

Rethinking Resurrection: For Better or for Worse

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Heaven

When I was on my ordination retreat as a deacon, the four of us talked nervously about wearing clerical collars and moving into new houses, meeting new colleagues and leaving behind old jobs or colleges. A year later on my ordination retreat as a priest, there was only one subject of conversation: funerals. We all had stories of tragedy and farce, of the man so big they couldn't close the coffin, of the incumbent who got too close to the grave's edge at a burial, of the suicide where the young widower insisted on playing "I can't live if living is without you," of the young widow who sat alone on one side of the crematorium chapel while every other mourner sat on the other side. Given the amount of exposure newly ordained clergy get to death and bereavement, it's in some ways surprising they so seldom preach about heaven and hell. It's quite possible to go through a lifetime of participation in regular mainline worship service as a lay person and never hear a sermon on heaven or hell. Whether Jesus rose from the dead, yes, what resurrection means in this life, definitely, and where God is in the agony of loss, many times: but heaven or hell – quite possibly not. Freed as I currently am from the weekly or twice weekly funeral burden, I feel a sense of responsibility to redress the balance a little.

Two obsessions have, I suggest, prevented preachers talking much about heaven over the years. The first obsession, which you'll recognize, is what revivalist preaching is largely about. It's the harrowing anxiety about who gets into heaven and who gets sent to hell and the determination to do whatever it takes to make sure one's in the group going upstairs rather than downstairs. The more significant question of what heaven is like for those who get there never seems to come up in these discussions. I vividly recall my high school English teacher saying she lost her faith at the moment when a preacher started his sermon "It's hot in here: but it's even hotter in hell!" Most preachers seem so keen to distance themselves from that kind of turn-or-burn style that they end up saying nothing at all about the hereafter and thus ceding the ground to their overexcited colleagues.

The second obsession is a much more contemporary one. It's about offering words of comfort to the bereaved. Setting aside the conventional language of heaven and hell leaves us as a culture with a desperate search for platitudes in the face of the agony of losing a friend or relative. Pastors avoid facing hard theological and philosophical questions in the mistaken notion that their principal role is to offer comfort, however superficial and clichéd that comfort may be. Many clergy spend the majority of their pastoral time with people in the early days and weeks after a death. That isn't usually the best time to explore the deepest questions about everlasting life. But one can't ignore such questions indefinitely. The truth is you can't enjoy the glory of heaven without first facing the reality of death.

What I'd like to do is to describe three things heaven is not before going on to describe three things heaven is. In between I'd like to suggest a way we might distinguish between the truth of heaven and what we might regard as second-rate

imitations. I understand that sometimes grief is so profound that we can cast off from our theological moorings in search of comfort. But my aim is to show that what the Bible promises us about heaven is so much greater than what's on offer from Hallmark greetings cards.

So, here goes with three things heaven is not. Heaven is not the continuation of a person's eternal soul. Countless people over the centuries have taken comfort in the belief that, while their loved one's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, his or her soul goes marching on. This isn't a belief rooted in Christian theology. The dualist idea that we are essentially physical bodies and spiritual souls which become detached at death whereupon we continue simply as spiritual souls – this idea is one that arises among the Greek philosophers centuries before Christ. It's not something the Old Testament comprehends. For the Bible, humans are one in life, body and soul, and one in death, body and soul. Death is real. Many people have found reassurance in the words uttered by Canon Henry Scott Holland in St Paul's Cathedral on Whitsunday 1910, reflecting on the passing of King Edward VII. "Death is nothing at all. I have only slipped away into the next room.... Life... is the same as it ever was. There is absolutely unbroken continuity." These were certainly words of comfort; but they can hardly be described as orthodox Christian theology. Can anyone look at Jesus on the cross and say "death is nothing at all"? Can anyone look at the aftermath of a suicide bombing in a market square and imagine the words "I have only slipped away into the next room"? Can anyone have experienced the scene of a terrible car accident and say "there is absolutely unbroken continuity"? Our death is the end of us. Our hope lies not in pretending otherwise, but in knowing that our death is not the end of God.

