

Heaven

by Richard Foster

Founder & Chair of RENOVARÉ

The following article is reprinted by permission from the Renovaré publication Perspective.

*We are unceasing spiritual beings
with an eternal destiny in
God's great universe.*

Heaven is, I believe, the heart's deepest longing! First, let me remind you of our touchstone concept: "We are unceasing spiritual beings with an eternal destiny in God's great universe."

The Absolute Realities

Some day in some obscure magazine you will read that I have died. But, of course, nothing will be further from the truth. At that moment I will be more alive than ever. To be sure, my physical body that is so much a part of who I am right now will die—it will have served its purpose. But my spirit will live on...forever. This is the reality of who I am as an unceasing spiritual being. This is what is true about me. You too. Ten thousand years from now we will continue living. You better get accustomed to the fact that you cannot cease to exist. So, deal with it. And plan for it. Let's get beyond our petty one-year...five-year...ten-year plan for life and start working on our ten-thousand-year plan!

God and life in the kingdom of God are the absolute realities that we can bank on. Really. Nothing in our universe is more real, more absolute, more certain. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the signpost of our future. And the indwelling and empowering Holy Spirit is "the earnest of our inheritance" to use the phrase of St. Paul (Eph. 1:14). We have the down payment now of the life that is coming in its fullness in heaven. And even here on earth heaven has its outposts, preeminently in the presence of the living Christ in the Eucharist.

Life in the kingdom of God then begins here, now, and continues in completed form in the age to come. Hence, what we call death is, for the disciple of Jesus, merely a minor transition from this life to greater LIFE. John the Beloved writes, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Eternal life is knowing by experience the triune God, and so eternal life begins here, now. We can know God right where we are and enter into life in the kingdom of God. Here. Now. Through Jesus.

Training for Reigning

What we are engaged in here and now is a disciplined training for reigning. A time is coming when we will see his face and his name will be written on our foreheads, "And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever" (Rev. 22:4-5 italics added). With Christ as our sovereign head we will one day be reigning "forever and ever." Now, "forever and ever" is a long time. Don't you think a little training is in order for such reigning? I'm afraid that as the situation now stands I just might make a real mess of things if I were put in charge of even a very small kingdom! So you and I are now training for reigning, learning from our ever-living Teacher Jesus how this reigning business is done properly. This reigning, you see, is our destiny.

I hope you immediately recognize what a stark contrast this vision of heaven is to the other major world-view contenders. For Hinduism our destiny is to merge ourselves with the One, as a drop of water would be absorbed into the ocean. For Buddhism our destiny is to extinguish desire as you might blow out the flame of a candle. For Atheism our destiny is death; we arise out of the cosmic slime, go around once, and then die which is the end of it all. In contrast, for disciples of Jesus our destiny is reigning in the new heaven and the new earth . . . reigning in such a way that there is an ever deepening extension of individual, personal relationship of love with God and others. Forever.

The Resurrection Body

Now, this stress upon our individuality and personhood is important. We will not be unrecognizable, disembodied spirits. Nor will we go through an endless series of reincarnations which obliterate our personhood. No, there will be a personal and individual continuation of ourselves after death. This is the incarnational reality of the resurrection body. Our wise teacher Paul puts it this way:

There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another...So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15: 39-44).

This resurrection body will be recognizable and consistent with who we are here and now, just as Jesus's resurrection body was recognizable and consistent with who he was in the flesh. Listen to Paul once again:

we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. 15:51-54).

Heaven Proper

As to heaven proper my tendency is to defer to the wise biblical observation, "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9, Isa. 64:4). Personally, I am content to leave it at that. However, since many would like more I will make a few educated guesses.

- ◆ Heaven will be brimming full of interesting people and landscape and creatures of many kinds.
- ◆ Learning and working and developing all manner of skills will be part of the joy of heaven.
- ◆ "Boring" will be the domain and experience of hell, not heaven.
- ◆ "Fellowship" and "community" will be experienced realities in heaven which will take on multi-dimensional meanings and ever richer complexity.

- ◆ We will learn to receive and give love in ways unimaginable to us right now. As Jonathan Edwards put it; "They shall see every thing in God that gratifies love. They shall see in him all that love desires...God will make ineffable manifestations of his love to them. They shall see as much love in God towards them as they desire; they neither will nor can crave any more."
- ◆ The "beatific vision" will be both wonderfully approachable and all-consuming. To borrow the words of Carol Zaleski commenting on Dante's vision of paradise:

...what we have...is a complex trinitarian dance of lights, a luminous and effervescent assembly, rather than a single searing radiance.

See you in heaven!



Richard Foster

Richard J. Foster is the founder and chair of Renovare and author of six books including Celebration of Discipline, Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home, and Streams of Living Water, which effectively promote personal spiritual renewal. From his base in Denver, Colorado, where he and his wife Carolyn live, Richard travels throughout the world, speaking and teaching on the spiritual life.

Reprinted with permission from Vol. 13, No. 4 of the *RENOVARE Perspective*, © 2003 RENOVARE, 8 Inverness Dr E, Ste 102, Englewood CO 80112-5609

© 2004 C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE
8001 Braddock Road, Suite 300 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE
Discipleship of Heart and Mind

*In the legacy of C.S. Lewis,
the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can
articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ
through personal and public life.*