand one another? What this will look like in the next age, I do not know, but I am convinced that one of the most wonderful aspects to look forward to in that new life will be the perfectly transparent communication. For the first time, we will experience true and complete and loving relations, without a possibility of being misunderstood. Loved ones with whom we may have been at odds in this life, even though fellow disciples, will be reconciled. We will understand each other perfectly and with compassion. We will “see” each other truly for the first time and in seeing, we will love. Every personality quirk, every defect of character, every soul-wound, will be seen for what it was, sympathized with, and healed. All past injuries given and received will be forgiven. We will all be whole at last, free at last.

A fourth reason for anticipating perfect and complete love between one other is that we will finally see Jesus. The Bible says with wonderful simplicity, “*They will see his face*” (Revelation 22:4). Even now, we occasionally experience times of such wonder and amazement and joy, that at least for a time, without thinking, people put aside their differences. I have personally seen this happen at weddings, at graduations, at the birth of a child. How much more will we experience this when we look directly into the loving eyes of Jesus? And the Apostle John confirms this when he writes, “*We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is*” (1 John 3:2).

One last thought about our relationships in that day. Loneliness will not be a possibility. The Beatles accurately sang, “All the lonely people; where do they all come from?” Well, lonely people come about fractured from the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. It is as if each of us has a unique puzzle-shape to our personality, with bends and curves, made to “fit” exactly with someone else. Our usual way of trying to find someone who “fits” with us is through romance. A good marriage can get pretty close, but even in the best of marriages, there will never be an exact fit. For one simple reason. Human beings are not created to complete one another. God alone completes us. Way too much striving on our part goes into trying to force our friends and loved ones to “fit” with our desires and needs. In the new heavens and new earth, there will be no possibility of rejection or loneliness due to unfulfilled parts of our personalities. We will have merged our lives in tandem with our Creator, yet in such a way that our personalities are not obliterated or dissolved, but made complete and whole at last. Our missing pieces will have found the perfect fit. We will be eternally unique and free individuals, loved, and able to fully love in return. That is what our relationships will be like!

5. WHAT WILL OUR BODIES LOOK LIKE?

At an appointed day in our future, known as “Resurrection Day,” followers of Jesus Christ will be instantly “clothed” with a new, physical body. Our new body will be solid, recognizable, and undying. It will not be capable of being sick, injured, nor will it be subject to pain. It will be like the resurrection body of Jesus Christ, in that it will have new properties. A new biology, chemistry, and physics will overwhelm this present, dying, evil-penetrated universe, starting first with our mortal bodies. This has already happened in the body of Jesus Christ. His resurrection is the “firstfruits” of the new heaven and new earth yet to come.

When Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, his old body did not back to life again. No, instead, his mortal remains, three days decayed, were caught up by the Holy Spirit and “consumed” into the basic elements of a new kind of body, a transformed body, one regenerated by the new physics of the coming age. This ultimate state of nature, which we too will be a part of one day, has come into this present age in the resurrection body of Jesus Christ. No wonder the Apostles were able to face persecution and death with such fearlessness! They knew absolutely that physical death was meaningless, because they had seen, spoken with, touched, and held-onto Jesus in his new resurrection reality. They knew, because they saw, that death as an enemy was destroyed.

Most Jews of Jesus’ day believed in resurrection (the Sadducees were the exception). They assumed that at the end of this age there would be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked (Acts 24:15). From Old Testament texts like this one, *“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever”* (Daniel 12:2-3), the Jews were anticipating that the righteous (at least) would one day be given immortal, resurrection bodies. They had no clue though that resurrection would be a two-stage event: first, the body of Jesus and then at a later date in the future, all those who belong to him. This is why Jesus is referred to by the Apostles as *“the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”* (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Believers who have already died and are waiting in Paradise for the resurrection will find their souls instantly merged with their immortal body on that day. Those who are still alive on earth will not experience death but be instantly transformed into their new bodies. *“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.*

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory!" (1 Corinthians 15:51-54; see also 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Of course we are curious about what we will look like in our resurrection bodies. Not many details are given, but a few are implied. Based on the fact that Jesus was recognizable and "huggable" so will we be, too. The Apostle Paul writes, "*And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven*" (1 Corinthians 15:42). There will be no ugly people in heaven! Why not? Because our outer person will exactly mirror the beauty of the gloriously transformed inner person. Even now, our countenance takes on to some extent at least, the kind of person we have become. George Orwell is quoted as saying that by the age of 50 everyone gets the face they deserve! Certainly, in the resurrection, the radiance of the fully-developed image of God in our new humanity will be staggeringly beautiful. In fact, we might be tempted to worship one another, except for the surpassing beauty in glory of Jesus whom we shall see face to face.

Do you have a weak, frail, or deformed body in this life? You won't in the next. Our resurrection bodies will be whole, complete, strong, and vigorous. Possibly our new bodies will still be capable of growth, though certainly not decay. Why should we not form even more solid, more beautiful, more "real" bodies as eternity rolls along? N. T. Wright makes the point that as sometimes we hear people say about someone who has been ill, "He's now just a shadow of his former self," Christians can joyfully say of themselves, "We are now just a shadow of our future self!"

A private hope I have is to be able to fly like Peter Pan! And why not? Surely a different physics will prevail. My suspicion is that we will be able to instantly transport ourselves anywhere in the universe. This is one reason why I believe it likely that we will be able to meet and converse with any of the redeemed who have ever lived in history. Even though you might feel shy or even nervous (I would), would you not like to be able to talk with Moses, or David, or the Apostle Paul, or Francis of Assisi? I hope to be able to tell Dr. Frank Laubach how much his writings meant to me, and to tell Pope John Paul II how much his first visit to Boston in 1979 meant in my own conversion. And I can't wait to get to talk again with my dad, Sam Hilborn!

Jesus ate fish in his resurrection body (see Luke 24:38-43; John 21:12-14). Will we need to eat? My guess is that we will be able to eat, if we want to, simply for the pleasure of it. Clearly, I don't know, but again, why not? Too many of our ideas of "heaven" have been formed by dumb cartoons, TV shows, and movies. The "new heavens and new earth" will NOT consist of our floating around on clouds, but will

be a whole lot more like this present earth and sky than we are normally used to thinking about—and a great deal more wonderful.