Here's the second thing heaven is not. Heaven is not our reabsorption into the infinite. This idea that when we die we blend back into the ground of being is a mixture of the simply biological assumption that we dissolve into the soil and the quaintly spiritual notion that we become part of the ether. Just as the champion of the eternal soul argument is Henry Scott Holland, so the great exemplar of the reabsorption argument is Mary Frye. These are her most famous lines: "I am a thousand winds that blow, I am the diamond glints on snow, I am the sun on ripened grain, I am the gentle autumn rain." Again, these are comforting words, but they seem to have come out of a world view that has stopped caring whether a belief is true so long as it's reassuring. Note that, like the Scott Holland piece, God is wholly absent from this understanding of heaven. Jesus seems to have achieved nothing of any significance in his cross and resurrection, at least as far as our death and life thereafter is concerned. Perhaps the reason that the verses usually entitled "Death is nothing at all" and "Do not stand by my grave and weep" have become so enormously popular in our contemporary culture is that they offer pictures of continuity beyond death that require no belief in God or reference to Jesus whatsoever. The trouble is, they do so by denying the reality of death, and the pictures they offer, of heaven as a waiting room or as a disembodied wind, are so bleak as to offer little or no real hope at all.

The third thing heaven is not is simply the reconstitution of our fleshly bodies. This is less of a mistake than the first two, and it may sound obvious in an age where cremation of dead bodies is relatively commonplace, but it's still worth stating. The funeral sermon that says, "I'm sure Peggy's up there now watering and pruning her roses just as she did down here," seems to be assuming that heaven is basically a continuation of our present physical life in all its prosaic mundanity. To be sure, heav-

en is a physical existence, but the bodies of the saints are not simply embalmed versions of the ones we have here. To be sure, our experiences of joy in this life are foretastes of the joy to come, but heaven is not simply earth in a loud voice. The idea of the Rapture is one that likewise overstates the physical continuity of heaven. It's said in some circles that the Rapture is a good thing because it would whisk away all the fundamentalists and leave everyone else to get on with things, but that still distracts from the fact that the Rapture offers an impoverished picture of heaven.

So these are three things heaven is not. It's not unbroken continuity, it's not reabsorption into the infinite, and it's not the simple recomposition of our earthly bodies. What's wrong with them is that they make no reference to the scriptural notion of heaven, have no place for God, and specifically have no relationship to anything brought about by Jesus. I wish I could say they were harmless, but I can't, because in fact they distract attention away from the Bible, away from God, and specifically away from the God we meet in Jesus.

The Bible doesn't speak much about heaven as the eternal dwelling place of Christians. Instead it speaks of heaven as the place where God dwells. And this points to the crucial difference between a Christian notion of life after death and the ones I've been describing. For Christians, there is only one thing greater than the overwhelming horror of death, and that's the overwhelming glory of God. The popular verses I've quoted lose their credibility when they deny the overwhelming horror of death, and they lose any sense of wonder when they ignore the overwhelming glory of God. The Christian hope is that after death we come face to face with the wondrous power and love and passion of God, an experience we could liken to a tidal wave or a raging fire or a dazzling light; and yet, because of Jesus, that overwhelming glory doesn't destroy us, sinners that we are, but transforms us into the creatures God always destined us to be. After death we face neither the oblivion of physical disintegration nor the obliteration of spiritual destruction, but the transformation of glorious resurrection.

As we turn now to the three things heaven is, we realize that we find those things not by massaging our own bodies or souls for continuity, but by looking to what we are shown of the character of God and discovering that God's purpose is to model our transformed character on his.

So the first thing heaven is about is worship. It's no coincidence that one scriptural picture of heaven is of a choir, because a choir is a wonderful picture of what it means to have a body of your own, but to find your true voice in a much greater body, a body where your voice sings most truly in harmony with the voices of others, where you find your voice most fully in words of praise and thanksgiving, where you are lost in concentration and where every detail matters, where you rejoice at the gifts of others which only enhance the gifts that are your own, where fundamentally you are all turned to face the source of your gifts and the focus of your praise.

I currently serve in a church where we put enormous care and attention into the way we worship. And that's because we believe the way we worship is the most significant way we depict and anticipate the life of heaven. Every Sunday Christians gather together and depict and anticipate the life to come. That's why worship matters so much – because in eternity, that's all there'll be. And worship isn't just some abstract ideal. Everything depends on who we worship. And the book of Revelation makes it absolutely clear who we worship – we worship the Lamb who was slain, the Lamb on the throne, Jesus, the one who gave his life because God loved us too much

to leave us to oblivion and obliteration, the one whose resurrection gave us the life of heaven for which we long and on which our hope depends. What we strive for in worship is that every ounce of our energy and concentration is focused on the God we find in Jesus Christ, so that we are truly lost in wonder, love and praise – because that’s what heaven is like.

