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Eternal Life

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Illustration by James Converse

Why are modern Christians so silent about heaven? Ministers and laymen alike seem embarrassed by the subject. Many are agnostic as to the life beyond; others deny its reality. Many more are just too busy to give the matter a serious thought. Yet every Christian creed contains something about "life everlasting."

There are several reasons for this profound silence on a once-prominent Christian doctrine. First, the concept of heaven is in the realm of the supernatural, and nothing frightens many modern Christians so much as the supernatural. They cannot conceive of any possible existence other than that experienced in this world. Everything supernatural has had to go, and little is left of their religion but a set of philosophical constructs.

Second, modern man is so secure in his air-conditioned luxury that the conventional pictures of heaven leave him unimpressed. What appeal does a mansion in glory have for a man who owns a split-level in American suburbia? Heaven seems to him like a last forlorn hope for the aged, the oppressed, the poverty-stricken, the suffering.

Third, there is a morbid fear of the "otherworldly." Religion is limited to a social gospel, and is supposed to be much more concerned about the here than the hereafter.

It is true that many descriptions of heaven leave much to be desired. A place "where congregations ne'er break up" has questionable appeal to the modern young person. An unending series of choir rehearsals is equally uncon-

vincing. An unlimited sensuous existence would be worse than utter extinction.

Is there nothing on which the intelligent person who is not making a failure of this life can pin his hope? Or does he no longer need the Christian hope? It is true that the Bible has chosen to tell us very little about the details of future life, and much of what it says is couched in symbols. For what, then, can we hope as we look beyond the resurrection day, foretold so often in the Scriptures?

The first and greatest blessing of eternity will be the realization of love. Love is the greatest incentive to man for desiring eternal life, and it is the purest of all incentives. True love never willingly gives up the object of its affections. A million years would not lessen the love of a mother for her child. As Ellen G. White once wrote, "The loves and sympathies which God Himself has planted in the soul shall there find truest and sweetest exercise."

The second great attraction will be in the creative realm. The Old Testament describes the ideal state in the words, "They shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them." Man is endowed with a desire to accomplish. He finds his greatest satisfaction—next to love—in doing. Whether the result of his prowess be a piece of pottery or a jet airplane, man thrills in that which his mind conceives and his hand makes. It would be folly to try to predict the activities of eternity; but the possibilities of the universe as we know it would

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indicate that there will be no end of challenge to man's creativeness. The same commentator has said, "Every faculty will be developed, every capacity increased. The acquirement of knowledge will not weary the mind or exhaust the energies. There the grandest enterprises may be carried forward, the loftiest aspirations reached, the highest ambitions realized; and still there will arise new heights to surmount, new wonders to admire, new truths to comprehend, fresh objects to call forth the powers of mind and soul and body."

One of the great, classic arguments for a life hereafter is the contention that this life leaves life unfinished. Love and accomplishment are alike interrupted by death.

"The chisel falls from the sculptor's hand when the statue is but half finished. Death lays its hand on the artist's shoulder when the masterpiece is only well begun. The foundations of the temple are scarcely completed when the architect lays down his blueprints. The saint with inspired eyes sees towering above him the mountain peaks of moral and spiritual perfection and has scarce begun to climb when weariness lays hold of him and he falls on sleep. Man must have more time. The world is incomplete. Everything here is unfinished."—John Sutherland Bonnell, *Heaven and Hell*, Abingdon, 1956, page 16.

Only feebly are we able to exercise the creative gift here. Human frailty inhibits us; life's responsibilities preempt our time; shortage of time curtails our activity. But these shackles will be broken in the hereafter, and man will be permitted to exercise to the fullest extent the creative instinct to which God referred when He said that He created man in His own image.

Man will not only love and work—he will also worship. The book of Revelation gives us a picture of worship in heaven. In the rich symbolism of the text, God is pictured on a jasper throne, surrounded by a rainbow. Heavenly beings of various ranks are about Him, singing His praises. Christ is presented under the symbol of a slain lamb. Finally there comes into focus "a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, [standing] before the throne, and before the Lamb." Who are these worshipers? "These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple: and He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them." Revelation 7:9, 14, 15. The worship of that day will not become routine or monotonous, because it will result from an experience that will remain always new and thrilling.

But isn't it a bit below the dignity of the Christian to look forward to heaven for reward? Should not the Christian serve God because it is right to do so, and not for what he can get out of it? A New Testament incident throws some light on this question.

The story of the rich young ruler is told in Matthew 19, with its sad sequel that he "went away sorrowful." After the young man had gone, Peter said to Jesus, "Behold, *we* have forsaken all, and followed Thee; what shall *we* have therefore?" Matthew 19:27. Was this not a poor question for Peter to ask? Did not Jesus rebuke him for it? No. The Master said, "Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of His glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life." Verses 28, 29.

The Lord knew that Peter needed encouragement, and He also understands our needs. While He doesn't want us to work merely for reward, He does not hesitate to remind us that "eternal life" is at the end of the road.

Selfishness creeps upon us when we anticipate heaven merely for ourselves and our own. When a man longs for heaven when he is sick, or tired, or defeated, but forgets about it when things are going well, he reveals selfishness. I should prize heaven, not just because it will provide a refuge for me, but because it will be the solution to the problems of *all* of God's children. Any person who thinks for a moment of the misery and heartache in the world will forget himself and say, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

On the other hand, there *is* a danger of an unwholesome otherworldly attitude. As long as this world remains, and human need continues, service is more important than reward. If you were given the opportunity today of leaving your responsibilities, your family, and your community, and going directly to heaven, you probably would rightly decline the invitation. You wouldn't enjoy heaven if you knew you were needed on earth. So it is God's plan that all wait together until the resurrection. Then all will be made perfect together.

The whole question of future reward should be removed from the realm of the visionary and emotional. The believer in Christ must accept His promise of a future life. Such a future deserves our serious and happy anticipation. While we know very little about the future, we can assume that the best things of this life will be better then; and the unpleasant things of this world will be absent. We are not justified in completely dematerializing the future; neither can we safely assume that the physical aspects of the future will be just like the present. Paul speaks of a "spiritual body," but he does not explain what he means by his reference.

At the end of the history of this world, when Jesus comes, the redeemed of all ages will begin their new life. This will be one of the great events in the history of the universe; and this event is one in which all of us, through the grace of God, may participate. [END]

LIFE

Will It Be Worth Living?
by NORVAL F. PEASE