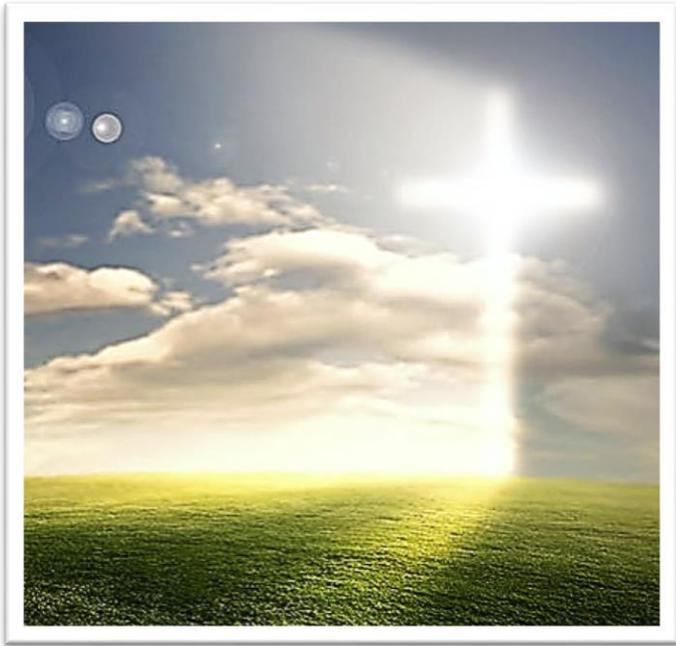


# The Next Life

What to Expect and  
How to Prepare



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

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# **THE NEXT LIFE**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

"You know, Scott, you could have re-financed your mortgage again and saved even more money 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 in the sixth grade, with my Grammy Hilborn died. 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.

Our family flew to Portland, Maine for the funeral. This was the first funeral I had ever been to and the first time I had

seen a dead body. The room at the funeral home was very formal, the lights casting a yellow and pink rose-colored glow on the walls, with large arrangements of flowers stacked in front of the casket. 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 whole experience was unsettling. To this day I am uncomfortable at visitations in funeral home parlors.

The other thing I remember about the funeral was when my Grampy Hilborn said in anger, wiping tears from his eyes, "I don't know why God takes the good and leaves the bad behind!"

Many years have passed. 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 is one of God's little angels," or, "I bet he is there in heaven enjoying a golf game!" 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 just mentioned.

To try to correct those statements has never seemed to me appropriate in the time of grief. This booklet is my attempt to make plain what we can know about the "hereafter" from the teachings of Jesus and the Bible.

N.T. Wright, one of the great New Testament scholars, also an Anglican bishop, has written a statement about the next life 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 are 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 end 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 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. On both sides of the fertile banks of the crystal-clear stream grow 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."

I remember a time 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, many years later, I can still picture in my mind. The sky was intensely blue, the bright sun and light breeze making it a perfect temperature. Walking that soft, pine-needle covered alpine

trail winding along the crest of the 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, I knew what he meant. The pine tree standing before me, as beautiful as it was, would not compare to the pine trees I would see in the new heavens and new earth. Those would be so stunning by comparison, that the beautiful tree in front of me would not even count!

We can expect that our final destination will look a lot like planet earth, only ten thousand times more beautiful!

To compare this life to the next might be like the difference between looking at a beautiful painting and actually LIVING in the scene. On the wall next to my desk is a Thomas Kinkade painting, "The End of a Perfect Day." I often look at it and wish I could be there. A stone cabin, smoke rising from its chimney, lying 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 small 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. The yearning that rises within me when I look at that painting is the longing for a REALITY I expect to find more than fulfilled in the next life.

Will our pets be there with us? 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 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, 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.

### **3. WHAT WILL WE BE DOING?**

Genesis 1:26-27 states 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.

**“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and overall all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”**

I anticipate this will also be realized and enlarged upon 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 7.5 times!) It is also estimated that our galaxy is just one of 300 billion 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) 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 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 our 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 has little desire to micro-manage our lives, once we become 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 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).

Does it disappoint you to realize we will have purposeful work to do in the new heavens and new earth? I hope not. Human beings were created to do work. 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 joy, and will manifest the

uniquely creative part of God's image in us that will in turn, gloriously reflect his fatherhood of us. In other words, for the first time in our lives, we will be able to truly say, "This is why I was made!"