And here’s the second thing heaven is about. Heaven is about friendship. Jesus said at the Last Supper, “no longer do I call you servants – I call you friends.” The heart of God is three persons in perfect communion. And yet at the table there is a fourth place – a place left for us to join the communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is heaven – the experience of being invited to the table of friendship to join the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At last we discover, not just what God can do when left to do it on his own, but what is possible when in perfect communion, humanity and all creation join the everlasting dance of the Trinity.

If friendship is what heaven is about, that means not just friendship between God and us, but friendship between us and one another. And this is what the book of Revelation points us to when it talks at the very end of the coming of a new heaven and a new earth. At the very end of the Bible, we have a picture of Jerusalem the new city, coming down from heaven. In other words cities are not essentially transitory, dirty, soiled things that are transcended by the coming of heaven. There will always be a city. Learning to live together as friends is at the heart of preparing for heaven, just as worship is. The reason why Christian communities work as hard at their relationships with their neighborhoods and cities as they do at their worship is because they believe making friendships across social barriers is what they shall spend eternity doing, and what they are called to do now is to anticipate heaven.

And the third and final thing heaven is about is eating together. This is maybe the most common picture of all in the New Testament – heaven as a great feast, a banquet celebrating the marriage of heaven and earth, the perfect union or communion of God and all God’s children. Just imagine a fabulous meal where there were no allergies, no eating disorders, no inequalities in world trade, no fatty foods, no gluttony, and no price tag. The reason why the Eucharist is at the center of the life of the Church is because the Eucharist is where food, friendship and worship all come together. We are made friends with God and one another when we eat together in worship. In eating together we recall the transforming meals Christ shared before, during, and after his passion, and we anticipate the great banquet we shall share with him. The Eucharist depicts what creation was for and what it cost. And when we gather together as two or three or twenty or two thousand and make new friends by eating together, we are celebrating a little Eucharist, a little icon of the Trinity at table together, a little glimpse of heaven.

This is what heaven is. Worship, friendship, and eating together. Don’t settle for anything less. Don’t pass into the next room or become a thousand winds that blow. Don’t leave the central claims and shape of the Christian hope behind you in the face of death, just when it really matters. Enter the life that God has prepared for you, the life that Jesus laid down his own life to open up for you.

There are things I haven’t talked about. I haven’t talked about whether heaven comes to us on the day we die or whether we await our resurrection on the last day. I haven’t talked about near death experiences and whether they tell us anything about life after death. I haven’t talked about how we preserve our individual identity and

personality when we've been so thoroughly transformed. I haven't talked about whether the end of the world is coming soon or is millions of years away. I haven't talked about them because I don't think, finally, they matter all that much. Like the popular verses, they're all about us, whereas what we'll discover is that heaven is all about God. There's a great sense of mystery about heaven, but I think the scriptures tell us all we really need to know. They tell us what matters. What matters is being overwhelmed by the power and love and glory of God, now and forever. Heaven isn't a half-hearted reward for those who have lived a life of grudging misery, and it isn't an automatic entry into a revolving door of thudding dullness. Heaven is being overwhelmed by the horror of death and then finding not oblivion or obliteration, but a further overwhelming. This second overwhelming is an overwhelming by the glory of God. It's a transformation into the life that the Father gave us, Jesus lived, and the Spirit infuses in wondrous worship, loving friendship, and a feast of praise. That's what matters. In the end, that's all that matters.

Hell

There are good reasons for believing there's such a place or experience as hell. Most obviously, Jesus seems to refer to it a number of times in the language of gnashing teeth, weeping, and the fiery furnace. And of course the book of Revelation is particularly vivid in its portrayal of the lake of fire and its contents of burning sulphur. The existence of hell underwrites a whole moral universe in which those who have shunned the light and truth of Christ and the gospel and particularly those who have made life a living hell for others on earth reap the rewards of their evil deeds. Those who turn to God in anger and dismay when cruelty and malice seem to prevail can find a certain comfort that not only are the good vindicated on the last day, but that the evil are roundly punished.

There are broadly three ways of conceiving of hell. The first is the endless, bloodthirsty torment of body, mind, and spirit that has captured the religious imagination over so many centuries and is the stuff of nightmares, graveyard humor and revivalist preaching. This version sometimes appears with significant exceptions – for example it's relatively common among advocates of eternal damnation to have get-out clauses for infants, for those who have never had a chance to hear the gospel, or even for those who have been faithful adherents of other faiths. Rather as we noticed with heaven earlier on, the question of who goes upstairs and who goes downstairs generally proves more fascinating than anything else about eternal life. One curious aspect of this is that it reveals the curious spectacle of theologians and preachers in some cases strongly appealing for the admission to heaven of people who have made it clear they have no aspiration or desire to go there.

