

THE REVEREND FRANK HAGGARD'S
MESSAGE TO
WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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"THOSE WHO LOVE THE MOST DIE THE BEST"

I Corinthians 15:20-28

Psychiatrists have told us that life would be unbearable if we were not able to create fantasies in our minds. A fantasy is something you imagine or day-dream about when the real world becomes boring, frustrating, and difficult. For instance, if this sermon bores you, as I speak, you may fantasize that you are on a warm sunny beach in the Caribbean or that tomorrow you will win the lottery and be able to pay all your debts and build your "dream house." If you're single, you might entertain yourself by thinking that sometime soon you will meet "Mr. Right" or Miss Perfect." Or, if you've lost your job or are stuck in a position which holds little promise for advancement, you may see yourself as the boss of an important department or a movie star earning millions. Yes, the real world, our everyday life, does not usually measure up to our expectations or wishes or dreams. The worse or duller it gets the more we tend to fantasize about a happier, more fulfilling life, and occasionally with some effort and a break, people are able to turn a fantasy into reality. Most of the time, however, fantasy never goes beyond our private thoughts or "day-dreaming."

There have been many skeptics in our modern world who claim that the Christian's belief in Heaven or a perfect world of peace and love in the next life is nothing but a fantasy, a way of making death and suffering more bearable. If the thought of death frightens me, I can sooth my anxiety by imagining a beautiful heavenly place where I will be surrounded by friends and loved ones and we will all live happily there ever after. If I've had a lot of bad breaks in life or failed in my career, I can ease my frustration by thinking of another life where success, competition, achieving won't matter. In that other life my fortunes will be completely reversed: whereas here and now I am a bitter loser, there and then I will be a joyful winner. On the other hand, if my life in this world meets my expectations and I felt successful, fulfilled, and happy, I wouldn't even think about another life or Heaven.

The happier this world makes me the less need or desire I have for Heaven or another life after death. Didn't St. Paul say that our "last enemy" was death? And didn't he mean that death was our "last" enemy because it was the last fear we needed to overcome to keep from being anxious and disturbed by knowing that this life will end? If we had no fear of death and no worry about disintegrating into dust, there would be no need to believe in Heaven. Heaven is simply a fantasy, an impossible dream of those who are frustrated and unfulfilled in this world or who are afraid to die. This, in brief, is the way some psychologists and their skeptical partisans criticize and dismiss the traditional Christian belief in Heaven or a better world after and beyond this one. We are usually called "escapists" because we just cannot take or accept life as it is and we try to escape in our imaginations to a happier, more perfect world.

In reply to this accusation that Christians have created heaven as a fantasy or escape from the disappointments and imperfection of this life the Christian would answer that his belief in Heaven motivates him to make this world more "Heaven-like". Just look at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount which some have called a "blueprint for life in God's Kingdom", or "the ethics of the Kingdom of Heaven". Jesus did not mean that we should delay practicing or using these difficult commands until after we die or we reach another life after this one. No, the Sermon on the Mount is the way to show people on earth today, right now, how great and good God's Heavenly Kingdom is. Loving one's enemies, giving without desire for reward, forgiving the worst sins against us, purifying our thoughts of lust, anger, revenge, envy – this is not behavior to have fantasies or dreams about. This is how we should live now in the midst of a fallen, sinful, unappreciative world. Jesus did not tell us to escape from our enemies or to have a fantasy that they were really saints. He said that we should love all people as they are – ruthless, mean, dull, greedy, and vicious. Practice heavenly love in every "hell-like" situation! It is the Christian's belief in Heaven or what Jesus called the "Kingdom of God" that gives him or her the inspiration and power to bring Heaven down upon this earth by living on earth the way we will in Heaven, living, that is, by an ethic of total self-giving.

If unbelievers accuse Christian of being too "other-worldly" or too pre-occupied with Heaven, this should not be regarded as something to apologize for or to be embarrassed about. It is just this "other world" or "Heaven" that motivates us to close

