

***The Doctrine of Heaven*** by Pastor John E. Stellick, Trinity Lutheran Church, Crete, IL written for Chicago Pastoral Conference WELS, which assembled at Beautiful Savior Ev. Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, IN on September 10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007. Conference Theme: ***“I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.”*** Abridged with the author’s permission by Pastor Nathan Cordes for “Saints Triumphant” Sunday.

1. One of the articles I read for this paper was “Life After Death” in AARP magazine.<sup>1</sup> Of the 1,011 people AARP interviewed, 635 believe in heaven. That’s better than nothing I guess. But only 184 believe the way to heaven is to “believe in Jesus Christ.” 159 indicated: people who “are good” get to heaven. 64 felt that anyone and everyone gets to heaven. Old people need huge dosages of law and gospel along with their medication prescriptions.

I have had some “experience” with heaven. During my ministry I have conducted nigh unto 240 funerals. A perusal of those funeral sermons will reveal at least a reference to heaven in nearly every one of them.

And I have had some personal “experience” with heaven in that I have loved ones there. In October 2003 my father was bringing up some apples from the basement. At the top of the steps he violently (perhaps from a seizure) fell backwards down the steps and died instantly from a skull fracture. At the visitation for his funeral one comment especially stood out for me and still does. A long-time friend of my father said, “Your father’s race was run and now he is at rest.” Perhaps the comment stood out because it was quite different from most expressions that were offered. Perhaps it was because of the tinge of envy in the gentleman’s voice when he said it. Or perhaps because it helped me deal with the sudden and unexpected way in which my father died. Heaven is the culmination of life.

Two years ago my sister, two years younger than I, died after a yearlong battle with cancer. When I think of my sister in heaven, I do not think so much of what it is like for her there. I think of the grace of God that got her there. For many years my sister was not a Christian. Caught up in the worldly hippie movement of her day, she drifted from the Lord and walked away. But God used cancer and the

testimony of a loving husband and family and friends to give the Holy Spirit an opportunity to bring her back to Jesus. God allowed her to experience some “hell on earth” for a year to keep her from a far worse hell forever. Heaven is evidence that God loves his people and loves them enough to do whatever it takes to get them there.

Last year our granddaughter died. Our daughter is a scrap booker. So there is a life history book on our granddaughter. It is short, only a few pages. It doesn’t take much space to portray twenty hours. On the last page our daughter gives the summary. “Athena Grace Dub was born on September 30, 2006. She died the next day. We will get to see her in heaven someday.” I find it interesting, but not surprising, that my daughter did not write, “We will get to see her *again* in heaven someday.” Rather she wrote, “We will get to see her.” Didn’t they see her here? Yes. But all they saw was a little body struggling for life with tubes and needles and pieces of tape everywhere. They did not see her baby smiles, ribbons in her hair, nor the first day of school. One day they shall see her alive, a living being, in whatever form and appearance God chooses. Heaven is life.

The Sunday I was back at Trinity after Athena’s funeral, many people were offering their expressions of sympathy and Christian love. One man said to me, “You are lucky.” I looked at him rather strangely. He explained, “You already have one in heaven.” This came from a devout Christian man. Three of his four children and their families have drifted from the Lord. It weighs heavily upon him. Heaven is the heart’s desire for ourselves and our loved ones.

Heaven means different things to different people at different times in different circumstances. I believe that is the way God intends it. He gives us many glimpses of heaven. Oh, we chafe sometimes because he doesn’t answer our every question. Sometimes his descriptions even raise more questions than provide answers. But God tells us what he does to give us longing, to give us hope, to give us comfort, to give us strength, to give us reason for living in all aspects and circumstances of life.

Since heaven means different things to different people at different times, I ask, “What appeals most

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<sup>1</sup> AARP *The Magazine*, September & October 2007- pages 66ff

to you about heaven right now, today, in your family situation?" It has been said of heaven, "Eternal life is the grand perspective to which our Christian hope should constantly look forward."<sup>2</sup> Or as Luther expressed it, "A Christian life uncharted and unmotivated by the sure hope of eternal life is inconceivable."<sup>3</sup> So we consider THE DOCTRINE OF HEAVEN: 1. Its teaching and 2. Its application.

