

Foreword by Bryan Chapell

WHAT HAPPENS
AFTER I DIE?



MICHAEL ALLEN ROGERS

“Michael Rogers has given the church a fascinating study of the Christian hope of heaven. With pastoral skill, careful interpretation, and logical force, the ultimate destinies of the soul are portrayed. This engaging book will bless laymen and clergy alike. Highly recommended!”

Peter A. Lillback, President, Westminster Theological Seminary

“What happens after I die? Who has not asked that question? And very obviously believers want to know what the Bible says. Michael Rogers in this marvelous book has provided a thorough yet readable treatment of Scripture focused upon the triumph of Christ over sin and death. It is convicting and encouraging, challenging yet attractive in handling what the Scriptures say concerning the matters of eternity. It compiles and arranges what the Bible affirms and reveals yet avoids exotic speculation where the Bible is silent. This book is at one and the same time a great read and a great resource.”

Harry L. Reeder, Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

“Death is the great modern taboo, the thing which we all fear more than anything else and yet which is rarely mentioned, even in Christian circles. It is thus useful to have available a helpful book on the topic. Michael Rogers here addresses the issue head on with theological care and pastoral concern. This is a thoughtful and sensitive exploration of questions surrounding the afterlife and will repay the time spent reading it. Highly recommended.”

Carl R. Trueman, Paul Woolley Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Though death, along with taxes, is for certain, surprisingly little has been written on the subject. And most of what is out there may actually be counterproductive. This book stands in the gap. Filled to the brim with keen biblical insight, sound theological engagement, and warm pastoral care, this book will be your first—and maybe only—stop for guidance on any and all issues related to death. Speaking personally, my family and I have been richly nourished by the pastoral ministry of Michael Rogers for fifteen years. I am delighted to see that wider audiences may now experience his edifying teaching.”

Stephen J. Nichols, Research Professor of Christianity and Culture, Lancaster Bible College

“After nearly forty years of fruitful pastoral ministry you would expect Michael Rogers to be wise in guiding believers through the challenging question, what’s next after this life? In *What Happens After I Die?* those expectations are exceeded. These pages reflect a depth of biblical reflection and practical help through which Dr. Rogers now extends his thoughtful understanding of Scripture to all who will read. What does the Bible say about heaven and hell? How will this world end? How can I be ready? These and many other questions are addressed with skill and Christ-centered hope. This is not dry eschatology; it is biblical truth that both challenges and encourages, enlightens and engages.”

Timothy Witmer, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary; author, *The Shepherd Leader* and *The Shepherd Leader at Home*

“Is it pie in the sky when you die? Or is it seventy virgins? Or both? Or neither? Michael Rogers does an outstanding job of leading a search of the Scriptures to see what is true about the future destiny of God’s children—and of everyone else. This book will shape your prayers and your life so that both are more ‘conformed to the image of his Son.’ I commend it highly.”

Samuel Logan, International Director, The World Reformed Fellowship

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FOREWORD

THE QUESTION NEVER GOES AWAY: What happens after I die? One of the most poignant times I have been asked this question was after the funeral of a young girl, killed in a farming accident. She had only done what many of us raised on farms have delighted to do—ridden the fender of a tractor while her father cultivated a field. For many farming families, this is a way that kids do what “big people” do, learn farming, and spend time with Dad—all at the same time. The family outing turned to tragedy when the tractor hit a hidden ditch and the girl was thrown.

As she fell, her father turned to catch her, but she was already beyond his grasp. Instead, her eyes met his, and she spoke one word: “Daddy.” He later said that she did not scream his name in panic or desperation. Instead, she seemed calm and spoke his name only as if saying a loving goodbye. At one level, his daughter’s lack of fear comforted the father. He knew his daughter to be a dear Christian, and he believed that, even in the moment of death, her faith had spared her the terrors of the accident. At another level, the daughter’s expression of love for her father haunted him.

In her dying, the young girl had reached out to comfort her father. There was no hint of blame or abandonment. The gesture was a reflection not only of faith, but also of the closeness of the family. And now the father felt keenly the weight of his daughter’s enduring some measure of eternity without her parents. He asked me, “Won’t she be lonely without her mother and me?”

The father believed that he and his wife would eventually join their daughter in heaven, after their deaths. But he struggled with the idea of their child enduring what would likely be decades without her immediate family. He was simply being a caring father in asking what may have seemed like a question inappropriate for the polite and careful conversations that accompany funerals. As a parent, he could not fathom how his child could navigate the unfamiliar streets of heaven or rest “in the arms of Jesus” without her mommy and daddy there.

The simple question that came from such fatherly concern actually represents a host of questions that stretch thought and imagination as we

try to grasp profound truths of our faith. The question about a daughter's loneliness in heaven implicitly is also a question about: (1) the nature of our existence prior to and after Christ's return; (2) the timing and effects of our reunion with loved ones; (3) the nature of our relationship with God and others for eternity; (4) the spiritual status, mental state, and maturity level in heaven of a person who dies as a child on earth; (5) the status of the body (before and after Christ's return) of one who has died, especially if the death is disfiguring; (6) the nature of time in eternity, and whether decades on earth are relevant to a heavenly clock; (7) how answers to all of these questions should affect our lives now; and many more related questions.