the gap or overcome the difference between "this world" and "the other world." The Christian constantly prays: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." When we pray these words, we are not resigning ourselves to fate or some iron-clad, unchangeable plan God has made. God's will is not done against us or in spite of us or outside of us. God has chosen to do His will in us and through us. And what is God's will? It is to obey the Sermon on the Mount or, more simply in Jesus' own words: "to love others as I have loved you." Heaven is where love begins and continues but love is not confined or limited to Heaven. We could easily re-word the Lord's Prayer to say: "Thy love be done on earth as it is in Heaven." And love is always doing what is right and best for everyone, including yourself, at all times and in all situations. The fundamental difference between Heaven or "the other world" and earth or "this world" is the amount, quality and duration of love. In Heaven the amount of love is total and absolute, its quality is perfect, selfless service of everyone, and its duration is always and forever. On earth, because our sin makes us more important than God or others, love is at a minimum and we mix our goodness with selfishness and our good deeds are sporadic and occasional. But this is not God's will or the way it ought to be. We need to be more "other worldly" and close the breach between Heaven and earth. God's ideal for this world is a place of perfect love. In the beginning God created this world to be an exact copy of Heaven; that's why this world without sin is called paradise. Paradise is not a place of self-indulgence where my will prevails at all times. Paradise is where my will and everyone else's will is to make others more important than oneself. Yes, Christians are very "other-worldly" or "Heaven-oriented." But what could be better for this world than that? The more Heavenly and loved-filled this world becomes the more like paradise it becomes.

We can reverse the accusation and criticism of the unbeliever. We as Christians would claim that the more absorbed and totally focused on this world you are the less good you will do for this world. Worldly people are too intent on taking from this world rather than giving to it. If you only enjoy this world as it is and don't strive to change it into a more love-filled, selfless place, you add to the world's problems. The world's basic problem is that it isn't heavenly enough; it is too worldly in the sense that most people don't use their vision of a more loving, God-filled place to improve themselves. People are always complaining that they're not getting their fair share or they are

missing pleasures and opportunities owed to them. Rarely do you hear people complain that they have too much or that they haven't been as self-denying and self-giving as they should be. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between a Christian and an unbeliever. Far too many Christians ignore thinking about the "other world" until their physician pronounces their condition "terminal" or their life is suddenly struck by tragedy. Christians, like everyone else, become so attached to this world the way it is that they cease to try to change themselves and their community into Heaven on earth. Rather than fantasizing of God's perfect, love-filled Heaven we dream only of success and fulfillment in this world. We begin to believe what the media, advertising, and our neighbors keep telling us: we've got to have more and more of things of this world and that worldly pleasure comes before heavenly bliss. Thus, we fear death believing that earth is a better place than Heaven and we have little motivation to change ourselves into those who desire heavenly selflessness over earthly self-indulgence.

St Paul was correct when he called death "the last enemy". Paul's words are these: "For Christ must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." Death is obviously our enemy because it destroys us; we cannot do or be or enjoy anything if we are dead. Only if we are alive, either now in this life or later in Heaven, can we do, be, and enjoy something. Paul maintains that there are two ways to live: 1. either selfishly for one's own satisfaction and glory or 2. Selflessly for God's glory and our neighbor's need. For Paul the first way to live, although the most common, is not true life, selfish living is false life doomed to a short span of less than 100 years. The second way, although rare and only seen in its perfection in Jesus is true life; selfless living is true life, and after selfish living dies and is destroyed, selfless living will become Heavenly living to which there is no end or termination point. Therefore, according to Paul, death is the enemy of all selfish, "me-first", "I-want-to-be-Number 1-in-this-world", "gimme-more-of-this-world's-things" way of living. Death is a disease that infects all selfishness and will eventually destroy it. To state the obvious: death is terminal! It's going to kill us because of the selfishness that dominates and controls most of our daily living. However, Paul maintains, this enemy will eventually be conquered and, poetically speaking "put under Christ's feet. The Christian does not have to fear death as depriving him of what is best and most

important. What is best and most important is God's love for us and our love for one another. Heaven or life after death is a continuation and fulfillment of God's love for us and our love for one another. What begins in this life when we live selflessly as Jesus did becomes total and complete in Heaven. Death can even become our "friend" rather than our "enemy" when we see it as the end of our selfish living and the beginning of unending selfless living. Life on earth is good because there is some love here but life in Heaven is so much better because there is absolute and total love there.

Yet, the more selfish and self-indulgent a person is the more they will fear death. Such a person wishes to get as much out of this world as possible and for as long as possible. Death is frightening because it means the end of earthly things, the pleasures we have sought and received in this life. Jesus' promise of eternal life, a life where our only pleasure will be to bring pleasure to God and to others, seems vague and unrewarding. From death and total disintegration into a brand new, total recreation as a total selfless person is too radical a change for most of us either to believe or to desire. The urge to hang on to our old selves the way we are now is very strong and persistent. We call it "self-preservation" or the "survival instinct." The selfish person just won't let go of himself either in this life to give himself completely to others or in death to give himself completely to God. Death will always be hard, frightening, and sorrowful for those who are deeply attached to themselves. But for those, who in this life have already given themselves to God and to others, death may cause some anxiety but such anxiety is soon overcome by knowing and trusting that what lies ahead is far more perfect than what we have ever experienced before. Those who have loved the most die the best!