

A Humble Agnosticism, a Radiant Hope

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1 John 3:1-2

Yesterday, peering out my study window on a gray, blustery day, I watched golden leaves break loose from trees and make their gentle descent to the ground. Soon, their vivid, golden glory will turn brown, then gray, then very dead before those leaves are caught up in the cycle of nature to be reborn. Only not as themselves, but as a cran apple or crepe myrtle or chirping bird.

But the hope we gather to celebrate on this All Saints Day is for a transformation far more personal and profound than that. For we do not believe our loved ones die, only to become something or someone else. We believe they slip into the nearer presence of God to be forevermore *themselves*.

As Paul argues in 1 Corinthians, if I bury an apple seed, I don't expect to grow an oak. No, from that humble apple seed will flower an infinitely more beautiful and magnificent tree. But that tree will produce apples, not acorns. Even so, our loved ones who shake the shackles of sin to slip into the loving arms of God become more, not less, themselves.

But if pressed on the details about this larger hope for the dead in Christ, we quickly bump up against more questions than answers. Yes, those departed saints are "with God," but what does that mean? Do they peer down at us from heaven like Houston Astro fans, cheering

their team on to victory? Or do they while away their hours playing harps and flapping angel's wings, a destiny so unimaginably boring, it might actually make one wish for hell!

Perhaps that is why I find the startling confession of 1 John 3:2 so liberating and live-giving. On the one hand, the writer admits to a humble agnosticism: "Beloved, what we shall be has not yet been revealed."

And yet, immediately after that simple acknowledgment, resounds a radiant hope: "But *what we do know* is this: when Christ is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

Now, those who think the Bible has a neatly catalogued answer to every conceivable question, find acknowledging the limits of our knowledge troubling. But for the rest of us, perhaps there is some relief in knowing our confidence in the life to come is based not in our command of the facts, but in the One who promised, "*I am* the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Recently, a grandmother in our church told me about her two young grandsons coming home to discover Lulu, the family cat, had died. According to grandma, "eight-year-old Peyton was inconsolable." But he did find some comfort in knowing that Lulu chose to die under his bed. Three-year-old Cooper was more curious than sad.

Cooper told his grandparents he knew Jesus was going to come take Lulu home to God; he just didn't know how. Was Jesus going to fly into the Richmond airport? And if so, was the family going to pick him up or did Jesus have a rental?"

Eight-year-old Peyton quickly grew impatient with these theological musings: "Cooper," he snapped. "You are hurting my heart. Please stop."

Eventually, the family let Lulu “lie in state” while daddy built a casket. Meanwhile, Cooper wondered aloud, “If Lulu is going to live with God, why doesn’t she go on and wake up now?!”

I don’t envy his parents having to answer *that!*

Finally, everything was ready and the casket lowered into the ground. Peyton gave thanks for Lulu, adding that he knew someday they would all be together again. Cooper gave an impromptu benediction, observing that “Lulu was a good cat.” And then, yet another fallen creature, was swallowed by the ground.

It helps to have children around when death comes calling. Because they are willing to speak the questions the rest of us are afraid to ask.

Nonetheless, sometimes the assurance that “Lulu is with God” and “Jesus will take good care of her till we can see her again,” is about the best we can do. Because “beloved, what we shall be has not yet been revealed But what we do know is this: when Christ is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

Thankfully, the gospel doesn’t ground our assurance in the life to come in having answers to all our questions. The gospel grounds our assurance in the life to come in the life *that is*: “See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. Beloved, *we are God’s children now.*”

No, we are not destined to become angels in the sweet bye and bye. We are destined to become more fully who we already are: the sons and daughters of God.

Further, “eternal life” is not just a future hope; it is a present reality. “I have come that they might *have* life,” said Jesus. “And have it *abundantly!*”

If you want to find assurance about the fate of loved ones lost--or face your own death and dying without fear and foreboding--then skip the latest, greatest best-seller or blockbuster

purporting to unveil the secrets of heaven. Instead, get to know Jesus in a vital, personal way by meditating on his words, praying and singing in his Spirit, and living and serving in his love.