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Is there a heaven? The AARP statistics referred to earlier indicate that nearly half of the people surveyed don't believe there is a heaven. Twenty-three percent of the respondents said they believe in reincarnation. The article quotes Jeffrey Burton Russell, from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and author of "A History of Heaven." "If you took this study 50 years ago, the belief in reincarnation would be down at about one percent. Generally, the traditionally clear Christian vision of heaven has declined, while the vaguer visions of the continuation of life have taken its place."<sup>4</sup> Alas the question, "Is there a heaven?"

There is only one place to find the answer—the Bible. Heaven must be revealed to us. It does not lie within the realm of human discovery. "The conceptions of natural man as to the state after death cannot rise above the level of human reason, or fancy, or experience in this life. The wisest philosopher, the most renowned scientist can give us no more reliable information about life after death than the most ignorant bushman. Neither telescope nor television nor radar nor any other human invention can penetrate the veil which God has hung over eternity. Thank God, He, the Author of life eternal, has given us in His holy Word quite a complete picture of the heavenly home prepared for us and in which we shall spend everlasting life."<sup>5</sup>

The Old Testament Scriptures speak of heaven with the word "*shemayim*" which is used 420 times.<sup>6</sup> While most often the word refers to the 'sky' or 'outer space,' it is also used to refer to 'the abode of

God' and 'the place where believers go after their life on earth.' Here is one example of each usage.

- ☞ Genesis 1:20: "Let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the *sky* (*shemayim*)."
- ☞ Genesis 15:5: [God] took [Abraham] outside and said, 'Look up at the *heavens* (outer space) and count the stars—if indeed you can count them."
- ☞ Deuteronomy 26:15: "Look down from *heaven*, your holy dwelling place, and bless your people Israel."
- ☞ 2 Kings 2:11: "As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to *heaven* in a whirlwind."

Here are examples of similar usages of the New Testament word for heaven, "*ouranos*," which is used 284 times.<sup>7</sup>

- ☞ Matthew 16:2,3: "(Jesus) replied, "When evening comes, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the *sky* (*ouranos*) is red,' and in the morning, "Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times."
- ☞ Hebrews 11:12: "And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the *sky* (*ouranos* – outer space) and as countless as the sand on the seashore."
- ☞ Revelation 11:12: "Then they heard a loud voice from heaven (God's abode) saying to them, 'Come up here.' And they went up to heaven (where believers go) in a cloud, while their enemies looked on."

While the New Testament uses the word for heaven to refer to 'sky' and 'outer space' as did the Old Testament, more often in the New Testament it refers to 'the abode of God' or 'the place believers go when their life on earth is ended.'

It would be shortsighted to think that the Bible speaks about heaven only when it uses the word 'heaven.' Think of Jesus' words to the criminal on the cross. "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Jesus was talking about heaven. Think of his glorious ascension words. "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I

<sup>2</sup> The Abiding Word, Volume One, Concordia Publishing House, page 561

<sup>3</sup> Francis Pieper quoting Luther's sermon on Titus 2:13 (St. L. IX:930ff) in *Christian Dogmatics*, Volume III, page 555.

<sup>4</sup> AARP *The Magazine*, page 70

<sup>5</sup> I cannot find where I found this quote – probably The Abiding Word

<sup>6</sup> WLS Summer Quarter 2006 notes ST 5048 *Heaven and Hell* – provided by Staff Minister Mark Blauert

<sup>7</sup> WLS Summer Quarter 2006 notes

would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). What was Jesus talking about? Well, where did he go? The ascension angel answers, “This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). Think of the incredible invitation we shall receive on Judgment Day: “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world’” (Matthew 25:34). All this is heaven. “That there is an everlasting life in glory and bliss for all true believers in Christ Jesus is the culmination of all Gospel revelation in Holy Scriptures.”<sup>8</sup>

“Our belief in life everlasting (heaven), therefore is not merely a logical and reasonable deduction arrived at on the basis of natural knowledge and its processes. It is an irrefutable truth founded upon God’s own revelation in both the Old and the New Testament Scripture.”<sup>9</sup> Because the reality of heaven does not rest on human wisdom but on the revelation of God, therefore we confess in the Creed, “I believe in...the life everlasting.” “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1).

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Since heaven is real, where do we find it? Where is it located? Is it even located anywhere? Is heaven an actual place or a state of existence? It is both.

