

## *Better than Heaven*

Pastor Jim Bangsund

So, seven brothers, one after the other, all marry this same gal and all die. I mean, if I was even brother number *four* I think I'd look at that track record and be having some serious doubts. But I digress.

Some time ago, I was reading the paper and came across an article about a memorial service for a young child. As the grieving father spoke, he said, "Though our little son is no longer with us, we know he is an angel looking down on us from above." The words were heartfelt and sincere, and were a comfort to many who were present. But they fell far short of the true hope we have as followers of Christ. And they were simply, and sadly, wrong. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus said we'll become "*like* the angels" in that we'll never die again ... but not that we'll become angels.

So what happens when we die? My friends, we have some really, really good news to explore this morning – some of which may come as a great surprise to you ... especially if you haven't been in my classes over the years when we've on occasion tackled a bit of this.

We've come to the last sermon of our six-week series on Paul's First letter to the church at Corinth – a letter that has two bookends, as it were. The first bookend was at the beginning where Paul wrote, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." That was week one. Christ crucified, the message that our faith, our salvation, our relationship with God, all stand upon one solid foundation: Jesus death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave. Apart from that we have nothing; with that, we have everything from forgiveness of sins to an open and free relationship with God.

This morning, we come to the second bookend – which is based on the first one and is found at the end of Paul's letter: his absolute conviction regarding the resurrection of the dead. Not just Christ's resurrection; in the Corinthian church, there was no doubt about that point. But there were those who, though they believed that *Jesus* had risen from the

dead, were questioning and even doubting whether resurrection was also in *our* future as followers of Jesus. Some were saying No. A few minutes ago, you heard a reading from the end of chapter 15, that triumphant declaration, “the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” But here’s how Paul *begins* his argument earlier in verse 12:

... if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

And then at verse 16:

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

Paul’s point: the resurrection of Christ and our future bodily resurrection are all of a piece. They are joined at the hip. They cannot be separated. Just as Christ was raised from the dead, so shall we be one day also.

So let’s take a look at two very interesting questions here that are *also* joined at the hip: First, “Will we become angels? ... or what?” And second, “Will we go to heaven?” Some of you have heard me speak to these questions before and know where I’m going with them; others may be a bit surprised at the second question about heaven. First, the angel question. No. We don’t become angels. Resurrection of the body is a whole different thing. The Bible never says we’ll become angels – or have wings or halos or harps – nor does it say that we have immortal souls. Rather, scripture again and again speaks of resurrection of the body or resurrection of the dead – body and soul together.

So what *do* we look for when we come to the end of our run here on earth? First of all, let’s be clear, we’re not talking escapism here – pie in the sky when I die by and by, and all that. *Escapism* means closing your eyes to reality, escapism means sticking your head in the sand to avoid an unpleasant truth. *Hope*, on the other hand, means fixing your eyes on something real in the future that makes you better in the present – that helps you *perform* better in the present. In college, for instance, looking forward to that desired career can bring you through the drudgery and

stress of finals week. And, eventually, looking forward to that trip to Tahoe can bring you through the drudgery of that desired career. Let's face it, even the most wonderful careers have their moments, and that's where a healthy sense of hope for the future – not escapism, but rather anticipation of something real and good and true – can help bring us through. That's hope. And that's why hope for eternal life – when properly understood – is such a wonderful thing.

Resurrection of the dead – the fact that one day we, as complete body-soul creatures, will be raised from the grave and live again but this time forever – this is what Paul contends for in chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians. This is the opposite of the popular but mistaken view that when we die our souls go to heaven and our bodies merely rot away in the grave.

Unfortunately, as I've said before, our views are too often more influenced by ancient art and modern comics than by scripture. Even those of us who study the Bible faithfully can't help but be affected by those sketches of folks with halos in white robes wandering around on clouds, or St Peter with his lectern and big book and those wrought iron gates behind him. None of that is from the Bible, of course.

