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## All Saints' Day • 1 John 3:1–3 • November 1, 2015

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## **All Saints' Day • 1 John 3:1–3 • November 1, 2015**

Our modern rockets are useful for other than scientific and military purposes. In addition, they suggest a profound spiritual truth. It is characteristic of rockets to go through multiple stages. At some point after the initial liftoff, the rocket, amoeba-like, divides; the one part may be left behind to disintegrate, and the other part enters a new trajectory and begins a new phase. This process may occur again at a later point. Well, the Christian life, in some respects at least, resembles a multiple-phase rocket: the first phase is from conception to birth; the second phase is from birth to death; and the third phase is from death into eternity. And just as there is a critical point in the progress of a rocket at which a certain phenomenon or activity needs to occur if the rocket is to complete its mission successfully, so there is a critical point in the life of a human being at which a certain phenomenon or activity needs to occur in order to attain the goals. At some time in the second phase (and the earlier the better), a human being needs to experience the phenomenon we call conversion. Having been born already, we need to be “born again”—that is the urgent language in which the Bible describes this critical stage. Having gotten bodily life, we need to receive spiritual life as well, or else the whole process fizzles out into eternal death. The success of the second and third phases depends one hundred percent upon at some point accepting Christ as the Savior.

You and I are now in the second phase of our multiple-phase existence. Each of us has successfully undergone the critical phenomenon called conversion. “Beloved, now are we the children of God,” our text assures us. The Holy Spirit’s application to us through the gospel of the saving work of Jesus has given us this glorious status. The thing to keep in mind, however, is that it is only the second phase. Another one, the final one, still lies ahead. Glorious and significant as is this present phase, from womb to tomb, there is an even more glorious and significant phase ahead, a phase that staggers the imagination and with which nothing in this present mode of existence is worthy to be compared. I refer, of course, to heaven. “And it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see

him as he is," our text says. Our goal today is to fix our sights a bit more firmly on this, the last and grandest stage in our progress.

It is common knowledge that many in our world, either by design or by oversight, regard these seventy to eighty years of existence on this earth as the whole meaning of life. They mistake what is a mere phase for the goal of the journey. Even Christians sometimes have their weaker moments, and I suppose this is even sometimes true of those Christians in attendance this morning. The lonely sound of a train whistle at night, the rhythmic lapping of water on a beach, the sonorous hum of an electric fan on a hot summer day, the monotonous drone of the officiant at a graveside, a page from Hemingway—and our doubts are triggered. How can a person live forever? What kind of life can it possibly be? Maybe the grave is the end of it, after all, and we might as well face it bravely.

Well, perhaps we can better keep in mind the final phase of our journey, heaven, by thinking for a moment of the first phase. I refer to that nine-month existence before we were born. None of us, now that we're at this stage in our development, would regard that nine-month period as the whole meaning of life beyond which there is nothing more. By now we know better.

But let us say, by way of illustration, that during our pre-natal life we had the capacity to think, to hope or not hope, and so on. And let us add that while in our mother's womb we got word that another life lay before us, a life that might last the incredibly long time of eighty or ninety years. The new world we would someday enter would contain light in which we could see things and vast reaches of space in which we could move around. It would contain towering skyscrapers, majestic mountains, queer-looking quadrupeds called animals, large plants called trees, four-wheeled vehicles traveling at shocking speeds. Someday, we were assured, we would be able to do such impossible things as walk and talk. What's more, we wouldn't be alone in this world; there would be millions of other creatures similar to our self, and where could there possibly be room for them all? Yet strangest of all would be the mode of entering this new world, a rather perilous process called birth, involving pain, danger, doctors, and hospitals, a process we would never guess could thrust us into such a beautiful life as we live at present.

Now what reaction might an unborn child have toward this talk of another and more abundant life, assuming that an unborn child can have reactions? In spite of the fact that she couldn't possibly understand what earthly life would be like, she could still believe in it and look forward to it. Doing so would make her nine-month existence much more pleasant. Or she could be a realist and assume that the darkness and cramped quarters she lives in are the whole meaning of life and that beyond that dreaded process called birth there is no more. All this talk about another life is wishful thinking, and one might better make the most of what she has got.

Then comes the day—the day of birth. It turns out true, after all, gloriously true! There is another life. You can live eighty or ninety years. There are such things as light and space and skyscrapers and mountains and animals and plants and fast-moving vehicles. You can walk and talk. And this dreaded process called birth, in spite of appearances, turns out, after all, to be the gateway to this new and wonderful world.

I'm sure you begin to see what we're after this morning. Our present life is not the climax of life; it is but a phase in our journey. In relation to the heavenly life, we might call it a pre-natal stage. We have it on good word—God's word—that there is another life, another world, ahead of us called heaven. In it we shall live unbelievably long—forever! It is a world without space or time. Angels will share its mansions with us. We shall behold the face of God. We shall see him as he is. In fact, we shall be like him. All the ills and inconveniences of this present life, chief of which is sin, will have vanished. In the words of John Donne:

For when our Soule enjoyes this her third birth,  
(Creation gave her one, a second, grace,)  
Heaven is as neare, and present to her face,  
As colours are, and objects, in a roome  
Where darknesse was before, when Tapers come.

Strangest of all, the mode of entering this world is a dreaded and painful process called death, a process involving undertakers, caskets, tombstones, and bodily decay, a process we would never guess could thrust us into such a beautiful life as the heavenly existence is. Best of all, no part is left behind to disintegrate. The capsule of the second phase, the body, is recovered and restored; there is a resurrection.

Obviously, we can't conceive of this life, no more than an unborn child can imagine life on earth. But we can believe in it and hope for it. We can join the Apostle John in saying, "Beloved, now are we the children of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."

Francis C. Rossow