

The Other Side of Heaven (Version II)

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

Community Lenten Service, Elvaston, Illinois — February 28, 2016

1 Corinthians 15:19-26, 53-58; 16:1-2 NIV

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

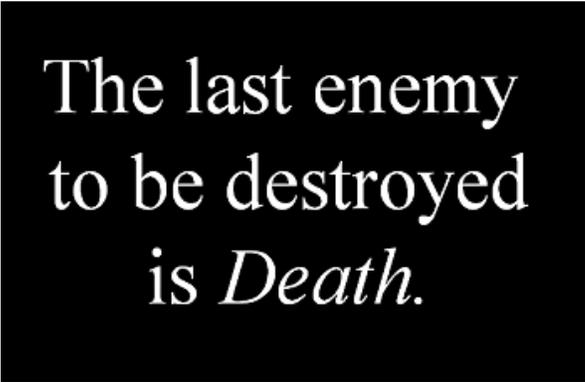
But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

. . .

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." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

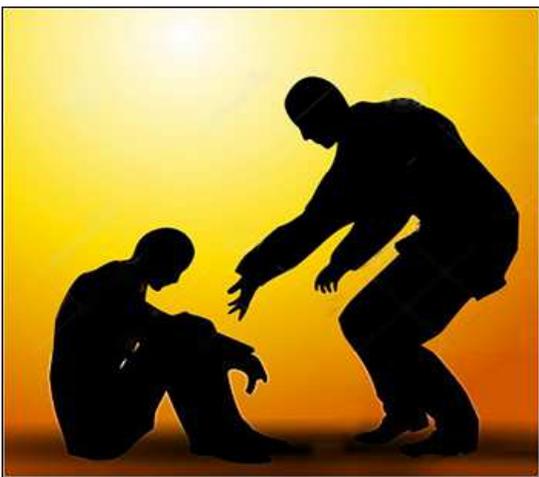
Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.



The last enemy
to be destroyed
is *Death*.

In the year 1205 a wealthy young Italian named Francesco di Bernardone renounced his fortune. He adopted a life of poverty and giving aid to the poor. We know him today as St. Francis of Assisi.

In 1833 the British Parliament passed a law doing away with slavery. This achievement is credited to the work of William Wilberforce, an evangelical Christian who fought tirelessly to abolish the slave trade and free the slaves in a struggle that lasted four decades.



In 1836 George Müller, recognizing the desperate plight of orphaned children in England, started a home for orphans that eventually served more than 2,000 children at a time. Müller accomplished this entirely through prayer, never asking anyone for financial support.

While he was the Communist dictator of East Germany, Erich Honecker discriminated against Christians. Nevertheless, after the fall of the Berlin Wall when Honecker became seriously ill and was under prosecution for his crimes, a Lutheran pastor took him into his home and provided for him for nearly a year.

An executive in Kansas City wanted to help young people in trouble because of drug use and other issues. So he established a place where they could live while learning dairy production, mechanical work, and other skills as well as giving their lives to the

Lord. Today Heartland, in Missouri, has helped hundreds of men and women to a better life.

A Christian businessman in Wheaton, Illinois, saw that people coming out of prison had trouble finding employment. So he and a partner started the Second Chance Coffee Company that hires former inmates to produce high-end coffee blends, now marketed in the Chicago area under the brand name "I Have a Bean." (The businessman, by the way, is our son, Peter Leonard.)

A group of churches in Hamilton, Illinois, devote their Lenten service offerings to providing for a community food pantry that serves people in need within the local school district.

Why did any of these Christian people do any of these things? If we're just going to heaven when this life is over, why not forget the problems of a sinful, dying world instead of trying to make life better for other people?