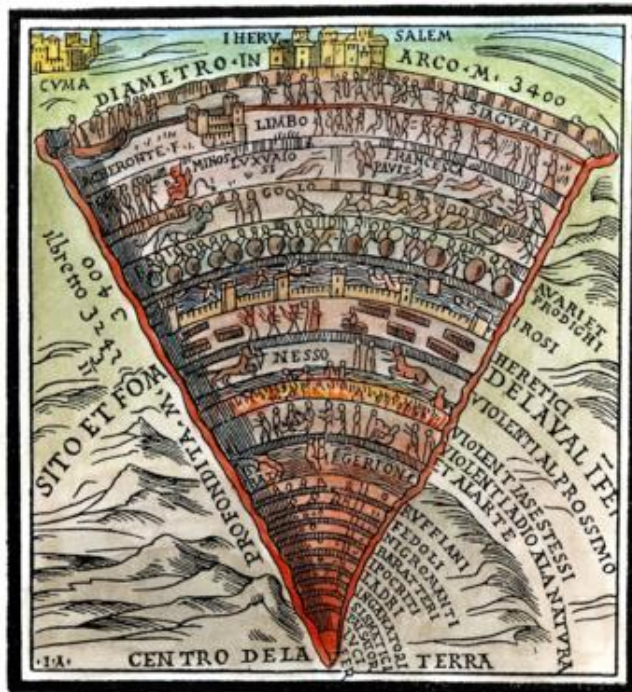
So where did all that come from? N. T. Wright, whom many describe as a modern day C. S. Lewis and whom Time magazine has described as “one of the most formidable figures in the world of Christian thought,”<sup>1</sup> points to several things. In the early centuries of the church, everything was clear. When we die, we await the end of the age when Christ returns and the dead are raised – body and soul. We are, you see, not souls trapped in bodies – that's the old Greek idea – but rather body-soul creatures, all wrapped up into one. Always have been, always will be. That's the way God made you, and that's the way God will raise you again one day. With a few less wrinkles for some of us, I'm hoping. It's a marvelous picture; a great hope.

But then, N T Wright notes, in 1320 Dante wrote his great, creative poem, *The Divine Comedy*, describing a trip through hell, purgatory and

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1710844,00.html>, Thursday, Feb. 07, 2008.

heaven. I've never understood how that could be a comedy, but the nine layers of hell definitely got people's attention.



So did Michelangelo's image of the last judgment, painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel 200 years later, with people rising from earth on the left to be judged and then the condemned dropping off to Hell on the right.



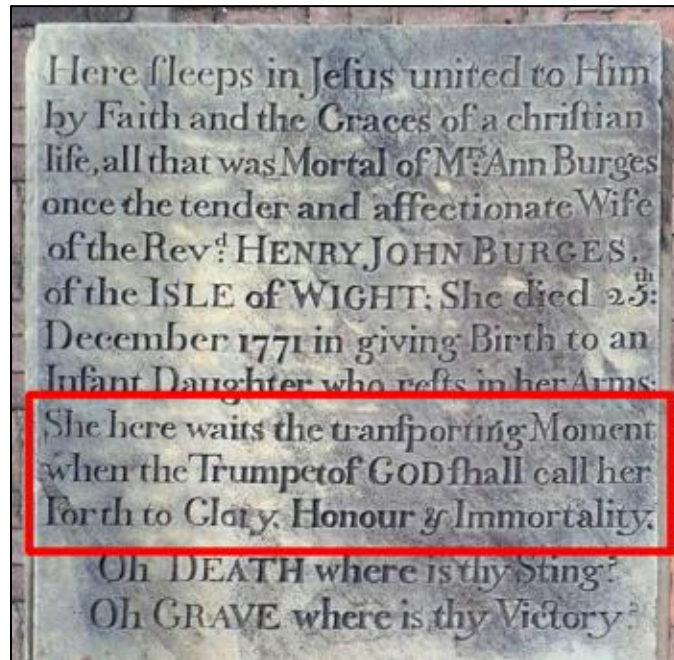
Yet, actually, the Bible doesn't say that much about the geography of heaven and hell – certainly not as much as Dante and Michelangelo did [blank slide]. In our English translations of the Bible, Jesus seems to mention hell fairly often, but if you check out the Greek you find he actually refers not to a place of fiery subterranean caverns but rather just uses the name of Jerusalem's smoldering garbage dump, *gehenna* – unpleasant, certainly, but rather pale compared to the images of Dante and Michelangelo – or other popular stuff you see today.

