

The Afterlife

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The British actor Ricky Gervais has become popular in the United States, partly because he created the original version of the popular TV sitcom "The Office." Being interviewed to promote a movie, he was quoted as saying that he is "a skeptic across the board of ghosts and elves and ESP and the afterlife."

Elves and the afterlife? These really don't fit together unless you believe that they can be lumped with ghosts and ESP, and that the whole "lump" can then be conveniently dismissed as childish superstition, unworthy of a second thought.

But for Christian believers, the "afterlife" is something to be thought about and prepared for during every minute of life. It has nothing to do with elves, and in fact we would normally speak of "eternal life" rather than an "afterlife" because our life with God begins here and now, and continues after our earthly life ends.

Perhaps some people want to dismiss the thought of eternal life because they have a wrong idea of what it is. They may believe, and may have been taught, that God intends either to punish or reward each of us, or that evildoers will be cut off forever from Him.

But the early Church never taught that God is out to punish. Jesus assures us, in John 14:2, that He prepares a blessed place for us, not punishment. And the prayer "O Heavenly King" tells us that God's Spirit is "everywhere present and fills all things." So we can never be cut off from God; He is with us always and in all places. As the psalmist asked (Psalm 139), "Where can I go away from Your Spirit?"

Thus in one way, our eternal destinies as human beings are identical: we will all be with God. Yet there is a difference, and the difference is that for some His presence will be eternal joy, and for others it will be eternal torment. For those who want to be with Him, eternity will truly be bliss; it will be heaven. For those who do not want God in their lives (and perhaps never have wanted Him) it will be hell.

We ask in every worship service to be granted a "good defense before the dread judgment seat of Christ." Our common human destiny includes standing before that seat of judgment; the experience is in store for all of us. But the eternal experience of life in God's presence will not be the same for everyone.

Our life in this world can already be the beginning of the glorious, joyful life of the Kingdom if we strive to make it so. We can live in a way that brings us into communion with the Holy Spirit that "fills all things" in our world. Then eternal life will be a continuation of life in communion with God.

Of course it's also possible to choose differently and to ignore or reject God's call to communion. Then, for sure, eternal life in His loving presence—a presence we turned away from—will be horrible. It is a clear and urgent choice. No elves, no ghosts, no ESP—but a matter of life or death.