The answer is found in two verses from the lesson we read from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. . . . Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:20, 58 RSV). And let me add a third verse of Scripture we repeat each Sunday in many of our churches: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth as it is in heaven.*"

We understand that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead opens up to us the promise of life beyond this plane of existence, life in heaven with Jesus. Indeed, Christians often talk about going to heaven as "going home." "This world is not my home," people say, "I'm only passing through." Many of our favorite old songs reflect this sentiment. But if heaven is the *end of our journey* — if there's nothing on "the other side of heaven" — why be concerned about helping the poor, or freeing the slaves, or providing for orphans, or caring for your former enemy in his illness? Why bother to help drug addicts or people with a criminal record get a new start in life? What's the point of providing food for our needy neighbors? If this sorry old world is doomed to destruction anyway, and the only hope anyone has is to escape to heaven, why do anything to make it better? Isn't that just rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic? If the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is just a ticket to heaven, like a "get out of jail free" card in Monopoly, and if we're just going to leave this earth behind forever and God is going to throw it into the trash heap — then isn't our labor *here* in the Lord really in vain, after all?

Obviously, you and I know better than to suggest that. We know that Jesus has saved us not only for heaven, but also — as the apostle Paul says — that we've been "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). And those "good works," through which we do our best to bless others and improve our world, aren't just so we can make ourselves look better and maybe earn a gold star or a merit badge from God or a one-way ticket to paradise. No, they're part of a plan God has for his creation — a plan he has laid out in Scripture from beginning to end. The good works that we do are *building toward the day of resurrection*, when God will restore his creation to its original goodness, destroy death, and raise his people up in their incorruptible body. Our permanent home isn't going to be in heaven, but *in the renewed creation* when earth and heaven become one. We see that in the very last pages of the Bible, where the holy city *comes down out of heaven to earth*: tears are wiped away, death and sadness and pain are ended, and everything is made new (see Revelation 21:1-4). In the end the holy city, the coming together of heaven and earth, is where God's plan is headed, and where we are headed — on *the other side of heaven*.

The Bible is divided into two parts: the problem, and the solution. The problem develops in Genesis 1 through 11, where by turning away from God people defaced the good world he created. The solution begins in Genesis 12, where God calls Abraham to begin a new family that will bless all nations of the earth. Through Jesus — his life, death, and resurrection from the dead — you and I have been brought into that family to be

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

— 1 Corinthians 15:58

partners with God in his project of restoring the creation. God loves the world — that's in John 3:16 —and he won't abandon this wounded, damaged creation that's crying out for rescue from sin and death. Through Messiah Jesus, and those who belong to him, the Father is responding to that cry.

As the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans 8: "The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God . . . because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:19, 21 RSV). This universe will be delivered from the *entropy* that allows things to degenerate and break down. *God is materialistic*; he cares about all this "stuff" he has made, and he won't let it go to rack and ruin. To rescue it, he sent his Son as a physical, flesh-and-blood man, and Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of the redemption of this physical universe. Some would-be Christians in the second and third centuries didn't believe this; they taught that Jesus only *appeared* to be a man, that really he was a ghost-like figure who only cared about "spiritual" things. Those people were declared to be heretics, and we need to be careful we don't fall into that same false teaching.

So the new creation is already taking shape. Jesus' resurrection is the first evidence of it, and whoever belongs to Jesus already has a foothold in it. For as Paul says, in Romans 8:29, Christ has been raised as "the first-born among many brethren" (Romans 8:29). And in 2 Corinthians 5:17 he says, *ei tis en christo, kaine ktisis*: "if any one is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."



But what kind of body will we have in the resurrection, when God's final purpose for this earth is fulfilled? The Corinthian Christians to whom Paul wrote were asking that same question: "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" His answer is this: "So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural [or physical] body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural [or physical] body, there is also a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:42-44 NIV).