Is not difficult for us to think of heaven as a place. Elijah went up to heaven; Jesus ascended into heaven; Paul was caught up to paradise. Sure sounds like a place. In my funeral sermons and preaching on heaven I tend to speak of it as a place. That sounds more comforting than to say, “Your loved one has entered another dimension of being.”<sup>10</sup> At the same time, “Every attempt to locate heaven geographically is folly.”<sup>11</sup>

There are, however, a number of things in Scripture that argue against heaven being a place. Let Dr. Siegbert Becker explain. “I suppose that many of us grew up as I did, visualizing the ascension of the Savior in such a way that we imagined that Jesus reached the cloud layer and then disappeared into it, and if the cloud had not come between Jesus and his disciples they could have continued to watch him until he would have disappeared as a tiny speck in the sky.

While there is probably no particular harm in such a view, yet it hardly does justice to the words of the Bible dealing with the ascension. Jesus did not go far away when he ascended. Shortly before that event he gave his disciples the promise, ‘Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.’ Moreover, St. Paul says that the Savior ascended up far above all heavens that he might fill all this (Ephesians 4:10), in other words, that he might be present everywhere. In answer to the Reformed argument that Jesus’ body could not be present in the Lord’s Supper because it was seated at the right hand of God, Luther correctly replied that the right hand of God is everywhere. It would probably therefore be more in keeping with the Biblical imagery if we would visualize Jesus as rising only a short distance above the heads of his disciples with the cloud coming there to render him invisible. Thus, when he ascended he was still near them.

It is thus perhaps more in keeping with the words of the Bible to think of heaven not as a place far beyond the stars but simply as another realm of existence or another dimension of being. We are told, for example, that the holy angels always behold the face of the Father in heaven. Yet we know that the angels are with us here on earth. Wherever an angel goes, he can still see the face of God; the beatific vision never comes to an end for him. He is always in heaven even when he is here with us on earth.”<sup>12</sup> Heaven is real and, whether it be far away or hidden by a veil right next to us, when the time comes for Jesus to take us there he knows the location.

“Will heaven ever change?” “Will it be different after Judgment Day than it is now?” “Will there be a new location?” The safest answer here is “maybe.”

<sup>8</sup> Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, Concordia Publishing House 1955, page 639

<sup>9</sup> Abiding Word I, page 565

<sup>10</sup> That sounds too much like the “Twilight Zone” which old people remember.

<sup>11</sup> Pieper Dogmatics, page 553

<sup>12</sup> Siegbert Becker – “Heaven and Hell” – essay presented to the Michigan District Teachers’ Convention 1978

The Bible speaks of “new heavens and a new earth” after Judgment Day.

- 📖 Isaiah 65:17: Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.
- 📖 2 Peter 3:7,10,12,13: The present heavens and earth are reserved for fire... The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare... That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.

There are those who interpret these passages to mean that the destruction of this sinful world will be so fierce and complete that everything will be turned into nothingness as it was before creation (annihilation). A possibility.

On the other hand the word ‘destruction’ does not necessarily mean annihilation. In fact Peter says the earth was “destroyed” in the Flood. Obviously it was not annihilated. Perhaps then there will be material remaining after Judgment Day from which God will make a “new creation” (renovation). A possibility.

Some take Romans 8:19-21 in support of the renovation theory, that the fire will purify the present creation and God will then restore it to its original condition. “The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” From this passage some also maintain there will be animals in heaven.<sup>13</sup> Who is to say for certain?

Do these questions, or the inability to answer them with certainty, trouble us? It need not. J.P. Meyer

makes this observation. “No matter what happens to the present world, being under the curse because of our sin, it will give place to a new heaven and a new earth. The greatest thing that will distinguish the new world from the old is compressed by Peter into the short [phrase]: ‘the home of righteousness.’ The fact that there will be no sin in the new earth, that there is no danger of falling into sin because no tempter will be permitted to enter—this makes the new earth a veritable, everlasting paradise. ‘Oh, that we were there.’”<sup>14</sup>

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So let’s talk about this glorious paradise that awaits us in Christ. What is it about heaven that creates a longing in you?

