

No one knows what life after death will be like, or heaven, or hell or purgatory. But we can gain an idea through Scripture, Catholic teaching and meditation.

Life After Life: What Do We Do for an Encore?

by William J. O'Malley, S.J.

When I was first ordained, I had to give a homily on the Ascension. I wanted to say something really new, so I sat down and meditated.

My imagination got me so realistically into that scene I felt the dust between my toes and smelled the other apostles' sweat. Jesus took us up a hill, said goodbye, and began to rise—about 50 feet in the air (where artists capture it). Nothing new there. So something impelled me to let him keep going—up, up, like a rocket in slow gear.

At that point, the left lobe of my brain (where I stored my reasoning equipment and knowledge of science) began asking unsettling questions of my right lobe (where I stored my imagining tools and knowledge of religion).

Did Jesus go through the Van Allen Belt? Was he radioactive? Did he sail through the endless cold of space till he finally came to the thinnest membrane between the universe and heaven and go through (boop!) like through a self-sealing tire? And there he was in this great golden city—like the ogre's castle atop the beanstalk? Beyond time and space, where do they mine all that gold? (Not to mention all the coal to keep the hell fires burning.) And if Jesus went "up" to heaven from Jerusalem, an Australian would go "up" in exactly the opposite direction. And never the twain shall meet. Back to the drawing board.

What Do We Know?

We know so much more about the cosmos than the scripture writers. We know now the earth isn't really an island floating on the waters, covered by the great crystal bowl of firmament, beyond which lies heaven. We know that, if God pre-existed the universe of time and space, God dwells in a dimension of reality where everything temporal and physical has no meaning or purpose. God has no genitals and thus is not male. Angels don't need wings to get about. Devils don't sport tails and use pitchforks.

But how do we deal with realities like heaven, hell, purgatory and God himself when the only tools we have are our space- and time-bound experiences?

Maybe Hindus and Buddhists have the right idea. In their view, the Ultimate Reality does exist, but in such an unimaginably different way from our existence we can say nothing true about "It" or Its environs. Anything we say about such a Being is so far from the actuality as to be closer to a lie than to the truth. You can't even legitimately use the word "is" about such a Being in any remote sense like the way we use it about anything else we know.

Still, God gave us complex intelligence for a purpose: to try to understand things, even if our approximations are "straw," as Aquinas reputedly said, compared to the Reality. That's why God made us symbol-spinners, metaphor-makers, trying to make realities we can't actually see: tiny solar-systems for atoms, a wedding ring for commitment, a parchment for intellectual achievement (or endurance). None of the symbols is the reality (thus Jews and

Muslims forbid them), nor even in the remotest sense much like the reality. But they're a helpful placebo for the inquiring mind. And if Jesus used analogies to help explain his message, we're in good company when we try them, too. They help us understand a bit better something we don't really understand in terms of things we do. Symbols are (to use a metaphor) like the Ace bandages the Invisible Man wrapped around himself to be seen. Like trying to "explain" color to a blind person. "Red is like the burning sensation of sucking a hot cinnamon jawbreaker." That's not "it," but better than nothing at all.

The Hebrew Scriptures try that in the Book of Daniel (7:9-14), about as close as they get to a "picture" of God, clad in snow-white clothes on a fiery throne, sitting upon the clouds of heaven. And the whole Book of Revelation pictures heaven as "the New Jerusalem," the most opulent city the author could conceive. On the very rare occasions hell arises, the analogy is to Gehenna, where Jerusalem burned its trash. Again and again, Jesus used metaphor to describe the Kingdom of Heaven as a wedding banquet where (presumably) no one has too much to eat or drink, the conversations are never dull, and everybody dances like Fred and Ginger.

Literary Afterlife

Unfortunately, because we still carry a reptilian brain stem, hell is much more interesting than heaven (to say nothing of its usefulness to preachers to panic us to piety). But we owe our "understanding" of hell far more to the imagination (and prejudices) of Dante and the fervor of Irish Jansenist preachers than to the meager evidence of the scriptures. The atheist Jean-Paul Sartre has, for me, a far better re-imagining of hell than Dante: three people who detest one another forced to share a hotel room for all eternity, without the possibility of murder or suicide. I can think of at least 20 people I'd do just about anything required to avoid sharing that fate.

The best re-imagining of the afterlife I know is C. S. Lewis's series of vignettes called *The Great Divorce*. It begins in a Grey Town where everything is grim and everyone surly. But at any time you can take a bus that lands in a beautiful meadow, a kind of staging-area for heaven, up in the beautiful mountains. Each one is greeted by a shining Solid One, someone from their past, who tries to coax them to jettison their self-absorption, be utterly honest, stop telling lies to themselves about themselves—and believing them, and yield center-stage to the only One who deserves it: God. Some do, and for them their sojourn in the Grey Town has been purgatory. Others cling to their narcissism, get back on the bus and return. For them, the Grey Town is hell. Not the fascinating sadistic punishments of Dante, just plain boredom, mean-spiritedness, frustration. But, as Milton says, "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven."