6. WHAT WILL THE DAY OF JUDGMENT BE LIKE?

The Bible says that *“Man is destined to die once and after that to face judgment”* (Hebrews 9:27). There will be no reincarnation, no repeating of endless cycles of existence to pay for and cleanse away sin. Even for those who belong to Jesus Christ, the Day of Judgment will surely be an event like no other in its awesome finality—and for those who consistently reject God, it will be an event of denial-shattering truth, the specter of which even now lurks on the fringes of their consciousness, no matter how hard they try to push it away.

Chronologically, the Day of Judgment will be the event that happens after the resurrection. In this booklet, as I am trying to work backwards in time, the reader has probably noticed that I have only mentioned the ultimate future of those who belong to Jesus Christ. What about the others? What about judgment and rewards and the final separation of the righteous from the wicked? These are difficult matters but ones which must be addressed. But again, first I want to begin with the righteous—those who trust Jesus Christ.

There is disagreement among Christians as to whether believers will be judged at the same time as those who are without Christ. Some hold that the “Great White Throne Judgment” of Revelation 20:11-15 is the scene of judgment only for those who will be lost. But whether final judgment is two events or one, this much is certain: each human being will stand before Jesus Christ to give an account for his life.

Jesus taught that those who belong to him in this life have already “passed” the judgment. *“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life”* (John 5:24). Each disciple nevertheless, will still give an account of himself to God (see Romans 14:9-12). As we stand before God in judgment, the things we did, the way we lived, and in particular, the kind of person we became will provide living testimony that we were indeed those who trusted and followed Jesus Christ. This is why even though we are “saved by faith,” judgment will be by “works.” The life we lived will not EARN us a thing—it will simply be evidence that we trusted Jesus. Jesus, you may remember, said that we will give an account for every idle word. He also taught us that it is from the overflow of the heart that the mouth speaks. In other words, the one in whom the life of God has been placed will be one whose heart (and subsequent speech and actions) will be of an entirely different sort than

those whose hearts are still dead in sin. "Make the tree good and the fruit will be good," is another saying of Jesus that exactly applies here (see Matthew 12:33-37).

Possibly, while reading now, you find yourself wanting to make sure your life will be found acceptable to God in that great day. What should you do? Place your trust in Jesus. What does that look like? It looks like giving up. You give up control of your life into his hands and start trusting Jesus with the outcomes of your life. You decide to stop running your life so as to please yourself and instead you receive his kingdom, his ruling over you, to determine everything in your future. Yes, obviously you intend to cooperate with his governance and guidance. Yes, you turn away from any known sin to God with the intention of living for him. You will find though that even your best intended efforts, if done in your own strength, will fail. So to trust Jesus also means that you will be learning directly from him how to do everything in your life. It will mean being filled with the life of his Holy Spirit to enable you to do what you cannot do on your own. It will mean developing a lifestyle of spiritual disciplines that will enable you to receive grace. It will mean becoming like a little child again, starting over, unlearning bad habits, and finding from Jesus the ways and means to live as his disciple. As the hymn, "Great is thy Faithfulness," by Thomas Chisholm says in the third verse, *"Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth, Thy own dear presence to cheer and to guide; Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!"*

But it all starts with trusting Jesus, it continues by trusting Jesus, and it will be completed in your life now, and in the new heavens and new earth, by trusting Jesus. The greatest virtue mentioned in the Bible is to trust God. Conversely, the greatest sin is to not trust God. Whatever you are doing right now, you can turn-loose of your anxieties and longings, surrender control over your very self, into the hands of Jesus and begin to trust him.

It is clear also in Scripture that our Lord will be seeking ways to reward his children for their trust in him and their faithfulness. Certainly, if he wanted to, he could point out endless examples of sin and faithlessness on our part. How hard would that be for him to do? *"If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared"* (Psalm 130:3-4). Even though I do trust the Lord to have forgiven me all my sins, still, I can easily become nervous at the thought of what God could say and do about my sins if he wanted to. But the gospel makes clear that for those who trust Jesus, our sins will not be held against us in that day! *"Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him"* (Romans 4:7-8). In fact, God himself says that he not only forgives our sins for the sake of Christ, but that he has chosen to FORGET about

them. One might ask, “How could God, being omniscient, forget something?” He can forget if he chooses to. And he chooses to forget the sins of those who appeal to him on the basis of his mercy, trusting Jesus Christ. *“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more”* (Hebrews 8:12).

Our sins will not be held against us. Can you believe that? As another hymn so gratefully puts it, *“My sin—O, the bliss of this glorious thought, My sin—not in part but the whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!”* (“It is Well with my Soul,” Horatio Spafford).

I can picture a repentant sinner, kneeling before the Lord of Hosts in that Day of Judgment, surrounded by the angels, the songs of heaven overhead, yet his heart like stone within him anticipating a word of condemnation his many sins deserve as he hears, “Look at me.” Trembling, shaking, he lifts his head towards that bright countenance, compelled yet unable to look directly into his face—but then sees the wounds on the wrists of the hands stretched out towards him. Tears flowing now, he risks a glance and stops—his gaze captured by those amber eyes smiling at him. With amazed relief and heart-melting joy, he hears from the lips of Jesus, *“You are my son, whom I love. Fear not, I am the first and the last. I was dead, but now I am alive for ever more. I hold the keys to death and Hades. I have made you clean in my sight. I have removed your sins from me as far as the east is from the west. I have made you acceptable in my sight. Welcome to the joy of your Lord!”*

Though we may now tremble at the thought of standing in judgment, we have every reason to believe that for we who trust Jesus, that Day will be a day of vindication and relief. We will know the truth of how securely we were always held by the commitment and strength of Jesus from the moment of our conception to our final passing into his full life. We will see and understand the inherited weakness and sinful bent of our flesh, the strength of the temptations arrayed against us, the cunning diabolical strategies for our ruin, yes, even the stubborn meanness of our own will set against God and our prideful (and contemptible) insistence on our own way and pleasure—but we shall see all of it displayed under the invincible narrative of Jesus Christ’s determined persistence in grace to save us.

And we will see Jesus vindicated in choosing us. With stunned relief we will, to some degree, comprehend the predestined security of our final destiny at the hand of this incredible God. *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified”* (Romans 8:28-30).

