



Elevator Dogmatics

My close friend Auggie enjoys travel. Over the past couple of years she has accompanied me on camping trips and road trips, including one all the way across the United States. We've spent many a night in inexpensive motels. Auggie loves good food and drink and is exceptionally social. She delights in going out with new friends. She is physically fit and loves vigorous walks. Oh...did I mention that Auggie is a dog?

Despite her travel experience, there's one thing that astonishes her—elevators. How is it possible to walk into a little room, shut the door and reopen it only to be somewhere completely different? Auggie runs anxiously around in a circle, sniffs the elevator door and is incredulous whenever it opens on a different floor. To Auggie, elevators are the equivalent of folding space and time.

I can identify with her bewilderment. Every time I endure the death of a loved one, I feel like Auggie in an elevator. A person lives with you for years or decades, until suddenly they don't. They're gone. One day you're talking with them, sharing a meal, holding their hand. But now you're not because they're just not there. You may believe in an afterlife, but really—how does that work? Can they hear or see you? Are they busy doing something else? What, exactly?

At this point, our faith in Christ should bring us joy and comfort. But sadly, ungodly religious dogma barges in with crushing anxiety, sleepless nights and downright pain—designed to terrorize and subjugate its followers. Billions worry that their loved ones didn't make the grade and are being forever tortured in hell. If not, billions anguish over their loved ones being tormented in purgatory to cleanse them of residual sin (which somehow Jesus missed).

Actually, the Bible says nothing of eternal hell (as commonly taught), or of purgatory. What does it say? Among other things, it speaks of the deceased going to be with God and of a resurrection, but it says little about what happens between these two events. Some Christian traditions call this time *the intermediate* or *interim* state, during which deceased

souls are judged and/or “await” the resurrection of their bodies. Other traditions suggest the idea of “*soul-sleep*” where the dead are not conscious until the resurrection. Popular Christian culture largely ignores the resurrection and has the “good” deceased souls instantly equipped with angelic wings, harps and halos as soon as they arrive in heaven.

The underlying assumption here is *time*. Early theologians assumed that God exists in time. Yet thankfully, as author Douglas Campbell points out, we have the advantage of living after 1915. That's the year Albert Einstein published his general theory of relativity, asserting that gravity, space, energy, motion and time are all related—and all of these are *physical* properties of the universe. Since then, evidence has confirmed this to be correct. Now we know that time is quite physical, part of creation and it varies throughout the universe.

God, by contrast, is not subject to time. He is the beginning and the end, existing eternally—outside of our physical timeline (except when he steps into it as he does in the Person of Jesus). If our departed loved ones are with God, at perfect, joyful rest in this timeless eternity, are they “awaiting” anything? The Apostle Paul speaks of the resurrection as part of a sequence of events, but that seems to be from the perspective of an earthly timeline. Ultimately, the resurrection has happened, is happening and will happen in eternity, *as Jesus himself is the resurrection and eternal life* (John 11:25)!

Maybe you can understand how all this works, but I sure can't, any more than my dog can figure out elevators. Like Auggie in the elevator, I can only be astonished—but I need not be anxious. Paul offers further reassurance when he writes that “*God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus*” (Ephesians 2:6).

Wow! It almost sounds like we're already there in eternity, doesn't it? And I think that's the point. Our departed loved ones (and really everyone else, ourselves included) are totally forgiven and eternally safe in the timeless reality of Jesus—the only certainty or dogma we will ever need. □

—Monte Wolverton