



HEAVEN'S MORNING

Rethinking the destination

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Introduction

Modern man, if he dared to be articulate about his concept of heaven, would describe a vision which would look like the biggest department store in the world, showing new things and gadgets, and himself having plenty of money with which to buy them.

Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (1955)

The undertakers phoned. An elderly man in my parish had died and the widow wanted a church funeral. I knew the house but was pretty sure that I had never seen any of its occupants in church. I rang the bell and a woman who had obviously been crying opened the door. We went into a cosy parlour and I asked about her husband. She was keen to talk—how she'd constantly urged him to go to the doctor, but he was so stubborn ('There's nothing wrong with me but a bit of indigestion'). Finally, he agreed to go to the GP but by then it was too late. He was in hospital a week and died there.

She was still numb from the shock of it all, but eventually I had to raise the question of the funeral. Had she any particular wishes about it—people to speak, perhaps, or special music that her husband loved? She thought for a moment. 'Well, vicar, we don't want anything miserable.'

Some gentle questioning established what she meant by 'miserable'. She didn't want anything that would upset family and friends. Basically, when you reduced it to essentials, she didn't want us to talk about death.

She'd made a few notes on a sheet of paper to explain what she had in mind. Someone from his golf club to tell a few funny stories about his experiences on the links. A couple of his favourite songs—'I Did It My Way', for one. Perhaps one of the grandchildren reading a poem about grandpas. 'But no "dust to dust". Please,' she said firmly. I pointed out that I was bound to use the regular funeral service, which she accepted, but was anxious that people who came already 'upset' should not be made to feel worse.

Eventually we agreed on the service, but in fact we both compromised. She agreed to several prayers that spoke fairly clearly about the reality of death and the sense of loss it inevitably entails. I agreed to do the graveside committal in the town cemetery with the aid of the undertakers while everybody else went off for refreshments in the local pub. I don't think either of us was entirely happy with these arrangements, but in the event the service was for me recognisably Christian and for her the reading (Revelation 21:1–5, with the words 'he will wipe every tear from their eyes') evoked a positive response. 'It's like a lovely poem,' she said, and I agreed.

That was over 20 years ago, in the days when virtually all funerals were conducted by ministers of religion. Since then that scenario, familiar to clergy and undertakers and accepted by relatives who expected at least the formality

of a religious ceremony, has slowly given way to a new one, in which church and religion are carefully excluded. The advent of secular ‘celebrants’ has given families (and undertakers) a way to sidestep any notion of a religious rite and to replace it with a kind of public tribute with songs. This does at least accurately mirror the spirit of the age, which finds the whole business of death a painful reminder that no matter how clever we may be technologically and medically, this is how it inevitably ends.

This book is an attempt to address the issues raised by that situation. Do Christians simply accept the situation, recognising that belief in things like resurrection, eternal life and heaven is now a minority interest of ‘religious’ people? Or can we re-present the issue of death and the ‘hereafter’ in terms that can make sense to people in a world not only vastly different from that of biblical times, but from that of a mere 20, 30 or 40 years ago? As followers of a faith whose basic tenet is that its Founder rose from the dead, and promised ‘eternal life’ to those who believed in him, it is, as they say, a ‘no-brainer’.

Facing the final curtain

The modern world, and even the Church in that setting, struggles to make sense of the whole business of death, dying, judgement and the ‘hereafter’. People have spotted that hardly anybody actually believes the traditional stuff about heaven and hell any more. On the other hand, some deep residual instinct makes it hard for them to sign up to a complete rejection of the idea of a life beyond this one. So, even at a ‘secular’ funeral service, people cheerfully talk

of their loved ones who have 'passed on' (in the tentative language favoured by relatives) as somehow being 'Up There', fully conversant with the football results and the arrival of a new grandchild. Vera Lynn ends the service with 'We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when', but for many people it's just wishful thinking—a gentle subterfuge to avoid a harsh reality.

If Christians wish to convince a scientific, sceptical and largely secular generation that to believe in heaven is anything more than that, they can't hide any longer behind ideas and images that are the products of a long-past tradition rather than the actual teaching of Jesus and the apostles. We believe in resurrection, not resuscitation. We look for a *new* heaven and a *new* earth, not the old one extended. Our hope is the kingdom of God, not more of what we've got already. We believe in eternal life, not everlasting existence.

When people speak of their loved ones as 'Up There' it bears little relation to the traditional Christian teaching about heaven (let alone hell). It's simply a second innings on a better pitch with nothing fundamentally changed. By and large, and sadly, Christian ministers (and I include myself) have felt bound to buy into this pathetic dilution of the glorious vision of the kingdom of heaven.