Even if the scriptures say nothing much (that I can find) about purgatory, I think plain common sense dictates there must be such a "place." There must be some purgation (not fire, but like the slow anguish of self-discovery in a psychiatrist's office) for those who die incapable of joy. People who have spent lives insulated from others, self-protective and self-delusive, hearts as hard and pitted as the seeds of peaches. The cranks, the faint-hearted too afraid of being hurt to love, those who buried their thousand talents rather than risk losing them. How disoriented would they be in heaven? Like Laplanders suddenly transported to the Sahara. And common sense also impels me to believe there must be a hell, for those who simply don't want to be with anyone more important than themselves. If heaven were a place of light and music and laughter, you could set them square in the middle of it, and they'd be wretched. "Stop those damn harps!" And the saved would be so loving they would drive the unworthy batty. "Stop hugging me!" Even in heaven, they'd be in hell.

Ah, But What of Heaven?

My mom used to say, "Billy, all I want to do is catch hold of the edge of heaven with my fingernails." After the life she led, if that's all Mom got, if she didn't get first-class accommodations, I'm not too sure I want to go there. An alcoholic old Jesuit who had failed some godawful exam back in the seminary and was thus allowed only a kind of second-class kind-of final vows said to me once, weeping, "Father, to think after I've tried so hard all my life, I'll have a lower place in heaven than the fully-professed." Again, if rule makers have the keys of the kingdom, I suspect heaven is a rather sparsely populated and sterile state of being.

In Alice Sebold's wonderful novel *The Lovely Bones*, the narrator tells her story from heaven where, if she chooses to frolic in the rain, it rains; if she wants to cavort in the fields, the sun radiates warmth. But she seems to have an "inordinate" preoccupation with what's still going on back at home and the capture of her murderer. In Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, the dead sit placidly in straight-backed chairs in the cemetery, gradually letting go of the world, as the people they love let go of them. Perhaps that's true, that the recently dead hover around trying to interfere, but I hope that's not the way it is.

Whatever it is, I find it hard to accept that heaven is static, that we just sit there with the fussy budgets fine-tuning the triangle of the Beatific Vision. God has so conditioned us to growth, to evolution, to looking for something better, that I have a notion (a hope) heaven will be a place of learning more and more. I'd really like to be able to do all the things I "never had time for" here, like understanding classical music. I'd like to learn patience and shed myself of workaholicism in order to just sit and fish. (Perhaps that would be purgatory.) I'd really like to talk to God (or some trustworthy assistant) about a lot of mysteries I've spent a lifetime trying, vainly, to erode, like why God created a world in which innocents can suffer, why the Holy Spirit allowed the Church to be so manifestly imperfect, why my mother took eight years to die. And both my Teacher and I will have no impatient rush to closure in unraveling the Truth.

Ignorantly, I used to think the Eastern understandings of the eternal were soul-suicidal, that the purpose of life, to them, was to eliminate the self so totally that it would be ready to be absorbed into the Oversoul. Then I read a sentence that shocked me. In achieving Nirvana, it said, the droplet is not absorbed in the All; the droplet absorbs the All! That's getting closer to less unsatisfying.

Look to the Light

I believe the nearest approximation we can get to the Ultimate, to heaven, has something to do with light. Science says no reality can be faster than light. But science delights in playing "what if." What if there were a Reality faster than light? It would be so hyper-energized, it would be at rest. Like God. So incredibly fast, it would be everywhere at once. Like God. And if you break open the tiniest kernel of matter, what do scientists say you will find? Non-extended energy, like God. When I had my most intense encounter with God, I could describe it only as "like drowning in light." So many who return from near-death experiences describe it as seeing some trusted figure incandescent with light.

Perhaps the dead are something like neutrinos, particles with no discernible mass or electrical charge that whiz all around us, at every moment. They pass through the whole earth without being slowed down. (This is hard science now.) If neutrinos were intelligent and caring and full of joy, perhaps they may be like the dead, zipping around for the sheer zest of it, like children. And if they now live in a dimension unchecked by time and space, where God dwells,

they can be anywhere they choose—closer to us now even than they were in this life!

All this is, of course, supposition—imagination working on the facts that heaven, hell, and purgatory exist. But if Dante and Lewis and Sartre can do it, why can't you and I?

But whatever heaven turns out to be, it sure isn't going to be some majestic panoply planned by liturgists or sitting on clouds twanging harps. Whatever gives the best part of you joy, that's what it'll be. If you love babies, you can take care of all the new ones who arrive. If you love to sing and dance, do it and never drop. But what about me? My great joy is to tempt people to really live. But that'll be all taken care of. Maybe I'll just fish, and dream up questions to ask God, like why do we have an appendix, and has there ever been an unkind librarian, and is there a planet somewhere where unicorns gambol in the sun? Or be a purgatory teacher. I'm equipped.

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