#### **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 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 through God. Our relationships and friendships in the sense of our continuing to know and interact with one another (including mine with my wife Anne) will continue into the next life, provided those relationships have been redeemed in Jesus.

I was asked once by a student concerning relationships in heaven: "What about those people who can't get along with each other now?" I replied, "Well, maybe that is one reason why heaven is such a big place!" Truthfully, not much is said about our relationships in the next life, but much is certainly implied. Remember the Sermon on the Mount? We should assume those qualities of life Jesus taught, which 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 fullness 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 has 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 or trying to manipulate others. He is kind. He is modest about his accomplishments. He is able to treat people well, even those who don't like him. He spends little 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, love 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 part 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 see 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 "knowing" of God, and it will also be true of our knowing one another in the next life. How much ill-will, hurt feelings, and broken relationships 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 one of the most wonderful aspects to look forward to in this new life will be perfectly transparent communication. For the first time, we will experience true and complete and loving relations, without possibility of being misunderstood. Loved ones with whom we may have been at odds in this life, even though

fellow believers, will be reconciled. We will understand one another 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 whole at last, and 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 seen this happen at weddings, at graduations, at the birth of a child. How much more will we experience this when we can 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. 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 were 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” 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 neither obliterated nor 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 the future, known as "Resurrection Day," followers of Jesus Christ will be instantly clothed with a new, immortal, physical body. This 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 overcome this present, dying, evil-penetrated universe, starting first with our mortal bodies. This future "clothing" 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 come back to life again. Instead, his mortal remains, three days decayed, were transformed by the Holy Spirit into the basic elements of a new kind of body, a transformed body, one regenerated with the new biology, chemistry, and physics of the life to come. This ultimate state of nature, which we too will share one day, has come into this present age NOW in the resurrection body of Jesus Christ. No wonder the Apostles were able to face persecution and death with such fearlessness! They absolutely knew 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 JESUS WITH THEIR OWN EYES, that death as an enemy was destroyed.

Believers who have already died and are waiting in Paradise for the resurrection will find their souls instantly joined with their immortal body on that day. Those who are still alive on earth on Resurrection Day 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” I expect we will 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 unattractive people in heaven. Why not? Because our outer person will mirror the beauty of our gloriously transformed inner person. Even now, our countenance takes on to some extent the kind of person we have become. George Orwell is quoted as saying by the age of 50 everyone gets the face they deserve! Certainly, in the resurrection, the radiance of the now, fully-developed image of God of our new humanity will be staggeringly beautiful. In fact, we may 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 beautiful, more “real” bodies as eternity rolls along? N. T. Wright makes the point that

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. That may sound silly, but I would really like to do so! 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 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. To sit down one more time with my mentor, Dr. Dallas Willard, and ask him more questions – I would love that. And I can’t wait to get to see 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 will be 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 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 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 of 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 believer 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 among 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 by evidence that we trusted and followed Jesus. Jesus, you may remember, said 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 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 let loose of your anxieties and longings, surrender control over your very self, into the hands of Jesus and begin to trust him and obey 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 disobedience 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 chooses to forget. **“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 a stone within him anticipating condemnation for his many sins, when he hears, “Look up at me.” Trembling, shaking, he lifts his head

towards that bright countenance, compelled yet unable to look directly into his face — and then sees the wounds on the wrists of those hands stretched out towards him. Tears flowing now, he risks a glance and stops — his gaze captured by those eyes smiling at him. With amazed relief and 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. You are perfectly acceptable to me. I have made you new. 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, for those of us who trust Jesus that Day will be a day of vindication and reward. We will finally know how securely we were always held by the purpose 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 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 seek 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 kind promise to be hoped for. He will reward his own for their faithfulness (see also Ephesians 6:8; Colossians 3:24).

I believe God will make every effort to find something praiseworthy to commend us for 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. Because he wants to reward us, we who see our lives now as a tattered quilt at best, can expect to hear these words from Jesus: *Well, done, good and faithful servant!*” None of this will have been earned, of course. But as Dallas Willard liked to say, “God’s grace is disgraceful!” Though my heart sometimes fears when I think about past sins, my faith also rises in hope when I consider the graciousness of Jesus toward sinners. Think about it. Before whom would you rather stand in Judgment than he?