The answers to some of these questions will readily come to the minds of biblically informed believers; the answers to others have perplexed theologians for centuries; and the answers to a few will come only when Jesus returns to answer them. The difficulty of some of these questions, however, should not make us hesitate to search Scripture to answer those that we can. The Bible addresses the most pressing questions we should have about what happens after we die in order to give us a strong and precious hope, enabling us to face life's greatest challenges and griefs.

The Bible clearly tells us that we will meet again with loved ones who have died in Jesus. We know that after death, we will be with the Lord forever. We know that when we are with Jesus, grief and pain will vanish forever. We know that our spirit will finally be united with an incorruptible body. We know that sin will touch and tempt us no more. We know that evil will be punished and righteousness will be vindicated. We know that Christ's righteousness will be ours. We know that everlasting joy will be ours. We know that our world will ultimately be made new and better. We know that the afflictions we face now will fade in comparison to the glory that will be revealed in us. We know that when our children die, they are safe in the arms of Jesus.

In order to receive the full comfort and courage of these truths, while also not making assertions that would create false hopes, we need to know what Scripture promises and how those promises apply to our lives. *What Happens After I Die?* does precisely this. In these pages we have the double blessing of clear articulation of biblical truth *and* deep reflection based upon decades of pastoral experience. Dr. Michael Rogers brings us both the sound reflection of a mind that has studied the Scriptures for decades

and also insightful applications from a heart made tender by pastoring people through generations.

As a consequence of his pastoral experience, Dr. Rogers presses the biblical truth precisely to the issues that are most likely to affect our lives and challenge our hearts. His conclusions are based on rigorous and faithful exposition of Scripture. When he offers an occasional speculation in the light of mysteries Scripture does not fully unravel, he honestly identifies the questions that remain, while still showing how his tentative conclusions are consistent with what Scripture does disclose.

The importance of this book must be measured against the reader's assessment of the accuracy of the sentence that begins this foreword: "The question never goes away: What happens after I die?" More than three decades of pastoral experience confirm the truth of that sentence for me. A father's question about the possible loneliness of his child in heaven has been preceded and followed by hundreds of a similar nature: "Will Dad recognize us when we get to heaven, though we will be many years older than we were when he died?" "When we are in heaven, will my sister still blame me for not coming to her wedding?" "Will my mother finally be able to support my choice of spouse, after we all die?" "Will Jesus forgive the sins that I have forgotten to repent of, after I die?" "Will my father regain his right mind in heaven?" "Will I have to forgive the man who killed my daughter, if God lets him into heaven?" "Will our baby, who died in infancy, be in heaven, and will she love her parents?"

Such questions can perplex us, worry us, and even deprive us of the joy of the gospel, if we don't know how the Bible addresses them, comforts us, and gives us hope beyond the challenges of this life. Thus, as a faithful pastor, Dr. Rogers is careful to take us to the Scriptures to answer these and many more questions in order that each of us may say, "I can live fully and joyfully now because I know what will happen after I die."

Bryan Chapell

PREFACE

“*NOW I LAY ME DOWN* to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” In early childhood that prayer formed both a mantra and a creed; it was the total sum of Christianity I knew. When you think about it, the systematic theology packed into those two sentences is very comprehensive. It is a petition for God’s providential care offered in conscious acknowledgment of one’s felt mortality, humbling the petitioner and teaching a sense of God’s sovereignty over human beings he has made. Here is a great spiritual foundation to build upon. Would that all prayers were as eloquent.

My mother must have taught me the prayer, though I have no remembrance of that. We were an unchurched family until I was six. Nevertheless, this bedtime petition was a fixed ritual well before I began Sunday school attendance as a first grader. The prayer was my entire religious life, repeated as a reflex when the bedroom light was switched off; I recited it with all the discipline of a cloistered monk at Evensong. Looking back, I believe a subliminal element of fear motivated me. That one word, *die*, was conspicuous in this liturgy, like a word wrapped in barbed wire. Could it be that I might not wake to see tomorrow? I was ten before death affected my life, when a boy from my school died in a fire. But the merest possibility of life cut short sobered me. I figured adults who composed prayers probably knew things I did not, so I prayed with fervor about premature death, however remote the chance. Such was my talisman raised against unknown darkness.

People everywhere are hungry to know what the Bible teaches about death and realities beyond. A relative void of sound, Scripture-based preaching on the subject is now filled by a glut of personal experience testimonials, proclaiming near-death visionary experiences. A recent best-seller apparently is based on a preschool-age child who stuns his family with specific facts reported about dead relatives—knowledge he supposedly acquired via a brief trip to the edge of heaven and back. Nothing I can say will keep millions from pursuing eternity based on subjective, mystical accounts. Humanly speaking, I offer no comparable fireworks,

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only the divine Word of God as it speaks on these subjects—the one inerrant sourcebook of truth revealed from the mind of God by his Spirit. My entire authority as a death spokesman resides in the Bible. If I stray from it, by all means doubt what I say.