Is it the Beatific Vision—*visio Dei*—seeing God? Certainly Job longed for it. “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” (Job 19:25-27). One can almost feel the awe in the voice of St. John: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! We know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:1,2). No wonder this is a favorite passage. What joy unspeakable, to see God face to face, who loved us with an everlasting love, who provided for us a way of salvation through His own dear Son, and who graciously kept us in the faith unto the end, so that we will have received the crown of life! Who can begin to describe the joy that will fill our hearts when, basking in the sunshine of God’s presence, we shall be permitted to thank and praise Him forevermore for His marvelous grace toward us? What a thrilling experience it will be to meet Jesus, to talk to Jesus, and to thank Jesus for His undying love!<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Becker also speaks highly of the Beatific Vision and makes the interesting observation that it

<sup>13</sup> Becker, *Heaven and Hell*

<sup>14</sup> Meyer, J.P.; *Eternity*

<sup>15</sup> The Abiding Word, Volume Three, Concordia Publishing House, page 126

helps us keep our thoughts about heaven from becoming too earthy. “The statement that ‘we will go to heaven when we die’ is in form not a common Biblical way of speaking. The Bible describes what happens to believers at death in a much more personal way. “So shall we ever be with the Lord.” How much warmer, and how much more significant and comforting it is to say that ‘we shall be with our Lord forever’ than to say that ‘we will go to heaven’! To be with Jesus our Savior through all eternity is the fondest hope of the child of God; and the realization of this truth guards us against a Mohammedan view of heaven which lays stress particularly on the enjoyment of the same sort of material pleasures in which men rejoice on this earth, complete with feasting and dancing girls. Whatever joys we may experience in heaven, the greatest of all joys to which the Christian looks with longing is to be with Jesus, our Lord and Savior, and to behold him in his infinite glory of which we will never tire and which we will never exhaust.<sup>16</sup> This helps explain the thrill of King David when he wrote, “You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand” (Psalm 16:11).

Besides God, we shall see others in heaven—all fellow believers. “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 4:16,17). And it appears we will recognize everyone. After all, Peter recognized Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:4). Thus we have the hope of a blessed reunion in heaven. It is not uncommon to hear things like, “I’m sure Mom and Dad and Aunt Alice were at the gates to welcome him.” “I can just see my brother exchanging recipes with Grandma and Grandpa in heaven.”

Perhaps this says it more poignantly. True story. “A pastor and a seminary professor were traveling together on an airplane to attend a conference. The pastor was hoping to have a good theological discussion with the seminary professor. As the

plane got on its way, the seminary professor said to the pastor, ‘May I tell you about my son? His name was Jimmy. He was nine years old. He came home from school one day with a fever. We thought it was just one of those childhood things. But it didn’t go away. We took him to the doctor and it was found to be a virulent form of meningitis. The doctor said, “There is nothing we can do for him. Your son is going to die.”’

And so this seminary professor and his wife sat by the bedside of their beloved son in a death vigil. It was the middle of the day with the sun shining brightly. The little boy, whose strength was waning and whose vision and brain were getting clouded, said, ‘Daddy, it’s getting dark, isn’t it?’ The father said to his little boy, ‘Yes, son, it is getting dark, very dark.’ Of course, it was dark for him. He said, ‘Daddy, I guess it’s time for me to go to sleep, isn’t it?’ ‘Yes,’ the father said, ‘it’s time for you to go to sleep.’ The professor said the little fellow had a way of fixing his pillow just so, and putting his head on his hands when he slept. He fixed his pillow like that and laid his head on his hands and said, ‘Good night, Mommy and Daddy, I will see you in the morning.’ He then closed his eyes in death and stepped into heaven.

The professor didn’t say any more after that. He just looked out the window of the airplane for a long time. Then he turned back and looked at the pastor with scalding tears coming down his cheeks and said, ‘I can hardly wait till the morning.’<sup>17</sup> The morning is coming. And we shall see our loved ones who have fallen asleep in Jesus. I like that.