So, Dante and Michelangelo rather muddled things up in people's minds. And then Wright noticed something else. Wright is not only a New Testament seminary professor and scholar but was also an Anglican Bishop. At one point, he served as Canon of London's Westminster Abbey, that grand, somewhat dark marble edifice which our son Peter, at age 8, once declared to be “boring,” and suggested that “someone should *paint* this place.”

Well, be that as it may, within the gray walls of Westminster Abbey – actually, *in* its walls and floors – are buried centuries of Britain's royalty and nobility including Sir Isaac Newton, Charles Dickens and seventeen British kings and queens. What Wright noticed, as he inspected the more than 3300 gravestones, was that up until 1780 or so folks got it right. The engravings on the stones say things like, “I lie here awaiting the day of resurrection.” But somewhere around 1780 and thereafter things changed. You start seeing things like, “My body lies here moldering in the grave but my soul has flitted off to heaven.” What happened around 1780? I don't know.

But the same thing happened here in America where I found this very large gravestone in Williamsburg, Virginia. Dated 1771, it begins “Here sleeps in Jesus, united to Him by Faith and the Graces of a christian life, all that was Mortal of Mrs Ann Burges” ... a bit hard to read but note these words in particular: “She here waits the transporting Moment when the trumpet of God shall call her forth to glory, honour and immortality.” She waits; her soul hasn't flitted off but “she waits.” That's 1771. Shortly after that, the confusion of moldering bodies and

flitting souls takes over in America just as Wright noted it did in Great Britain.



Well, these are some of the things that have so muddled our understanding. Add to that the constant barrage of movies and comics and you get what is so popular today, but totally non-Christian: the belief that our bodies fade away in the grave while our souls go to heaven [slide: comic1] –



perhaps to become angels or to sit on the edge of a cloud with a harp and halo.



I must say, if that's all it's going to be – thank you, but I don't wanna go there. But the good news is that what the Bible does teach is so much more intriguing and enticing: that God's final intent for us is pretty much the same as was his original – which shouldn't be so surprising. We will once again be unified body-soul creatures.

By the way, if you would like to explore a fascinating series of short YouTube clips of N T Wright's takes on heaven, hell and resurrection, you can go to [tinyurl.com/wrighton](https://tinyurl.com/wrighton).

[tinyurl.com/wrighton](https://tinyurl.com/wrighton)

Well, you can see why Paul was so intent upon pressing upon the Corinthians the great hope we have in bodily resurrection.

So let's finish now with a very brief peek at my other question. Remember when I started this sermon and I first asked, "Will we become angels?" – and clearly the answer has been No. But the second question, "Will we go to heaven?" is now even more intriguing. Because heaven is a spiritual realm – God's control room, if you will. And that being the case, some have noted that heaven isn't a particularly good fit for raised-from-the-dead body-soul creatures. In fact, in spite of Dante and Michelangelo and all those comics, movies, and more recent gravestones, the Bible itself doesn't seem to say we're headed for heaven. So what *does* it say? The Bible, my friends, promises

something *better than heaven*. Briefly the Bible speaks several places of a new heavens and ... a *new earth*. Or perhaps a renewed earth. But whether new or renewed, the point is that it's a physical world which the Bible seems to describe as our destination, not heaven which is the spiritual realm of God. We see this first at the end of Isaiah, but it's the most clear at the very end of the Bible, as the curtain is coming down in chapter 21 of the book of Revelation. There, we read:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down *out of heaven – from God* – prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men.”