Beginning in fall 2009 and culminating Easter Sunday 2010, I preached twenty-six sermons on death and the afterlife for the congregation of Westminster Presbyterian Church (PCA) of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Sermon CDs purchased and responses to our radio broadcast indicated I had touched a nerve of interest. I serve a congregation of people who love the unvarnished truth of God preached. My predecessor told me after he retired that what he missed most about worship at Westminster Church was “the quiet rustle of Bible pages” as he spoke—hundreds of folk looked up each reference cited. This splendid Berean congregation prodded me to publish the sermon series. I am deeply grateful to them for prayerful support of my weekly pulpit ministry. Likewise, I should thank members of Valley Presbyterian Church in Lutherville, Maryland, where earlier messages on this material were heard by God’s flock in the 1980s.

The order of the material has been revised here from the preaching series, and everything was rewritten and expanded. I first deal with the origin of death as the Bible describes its source and its tyranny. Then we delve into the horrible subject of an unbeliever’s fate without Christ—termed the “default destination.” Only after probing hell will we explore the shining prospect of heaven. As we do, keep in mind that heaven has, in a manner of speaking, two stages: the immediate state of the believer after death as a soul perfected in righteousness and the ultimate event of receiving a resurrection body, climaxing at the final coming of Christ on the historic “Day of the Lord.” One chapter, “Is My Child in Heaven?” was at first two sermons, but is now merged into one chapter. Despite its considerably greater length than the other chapters, I felt it had to be written as a unified argument.

Preachers generally find it hard to translate pulpit words into written prose for publication. It is somewhat like reducing a movie made in three dimensions back to just two. Sermons that may have been effective when spoken can seem bland in print. George Whitefield complained once that he would accede to a request to publish his sermons if someone could figure out “how to get the thunder and lightning on the printed page.” My oral style remains intact, since I seek a conversation with you as a reader. I am

quite aware of an autobiographical element in these pages, which I sought to restrain but not eliminate. I hoped readers might journey through my own emerging discoveries as a Christian pilgrim learning about death and life eternal, as I've matured from boy, to pastor, to senior citizen.

My audience is the man, woman, or young person in the pew, ordinary folks who seek biblical answers about their future. This book is a layman's survey of a vast landscape. Thus the academic community will most likely dismiss this volume as simplistic. Every subject I undertake is far larger than what I have covered. Whole books have been written about each chapter topic, and I am frustrated by all the side alleys and interesting details I had to neglect. More detailed discussions would be required at many points if I had been writing for scholars.

For those who do seek a more comprehensive, yet plainly written expansion of these subjects, I heartily recommend *The Promise of the Future* by Cornelis P. Venema.¹ Venema's work is superb—thoroughly biblical and balanced. He also deals with competing millennial views and other areas of general eschatology, which I have studiously avoided in my narrower focus upon the experience of the individual at death and beyond. (If you must know my millennial stance before we embark, it is amillennial, the same as Venema and many of the sources I have cited. I look to the lordship of Christ active today, even before he returns to history, and I view the redeemed people of Israel and today's church as one covenant people of God.) Another fine guide written at the layman's level is *Biblical Teaching on the Doctrines of Heaven and Hell* by Edward Donnelley. Anthony Hoekema's *The Bible and the Future* has been a trusted guide for me since the day it was published.²

My hope is that the transformational gospel of Christ crucified and risen will be repeated often within these pages. Every sermon I preach endeavors to present at least the kernel of the gospel of God's magnificent grace in Christ Jesus, as do these chapters. Those who do not already confess him as Lord can certainly read this volume with some level of understanding, but I pray that in doing so, they will realize that apart from trusting in Christ as Lord, their only prospect beyond the hour of their death is catastrophic. But with Christ, hope for the future becomes stunning beyond all description.

When I finished the manuscript, I was surprised to realize how often I had quoted various works of C. S. Lewis. He is, of course, one of

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Christianity's eloquent defenders, but he disclaimed being a theologian or Bible scholar. Imagination was his forte, and eternity was never far from his gaze. Colorful imagery makes Lewis's exploration of issues touching heaven, hell, and death unforgettable and usually spot-on within biblical parameters.

I am indebted to Dr. Bryan Chapell for his eloquent foreword. He graciously completed this just as he was transitioning from nearly two decades of service as president of Covenant Theological Seminary, to serve as chancellor. My ministry colleague and friend, Dr. John S. Light, was an ever-present theological sounding board. Dr. Stephen J. Nichols heard this material preached and gave me unique aid in early stages of the move toward publication.

Lastly, I speak with profound gratitude to my wife, Carol, to whom this volume is dedicated. Beloved wife: awesome death now wields only one glittering dagger that gives me real pause—a severe yet temporary separation from you.