At the same time this idea of recognizing people in heaven often causes some consternation, because if we recognize people who are there, we will also know if someone is missing. How can we then still be happy? Here is one answer: “The will of the blessed will in all things concur with that of God. Such carnal affections as are signs of our weakness in this life will entirely cease in the life to come, when our love will extend to those who are beloved of God and whom He has made heirs of everlasting life. But in the damned they will supremely admire and eternally praise the exalted justice of God.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Becker, *Heaven and Hell*

<sup>17</sup> Illustration from sermoncentral.com

<sup>18</sup> Mueller, quoting Hutter in *Doctrinal Theology*, page 662

I like this answer better. “This question is very difficult for us to answer, and I do not know how I will be able to rejoice without sorrow if any of my children or my wife should be missing when we stand together at God’s right hand. *Such thoughts surely ought to move us never to become indifferent to their salvation during this time of grace.* (emphasis added) But as for what it will be like in heaven under such circumstances we can only remind ourselves that in God’s presence there will be fullness of joy.”<sup>19</sup>

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Permit me at this point to share with you one of my favorite longings of heaven. It is intimated in the words of St. John. “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” (1 John 3:2). This speaks of the full restoration of the divine image that Adam and Eve lost for us all. Quite frankly my longing in this is more from a negative aspect—I want to be done with the sinful nature.

I am able to identify too readily with the Apostle Paul’s agony, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24). Yes, I rejoice in the victory won by my Lord Jesus Christ. And daily I seek to drown the old Adam in contrition and repentance. Probably much of the problem is that my drowning techniques would not even threaten the life of a cat. I shall be glad when my sinful flesh is just plain dead never to come back again. Oh, to be without sin, without temptation, without guilt, without regret, without tears. Oh, to have the race finished and be at rest (Hebrews 4:11)!

And there are the positive aspects also. With the restoration of the divine nature in humans comes holiness and the end of the consequences of sin. In heaven, God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying

or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4). That which has made this world a vale of tears will be no more.

Gone, also, will be the need for conference papers.

“As the image of God consists in blissful knowledge of God and in righteousness and true holiness, we shall then ‘know even as we are known,’ shall fully know God, His will, and His ways; we shall understand what now is still dark to us. All our questions both with respect to certain mysteries of doctrine and to happenings in our personal lives will be fully answered.”<sup>20</sup>

Oh for that day when, “I—in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness” (Psalm 17:15). Not only shall we see God, we shall be “like Jesus” when he “will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:21).

Also we shall be “like angels,” Jesus says. This aspect of life in heaven quickly sounds quite appealing to many people today since Hollywood’s foray into the realm of God and the preoccupation of angels in the New Age mentality. People envision themselves becoming angels and being involved in peoples’ lives, or in the likeness of Clarence striving to achieve their wings and establish their rank among the hosts.<sup>21</sup> But this is what Jesus says, “Those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels” (Luke 20:35,36). We shall not become angels, we shall be like angels. It seems we can only be sure of two things when it comes to being like angels. First, we shall not marry or be given in marriage in heaven; second, we shall never die.

At least one of those aspects is truly appealing to us—we shall never die. And so we come to one of the most common expressions in Scripture in speaking of heaven—‘eternal life.’ “God so loved

<sup>19</sup> Becker, *Heaven and Hell*

<sup>20</sup> Koehler, Edward W.A., *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, page 314.

<sup>21</sup> “Touched by an Angel” and “It’s a Wonderful Life”

the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Eternal life not only means we shall live forever. It also means that once in heaven we shall never sin again. Since the “wages of sin is death,” where death cannot come, sin cannot come. From this comes the expression “confirmed in bliss.” We shall never be able to fall away from God. We will never want to leave heaven. And we won’t. “Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it” (Revelation 3:12). We will enjoy every appealing aspect of heaven forevermore.

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So what is it about heaven that gets your heart pumping? Or, what is it about heaven that calms your heart? Is it the Beatific Vision? Is it the hope of a blessed reunion with loved ones in heaven? Is it the absolute final demise of the sinful nature and full restoration of the divine image? Is it life everlasting? Or is it something else? These pages have not exhausted this topic. There is much more. Perhaps that means there are more questions too. May this just increase our longing.

“Much that we would like to know about heaven and eternal life will be revealed to us only after we have entered there. Neither is it necessary for us to know here and now what God in His wisdom has seen fit to withhold from us. However, all that is needful for us to know, enough to stimulate our interest in, and to create a longing for, that eternal life prepared for us, is clearly revealed in the Scripture.”<sup>22</sup>

However, we are not yet finished. It is now my privilege to share with you the greatest of all revelations concerning heaven that God gives us in his Holy Word. Without this greatest of revelations heaven would be ashes in our mouths. It would be a cruel joke. It would be the product of a sadist. Listen well, my friends, as our Savior speaks to us of the way to heaven.