What is more, on that day, God will be seeking to reward us. *“For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done”* (Matthew 16:27). These words of Jesus should not be understood as a subtle threat (you’re going to get yours!!) but as his true promise to be hoped for. He will reward his own for their faithfulness (see also Ephesians 6:8; Colossians 3:24).

I believe that God will make every effort to find something praiseworthy to commend us for, even we are only too aware of our sins and failures, because God considers us to be the pride of his heart. In the parable of the sheep and goats, you may remember, the sheep were clueless about why they were being rewarded! (Matthew 25:37). My strong suspicion is that every response from us to God’s grace, every standing firm against temptation, every return to faith after retreating into sin, every act of kindness inspired by Christ, every decision to believe in spite of the pain, every small act of love, will find a reward in his eyes. Because he wants to reward us, we who see our lives now as a tattered, patchwork quilt of faithfulness at best, can expect to hear these words from Jesus: *Well, done, good and faithful servant!*” None of this will be earned, of course. But as Dallas Willard likes to say, *“God’s grace is disgraceful.”* Though my heart sometimes fears when I think about my past sins, my faith also rises in hope when I consider the magnanimity of Jesus toward sinners. Think about it. Before whom would you rather stand in judgment than he?

True, Scripture also implies that there will be “non-rewards” for some believers. Here is the passage: *“If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames”* (1 Corinthians 3:14-15). The apostle Paul was speaking about evangelists, but I believe this principle also pertains to ordinary followers of Jesus. Namely, the Day will show what we built our life upon. In other words, did our calling as disciples of Jesus form the real basis from which we made our daily plans and decisions? Our calling, remember, is to do ALL that we do “in the name of Jesus Christ.” The apostle continues, *“Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God”* (1 Corinthians 4:5).

It may turn out that some believers have given themselves over to things that in the end will be shown to be ultimately worthless—in which case, they will still be saved, but their “reward” will have been lost. Even then, I am sure our Lord will be quite kind in his welcome. After all, he died for them.

The Bible urges us to take each day seriously and regard each day as one in which God has an agenda for us. Will we follow his agenda? Or will we insist on our own, either through apathy or stubbornness? In the movie GLADIATOR, General Maximus exhorts his cavalry to courage before battle by reminding them, "What we do in life echoes into eternity!" How much more so for disciples of Jesus Christ! It is far more important HOW we do what we do and our MOTIVES for what we do than the actual tasks themselves. I can assure you, from my own personal experience, that one can even preach the gospel of Jesus with thoughts of personal glory rather than God's glory. Do you find your work in life to be ordinary, even mundane? What we do does not matter nearly as much as for WHOM we do it. Some of the most devoted Christians at my high school, and there are many, are on the custodial staff. Never forget that even a cup of cold water given, because one is a disciple, will bring a reward, according to Jesus (Mark 9:41).

So what should be our attitude in terms of the coming judgment? *"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory"* (Colossians 3:1-3). Clearly, we want to be about the work of Jesus. But remember, his work is usually NOT something "religious." For most disciples, most of the time, God's work will be the simple doing of our duty at work and home, but with this difference: our real boss will be Jesus. And what we do, we do by faith. We learn to trust Jesus with everything and we do everything by trusting Jesus. We live confidently before God, anticipating his generosity towards us now and in the Day of Judgment.

Again, we do not earn our reward, but because he has chosen to place his favor upon us, we accept his generosity of spirit and act accordingly. We gladly seek to live lives "separated unto Jesus." He is our life itself. But we keep away from the terror of "the law of sin and death," by placing ourselves under the supervision of his Holy Spirit (in contrast to the Law) and learning how to "keep in step" with our Lord Jesus.

We place our hope not on success, or personal fulfillment, not on a happy family, or good investments, or the applause of others, not even on "making a difference in this life," but we place our hope fully on the glory that will be ours when Jesus Christ is revealed. And we seek out opportunities to persuade others. *"So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men...We are therefore*

Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:9-10, 20-21).

7. WHAT ABOUT THOSE NOT RECONCILED TO GOD?

When asked his opinion about who will be in heaven, Dallas Willard responds, "I believe God will bring to heaven anyone who in his considered opinion can stand to be there." I love that answer. In other words, one should consider whether heaven is a place he would enjoy. The new heavens and new earth will be full of God and holy angels and holy people. We will live in an atmosphere of holy love. We will see God face-to-face. We will love loving! Among our greatest delights will be the preferring of one another before ourselves. God will be the thrill of our hearts. So ask yourself: "Is that the kind of life I think I might enjoy?"

The Bible makes clear that there are people being trained now to enjoy being a part of God's "new heavens and new earth" namely, disciples of Jesus Christ. I deliberately use the word "disciples" when speaking of this group of people. In the New Testament the word "disciple" is used 269 times; the word "Christian" only three times. What is at stake is NOT whether one has made a "decision for Christ" or made a "profession of faith" at some point in the past, and certainly not whether one is an active church member, nor whether one has received "the sacraments"—what is at stake is whether one is a personal disciple of Jesus Christ.

What is a disciple? A disciple is someone who follows Jesus. A disciple is a person whose calling in life is to trust and obey Jesus. A disciple is one who is with Jesus, learning from Jesus, how to become like Jesus. A disciple is one who is learning how to live his particular life as Jesus would live it, if Jesus were he. In other words, when I am teaching Algebra to my students, as a disciple, I am learning how to teach that class as Jesus would teach that Algebra class. Discipleship is not a matter of trying to duplicate the life Jesus once lived in Palestine (though we do learn to imitate his spiritual practices, such as solitude, fasting, prayer, and worship). Instead, it is learning how to live the life we have been given, which includes our time and place in history, our particular family, occupation, and culture, together with all the eccentricities, strengths, and limitations we personally have, and we learn to live our unique life as Jesus would live our life.

Some reading this booklet may be confined to bed in a nursing home. You have the privilege of learning how Jesus would live your life confined to bed in a nursing home. Some reading this may be students in college. You can learn from Jesus how

he would live your college-student life. Some readers may be in prison. Jesus is very happy to live his life through you in that prison setting and will teach you how.