DEATH'S POWER DESTROYED



THERE IS A PECULIAR SECRET you would have to learn if you sought to know me well. It sounds absurd, but I'll just say it and you can think whatever you want—I once *died*. It was 1957, and I was an eight-year old boy. I solemnly assure you this is true. My death occurred more than a half century ago, and that event has made all the difference in how I live my present life. It also began my Christian outlook upon a vast heavenly existence I have yet to experience.

No, I am not about to reveal a so-called near-death experience following a car accident in which I floated above my body and saw dazzling angels beckoning. That kind of thing is the complete antithesis of what this book is about. If I had experienced that, I would claim no authority for it. Instead, I claim the identical experience Paul spoke about in Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” The day I put my entire trust in Jesus as Lord, the gospel of grace says my heavenly Father saw me as though I had actually died with Christ on his cross, and all my sin was covered in the perfection of Jesus, my substitute. So in June 1957, just after my eighth birthday in earth years, I died and was reborn into a new standing with my ever-living Savior, who makes all the difference for me, in time and eternity.

AFTER A FIRST DEATH, NO SECOND

The really fearsome aspect of death is the spiritual judgment which, if one is left unchanged, will render any person a castaway from God's presence. The Bible calls this the “second death”; it is also called spiritual “perish-

ing” of the soul that awaits unbelievers after their body has died. The terminology comes from Revelation 20:6: “Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power.” The first spiritual death and your first resurrection are part and parcel of the new birth of trusting Jesus as Lord, also called regeneration. Once this new life takes root, the second death is cancelled. After that, your physical death amounts to a mere change in forwarding address. Your soul goes right on living in union with Christ, and your body anticipates ultimate resurrection. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17).

You cannot trust appearances registered by your eyes as you study our present material society. A mere visual evaluation tells you death is firmly in charge over all earth’s people. In our last chapter, we observed that Romans 5:14 told us that “death reigned.” Every appearance of present human society tells you that death truly is the reigning power. News reports describe car wrecks, plane crashes, warfare, murder, acts of terrorism, and senseless school shootings. One industry that seems entirely recession-proof during a bad economy, with worldwide demand for its services undiminished, is the funeral business. Based only on visible appearances, we might ask, if the cross of Jesus was a conquest of sin and death, why are we still subjected to satanic powers that were defeated and put under Jesus’s feet?

The writer of Hebrews was concerned about this problem in Hebrews 2:8. He wrote, “Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.” Is this doubletalk? Does Christ actually *reign* right now over Satan’s rival power, or not? It appears that death is on the throne. Fear of death brazenly dominates millions, and the unbeliever has good reason to continue being terrified of a spiritual second death that will seize him beyond this lifetime.

There is an unseen dimension we will view only when it is emblazoned on the skies at Christ’s great return. The Christian who is under God’s mercy in Christ learns once and for all that there is no reason to fear death, because its worst threat already fell upon Jesus. The cross and resurrection smashed the tyranny of death for believers. Christ sacrificed himself for our sin and was raised in Easter triumph. Therefore, for every Christian the awful devastation of spiritual death has itself already died.

JESUS, BORN TO ENCOUNTER DEATH

Death's shadow lay deep upon mankind before Jesus came. People even wondered if God comprehended their great dread of the grave. And if he knew, did he *care*? The Greeks invented an array of mythical gods and goddesses. A common characteristic of these fictional deities was an elitist attitude of *apatheia*. As the word sounds, these imaginary divine beings were apathetic to human suffering—living in a realm set apart from us and not even pretending to care about mortal problems. The Greeks saw it as a virtue that their gods never condescended to be soiled by our woes. These superior beings would not consider letting the soles of their feet touch sordid human affairs. “Incarnation” would have been unthinkable to Greek gods and goddesses. Not so for the one true God of the Bible, who both cares about man's death-dilemma and acted in amazing power to reverse the consequences. The second person of the Godhead condescended to be born as a human baby, having a direct encounter with human death as his foremost goal in his incarnation.

Early Christian scholars sought Scripture's balanced understanding of the incarnational wonder of Christ as perfect union of God and man. Some explained the mystery by a heresy we call Docetism—a notion that Christ was like a phantom, a pure Spirit who only *appeared* man-like. This made the incarnation into divine play-acting. Jesus looked “as if” he were hungry, bleeding, or groaning in pain, but we knew he could not really be, since such low human characteristics would demean God. The docetic idea is unbiblical; Greek philosophy was in the driver's seat, not Scripture. Nowhere do we read of Jesus the apparition. Instead, the purpose of God becoming man in Christ was to confront in flesh and blood the most horrible moment of the human condition: a gory and painful death. Worse still, his death would be by official execution, promoted by the leadership of Israel, God's own people.