The second kind of hell is a modified version of the first. It makes a distinction between the references the New Testament makes to hell as a time or place of agony and remorse and the somewhat fewer references in which that time or place of agony and remorse is described as permanent. The modified notion of hell sees it as a finite time of punishment or preparation, sometimes known as purgatory.

The third kind of hell recoils from the traditional emphasis on physical torment and sees punishment as simply annihilation. After death, those who are written in the book of life go to eternal blessedness, while those whose names are not to be found in glory simply drop out of existence. They don't rot or scream or curse – they just cease to be.

A modified form of this annihilation proposal is that hell is the experience of the absence of God. This is a mixture of the first kind, the agony and remorse, with the third kind, the oblivion and obliteration. The absence of God is truly eternal hell, but it seems to spare those with refined tastes of the grisliness of howling screams and boiling oil.

There are two main reasons why hell is a theological and philosophical problem. The first we could call the moral objection. What kind of a god takes delight in consigning people to eternal damnation? Is it possible to imagine the God who formed us and called us and came among us and transformed us turning round and consigning us to perpetual horror? At the very least there seems to be a problem of proportionate response here. However ghastly the crime (and the twentieth century saw a good number of unspeakable atrocities), surely it could be paid off after the first 50 million years in hell? Isn't eternal punishment a little, well, excessive? It's hard to see how anyone could be happy in heaven forever knowing that eternal damnation was still going on downstairs.

The second objection to hell we could call the sovereignty problem. If God is all-powerful, how is it possible that things ultimately turn out differently from the way he wants them to go? Once we have ruled out the vindictive, merciless picture of God and thus assumed God wants all people to go to heaven, the suggestion that some never make it presents a major theological problem. How could God allow any aspect of his creation somehow to be lost forever? It's no use saying this is about free will, because it's simply not possible to imagine anyone choosing eternal damnation, however limited the rest of the menu and however unstable or antagonized they were at the point of choosing.

These two philosophical objections to hell are pretty overwhelming because they strike at the two most fundamental Christian assumptions about God – that God is all loving and all powerful. The existence of hell implies that God isn't all loving, otherwise he couldn't consign parts of his creation to eternal damnation, and that God isn't all powerful, otherwise he'd be able to bring their torment to an end whenever he saw fit. The notion of eternal hell implies not just that there comes a point where we can't change our minds, but that God is as constrained as we are. Thinking theologically about hell means doing justice to the scriptural imagery, to the full dimensions of eternity, to the centrality of Jesus and God's achievement in Jesus, and to the character of God as power and love.

In that light I think we should be wary of the first objection. There's always a danger of reducing God to our own size. It's obviously a mistake to project onto God all our anger and frustration and assume God gives the people we don't like a really hard time forever. But it's also dangerous to concoct a list of polite and genteel and fashionable virtues and say God is just a big version of that. God is our definition of good. If there is a hell, we have to believe that's all part of God's loving economy, whether we understand it or not.

But the logic of the second objection is a whole lot more convincing. The major flaw in arguments for hell is that they take evil so seriously that they make it more significant than good. The reason I don't talk more about the Devil is because the Devil always ends up sounding more interesting than God. And I want to talk about God. At the heart of God is Jesus. And Christians believe that in Jesus, particularly in his death and resurrection, God defeated sin, death and the devil. But the existence of an everlasting hell suggests that there is something God didn't defeat in Jesus – some part

of eternal existence that continues to hold out against God, a part of God's economy that refuses to abide by his grace. Again, it's no use saying this is a matter of free will, that if people weigh up the pros and cons and plump for eternal damnation, God loves them enough to let them go. That would be putting human choice at the center of the universe instead of God's grace. Surely the character of God's grace, the wonder of God's grace, is that God finds a way to draw back into his glory even those who are dead set against his kingdom and his love. The heart of the problem of hell is that it suggests God didn't achieve everything in Jesus, that the gift of Jesus didn't somehow give us everything we need, that there's still somewhere a fundamental, eternal estrangement from God.

So how do we listen obediently to the words of Scripture that speak of fire and torment and gnashing of teeth, and on the other hand, believe not just that Jesus shows us the character of God, but that God achieved everything in Jesus? I suggest the key lies in some words from the prophet Malachi. "Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness." Think about this picture of a refiner's fire.