But we don't want to make discipleship seem like something arduous that EARNs. Faithfulness can be extremely arduous, costing everything, even our lives. But the heart of discipleship is trust. And as we trust Jesus, we receive not only the ability to do what is right, but the DESIRE to do what is right. We learn that in our own strength we are not capable of much of anything. Trusting Jesus, we find salvation. We find forgiveness, the pardon of all our sins, and power outside ourselves, coming to dwell within us to motivate and carry us along in our trust and obedience.

We live today in a culture in which many "believe" in Jesus but are not his followers. They have mistaken what belief is. The devil has their kind of belief in Jesus. In fact, the devil is probably far more orthodox than any theologian. The devil believes that Jesus is the Son of God and that he was crucified, dead, and buried, and raised to life for human sins, that Jesus reigns over this universe now and will come again one day to make all things right. But despite this "belief," the devil hates God. Belief that saves is trust that moves us to repent of our sins and to abandon control over the outcomes of our life into the hands of Jesus of Nazareth. It is then as his disciple that we are pardoned all our sins, that we become inwardly "modified" to enjoy being in heaven, being graced with the very righteousness of Christ, and are even now learning to utilize our life in the service of a holy God. People with this kind of belief love God and other people AND WILL CONTINUE TO DO SO INTO ETERNITY. This is why I said earlier that the Day of Judgment is not only an assessment of what we did with this life now, but what we are capable of for the future.

Here is another illustration. Pretend that God is constructing a universe-wide, three-dimensional building made of Lego blocks. With billions of multi-colored Lego's pieces (we humans), he is creating a cosmic display of his goodness and mercy. In fact, it will be so beautiful that he plans on living in it himself. But there's a problem. Each one of the Lego pieces he has to work with (you and me) is crooked, mis-shaped, stained, and broken. How can he build using such faulty pieces? Well, it turns out that we, the Lego pieces, are malleable. Willingly given back to God, each of us is capable of being reshaped and recreated into a very suitable part for God's project. Even those of us who keep back-sliding into sin and brokenness again, yet repent and continue to offer ourselves to God are accepted once again, and re-built into God's building. In fact, since God is building his entire house on the basis of one perfectly straight cornerstone piece (Jesus Christ) God does not find it hard at all to take these mal-formed pieces and use them to create beauty and wonder in his building program—provided we are willing to yield to his purposes.

Are you prepared for your life's purpose to be that of bringing glory to God?

Let's be clear. There are lots of people on planet earth who simply will not fit into the program. It is not that they cannot fit in—it is that they will not. We will get to the issue of other religions and of “those who haven't heard” below. But we want to be very clear about the inner condition of the human being—any human being—apart from grace. No one is neutral towards God. By nature, all human beings are predisposed against the rule of God and frankly, prefer that God not exist, if that means God holding them accountable. (True, people do want a god who will bail them out when they are in trouble, but then leave them alone when rescued so they can do what they want. But that god does not exist.)

In other words, all of us presume to have the right to live as we see fit, with inalienable rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” But with respect to our founding fathers, theologically at least, we have none of these “rights” before God. This is one reason people are so angry. They assume that if there is a god, he OWES it to them to make them happy. Not so. This is a hard truth, but we have to grow up about this. We are creatures, subject to the wishes of our Creator. What should astound us is not that bad things happen but that so many good things happen! In answering a complaint about why anyone should be blamed since no one can resist God's will, the apostle Paul says this: *“Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?”* (Romans 9:20-21). In other words, does not God have the right to do with us as he pleases?

Everyone wants to have a god who will bail them out in time of trouble. But the cunning heart of man is such that once we are “delivered,” we then want God to leave us, so we can pursue our pleasures without his spoiling our plans. What kind of god would put up with this? Yet, our God does, at least for now. And he has willingly chosen a vast multitude of stubborn sinners to be melted by his love so that even with sin still inside us, we nevertheless choose to love and serve him in return. When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, he was acting-out the settled disposition of God towards his loved ones. *“But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8). Our God is humble and puts up with a lot of nonsense we never would. Jesus said about God that *“He is kind towards the ungrateful and the wicked”* (Luke 6:35). The apostle Paul also said that it is God's KINDNESS which leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). Nevertheless, there are people who persistently reject God's kindness and refuse to thank him or honor him as God. What about them?

I was once having lunch with Dallas Willard and asked him about this. His answer has always stuck with me. He said, “I believe God will look for every excuse to save someone.” That is my conviction, too. That in the final Day, there will be far more people in the “new heavens and new earth” than there will be in the hell of outer darkness. I am not ignoring what Jesus said about the “narrow gate” in the Sermon on the Mount: *“Enter ye in by the narrow gate, for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby. For narrow is the gate and straightened the way that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it”* (Matthew 7:13-14). But what I do understand Jesus saying with utmost seriousness is that they, his disciples, must enter in and stay in the “narrow way”—which is discipleship to himself. From the point of view of the disciple, then and now, there will ALWAYS appear to be more who are entering the wide gate and broad path to destruction. But it must not be so for his disciples. They are to stay on the narrow path of trust and obedience. That is the only path of life. All other paths lead to destruction.

What Jesus is NOT saying in this teaching is that those who enter the wide gate and broad path must necessarily continue on that path to destruction. Nor does he say by “destruction” that he means final destiny of hell (though I admit, that may be implied). “Destruction” at least pertains to this life, here and now. Non-discipleship to Jesus brings trouble and misery. This should be obvious. The obedient life is the happy life. Are you not convinced of this? Look around you. Think about the people you know who are bent on following their own whims and lusts. What is the real quality of their lives? The blessed and meaningful life, in spite of the pain and trouble we all experience, is the life of discipleship to Jesus. There is no other REAL life. *“He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life”* (1 John 5:12).

Back to those who continue to resist God. Ultimately, God will let people have what they want. If they really want God (not just the good things he gives, but God himself) they will find him. *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”* (Romans 10:13). On the other hand, if what they really want is their own way, then that is what they will end up with. They will get what they really wanted—to live unto themselves, by themselves, without God, apart from him forever. No one will miss heaven by a hair. The judgment will not be one like earning a grade of 69 when “passing” was a 70, so then unfortunately, you failed. No, the judgment will make plain and obvious what has in fact been the case all along—whether that individual human being trusted and loved God—or not.