Jesus the eternal Son took upon himself a body capable of dying. Being fully God and man, he moved unswervingly toward the cross as the pivotal event in human history. All four gospels make it clear that Jesus was attuned to a private destiny only he understood at the time. Disciples called him to go off in this direction today or to take up their agenda tomorrow, but Jesus obeyed his inner compass, fixed upon a distant horizon where a cross made of Roman lumber was as good as built

on the hill of Golgotha from before time began. Jesus lived out what the prophet wrote: “Therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame” (Isa. 50:7). In John 10:18 Jesus declared: “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.” Jesus always knew he was born to die. Nothing could deter him from fulfilling a historic appointment.

Christians learn that the eternal condemnation of death we deserve, we do not receive, and the salvation we receive in Christ, we do not deserve. Hebrews 2:9 declares: “By the grace of God [Christ] might taste death for everyone.” The verb reporting Jesus “might taste death” was not intended to minimize his full immersion in it. Tasting sometimes indicates only an experimental sampling of food on the end of your tongue without ingesting its bitter poison. However, in this Hebrews 2:9 usage, it means a full-fledged experience. Jesus plunged into death; he was slow-roasted in the curse of death, although he had no sin. To encounter death head-on was the prime reason God’s Son was born in flesh.

CHRIST THE VICTOR IN A DEATH DUEL

The doctrine of Jesus’s atonement has many sides to it, like a huge diamond capable of being viewed by its various individual facets. Often we speak of the atonement of the cross in terms of “satisfaction” for various divine requirements of justice. Or we may use the Bible’s language about “ransom” from the slavery of sin. We might discuss Christ’s “redemption” that buys back what was lost. And we should explore biblical pictures of Jesus as the substitutionary, once-for-all “sacrifice” who appeased the Father’s wrath, in our place. Each image correctly shows an aspect of our justification with God. All are accurate, scriptural concepts describing the achievement of the cross, and these meanings overlap harmoniously.

But one facet of the atonement not so often discussed is the military conquest Jesus achieved. Some theologians name this snapshot of the atonement, Christ the Victor. The image is as true a portrayal of the cross as the others, but with special emphasis on how the death of Christ conclusively crushed the head of Satan, fulfilling Genesis 3:15. He met Satan as if two great champions squared off in combat.

Granted, very little seen in the historic drama at Calvary appeared as if Jesus were a warrior engaged in combat; and far less gave any evi-

dence that he won! He was spread-eagled on a cross, hands and feet nailed in a fixed position. He was humanly powerless through hours of a cruel execution. Death was allowed to seize God-in-flesh, but not to hold him permanently. Acts 2:24 declares: "It was not possible for him to be held by [death]." Jesus, who to all appearances seemed a victim, really was conqueror, as his resurrection proved. The combat that mattered was spiritual, and it took place entirely out of our sight, in heavenly realms and hell's deepest dungeons. His victory in that realm was announced on the cross by the words "It is finished" (John 19:30). The conquest finally became visible to chosen resurrection witnesses. One fine Easter hymn trumpets an end-of-battle theme: "The strife is o'er, the battle won. The victory of life is won. The song of triumph has begun—Hallelujah!"

The Bible claims that the death of Jesus was God's masterstroke of military strategy. Jesus was a Trojan horse, rolled into Satan's walled stronghold, who then overthrew the eternal condemnation of death from within the fortress, on behalf of all who trust in him. It seemed a most unlikely battle plan, but by the wisdom of God it was a brilliant tactic.

Hebrews 2:10 calls Jesus the "founder" of our salvation. That Greek noun can also mean "champion." Perhaps this illustration is not worthy of sublime subject matter, but I think about a Sylvester Stallone *Rambo* movie—the one in which he is dropped into the jungle of Vietnam, armed only with a knife and his bow and arrows, on an errand to singlehandedly destroy a Vietcong prisoner of war camp. Rambo freed several emaciated, hopeless American POWs from bamboo cages, men who thought they had been forgotten by their country. Winning a single-handed victory against great opposition, Rambo led these victims to freedom.

Jesus announced in Luke 11:21–22: "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil." That was a decisive prediction of the cross. Satan was the powerful king in a fortified palace, and he guarded priceless stolen treasure—the souls of men and women bound to languish in his dungeons. Unlike Rambo, Jesus Christ did not enter death's main stronghold in superhero style, spraying bullets or hand grenades in all directions. He did it by *dying*—since that was the only way a man could penetrate that castle. He emerged on the other side alive and carried off the barred gates of death like a second Samson stealing the city gates of Gaza in the night (Judg.16:3).

At the cross, an apparent victim won a victory in which all believers share. Colossians 2:15 declares that Christ “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them.” Thus we read in Hebrews 2:14 that Christ in his death also “destroy[ed] the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.” Jesus was the stronger man who, after entering the death domain, forever after prevents his own people from being held there. Now as believers enter death, we pass immediately *through* what once was an impassable labyrinth. For people belonging to Christ Jesus, death is never more a locked dungeon—just a gray tunnel with broken gates all the way along.