And you know what? We confess these things to be true whenever we use the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed – those ancient confessions of faith that link us with the church around the world and throughout history. The Apostles' Creed concludes with “I believe in ... the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting” and the Nicene Creed concludes “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.” “The resurrection of the dead and the life of the *world* to come.”

So what's our takeaway this morning? First of all, let's be clear on one thing: the apostle Paul was a realist – more so than many of us are, I would suggest. Here's what I mean. Paul's *social* life was one that continually expanded outward, a life of relationships, of dealing with people and communities, of tricky power issues with religious leaders and Rome. And Paul's *physical* world was one of the open road and the open seas, sleeping under clear, starry skies and traversing the Mediterranean in fragile wooden ships that didn't always make landfall.

Our *own* lives, on the other hand, are, in many cases, lived in a world far less physical, a world far less “real” – a world often defined by electrons and screens – phone, computer and television. Even our relationships are often maintained more by the touch of a screen than the touch of a hand. And, speaking for myself, especially when I was younger I had this sense that whatever could go wrong physically could reliably be fixed up or touched up by good doctors or dermatologists. Because of



the blessing of living in an age of marvelous medical science, life often seems less fragile to us than it did to Paul – until, of course, it *becomes* fragile. (So perhaps those of you who are over 60, and who know this, are paying more attention to where I’m going with this than are those who are under 30, let’s say.)

Resurrection of the body. Far from Paul being “so heavenly minded he was no earthly good,” he was very earthly minded. Paul and early Christians in general were fixated on bodily existence – both fragile bodily existence as we know it today but also a clear, robust, future sense of bodily existence that would incorporate us again – embody us – on the other side of death. It’s to our great loss that, because of medieval art work and modern day comics and movies, we have to a great extent lost our grip on that firm resurrection hope. Rather than the hope of resurrection leading Paul to escapism, and an otherworldly drift away from reality, it instead provided a grounding for him. It is that hope which led Paul to give up a life of comfort and honor and prestige as a Pharisee and instead physically to take on the roads and seas of the Mediterranean so that others might know both Christ crucified as well as the hope of bodily resurrection. Paul looked forward eagerly to a body-soul life lived on a new earth – a new earth free, as I often say, of poverty, potholes and politicians. A new world with things to do, relationships to explore, discoveries to make. *Far* more appealing and exciting than sitting on the edge of a cloud with a halo and a harp!

As it was for Paul, so should it be for us. When we proclaim, in the words of the Nicene Creed, “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come,” we join with Christians down through the centuries and throughout our world in affirming that great hope – which should stir within us a confidence that energizes us, as it did Paul, for the challenges that lie before us – whether they be at work, at school or at home.

...

My friends, I hope this has been a helpful “refresher course,” as it were, of what the Bible really does say, because cartoonish images of angels

and clouds and halos can be so off-putting to faith. What the Bible actually says about resurrection is far more hopeful and simply makes more sense. And with that in mind, I encourage you to find some time each day to put down your phones, move away from the computer and even turn off the TV – perhaps step outside for a moment and pinch yourself as you look around at the *old* world we at present have before us – and remind yourself, “I have a great future, a *bodily* future, a future in a *new* world that, for us, will be ‘better than heaven.’”

Let us pray ....

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for these two great “bookends” in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: Christ crucified and the hope of the resurrection. May they both support us and encourage us as we face the stresses and challenges of life in this world. May they also fill us with a hope that energizes us for all that you would have us involved in – as we as individuals and as a congregation seek thankfully to follow your will and be a part of your work in the world around us ... and as we look with eagerness toward that new age you have prepared for us. For we pray in Jesus Name, Amen.