True, Scripture 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 missionary 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 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 have been ultimately worthless — in which case, they will still be saved, but their reward will have been lost. Still, 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 WHY we do what we do than the actual tasks themselves. I can assure you, from my own personal experience, 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.

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 stay away from the condemnation of "the law of sin and death," by placing ourselves under the supervision of his Holy Spirit (in contrast to the supervision of the Law) and learn how to "keep in step" with our Lord Jesus.

We place our hope not on success, not on personal fulfillment, nor 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 would answer, "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 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 class. Discipleship is not a matter of trying to duplicate the life Jesus once lived (though we learn to imitate his spiritual practices, such as solitude, fasting, prayer, and worship). Instead, discipleship is learning to live the life we have been given. This 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 those around us 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 if he were 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 life as a college student. Some reading this may be in prison. Jesus is pleased to live his life through you in that prison setting and will teach you how.

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 that kind of belief in Jesus. In fact, the devil is probably more orthodox than any theologian. The devil believes Jesus is the Son of God and was crucified, died, buried, and raised to life for human sins. The devil believes because he KNOWS Jesus reigns over this universe now and will come back one day to make all things right. But despite this "belief," the devil hates God. Belief that saves is TRUST in Jesus that moves us to repent of our sins, abandon control of our life into the hands of Jesus, and begin to follow him. 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 the Day of Judgment is not only an assessment of what we did with this life now, but what we are capable of into the future.

Let's be clear. There are many people on planet earth today who will not be happy in heaven. They don't like God. They

wish he didn't exist except to get them out of trouble. We will get to the issue of other religions and of those who "haven't heard" below. But we want to be 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 God and frankly, prefer God not exist, if that God holds them accountable. Everyone who has ever lived has known, at some point in their lives, that there is a God. Every one of us, sadly, has pushed that awareness of God to the side so we can sin. Yes, everyone would like a god who is a genie in the bottle, to grant us our wishes, and then let us do what we want. But that god does not exist.

By nature people presume they have the right to live as they see fit, unalienable rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." But with all respect to our founding fathers, theologically at least, none of this is owed us by 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 created beings, subject to the wishes of our Creator. 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, God has the right to do with us as he pleases.

So what has it pleased him to do? God in kindness has willingly chosen a vast multitude of stubborn sinners to be melted by his love so 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 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 said that it is the kindness of God which leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). Nevertheless, there are people who continue to reject God's kindness and refuse to thank him or honor him as God. What about them?

I was having lunch with Dallas Willard once 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 hell (though that may be implied). "Destruction" at least pertains to this life. Non-discipleship to Jesus brings trouble and misery. This should be obvious. The obedient life is the happy life. Look around you. Think about people you know bent on following their own whims and lusts.

What is the real quality of their lives? The blessed and meaningful life, in spite of 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).

But to those who continue to resist God? Ultimately, God will let people have what they want. If they 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). But if what they really want is their own way, then that is what they will end up with. They will get what they really want — to live unto themselves, by themselves, without God, apart from him forever. No one will miss heaven by just a hair. No, 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 knows right now all who trust him. Even trusting him a little seems to please him. In fact, there is nothing in the Bible that is as meaningful to God as when he sees his human beings trusting him. God is 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 love and obedience will flow from your hearts as you 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 “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 now, so as to reign with him later.

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 our sins might be atoned for and we might be pardoned and given 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 of 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 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”** (Romans 10:13).

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 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 SUICIDE?**

The Roman Catholic tradition has taught that those who commit suicide are eternally lost. As much as I respect Roman Catholicism, their tradition is not Biblical at this point. The Bible says there is one and one only “unforgiveable sin” – blasphemy against the Holy Spirit – not suicide. Taking your own life is a very serious sin, but the Bible does not even hint it is unforgiveable. Judas Iscariot hanged himself after he betrayed Jesus Christ. Later the book of ACTS implies that

Judas did go to hell – but for betraying Jesus, not for the suicide.

The older teaching about suicide was that a person had no opportunity to repent of the sin. The Bible says though that Jesus has atoned for all our sins ONCE AND FOR ALL! (Hebrews 10:14) That means the sins of our past, our present, as well as our future. A very close Christian friend of many years eventually took her own life after a long time with untreatable depression. I am very sure she is in Paradise now with Jesus who anticipated her sin of suicide when he died on the cross for her.