CLAMOROUS FEAR QUIETED

Knowing all this—that Christ has changed our position before God and removed the judgment called second death forever—still God’s adopted child in Christ may foolishly and unnecessarily cling to qualms and fears about physical death. We all can identify with filmmaker Woody Allen, who famously quipped, “It’s not that I’m afraid to die. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

A scorpion bites once and injects all its poison into a victim. What Scripture calls the “sting” of death is spiritual condemnation. The second-death sting went into Jesus Christ at the cross. Therefore, believer: do you accept his victory over second death as your own? If you do, our text in Hebrews stresses the unique sympathizing heart of our Savior. Since he was one of us as a man and endured death himself, who better can communicate transforming encouragement to us, comforting our remaining fears of death? Hebrews 2:15 declares that he died to “deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”

The *process* of death remains intimidating, even if its ultimate penalty is cancelled. Who but Christ will best hear our cries and fears about death? Jesus as our merciful and faithful High Priest is “able to help us” like no other. In the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the character Atticus Finch says, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”¹ Jesus knows our death-fear because he wore our skin!

I have stood at hospice beds and literally heard what some call the “death rattle” of someone’s last few strangled breaths. No one should call this experience a trifle. It is not. A week before I wrote these words, the

mid-sixties-aged father of a church member simply did not wake up one morning. As a fervent believer in Christ, he was in the Savior's embrace before his wife realized she should make a futile call for an ambulance. We all would wish for that so-called "easy" death, but that quiet passage is no entitlement to Christians or anyone else.

Another death occurred only days after, and it was calamitous in its circumstances. At a construction site across the road from our church facility, a twenty-seven-year-old worker was caught in the collapse of a ten-foot-deep trench. Only the geographical proximity of this accident brought him to my attention—he died two hundred yards from the office where I studied for a sermon. By the time I knew of his death, television news cameras had arrived. Without knowing the victim personally, the rare manner of his death made it hard for me not to imagine his last moments of panic. His brain surely told his arms to swim out from under tons of earth descending upon him, but those arms were securely pinned—much like the arms of Jesus. Who can bear to dwell on this young man's last conscious seconds as he gagged to death on a face full of dirt before his shouting comrades could dig him out. This unfortunate fellow human being was someone's son, someone's friend. I pray he might have been a child of God, trusting in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. If so, once his last moments of mortal fear ended, death had done its worst to him. I only wish I knew whether this were so.

A JAIL WITH A BROKEN LOCK

I was not kidding when I began this chapter by claiming that I died along with Christ when I trusted in him as a boy fifty years ago. Paul said in 2 Timothy 2:11, "If we have died with him, we will also live with him." Charles Spurgeon elaborated: "Those who die daily will die easily. Those who make themselves familiar with the tomb will find it transfigured into a bed. . . . Let us live as dying men among dying men, and then we shall truly live."²

Nothing in the universe can separate a Christian believer from the power of God exerted for us in Christ (Rom. 8:38–39). Apart from knowing this death-defeating Savior, people are still locked up and trembling before eternal judgment, which they have good reasons to fear. But Christian, why would you linger around weeping and fretful in a jail cell sealed only by a broken lock?

DEATH'S TYRANNY OVERTHROWN

John Chrysostom was an early Christian pastor who lived from AD 350–400. At one point in his ministry he observed elaborate moaning and crying going on at Christian funerals. As a pastor he considered this as a deep contradiction of Christian hope. So Chrysostom mounted his pulpit to ask his congregation, “Why all this crying and groaning? What could be more unseemly for loved ones of a man who is crucified to this world and risen with Christ, than to wail in the presence of death?” He further exhorted, “Those who are worthy of being lamented are those still living in their fear; who tremble before death with no sure faith in resurrection.” Then Chrysostom the preacher concluded with words that frame my prayer for you. He told his Christian flock, “May you die, *unwailed!*”³

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me also.

I CORINTHIANS 15:3-8

For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

I CORINTHIANS 15:16-26

BECAUSE HE LIVES



NOVELS WRITTEN BY CHRISTIANS FOR which Christianity is integral to the plot are inclined to be wooden at best and dull at worst. An exception is Paul L. Maier's *A Skeleton in God's Closet*.¹ Well versed in archeology, this New Testament professor plotted a diabolical hoax in which archeologists uncover the first-century burial tomb of Joseph of Arimathea in his hometown of Ramah in Galilee. Concealed beneath the floor of that tomb is something scientists stumble upon: artifacts and a first-century scroll in a sealed jar which testifies that an adjacent stone ossuary box contains physical remains of Jesus of Nazareth. The long-buried document claims that his body was stealthily moved to this location by Joseph of Arimathea on the evening of Good Friday before the garden tomb in Jerusalem was sealed off by Pilate's soldiers. This of course means the tomb found empty on Easter morning actually never held a body except for a brief time, until several women who accompanied the dead Jesus to that place had departed. Then Joseph the aristocrat and disciple had the lifeless body of Jesus moved to his other personal tomb, in Ramah, where allegedly it rested for twenty centuries.

