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Entering the suffering and grief of others, helping them to carry their sorrow in a way that reflects the truth of the Gospel, comes from walking alongside people and bearing witness to them of the hope we have in Christ. We look forward to that day when our worship and the worship of the angels will merge as the suffering Church joins the Church triumphant at the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom that knows no end. But as we wait, we remember that even now the feast is ongoing, with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.

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We can see, feel, smell, touch, and taste what is going on here on earth, but how do Christians know what is going on in heaven? Twenty-twenty vision and sensitive hearing do not help us at all to see and hear the mysteries of heaven. As in most spiritual matters, we are completely dependent on God revealing the mysteries of heaven to us through those who wrote the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And when it comes to heaven, one of the most significant writings that reveals the mysteries of heaven is the Book of Revelation.

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PUBLISHER

Dr. Lawrence R. Rast Jr.
President

PUBLISHER ASSISTANT

Carrie M. O'Donnell

PRODUCTION MANAGER

Colleen M. Bartzsch

EDITOR

Andrea L. Schultz

COPY EDITOR

Trudy E. Behning

ART DIRECTOR

Steve J. Blakey

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Today or the Last Day? **BOTH!**

From Better to Best: Resolving the Tension between Today and the Last Day

Roger A. Peters



The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb (Copy of The Ghent Altarpiece), Staatliche Museen, Berlin. Coxie (Coxie), Michiel.

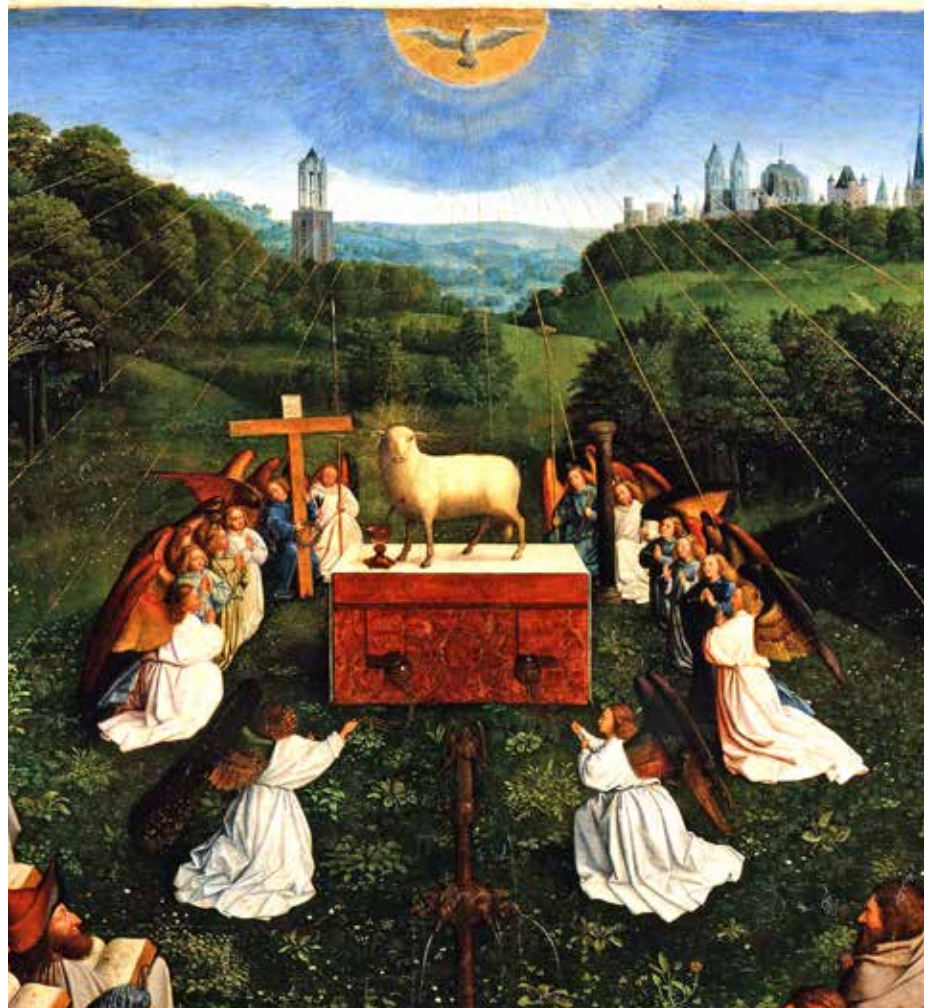
When faced with death—whether it be the loss of a loved one or the eventual future end of this life—Christians naturally gravitate toward the words of Christ as a source of both comfort and hope. This is precisely what Christians should do, and this is part of the reason Jesus gave us His Word. That Word of God creates faith, and it sustains us in faith and in hope.