There is a general reluctance in our Western society to think seriously about the possibility that there really is a life beyond this one, a transformation (not an extension) of our present life in an utterly new environment. The challenge of comprehending or putting into a belief system an entirely 'other' way of self-conscious being, which is what the Bible

offers, stretches our credulity to breaking point. We find ourselves stuck between the ineffable and the incredible.

Yet it is still an important question. The issue of life beyond this life—‘eternal life’, in biblical language—is crucial to our understanding of who we are and what purpose we inhabit in the creation. It offers one answer, at least, to Stephen Hawking’s haunting question, ‘Why does the universe bother to exist?’

A voice from another world?

Fifty years ago I wrote a short book called *Hereafter*, in which I sought to present the traditional Christian doctrines of eternal life for as wide an audience as possible. It turned out to be the only genuine ‘bestseller’ of my literary career (about a quarter of a million copies worldwide). When this present book was mooted I got that one down off the shelf and read it again. It sounded like a voice from another world. It’s not that what it set out was demonstrably untrue or false, but that it was strangely irrelevant. The answers may not have changed, but the questions have. The present book is my attempt, in the radically different environment of the early 21st century, to re-examine for the present generation our understanding of the great Christian vision of God’s ultimate purpose for humankind, and to do it in a way that respects both the magnificent revelation which the Bible offers and the honesty and openness of the questions modern people ask.

Chapter Five

Judgement

All the way to heaven is heaven.

St Catherine of Siena (1347–80)

If you asked a hundred people in the street what Christians believe happens after death, I suspect most of them would say something like ‘God decides whether you go to heaven or hell.’ That is how the message has come to them, through a garbled version of scripture, art and works like Dante’s ‘Inferno’. Many medieval churches still offer murals showing the good people flying up to heaven with blissful looks on their faces and the wicked sinners being prodded into the fiery furnace by the guardians of the inferno. I remember seeing in Pisa, in the chapel next to the famous Leaning Tower, a terrifyingly graphic painting of precisely that scene.

It offers, in fact, a caricature of the biblical vision of judgement. It has enough truth to perpetuate the idea, but not enough to make it remotely consistent with the Bible’s profound vision of the fulfilment of God’s ultimate purpose in the salvation of the world. Here is how the writer of the letter to the Hebrews expressed it: ‘And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that

the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him' (9:27–28).

Judgement is a vital element in the story of the Bible, because God is supremely the 'Judge of all the earth'. Time and again the Hebrew scriptures remind us that he 'judges the world with equity', that 'the Judge of all the earth does what is right'. It is a great reassurance for the people of earth that they do not live in a lawless moral chaos, but that over everything—every evil scheme, every act of human wickedness—God's justice and judgement are supreme. It is not simply that God is going to punish the wicked and vindicate the oppressed, but that he has a long-term purpose of salvation and healing for the whole creation.

It was not until the later prophets of Israel that the full import of that phrase 'long term' became clear. The people of Israel generally expected that God would vindicate their cause there and then, but they came to realise that what Yahweh had in mind was something far more universal. That's why the story of the Bible ends with a new heaven and a new earth 'where righteousness dwells'. 'I am making everything new,' proclaims God. The nations, the unbelieving Gentiles, will be healed by the leaves from the tree of life, and evil will finally be removed from the whole creation. This is much, much more than a question of the destiny of specific individuals. It is, in the true sense of the word, 'salvation', which means being made whole.

I think I should at this point enter a caution (more for the author than the reader). There are two perils in writing

about something like life after death. One is being so vague that no one knows what you're talking about. The other is being dogmatic about things which are literally beyond human comprehension. In the first case, there are many questions raised but few answered, or even attempted. In the second case the reader is left wondering how the author can be quite so certain about things beyond our ken. After all, it was the apostle Paul who wrote these words: 'For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12). I do not want to claim clearer vision than the great apostle, and readily concede that faith is not the same thing as certainty, and interpretation is not the same thing as direct knowledge. One day we shall know. For the present we are called to trust, but on the basis of our understanding of revealed truth.

Having said that, let us return to the subject of judgement. The word has distinctly negative tones in English, partly perhaps through the persistence of the old English word 'doom', as in 'doomsday' (the day of judgement) in popular thinking. In both the biblical languages it has a more positive tone. Here is the psalmist, in full song: 'The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they... than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb' (Psalm 19:9–10, KJV).

We don't usually think of judgement as 'sweet', but for the psalmist and the people of his day the thought that God was their judge, and not whoever held sway in the land at that point, was reassuring. Judgement, in other words, was equated with justice, and to a very real extent with mercy.