Up to the end of the novel it really does appear that the bones of Jesus had been found. Every test at the highest level verified the authenticity of artifacts no one had been looking for and almost everyone wished had remained unknown. The reader is made to reckon with the implications of this discovery. No matter how much society still desires to believe in a Savior who rose from his grave, it no longer seemed possible. I should not tell more in case you would decide to read the book. I will only say that by the end of the tale, Jesus lives, after all.

When we affirm the Apostles' Creed, we say, "I believe . . . in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." Those two facts are inseparable; you cannot have the second without the first. In chapter 3, we saw

Scripture's claim in Hebrews 2 that Jesus was a champion defeating death in a bold raid upon its stronghold. He was the one-man Navy SEAL team landing at Osama Bin Laden's secret lair in a surprise raid of lightning efficiency, taking the Evil One out of commission. Concentrating on the victory of the cross in the previous chapter, I gave little attention to the second epic cornerstone of Jesus's victory: his resurrection. This is now our prime concern.

First Corinthians 15 is Paul's full elaboration of the consequences of Christ's resurrection for all who trust in him. Without the bodily resurrection, the death of Jesus on Calvary would be of no effect. If he did not rise in power on Easter morning, all our hope in him is no more substantial than a wisp of smoke, for death still holds him.

ALL OUR EGGS IN ONE BASKET

Our hope of eternity stands or falls with the resurrection accomplished for the body of Jesus and applied to us. With dogged persistence, millions of people today believe they will claim eternity based on God's positive moral evaluation of their behavior. They suppose that "good" deeds earn heavenly bonus credits, and the goal is to pile up more good behavior than evil until the scales tip favorably for you. Such notions persist although the biblical gospel absolutely denies them. In biblical Christianity, attaining eternal life is based on nothing a human being does. Heaven's front gate never swings under the influence of human merit or moral entitlement. Hope of eternal life is 100 percent a miracle of God's grace.

Romans 1:4 states that Jesus Christ was "declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead." He was God's Son before the resurrection, but without this grand miracle we would have no certification of that fact. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 stressed that evidence and testimony of Jesus's resurrection was passed to him from earlier apostles. These eyewitness facts will stand up in a court of law where proof beyond a reasonable doubt is the standard for a verdict. You surely have heard Easter Sunday sermons relating this evidence that demonstrated why the empty tomb simply cannot be explained away. Christian apologist Josh McDowell wrote years ago to say that this clear evidence "demands a verdict."² Author Frank Morison's classic *Who Moved the Stone?* was God's instrument in my Christian life to build a sound foundation of reason beneath what I already believed.³

Resurrection facts like these build a castle of evidence: (1) The grave

clothes were arranged just as he dropped them; (2) The Roman guard detail was overwhelmed in its security task by frightening manifestations; (3) Enemies who had everything to gain by simply producing a dead body could not do so, and they resorted to a flimsy cover-up story; (4) Hundreds saw the form of a man recognizable as Jesus; (5) He ate food and appeared to be entirely in character with his former persona; (6) Radically transformed lives of eleven depressed, confused disciples bolster a tight case, leading to a conclusion that explaining the resurrection by means other than its straightforward gospel narration is more problematic than accepting the Bible's verdict that "he is not here, but has risen" (Luke 24:6). To have faith in the risen Jesus is no blind leap in the dark. This supernatural event is grounded upon reliable historic proofs and logic. We can be surer that this event occurred as reported than we are able to know many relatively recent historic events. (Shall we discuss what really happened in the Kennedy assassination, anyone? Maybe we can talk about the shooter behind the fence on the grassy knoll . . .)

It cannot be maintained by an honest mind that the church invented the resurrection. Quite the contrary, the resurrection was a catalyst for an explosion of faith in the first-century church. If God could raise Jesus from the dead, he must have all power over death. Peter's first sermon in Acts 2:36 declared that by the resurrection "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." So apostles went into the world as resurrection witnesses.

The glorified Lord appeared in a vision before John to say, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Rev. 1:17–18). By fulfilling his resurrection and by his subsequent miraculous ascension to the Father's right hand, Jesus was awarded the seat of sovereign authority over all affairs in heaven and earth. Paul concluded that either Jesus is raised or everything we believe is a lie and a delusion. Take away the reanimation of Jesus, and death proves to be stronger than God; Christian faith is then a colossal futility. All the eggs of our hope for eternal life really do rest in a single basket, called Easter.

THE FIRST-FRUIT PRINCIPLE

Now we look to 1 Corinthians 15:20–23 for the "so what?" aspect of resurrection logic. The miracle of Jesus raised by God's power was not once

and done; it was more like the first crashing chord opening of a grand Beethoven symphony. The bodily resurrection Jesus experienced is capable of being reproduced in any number of God's people from first-century Easter forward; it is the sole miracle of past history in which you and I can participate today. The Christian's fate is not just a shadowy survival of death, but a robust expectation of the Apostles' Creed's call for "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting."

First Corinthians 15:20 asserts that "Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Saying someone has fallen asleep is a biblical euphemism indicating Christians whose bodies died, who were known to be united to Christ while alive and thus still are so. Their "sleep" is not literal, and their passing is not permanent. To say they "sleep" now is a figure of speech touching upon a body still in the grave while the conscious soul is in God's presence, waiting for what an old spiritual song calls a "great waking up morning."