God is not fooled. He knows who loves him. He sees right now all who trust him. Even trusting him a little seems to please him. In fact, there is nothing in the Bible

that appears to be as meaningful to God as when he sees his human beings trusting him. God is far more pleased with trust than he is by religious scrupulosity. God looked at Abraham, and in spite of Abraham's early wavering and pagan background, saw that Abraham really did believe him. Abraham's "believing" blessed the heart of God and it was counted as RIGHTEOUSNESS for Abraham. Do you want to be "right" with God? Then trust Jesus. Simply trust Jesus. God knows that love and obedience will flow from our hearts as we trust him. Think about it. If you trust someone, I mean really trust someone, don't you also appreciate and admire that person? The one you trust will also be a person whom you grow to love. This is why I suppose that "trust" is portrayed as a separate thing from "obedience" in the Bible. Granted, trust leads to love and love leads to obedience. They all flow together. But in that order—not necessarily the other way around. Lots of people on planet earth, now and throughout history, have slavishly obeyed their gods, not out of love or trust, but out of fear, dread, or as a form of bargaining.

But if by nature all people are set "against" God in their heart, what will have made them change, such that at the judgment a great multitude will be found to have trusted and loved God in this life? God himself will have made that change. He has determined from eternity-past to have a people who will love him freely, from their hearts, not for his gifts but for his character, and loving him, earnestly desire to be with him forever, coalescing their lives with his kingdom rule, so as to reign with him.

For this reason, it has always been the intention of God to come as our Savior. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"* (John 1:1, 14). God came to us as the "suffering servant" of Isaiah 53 and took our sins upon himself. He died a horrible death on our behalf, shedding his blood so that our sins might be atoned for and that we might be pardoned and regarded with his very own righteousness. He overcame all the curse of the fall of man—God's judgment against sin, as well as sickness, disease, famine, insanity, toil and unrest, oppression, "the world, the flesh, the devil," and the final enemy, death itself. Again, we want to remember that Jesus' first disciples faced their own eventual martyrdom with joy, because they had literally seen, talked with, and touched Jesus in his resurrected, "new heavens and new earth," body. They knew that they, too, would be resurrected as Jesus had been, and would be physically alive forever.

In addition to the eternal plan for our salvation, there is an "appointed time" for each disciple to come to faith. Faith itself is the gift of God. For some, that appointed time is found in the natural outworking of growing up in a Christian family. For others, it is a crisis, usually painful, that leads us to Christ. For still

others, there is no crisis, but instead a dawning realization of the truth—that Jesus Christ has been, is now, and always will be the Lord of heaven and earth—and that our only appropriate response is to submit ourselves to him. Whatever the process, *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

Each disciple of Jesus, in the way and time appointed for him, calls out to God and is found by him. We have each been saved by grace, through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). This grace was given us before time began (Ephesians 1:3-6). We were literally predestined to be saved. This “predestining” is often misunderstood, but it is certainly shown in Scripture. We are a chosen people. We did not choose Christ—he chose us. (Yes, of course, we responded to his gracious call, but the real choosing was done by him towards us.) Jesus said, *“No one can come to me unless the Father draws him”* (John 6:44). The fact of his prior choosing does not diminish in any way the reality that all who wish to come to Christ may do so. My favorite verse of the Bible is Matthew 11:28-30, in which Jesus emphatically invites all who wish, to come to him to find rest: *“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

8. WHAT ABOUT THOSE OF DIFFERENT RELIGIONS OR NO RELIGION AT ALL?

The central message of the Bible is that Jesus Christ is Lord. He is the one who is running the universe. He is the one through whom this world was created. He is the one who bore in his body the sins of the world so that we might be pardoned. He is the one through whom human beings are saved. He is the one before whom all people will stand in judgment.

But the point of the uniqueness of Jesus is often misunderstood. The Bible does not teach that human beings are lost because through accident of birth they grew up in a different religion. People are lost because of their sins. People are in trouble with God for reasons OTHER than being a Hindu, or Buddhist, or Muslim, or Jew, or Animist, or “formal Christian” for that matter. People are trouble with God because even though all have an inner “knowing” that God exists, they have deliberately pushed away that awareness so they can sin. As a result, God has given them over to their sinful desires (see Romans chapters 1 and 2 particularly). Why have they been given over to their sinful desires? Is God being mean? Not at all. People are given over to sin because God is giving them what they want! Listen to these words of Jesus: *“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil”* (John 3:19).

The Bible makes clear that ALL people who have ever lived have known inside themselves that there is a God. But each one of us has deliberately pushed away that knowledge of God SO THAT WE CAN DO WHAT WE WANT. And God has in effect said, “OK. Do what you want.” The result for the human being has been the corruption of our minds so that we can, by nature, no longer apprehend TRUE truth. This is dire. God has shrunk in our minds, to the point where God seems little or insignificant. Concurrently, the importance of the human self in our own minds has swollen to ridiculous proportions. We have lost our ability to think truly, to understand our predicament, or to WANT to find the loving God who can save us. By nature, we are interested only in a god who would bless us and still let us sin. As I said earlier, that god does not exist. By nature we are lost—and we prefer it that way, at least for now. But when the Day comes and truth is staring us in the face, will we have delayed until it was too late? What if turns out that even in the final hour, it will not be God who refuses us, but we who refuse God?

This booklet itself is a pertinent example. Is not our eventual death the most obvious thing that will one day happen to us? And would it not be an “of course” to try to find out what will come next after death? Yet I anticipate that many will be reluctant to pick up this booklet, much less read it. How do you explain that denial of reality? It is because we have deliberately chosen to push the awareness of God out of our minds and have “protected” ourselves psychologically to the point where we cannot discern true truth, except by being born-again by the Holy Spirit. Even devoted Christians will often find themselves preferring the pleasure of watching NFL football to taking time to be with God. Certainly, there is a place for wholesome entertainment, but really, must that be our first thought? How many of those we encounter today will have their minds full, not of God or the seeking out of truth, or the facing of their mortality, but instead with minds saturated by fears, worries, and lusts, together with distractions of work or pleasure, such that God has no place in their thinking at all? *“In his pride the wicked does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God”* (Psalm 10:4).