Let's not be misled by those words "natural" and "spiritual" in the usual English translation. In fact, the words *physical* or *natural* don't occur here. The Greek expression is *soma psychikos*, the "psyche-body," or "soul-body," or "self-body," and it's contrasted with the *soma pneumatikos*, the "spirit-body." The contrast isn't between a material body and an immaterial one, but between a body *animated* by our willful, sinful selves and a body *given life* by the Holy Spirit, the life of God. The body of our resurrection isn't a ghostly, ethereal body but a real flesh-and-blood body — yet one unlike the bodies we have now, because it's filled with the life of God.

Our resurrection body, the Scriptures tell us, will be like the body of the risen Jesus. Paul calls him the first-born of many who will *be like him*. And the apostle John echoes that thought: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known," he says. "But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

When Jesus was raised from the dead he wasn't a disembodied spirit. He walked, he spoke, he ate, he prepared breakfast for his disciples, even invited them to touch him. He told his disciples, "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" (Luke 24:39). He was recognizable as the same Jesus they had known. But there was something different about him. He wasn't bound by the four dimensions of our



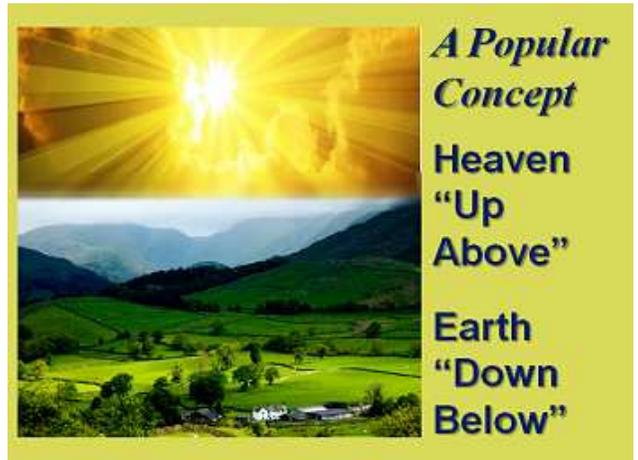
space-time universe. He could appear in a closed room without opening the door; he could pass from their sight in a moment. In his resurrection Jesus has a body, and we will have a body too when that day comes. But it will be the "incorruptible" or "imperishable" body like that of the risen Lord himself.

Here's what the apostle Paul says about it in Philippians 3: "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:20-21 NIV). Notice: our *citizenship* is in heaven; that's where the government of our life resides, with God in his space called heaven — but that's not where we enjoy the resurrection. Instead, Jesus comes *from heaven* to give us new bodies *here*. In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul describes his coming this way:

For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thessalonians 4:14-17).

The Christians of Philippi would have understood that picture Paul was painting for the believers in their nearby city of Thessalonica. Philippi was a Roman colony, familiar with how the Caesars ran their empire. When the emperor came to visit one of his cities, the people would go out to meet him and escort him into the city. Caesar wasn't coming to take them out of the city. He was coming to the city to do something important *there* — to announce some grand building project that would benefit the citizens, or to judge cases too difficult for the local authorities. It would have been grossly impolite — a "slap in the face" — to just wait for Caesar to show up; instead, the citizens would go out to welcome him, and return to the city with him. That's the image Paul is sketching. The Savior is coming from heaven, but not to take us back there; he's coming to establish his rule here, and to raise us up in our transformed bodies in the process. The scene of the resurrection isn't in heaven, but on *the other side of heaven* in the restored earth God has been working toward all along, the city coming "down" out of heaven in which he makes all things new, in which the Lord God and the Lamb dwell with the people of God.

What, then, is this place we call "heaven?" Strangely enough, the New Testament doesn't say much about it, because it's focused on *the other side of heaven*, the resurrection from the dead. So what happens when we die, if we don't "go to heaven?" The answer of Scripture seems to be, we *do* go to heaven — but we won't be there forever! As one writer has quipped, "Heaven is important, but it's not the end of the world!"