Sometimes, however, our fallen, sinful nature can hinder our understanding of Scripture and become a source of confusion rather than hope. Sadly, one of the times this often happens is when we are faced with

death. But with some reflection on God's Word, we can once again find comfort where there was confusion and the hope to overcome our struggles.

A primary source of confusion for many people is the simple question:

While Jesus' words may seem to be contradictory at worst or rife with tension at best, careful examination of Scripture reveals to us that these words are not contradictory but complementary. It is not an either/or situation, but in reality is more of a both/and situation. To put another way, when we die we go from this life to better, and then, on the last day, we get to best! When we see it this way, all that is left for us is comfort.



What happens to us when we die? We can see where this comes from in the apparent tension between two statements Jesus makes in the Gospel accounts. To the thief on the cross, Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). On the other hand, Jesus says in His bread of life discourse in John 6:40, “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.” So which is it? Is it today or the last day? Do we experience the joys of paradise today—that is, at the time of death—or must we wait in some unconscious state until the last day when we will all be raised?

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God cannot contradict Himself. When Jesus says, “Today you will be with me in paradise,” we can firmly believe what He says with all the confidence of our faith. For the thief who was crucified with Jesus, “Today” was a literal statement. He entered into paradise that very day. It is also a literal statement for those faithful Christians who have gone before us. They are indeed in the same paradise as that repentant thief today. For those of us who still await the glory of the Lord, we can be confident that the “Today” of Luke 23:43 is whatever day this life comes to an end. This is true for us and all faithful Christians near death.

What is paradise and what is it like? It's tempting for us to focus just on that word and let our imaginations wander, but we can't forget the two little words Jesus says just before: "with me." To be with Jesus is to be in paradise. In descriptions of paradise, nothing else matters but that we will be with Jesus. St. Paul describes being with Christ as "far better" than to remain in the flesh (Phil. 1:23). Thus, at the end of this life, we enter into paradise where we are with Jesus, and so we go from this life to far better.

This is not a state of sleep or of unconsciousness. Our loved ones who are with Jesus in paradise are aware that they are with Jesus. So will we be. While it is true that Paul does use the language of "falling asleep" to describe death (1 Cor. 15:6, 18, 20; 1 Thess. 4:13ff.), and "sleeping" to describe faithful Christians who have already died (Eph. 5:14; 1 Thess. 5:10), this is not a description of the believer's soul after death. On the contrary, it is a description of the body. To the outside observer, the body appears to be asleep, and much like the body of one who sleeps, this body will rise again in glory on the last day. Bodily death, like sleep, is temporary. This is therefore an accurate description of the bodies of deceased Christians, though the soul of the Christian is with Jesus in paradise already.

But if our loved ones are already with Christ in paradise, what do we have to look forward to on the last day? Well, this is where we go from better to best. Jesus promises, "Today you will be with me in paradise," but Jesus and the New Testament overwhelmingly point Christians forward to the last day and to the resurrection of the body as the ultimate fulfillment of all God's promises for His people. To be with Christ in paradise is better by far than this earthly life, but the work of God is not yet complete. This is something we look forward to. Paul confidently declares to the Philippians, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). This good work that the Lord has begun in us is our sanctification, which is begun in Baptism and brought to completion in resurrection.

Revelation, the final book of the New Testament, provides a wonderful, beautiful picture of the resurrection when God will finish everything that He has begun. Chapter 21 presents the image of a new heaven and a new earth and the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God (Rev. 21:1-2). It is here that the Lord proclaims, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:3-4).

In the next chapter, God's people are described as serving Him and worshiping Him, with the promise that "They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads" (Rev. 22:4). To be with God and see His face is the highest good any human could ever experience, for God Himself is the source of all goodness, peace, and joy. This is precisely what we have to look forward to. This is the reality which Jesus comes to usher in, where God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28). It is here where we go from better to best!

So which is it? Today or the last day? As we can see from Scripture, the answer is not one or the other but both! There is no real tension between these two. Today, or whenever we die, we will be with Christ in paradise. On the last day our bodies will be raised, and we will live with God and see His face. When this life comes to an end, we go to a place that is much better. On the last day, we go to the place that is the best. This is what God has planned for all His people. This is our comfort and hope. 🏔️

*The Rev. Roger A. Peters
(Roger.Peters@ctsfw.edu),
serves as Assistant to the
Director of Library and
Information Services at
Concordia Theological
Seminary, Fort Wayne.*



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