I admit to you that even as a pastor of many years, there are still plenty of times when to think about praying or reading Scripture brings an inner tug of resistance. Why is that? Why should I ever feel reluctant to pray or worship or fill my mind with God’s Word? It is evidence of the inner working of the power of sin (helped along by demonic suggestion, probably) creating a reluctance within me to take the time to expose myself to true truth. This reluctance usually takes the form of “not having enough time” or feeling “bored.” It is crazy how suddenly important the most trivial task can appear when considering instead to sit down and pray. Our “flesh,” that aspect of ourselves which has been habituated in sin and strives to live independently from God is profoundly hostile to God. The Spirit of God within us

leads us into the light and towards worship and holiness. But the flesh resists. There is a conflict. But those who yield themselves to be led by the Spirit of God know that our real identity is not the “flesh,” but that of a born-again child of God.

The division of pull we feel at times between Spirit and flesh is only apparent and temporary. The Spirit and flesh are not equal and opposite forces. The flesh is presumptive, egocentric, boastful, whining, but essentially dead, except through habit or when we choose to try to live again self-righteously before the Law or in our own strength independently of God. (The Bible teaches disciples to regard ourselves as “dead to sin and alive to God,” not by way of pretending, but because our old self, which could only yield to the influence of sin, really is dead and gone. See Romans 6:1-11).

The Spirit, on the other hand, is the Spirit of Almighty God himself, the Spirit whose power created the universe (continuing to expand, estimated now to be approximately 46.5 billion light-years to the edge!) and the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead with a new, immortal, transformed body. The Spirit is triumphant. We know that our true self and real preference, in spite of the opposition of the flesh at times, is to draw close to God, be filled with his love, and love him and others in return. This is so, not because we are inherently “noble,” but because in our new birth by the Spirit, the deepest core of our being was re-born with new substance—the love of God.

But back to the topic at hand. What about those who are of different religions or those who “haven’t heard?” Many Christians are reluctant, appropriately so, to accept that we are somehow enlightened in a way in which others are not. We are realistic enough to know that we are not morally better or more intelligent than our Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, or Buddhist friends. So what makes us think we are right and they are wrong?

To begin with, the issue is not our being right and their being wrong. It is a matter of Jesus being right. Sometimes Christians are a little too assertive about things for which we do not have a clear answer. David Dean, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Sudbury, Massachusetts, who lovingly helped me along in my early 20’s during my adult re-commitment to Christ, often said from the pulpit, “I believe there will be a lot of surprises in heaven.” I’m sure he is right. On the other hand, often Christians seem reluctant (cowardly?) to speak with conviction about that which we do know—namely, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. We want to be extremely clear about what we DO know from the Bible:

- 1) It is through the life, death, resurrection and on-going ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, that any human being will be saved. *“I am the way,*

and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

- 2) It is by the grace of God coming to a person, NORMALLY received through conscious faith (faith itself being a gift of God) that a person is joined to Christ. *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).*
- 3) No one is acceptable to God on his own merits. Rather, apart from the finding of forgiveness and righteousness as a gift, we face the prospect of standing before God in final judgment as culpable law-breakers, and not in minor ways either, but in persistent and heinous ways. This is true whether one is a Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, or an atheist. *“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:22-24)*
- 4) Everyone who cries out to God to be saved will be heard. The Lord sees every human heart. He is quick to respond to the cry for mercy. Right now, everywhere on the planet, the Lord God is aware of every human being seeking him, whether they be Christian or Atheist, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, or Animist. *“For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him” (2 Chronicles 16:9).* He has promised to be found by all who seek him with all their heart. *“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 29:13).*
- 5) The only way REVEALED to us by which a person will cry out to the Lord and be saved is in response to hearing about Jesus. That is why the Christian Church has always been a missionary church. It is the gospel of Jesus that is the power for any person’s salvation. *“For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (Romans 10:12-15)*

These five points should be held firmly in mind as we think through the issues. Now, let's do some derivative thinking from these points. It is irrefutable that the Bible teaches that Jesus Christ is the one through whom all people will be saved. No one will be found in the "new heavens and new earth" apart from Jesus. It is also clear that the Church is to obey Jesus' commandment to take this gospel to all nations and make disciples of Jesus Christ. What is NOT clearly stated are answers to some of the exceptions that come to mind.

Consider the Old Testament believers. What about their salvation? None of the Hebrews were saved through a personal understanding about Jesus of Nazareth, since they died long before he was born in Bethlehem. Old Testament believers were saved "by grace, through faith," as we are, except that the focus of their faith was not in trusting Jesus of Nazareth, but in trusting Yahweh, the personal God of the Hebrews. However, even though they did not know the name, "Jesus of Nazareth," they nevertheless "knew" Jesus. How could that be? In the words of John the Baptist, *"This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is become before me, because He was before me'"* (John 1:30).

Jesus, as the pre-incarnate Son of God, was in the beginning with God and is God. He is called "The Word" of God. All things were made through him and came into being by him. At the appointed time, the Son of God, "The Word," clothed himself in human flesh and lived among us. This means that anyone living prior to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth who had faith in Yahweh as his personal God simultaneously experienced a personal "knowing" of the pre-incarnate Son of God—even though he had not heard the name "Jesus of Nazareth." This is how best to understand the odd statement by the apostle Paul about Jesus among the Old Testament Hebrews: *"They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ"* (1 Corinthians 10:4).

So, similarly, is it possible that there are people, never having heard the name of Jesus of Nazareth, yet calling out to a god they hope is there, whom God could still save "by grace, through faith" even though they cry out to him in ignorance? I believe that is certainly a possibility. Think about the American Indians before Columbus. Think about the many "unreached peoples" of today. Think about those in other religions or cults who, unsatisfied with their religion, still are somehow crying out to the true God of whom they may only know a little. Think about people who are mentally deficient, or who are small children, or who die in infancy.

But the Bible is silent on this.

There are many things we do not know about the eternal destiny of other people. In a certain sense, the only destiny we are responsible for is our own. What we DO know is that the people who will be in the “new heavens and new earth” will have gotten there through Jesus Christ. And we know that ANYONE who puts his trust in Jesus Christ will be one of those “saved” people. We should never neglect sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ based on a hypothetical possibility of someone being saved apart from responding consciously in faith to Jesus. We are not God. We can trust God to always do what is right in the circumstances for which we have no real answer. We instead must be about those things which have been revealed to us. *“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law”* (Deuteronomy 29:29).