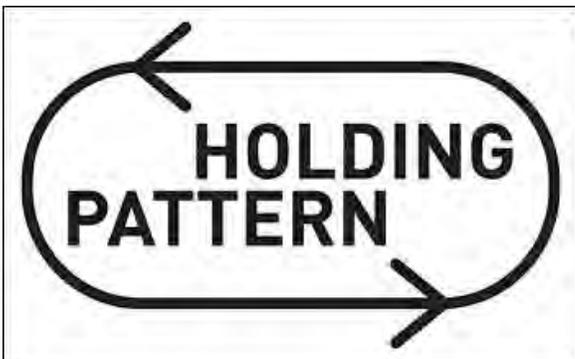
Heaven, in the Bible, is simply *God's space* — wherever it shows up. Often we visualize heaven as being "up there," and we talk about heaven as though it's a realm removed from earth, somewhere up in the sky "away beyond the blue." When Yuri Gagarin, the first Russian cosmonaut, returned to earth the Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev, triumphantly announced that there's no God because Gagarin didn't see him "up there." But that was just silly talk. Of course God and heaven aren't "up there," because the earth is a globe and "up there" is a different direction depending on whether you're in Alaska, or China, or Australia, or Illinois. But we still talk about heaven as

though it's some inaccessible place where God lives, far removed from earth. And if God is far away in our thinking, then it's hard to see him involved in our life right now.

But that's not the Bible's way of thinking about heaven. For the people of the Bible — for Jesus, the apostles, Moses, the prophets and psalmists — heaven is *wherever the action of God is evident and his will is being done*. Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven." Heaven and earth are simply two sides of God's creation — as we read at the beginning of the Bible in the book of Genesis, and at the end of the Bible where God restores both heaven and earth. The Bible's perspective is that heaven and earth are *interlaced, or interlocking*. Heaven is God's space — his control center, where he's running the show — but that doesn't mean he's far away. Instead, because heaven is simply another dimension of reality, God is always near to us. Throughout Scripture we're invited to draw near to him, even in the life we live now, because *heaven isn't far away*. As Paul writes to the Colossians, in Jesus the Messiah God has reconciled to himself *all things*, both in heaven and in earth (Colossians 1:20). In the resurrection body of Jesus, heaven and earth have come together.



What happens, then, when we die in the Lord? The Bible only gives a few hints about that, because it's looking beyond heaven. The apostle Paul, in prison for the faith and in a life-threatening situation, had to ask whether it was better for him to die or to go on living. He wrote to the Philippians, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. . . . I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far . . ." (Philippians 1:21, 23). Paul understood that, should his earthly life come to an end, as a member of Christ's body he would be "with Christ." Jesus told his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms [the older translation says "many mansions"]; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you" (John 14:1-2). There is a place for us after death, but the word Jesus uses here doesn't mean *a permanent place*, one that lasts forever. The word in Greek is *monē*, which means a temporary resting place, like a motel we stay in while we're on a trip.



A motel isn't our destination; it's only a place where we rest on the way to where we're really going. Heaven is like that. It's like being on an airplane flight that isn't yet cleared for landing, due to weather conditions or air traffic, so the flight has to go into a holding pattern. A motel room or a holding pattern are nice things to have, but they're not the end of the trip; they're not our "home." When we die in the Lord we go to where

Jesus has gone before us, "at the right hand of the Father," to that space that overlaps our space — where things happen that we can't quite fit into *our* four-dimensional world of space and time. We call that "heaven" because the Father and the Son are there. But they have another plan for us; there's another life to live, beginning on the day of resurrection. Resurrection is "life *after* life after death."

If you know anything about computers, or what they call "the cloud" which is just another name for the vast world of the Internet, you will appreciate this analogy. When we die, God uploads our software to his "cloud." He runs his anti-virus and anti-malware programs to clean it up. Then, at the resurrection, he downloads our software into our new body. We don't need our old body, which will have decayed long ago into its various elements that have become part of something else. We don't need our old "hard drive." The real "us" is our "software" — all that data, all those images that make us uniquely who we are. And God can download that into any new "hard drive," or whatever glorious "storage device," he creates for us, with the Holy Spirit as the operating system.