☞ John 14:1-6: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.’ Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?’ Jesus answered, ‘I am the way and the true and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’”

Thank God that he has prepared the way for us to go to heaven, revealed that way, and brought us to it.

As we glimpse the glories of heaven, it becomes shamefully apparent that we are not worthy of such a paradise. Just take this matter of heaven itself. We have talked much about the appealing aspects of heaven. But just how appealing is it to us? What gets more of our attention—our earthly house or our heavenly dwelling? Would we be readily classified with the heroes of faith who “were longing for a better country—a heavenly one” (Hebrews 11:16)? We heard Luther say earlier, “A Christian life uncharted and unmotivated by the sure hope of eternal life is inconceivable.”<sup>23</sup> From that perspective, just how Christian is our life? Luther goes on to say: “The citizenship, the sojourn, and the home of Christians are not in this world but in heaven. This is correctly taught, but not easily learned; rightly preached, but not so soon believed; correctly impressed upon the heart, but not easily followed; well said, but poorly practiced. Were we to confess the truth, we would have to admit that we seldom think of the fact that we must at last depart and leave this life; and for that reason our mind is not constantly set on our eternal home. Add to that our faintheartedness: we always stand in fear of death, we mourn and tremble under our

<sup>22</sup> The Abiding Word I, page 565

<sup>23</sup> See footnote 3

misfortunes. All of this shows that we do not look for the blessed hope as we should.”<sup>24</sup>

We are not worthy of heaven. Nor are we fit for it. For the last two years at Trinity in Crete the ministerial staff conducted an every member visit of the congregation. For this undertaking I purchased a new pair of shoes—slip on shoes so that in my old age I do not have to bend over and untie and tie them when I come to a home where I know they don’t wear shoes in their living room and expect visitors to do the same.<sup>25</sup> If people are that protective of their living room carpeting and expect the same of guests, the holy and just God is not going to allow us to traipse around his streets of gold wearing muddy shoes of iniquity. He is not going to allow us to crawl on his royal thrones dressed in filthy rags. We are not fit, nor deserving.

But God says in effect, “I created heaven because I love you. I still love you and want you in heaven. And I will do whatever it takes to get you there. Here is my Son who will make all things right.”

And Jesus did. With his holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death he has removed our unworthiness. With his perfect life he has made us fit. In Jesus we are dressed in garments designed for eternity’s feast. St. John was privileged to view this fashion parade in the glimpse of glory granted to him by God.

📖 **Revelation 7:9, 12-14** After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands... Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” I answered, “Sir, you know.” And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

Jesus, Your blood and righteousness  
my beauty are, my glorious dress.  
Mid flaming worlds, in these arrayed,  
with joy shall I lift up my head.

Bold shall I stand in that great day—  
Who can a word against me say?  
Fully through You absolved I am  
from sin and fear, from guilt and shame.<sup>26</sup>

Does heaven appeal to you? “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

Now I digress as I take you back to AARP. Near the end of the article, “Life after Death,” the writer makes the comment, “Whether we choose to take any side in the afterlife conversation, the reality is heading relentlessly toward us. We can straddle the line between belief and unbelief all we want, but in a world where we love to split the difference when it comes to spiritual matters, where inclusiveness often means reaching consensus on conceptual matters, the answer to the ultimate question of life after death leaves no room for quibbling. The position you took during your early life is either spot on or dead wrong.”<sup>27</sup>

The statement is intriguing. Was this writer, who by virtue of his assignment in writing for a secular magazine probably not permitted to share his personal beliefs, attempting to tell people, “Make sure you have your doctrine right before the ultimate application takes place”? Let us, who by God’s incredible grace, are certain beyond doubt of the reality of heaven and who have the sure hope of eternal life and thus are “spot on,” share these truths with those who are “dead wrong” before they are dead.

To God Alone Be the Glory.

<sup>24</sup> Pieper quoting Luther’s sermon on “The Blessed Hope” (St. L. IX: 930ff), page 86

<sup>25</sup> I also have to try to remember to wear socks without holes

<sup>26</sup> CW 376 vs 1,2

<sup>27</sup> AARP *The Magazine*, page 107