9. WHAT ABOUT HELL?

Some people, probably because of cartoons they have seen, or the lingering remembrance of medieval art and theology, think that hell is where God gets to torture bad people. I want to say, “Are you kidding me?” God, of whom Jesus said, “When you have seen me, you have seen the Father,” torture people? Don’t believe it! After a lifetime of living in the conscious presence of Jesus Christ, the beloved apostle John makes this simple statement summing-up everything he has come to know about God through Jesus: *“This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.”* (1 John 1:5) In other words, God is good, all the time.

The Bible does say there is a hell. But far too often, we accept (even nourish!) churlish, mean, even demonic images about our kind God. I believe God is hurt (offended?) when his own children doubt his good character. The Bible says that our God is a god who is not desirous that any should perish, but that all might come to repentance. Our God is a god who has made the gospel known in this age so that all nations might believe and obey him. Our God is a god who loves the world so much that he sent his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life! Our God is a god whose KINDNESS leads people to repentance (see 2 Peter 3:9; Romans 16:26; John 3:16; Romans 2:4).

The single characteristic that best describes God at the core of his being is love. The Bible says, *“God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him”* (1 John 4:16). There is a hell, but God takes no satisfaction that some will be in there. He has gone to incredible pain and effort that we might be saved. Yes, hell is a place and condition wherein justice will certainly be served, and ultimately that is a good thing, but God ALWAYS hopes and anticipates that mercy will triumph over justice. Some people, though, will continue to refuse his mercy. They will experience

torment, not at the hand of God, but rather by the outcome of the perversity of their own choices. The tree did nothing wrong when the drunk driver ran into it and was badly injured and had to go to the hospital and then later lost his license. That is what happens when you drive drunk and run into a tree.

Sometimes people wonder about the intentions of God towards them because of the incredible pain they have suffered in the past. Could God not have alleviated that pain? If he really is a God of love, would he not have prevented that pain from happening? These are concerns that are real and legitimate. If all we knew about God was what we see with our eyes, observing the distress, crime, betrayal, torment, suffering, and evil we see in the world and experience ourselves, we might be inclined to say, "If there is a god, he must be like a devil!" But we do know more about God than what we see by way of human suffering. We see how even awful things can turn out to have some good in them. We also see a beauty and artistry in nature that is beyond compare. We also have a book, inspired by this God, that tells us, through stories mainly, but with some deliberate teaching as well, that God is good, only good, and that he reigns over all things, even evil, for his good purposes. Most importantly, we have the knowledge of Jesus who is the incarnation of God. In other words, if you really want to know what God is like, the best thing you can do is to look at Jesus. No one can prove this to you—it is a choice you make to believe.

So how do we put together two seemingly contradictory ideas, one, the life we experience now, permeated with sin and suffering, with this other idea, that of a fully competent, completely "in charge," unquestionably loving God? There is a resolution, in part, available to our thinking, though I admit, satisfactory only to those who already believe. But here goes. God has created a universe in which for reasons of his own, he has permitted evil to exist and to exercise some amount of authority, at least for now. But the day is coming when he will make all things right. Ultimately, God knew that greater good will come about in allowing mankind to fall, because of the redemption he planned for them through his Son, Jesus Christ.

We live experiencing the effects of that original fall from grace. We do not have a choice about it either, do we? But we also live in the arena of history in which not only has there been a prior fall, but also a prior salvation (33AD) that is more than sufficient for every human need! And we had no say in that. But for those who will trust God, the pain and suffering of this life are labor pains into the next life of reigning with Christ in the new heavens and new earth (see Romans 8:22-25). For those who do not trust God, their sufferings are instead a prelude to complete destruction. That is what is at stake for us all! And the peril of hell is necessary for the vindication of Jesus Christ, our resurrection life, and the glory of God.

The following example is a little too obvious, but it does make the point. If you were to find yourself unexpectedly thrown overboard and slowly sinking to the bottom of the sea, you could argue with yourself about the unfairness of it all, and then drown, or you could instead begin swimming to the surface to find air, and later deal with the question “why?” That is our situation. We did not ask to be born, but here we are. And we certainly didn’t ask to be born into a fallen world, where one day we will die, but here we are, drowning in sin, weakness, distress, and death. What will we do? Will we set aside our answered questions and choose to be saved? Or not?

I am convinced that if you were to ask someone in hell, “Wouldn’t you like to be out of here and in heaven?” he would say, “Yes, by all means, I want out of here, but first, tell me what heaven is like?” Then, if you were to describe for him that heaven is a place of unremitting glory and beauty and self-sacrificial love, full of a Holy God before whom all live in grateful obedience, he would then say with a snarl, “I hate being here in hell—but I sure don’t want that kind of heaven!” People who will find themselves in hell will be people who cannot stand being in heaven. They will prefer to stay in evil and outer darkness rather than to be put in a situation that would mean their becoming people lovingly obedient to God.

As far as I know, most of the descriptions of hell in the Bible are metaphorical. They are vivid pictures describing the reality, not the reality itself. But that does NOT mean hell will be any less awful than say, literal flames. What can we say then, about the reality of hell? First, we do know that hell is a place originally designed for the devil’s punishment. Jesus said, “*Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*” (Matthew 25:41). That some humans will wind up there was not God’s original intention.

Second, hell is a place where God and his goodness are not. He will have withdrawn his hand. Even the worst of sinners in this life have been upheld by the kindness and provision of God. His hand will then be removed and they will collapse upon themselves in despair (but not repentance). Jesus’ use of the term “outer darkness” describes this in a way that makes perfect sense to me.

Third, hell is a place of no return. Even if God were to provide some additional way, post-mortem, those in hell would not have it. They prefer the fire of hell to the light of heaven. This idea grieves us now to think about, but as C.S. Lewis wrote in his novel about heaven and hell, *THE GREAT DIVORCE*, the joy of heaven will not be held hostage by the self-imposed exile and misery of those in hell. My strong guess is that hell will simply be forgotten, even by God.

Will hell be a place of unending suffering, or will those there just be “extinguished?” Some Christian thinkers over the centuries have held to a view of annihilation. The

idea is similar, I suppose, to that of our once having had no “reality” before birth, so humans in hell would also cease to have a reality. But I just don’t know. My own conviction (first mentioned to me by Dallas Willard, then confirmed to me in the Bible) is that all of us are unceasing spiritual beings. In other words, we cannot stop existing, even if we wanted to. So our choices to trust God in this life are of the utmost importance. And yes, as we have opportunity, let us share our faith with others. Let us learn to live in Jesus, for Jesus, and to work and pray and love others to Jesus! And as Saint Francis of Assisi is reported to have said, “Preach the gospel by all means possible. If necessary, use words.”