The term "first fruit" in 1 Corinthians 15:20 originated with Israel's Feast of Weeks, a harvest festival in which a priest waved a shock of wheat in the air to symbolize hopes for an expected harvest. The resurrection of Jesus is a prototype—the initial mold out of which millions more bodily resurrections could be cast. A flood of other resurrections will pour through that Easter breach God opened in death's barrier. Recalling a principle we emphasized earlier, the resurrection of Christ is seen as a *federal* act: Jesus was the representative of many others. Jesus promised disciples in John 14:19, "Because I live, you also will live." God decrees that the resurrection of Jesus is endlessly transferrable.

First Corinthians 15:22 says every human being dies because of Adam; it never concludes that every human being lives because of Christ. Instead, it says that all persons who are "in Christ" obtain his life. Notice the historic order of resurrection in verse 23: "Each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ." Pause over the phrase "*those* who belong to Christ." Who is included? Can we *know* if we are among these people? A good place to seek an answer is John 6:39, where we read a prediction by Jesus: "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given to me, but raise it up on the last day." By his sovereign will, God mysteriously foreordained who is included in the great company of those to be raised in Christ—a vast number of elect souls known to the Father and the Son. They were said

to be given as a total company from the Father into the care of Christ the Son (John 17:6). And we are told that the Son will not fail to resurrect a single one of this company entrusted to his caretakership. John 6:40 gives a further identity mark to these people: “For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” John 6:39 left a mystery element in God’s election concerning *who* exactly shall be resurrected, but verse 40 provides a highly practical way to identify this group—their present-world identity badge is depositing all their hope in Christ the Son.

We may have a good approximate knowledge of who belongs to this “invisible” church of the elect, although only God knows the case perfectly. The elect are all persons who claim this risen Savior with a sincere profession of faith. God’s mysterious grace in election causes Spirit-sponsored awakening of a dead sinner’s brain, heart, and tongue to verbalize faith in Jesus. Resurrection faith inevitably will become audible as each one “confess[es] with his mouth Jesus is Lord and believe[s] in [his] heart that God raised him from the dead” (Rom. 10:9). You and I exercise what seems in our estimation to be our entirely free human choice, to speak up and to lay hold of God’s miracle gift; but Scripture peers backstage to discover that our testimony of faith in Jesus had an eternal prelude. The Spirit of God was involved in the process of drawing me toward belonging to the one risen Lord.

WE MAY LIVE A NEW LIFE

Furthermore, this resurrection power of God is not merely scheduled for a final historic rising of our bodies in the last day when Christ returns. That final consummation of personal resurrection can seem far off and unreal. Every Christian already *has* a resurrected life. Romans 6:4 declares, “Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might *walk* in newness of life.” The Holy Spirit of the triune God resides in a believer now. Romans 8:11 is the capstone text for this matter: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” The same Spirit who awakens us to believe in Christ remains in residence as God’s down payment and seal of what will one day be fabulously complete (Eph. 1:13–14). The first stirring of what is yet to be—our graduation into new bodies with Christ—is

underway now, evidenced in the gradual transformation of our minds and step-by-step renovation of character, words, and action. All this happens slowly but surely, in our still-sinful but redeemed bodies.

Therefore “the Christian’s calling is a heavenly calling; it comes from heaven and reaches out towards heaven.” Paul Helm continues, “All aspects of our lives, not only those that are customarily referred to as ‘spiritual,’ but the social and cultural as well, have significance because they are woven in as part of the divine calling which will end for the believer in heaven. So heaven is not an excuse for taking it easy, it is a reason for renewed effort. . . . Our lives on earth, despite the seeming randomness of what befalls us, the nasty surprises and setbacks, is purposive. And it is not necessary to forsake the earth to find purpose.”⁴

NO LONGER INCREDIBLE

In Acts 26:8 Paul challenges the skeptical establishment of his day: “Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” God’s resurrection miracle that opened the tomb to raise the body of Jesus will impact weak clay-people. Our God specializes in resurrecting what is dead and powerless. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 1:3–5 to Christian disciples: “According to his great mercy, [God] has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

Have you consciously stepped out of imprisonment to death in Adam into new life in the living Lord Jesus? If you’re not certain, you may call on Christ today and say, “Lord Jesus, I am dead and powerless. Give me your miraculous new life. Then continue to be at work in me by your Spirit, today and forever.” He will answer that prayer.

Once you do know Christ in this bond of living hope, you can endorse these words from Blaise Pascal, scientist and disciple of Jesus: “Without Jesus Christ, death is dreadful, it is repugnant, it is a terror of whatever is natural. In Jesus Christ it is altogether different. It is amiable, holy and the joy of the believer. Everything, even death itself, is rendered sweet in Jesus. It was for this he suffered. He died to sanctify death and suffering to us.”⁵

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CHRISTIAN LIVING