## **9. 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 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 by accident of birth they grew up in the wrong 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 we all have had an inner “knowing” God exists, we have deliberately pushed away that awareness so we can sin. As a result, God has given us over to our sinful desires (see Romans chapters 1 and 2 particularly). Why have we been given over to our sinful desires? Is God being mean? Not at all. We are given over to sin because God is giving us what we 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 ALL people who have ever lived have known there is a God. But each one of us has deliberately pushed away that knowledge of God SO 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 we can, by nature, no longer apprehend REAL truth. This is dire. God has shrunk in our thinking, to the point where he seems little or insignificant. Concurrently, the importance of the human self in our own minds has swollen. 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 all are lost — and we prefer it that way, at least for now. But when Christ returns and TRUTH is staring us in the face, will it be too late? What if turns out even in the final hour, it will not be God who refuses us, but we who refuse God?

I admit to you 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 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 of 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 we who yield ourselves to be led by the Spirit of God know 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 self-righteously before the Law and in our own strength independently of God. The Bible teaches us 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. (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 and the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead with a new, immortal, transformed body. The Spirit is triumphant. We know our 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 necessarily better than our Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, or Buddhist friends. So what makes us think we are right and they are wrong?

The issue is a matter of JESUS being right. Here is what the Bible teaches:

- 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 law-breakers. **“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 Jesus to be saved will be heard. **“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord [Jesus] will be saved”** (Romans 10:13). The Lord sees every human heart. He is quick to respond to our cry for mercy. Right now, everywhere on the planet, the Lord God is aware of every human being seeking him, whether they be Christian, Atheist, Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, or Animist. 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 we know of 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 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 a possibility. 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 the people who will be in the "new heavens and new earth" will have gotten there because of Jesus Christ. And we know that ANYONE who puts his trust in Jesus Christ will be one of those "saved" people. There are things we do not have an answer for. 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).**

## **10.WHAT ABOUT HELL?**

Some people, probably because of cartoons they have seen, or the lingering remembrance of medieval art and theology, think 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 teach there is a hell. Jesus referred to it as a place “where their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched,” as “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,” and “outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Mark 9:47-48; Matthew 25:41; Matthew 8:12)

I am convinced if you were to ask someone in hell, “Wouldn’t you like to be out of here and in heaven instead?” he would say, “Yes, but first tell me what heaven is like.” Then, if you were to describe heaven as a place of unremitting light and glory and beauty and self-sacrificial love, full of a Holy God before whom all live in grateful obedience, he would then snarl, “I don’t like being here in hell — but I sure don’t want that kind of place.” People who will find themselves in hell will be people who cannot stand being in heaven. They prefer to stay in evil and outer darkness rather than to be put in a situation that would mean 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 presence. Even the worst of sinners in this life have been upheld by the kindness and provision of God. His hand will 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 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. My own conviction is that the Bible teaches we 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, we must share our faith with others.

## 11.WHAT HAPPENS AT DEATH?

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 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 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 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.

## 12.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 okay, as long as you realize that Paradise is temporary. The real “life

after death” begins after Resurrection Day in the new heavens and new earth, spoken of in Revelation 21 and 22. 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 where purgatory is located. 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 purgation and that further transformation may very well take place in Paradise.

I understand Paradise, in addition to being a place of beauty and rest, so as to be “still from the fevered rush of life,” to also be a time and place for reconciliation 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 suicide is the unforgiveable sin. I am confident Paradise will provide the opportunity for the healing of all manner of damage between loved ones. Possibly we need to be without a solid body of flesh for a time, so 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 Paradise will be an occasion for continued personal growth and change. Why not? 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 be healed and continue to grow and mature in Paradise. And whether that means mental growth, physical growth, or spiritual growth, we can know for sure 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).

### **13.WHAT IS HADES?**

Those who did not find 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, pain, 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 to impress, no one to manipulate, no one over whom you can rule, no one to applaud you — no one really to show you even the slightest interest, only 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 out of his 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).**

#### **14.WHAT ABOUT NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES?**

I believe we should take seriously what others have experienced by way of "near-death" occurrences. We hear stories about their "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 instead of what Jesus and the Bible teach. A woman in my church told me about a near-death experience she once 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 him. Let us fasten ourselves to him and follow. **"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).

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