10. WHAT HAPPENS AT DEATH?

I want to touch now upon the conditions we should expect when the time comes for our mortal body to die. We have every reason to believe that our true inner person, the “real” you and me, that conscious part of us that thinks, feels, and considers will not cease for a moment at the time of our death. In my opinion, we will simply walk away from our body. It may in fact take us a little while to realize we have even died. We might look back and notice our body lying there and loved ones standing nearby crying. Or, if our brain cells were diminished because of Alzheimer’s disease or if we had been heavily medicated, we may actually feel like we have just woken up!

What then? If we belonged to God in this life, we should expect to see angels and our loved ones in Christ who have pre-deceased us, standing right there, with smiles on their faces, arms open wide. I have known of two persons in my church now, and I have also heard of others who, as they lingered near death, were in animated conversations with loved ones who had passed-on long before. In fact, with one beloved lady in my church, her niece later told me that the conversations with her deceased parents were much more clear and distinct than with those standing near her bed. I believe we should accept these conversations as real occurrences, not as hallucinations. Jesus said, *“I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”* These words of his apply to his second coming, but also to his coming for us at our death. I am sure that he will bring to us, at the moment of our death, precisely those loved ones whom we will most want to see first thing. This will be the beginning of Paradise.

11. WHAT IS PARADISE?

Paradise is not the “new heavens and new earth.” It is the place of resting and refreshing and renewing prior to the resurrection. If you want to call it “heaven,” that’s OK, as long as you realize that Paradise is temporary. The real “life after death” begins at resurrection day in the new heavens and new earth, spoken of in

Revelation 21 and 22. For this reason, in his book *SURPRISED BY HOPE*, N.T. Wright likes to describe our ultimate destination in the new heavens and new earth as “life AFTER life after death.” But back to Paradise. Paradise will be WONDERFUL. The word describes a Garden. That may be a metaphor, but even if it is, Paradise will surely be a place of reward and rest and beauty. Even though we will not have our “solid” resurrection body yet, we will be recognizable to each other and delight in each other’s company. Jesus said to the thief on the cross, *“Today you will be with me in Paradise.”*

If you are Roman Catholic, Paradise is also where you would find purgatory. In the Catholic view, purgatory is the time and place for “purgation” or cleansing from sin that may still remain. I don’t believe in purgatory, since it is not spoken about anywhere in the Bible itself. But the Catholic concern that those who belong to God be made fit for “the new heavens and new earth” during their time in Paradise, does seem right to me. I believe that the sufferings of this life are in themselves a form of purgatory and that further transformation may very well take place in Paradise.

Here is what I understand about Paradise. In addition to being a place of beauty and rest, so as to be “still from the fevered rush of life,” it will also be a time to become reconciled with those deceased persons with whom we may have been at odds before death. I’m sure Paradise will provide a longed-for opportunity to give and receive forgiveness. Some who belonged to God may have ended their life by suicide. The Bible does not say that suicide is a sin for which there is no forgiveness. I am confident that Paradise will provide the opportunity for the healing of all manner of damage between loved ones. If you have read the novel, *THE SHACK*, you may remember the scene of the man being reconciled to his abusive (later repentant) father in Paradise. I cried. Possibly we need to be without a solid body of flesh for a time, so that the sin-power, habituated in our bodies (see Romans 6-8), can no longer interfere with our knowing (and loving) of one another.

I also believe that Paradise will be an occasion for continued personal growth and change. Why not? Though I have known many wonderful Christians over the years who have passed over to the other side, not all were like Mother Theresa by the time of their death! Nevertheless, they loved Jesus, trusted God, and served his people—and I would be proud to be with them in eternity. It is my opinion that all of us, including infants, children, those who died by abortion, all those taken “before their time,” as well as those with mental and physical handicaps will continue to grow and mature in Paradise. And whether that means mental growth, physical growth, or spiritual growth, we can know for sure that we will be changed. How can we know this? Because of the chief resident of Paradise, Jesus Christ. We shall see him as he is. And seeing him we shall become like him. This will pertain not only to

our inner character, but to all other aspects of our self as well. The apostle John wrote, *“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is”* (1 John 3:2).

12. WHAT IS HADES?

Those who did not trust God in this life, who resisted his rule of mercy so as to insist on living life their way and on their terms, upon the death of their body, will find themselves in the gloom and dreariness of Hades, the antechamber to hell. Little is said about Hades in the Bible, other than the fact that Jesus holds the key to it also, as he does to death itself (Revelation 1:18). It will surely be awful to find oneself surrounded by other lost souls who similarly care only about themselves. No one to give you the least sympathy or concern, no one you can impress, no one you can manipulate, no one over whom you can rule, no one to applaud you—no one really to show you even the slightest interest, except by way of contempt.

Occasionally I have been at the funeral of one who died who, as far as I knew, was not a follower of Jesus. Not infrequently, some well-meaning person will say, “At least he is not suffering.” Really? How do we know that? *“There is no peace,” says the Lord, ‘for the wicked”* (Isaiah 48:22). But let that not be our story. Let us draw near to God, trust him, learn to live by his Holy Spirit, find victory in this life through our Lord Jesus Christ, and set our hope fully on the grace to be given us when Jesus appears. *“Then I heard a voice from heaven say, ‘Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them”* (Revelation 14:13).

13. WHAT ABOUT NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES?

I believe we should take seriously what others have experienced by way of “near-death” occurrences. Many of us have heard stories about “seeing a bright light,” sensing a welcoming presence, hearing beautiful music, and so on. However, we must not let someone else’s experience be the template for our own belief. A woman in my present church told me about a near-death experience she had. She found herself in hell! I asked her what she did when she came back to life. She said, “I came to God!”

Our Lord has gone through the night of death and has come out safely on the other side. He has come back to us from death, more fully alive than ever—and he beckons us to trust him and follow after him. Let us fasten ourselves to him by faith. *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight”* (Proverbs 3:5-6).