Software doesn't do anything till it's installed in some device. When we die, we're *at rest* in Jesus till he gives us our resurrection body — a body like his. But there's this one catch. Our computers or mobile devices can't reach the Internet unless we have a connection to it. Our software can't get uploaded to God's "cloud" *unless we're connected*. And the Bible is pretty clear that God has set up only one connection, through his Son Jesus: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, except through me" (John 14:6). If we're going to have a resurrection life, we need to get connected with Jesus, and stay connected.

If we read the Bible, we discover that the aim of Christian believers is to live a life that reflects the resurrection of Jesus — a life that's to be revealed more fully when God renews his creation. As Peter asks in his second letter, "In keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and *a new earth*, where righteousness dwells. . . . What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming" (2 Peter 3:13, 11-12). Such a life challenges the authorities that now control this world. It reveals there's a higher authority that, in the end, will defeat the powers of injustice and oppression and death. Such a life proclaims that "Jesus is Lord" — not Caesar, or the state, or the prevailing culture. The New Testament



includes several descriptions of this life. It's the life of discipleship the risen Jesus told his apostles to teach throughout the world: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). (That's the point Brandon was driving home at our Lenten service last week.) Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote their Gospels to record *just what it was Jesus commanded us to do* to demonstrate that future life.

But somewhere in the Middle Ages things got turned around. The purpose of the Christian faith changed; it became a means to escape this life and get to heaven, leaving this *world God loves* to rot in its darkness and hopelessness and despair, and lacking the witness of a body of people whose lives point to God's ultimate purpose in a renewed heaven and earth. Friends, *we need to get back to Bible Christianity*, and the faith that holds to the hope of resurrection and *builds toward it* by the way we live, both as individual believers and as a community of faith.

So the Apostle Paul encourages us, at the end of 1 Corinthians 15: because Jesus has been raised from the dead, "be steadfast, immovable, always *abounding in the work of the Lord*, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." And notice what he says next. Recall that the Bible had no chapter and verse divisions till the thirteenth century; Paul didn't intend for his train of thought to break at that point. So let's remind ourselves of his complete thought: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. Now concerning the contribution for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do." Paul was collecting an offering to help the Christians of Jerusalem who were in dire need due to persecution and famine, and this work of mercy was a direct outgrowth of the promise of resurrection.

In other words, because Jesus has been raised from the dead, we who belong to him shall also be raised to life on this earth. Therefore, what we do to build toward the better world of God's new creation will not be in vain, it will not be lost; we will enjoy that better world one day. It won't be a completely different world, as if God decided he'd made a big mistake when he created this one; it's our same world, purged of evil and the curse of sin, and transformed into the kind of place where God can live together with his people. As John sees at the end of the Revelation, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation 21:3).

Working to free people from slavery or drug addiction, showing mercy even to people who have abused us, providing for the needs of our neighbors in difficulty, challenging injustice — these are things that build toward the day of resurrection when heaven and earth become one. So, if we follow Paul's train of thought in 1 Corinthians, which part of our church services is the part that best expresses our hope of resurrection? Believe it or not, *it's the offering*, where we provide for the ongoing ministries of the body of Christ!



Sometimes when people are wasting away with a serious illness we say they're "just a shadow of their former self." Friends, the Scriptural truth is that we're just a shadow of our *future* selves! On *the other side of heaven* we'll be back in our glorified bodies to enjoy the world God loves, a world restored to its original goodness, and even better than that. This is the promise of Scripture, from beginning to end. Jesus, in his resurrection, has opened up a window into that world, making it a reality for you and for me, and for everyone who unites with the risen Lord. *Resurrection*: it was good enough for Jesus, and it's good enough for me!

Text ©2016 Richard C. Leonard
Images from Internet sources