Those who do will find themselves--in the words of the 19th century Scottish divine, George MacDonald, "haunted by the scent of unseen roses." They will find themselves reveling in a Presence they cannot see. As 1 Peter 1:8 sings for that first generation of believers--and every generation since--not blessed to know Jesus in the flesh, "Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy."

That has certainly been my experience. I have not seen Christ, face-to-face. But I would bet my life indeed, *I* am betting my life that the joy of knowing him is not a sentimental delusion, but the deepest truth about God.

John Todd was a 19th century congregational minister. Orphaned at the age of six, he was raised by a beloved aunt who treated him as her own. Eventually, she made it possible for him to attend Yale Divinity School. Later, he became a pastor in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he received a letter from his aged aunt, now facing the dark specter of death. Terminally ill, she was terrified at the prospect of dying. She wrote her adopted son, asking if in his theological studies, he had learned anything that might calm her fears.

Here is Pastor Todd's reply: "It is now 35 years since I, a little boy of six, was left quite alone in the world. You sent word you would give me a home and be a kind mother to me.

"I have never forgotten the day when I made the long journey of ten miles from my home (to yours). I can still recall my disappointment when I learned that instead of coming for me yourself you had sent your (servant) Caesar to fetch me. I can still remember my tears and anxiety as, perched on your horse and clinging tight to Caesar, I started for my new home."

Todd went on to relate his growing fear as darkness fell, and how he wondered if his aunt had already gone to bed. But presently, the servant and the boy emerged from the woods

and saw a candle of welcome burning brightly in the window of his aunt's house. Hearing the noise of their arrival, his aunt came out to lift the tired, bewildered little boy from the horse into the comfort of her arms. She gave him his supper beside a cozy fire in the hearth, and then sat by him in his new room till he fell asleep.

"You are probably wondering why I am now recalling all these things to your mind," Pastor Todd continued. "Someday soon God will send for you, to take you to a new home. Don't fear the summons, the strange journey, the messenger of death. At the end of the road, you will find love and a welcome; you will be safe in God's care and keeping.

"God can be trusted--trusted to be as kind to you as you were to me so many years ago."

"See what love the Father and Mother of us all has for us, that we should be called the children of God. . . . And that is what we are. . . . Beloved, we are God's children *now*. What we will be has not yet been revealed. But what we know is this: when Christ is revealed, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

Like it or not, that is where we are called to live: caught between a humble agnosticism and a radiant hope. We might like to know more, but for now, our vision is limited. "We see in a mirror dimly," Paul writes. "But someday, face-to face."

"Now we know in part, but then, we shall know fully, even as we have been fully known and loved and set free" (1 Cor. 13:12). "For when Christ is revealed, we shall be made like him, for we shall see him as he is."

I can't help but wonder what it will be like to gaze upon the face of Jesus. I'm sure his face will shimmer bright with the light of a million suns. I'm sure his smile will be broad and beaming and his eyes, deep pools of sparkling, welcoming love.

And yet to look upon him--and to have him look upon me--will be both an excruciating and liberating experience, as being deeply known and loved always is. All my flaws and failings

will be exposed before the piercing gaze of his truth just before they are vanquished, once and for all, before the rushing, liberating embrace of his love.

"For yes I--even I--shall be made like him, for I shall see him as he is."

In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris tells about a friend keeping vigil at the bedside of her dying mother. Trying to comfort her mother, the daughter said, "Just think, mamma. You are about to enter heaven and everybody you love will be there."

The woman's mother pondered that, then raised up slightly on her pillow and said, "No. It's not that everybody I love will be there. It's that I *will love everybody* who's there."

Yes, someday, we shall be made like him . . . for we shall see him as he is. In God's loving, able hands, we finally become who we always wanted to be: someone with at least a passing resemblance . . . to Jesus.

O holy Christ, thank you for becoming who we were that we might become who you are: sons and daughters of God, frolicking, fearless, and free. In your name we pray, because in everything that matters most, we are counting on you. Amen.

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