Consider that the line between good and evil lies not like a thread through society between good and evil persons, those destined for heaven and those destined for hell. Suppose instead that it goes through every single human being. And imagine that there is indeed a fire which burns, not eternally, but until the last day. And that after we die, every little piece of us that has not turned to the glory of God, every tiny part of our history or character, every word or thought or deed that shrinks from God's grace is burned off by the refiner's fire. And that means that when that process is finished, not all of our earthly self gets to heaven. But not none of it, either, even among the worst that humanity has produced. Out of such as remains from the refiner's fire, God remakes a heavenly body fit for worship, friendship and eating with him forever.

For the Mother Teresa and the Francis of Assisi, we can imagine there's very little burnt off, and the refiner's fire is pretty much a painless process. They have accepted the forgiveness of God and been transformed by the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. They're pretty much in the clear and in heaven, they'll be instantly recognizable. But the Adolf Hitler and the Joseph Stalin are another matter. Almost everything in them, so we imagine, turned away from the grace and transforming love of God in Christ, and forgiveness was something they never sought. But here's the twist. Because God created them, because they emerged from God's creative purpose, we cannot simply say they are evil without giving up on the all-pervasive grace of God. So what we say is that for people like them, the refiner's fire is an agonizing and almost total experience, and that what's left is pretty much unrecognizable. It takes God to the very limits of his grace to make something beautiful and heavenly out of the scant and desolate remains that emerge from the refiner's fire. And what does appear in heaven after God's astonishing work is almost unrecognizable from the earthly person that perpetrated so much that desecrated the name of God.

So that's what hell is. Hell is not an eternal horror that abides forever as a scar on the face of God's glory. Hell is a refiner's fire, from which that in us that has been soaked in God's forgiveness and transforming sanctification moves on quite rapidly, but in which that in us that has turned away from the glory of God remains being

prepared to meet God for as long as it takes until the job is done. The punishment, if that's the right word, for the Hitlers and the Stalins and indeed for everything in each of us that we call sin, the punishment, is that by the time it gets to heaven, it's unrecognizable from its earthly self. And the less you allow yourself to be changed by the grace and transforming love of God in this life, the more agonizing and more radical the change will be when you leave this life.

Where is Jesus in this refining fire? The answer is that Jesus is at the heart of the refining fire. Can you imagine that the work of the refining fire is easy? Can you imagine what it costs God painstakingly to eradicate everything in us that turns from him and even more painstakingly to reconfigure a new person based on however little is left after the fire? This is to take on total alienation from God and try to transform even that alienation into something beautiful and glorious and truly heavenly. This is exactly what Jesus wanted to say no to as he knelt in Gethsemane. This is exactly what took Jesus to Calvary. This is exactly what was taking place on the cross. Jesus literally went through hell for us. Jesus on the cross was taking upon himself all in each one of us that turns away from the glory of God – all the sin of the world.

On the cross Jesus was in the refiner's fire, burning with agony so that he could refashion each one of us for heaven. The astonishing thing is that Jesus doesn't just enter the fire and make something wonderful from our ordinary and limited humanity. He even makes something out of the ashes. Somehow, once the fire has done its work, God in Christ transforms even the lost. And in the resurrection we see in Jesus God's grace and commitment to give each one of us a restored and transformed identity once the refiner's fire has done its work. Even the risen Jesus wasn't identical to his pre-crucifixion self. How much different many of us may be. But because of Jesus, hell is not God's last word on sin. So the more we focus on the cross, the less we think about hell. Jesus really did change everything.

This is a picture of hell that stays true to the scriptural imagery, stays true to our faith in the self-giving and loving character of God, and stays true to our belief in the almightiness of God. Most importantly, it brings us closer to the wonder of what God gives us in Jesus Christ. This is a faith that leaves us not trembling in agonized fear or cozy in judgmental complacency, but lost in wonder, love and praise. And that's a big part of how we know it's true.

I want to finish with a prayer. It's a prayer that unites the themes of heaven and hell. It's a prayer that sums up this lecture, which is to say that the way to think about heaven and hell is to focus on the God of Jesus Christ and not to settle for anything less. It's a prayer that I hope may become as precious to you as it is to me: "Loving God, if I love thee for hope of heaven, then deny me heaven; if I love thee for fear of hell, then give me hell; but if I love thee for thyself alone, then give me thyself alone. Amen."