After all, the distinguishing characteristics of their God and Judge were lovingkindness and mercy.

In the New Testament the usual words translated as 'judgement' or 'judging' carry a very strong message of completion—determining, deciding, separating. They certainly include legal judgement and the infliction of penalty, but they also convey the notion of what modern people call 'closure'. We are accustomed to news reports in which people bereaved perhaps through homicide or an unexplained disaster are said to find 'closure' when a guilty person is sentenced or a situation satisfactorily explained. We can certainly see the judgement of God, exercised through his Son, the Saviour of the world, as providing 'closure' in that sense. Finally, all the loose ends will be tidied up, the inexplicable mysteries of providence explained, the ways of God made clear.

So what does it mean to say, as we do in the Creed, that 'he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead'? It certainly speaks, in the language we have just used, of closure. It cannot be that the unfairness of life, the cruelty and dishonesty of some and the greed and indulgence of others will simply be passed over. That would not be closure but collusion. The God of the Bible would not simply say 'It doesn't matter' and let it pass. Before we can move on, the past and present must be judged. To a large extent, that is our responsibility. The best sort of judgement is self-judgement. Both the teaching of Jesus and of the apostles tells us that we should be slow to judge others but quick to judge ourselves (see, for example, Matthew 7:1–2; Romans 14:10). There is a school of thought which invites us to imagine what it will be like eventually to be

in the presence (in whatever sense of those words) of a God of infinite goodness, holiness and love. Would not that vision of utter purity be, in itself, an instrument of judgement? In those circumstances, would any of us plead innocence?

At the same time, biblical sources also make it clear that God, and Christ as his representative, will be the sole and ultimate judge of humankind. Biblical images of ‘the One upon the throne’—the *bema*, the Judgement Seat—are a feature of the visions in Revelation. Beside him, as he executes that final judgement, sits ‘the Lamb with the marks of slaughter upon him’, the crucified and risen Saviour, the one who ‘takes away the sin of the world’. In that one vision the whole truth is captured: absolute justice matched by absolute mercy. These are not two Persons with differing agendas, but one Person, with the Holy Spirit, in the unity of the Trinity.

We are all familiar with the childhood cry, ‘It’s not fair!’—probably one of the first phrases most children master! Humans have an inbuilt conviction that things ought to be fair, but as we grow older we learn that whatever life is, it isn’t ‘fair’. It helps me, at least, to think of the final judgement as the moment when universal, eternal *fairness* is established. To put it another way, I believe that no one after God’s judgement will be shouting ‘It’s not fair!’ I think this may lie behind the glorious celebration in the Psalms of God’s judgement:

*Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.*

*Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you. (Psalm 67:4–5)*

This judgement with fairness is not, we must be clear, a matter of people 'getting away with it'. The process of God's final judgement will remove from his creation every stain of sin and wickedness. His way of achieving this, however, is not primarily through punishment, but redemption. As a frequently overlooked verse in the Fourth Gospel expresses it, 'God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him' (John 3:17). Judgement, then, will bring, it seems, banishment to some but blessing to many, as they see the goodness of God, his 'equity', and their eyes are opened to his wonderful purposes. We may note that in the quotation from Psalm 67 the 'nations', the Gentiles, will be glad and sing for joy, because his purposes of love include them and all the 'nations upon earth'.

The last chapters of the Bible, Revelation 21 and 22, are post-judgement—the single divine act of judgement which is the general message of the Bible, and the two judgements (of those in 'the Lamb's book of life' and those judged by 'the books which are opened') in these concluding visions. They are a picture of the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, walled but with its gates permanently open, a city without anything 'unclean, abominable or false'. Heaven would not be heaven if it simply provided a new location for all that had previously marred and polluted God's perfect creation. The judgement, solemn, real, but motivated by mercy and love, has brought about the final transformation. We could say, 'heaven's morning' breaks.

If you insist on having your own way, you will get it. Hell is the enjoyment of your own way for ever. If you really want God's way with you, you will get it in heaven.

Dante Alighieri (1265–1321)

The Bible—especially the New Testament—has plenty to say about resurrection and heaven, but many Christians struggle to make sense of what it actually means in practice. David Winter's accessible book explores the biblical teaching on what happens after death and considers what difference this can make to our lives here and now. He also shows how we can present what we believe about eternity as a source of hope to our sceptical, anxious world.

David Winter is one of the UK's most popular and long-established Christian writers and broadcasters. He has written many books over the last 60 years, including At the End of the Day, Facing the Darkness and Finding the Light and Journey to Jerusalem for BRF. He also writes for New Daylight and contributed regularly to Radio 4's Thought for the Day from 1989 to 2012.



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