



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding.

Book of Common Prayer

A decade after my wanderings in the Louvre basement, I began for the first time to read the Bible. And there I encountered the New Testament's view of the afterlife. Not yet a believer, I took its references to a "kingdom of heaven" no more seriously than other ancient ideas about a blissful life-to-come. Here were the usual worldly pleasures. Like the rest of the Roman world, Christians looked forward to a never-ending banquet -- the "wedding feast" of the Lamb. Here were the negatives overcome: For the persecuted early church, heaven would have stout walls.



The Surprise

But then I noticed something else. Something different. Alongside the typical earthly imagery was a concept of the afterworld unlike that of any other tradition.

This world will surprise us!

It will not be what we think. Not what we *can* think. It will be another order of experience altogether. We can't come at such things, said St. Paul, by earthly extension at all:

*No eye has seen,
no ear has heard,
no mind has conceived
what God has prepared for those who love him.
1 Corinthians 2:9*

Surprise had been the hallmark of every step of my Christian walk, and surprise -- this idea of heaven as the utterly unexpected -- was the first hint to me that it might, after all, be real.

Therese Martin, the French girl who died in 1897 at age twenty-four, spent much of her short life thinking about heaven. John and I have often stayed in the small provincial city of Lisieux where the girl often called "the greatest saint of modern times" grew up in an ordinary-looking middle-class home still standing not far from the enclosed convent she entered, never to leave again, at age fifteen.

In her joyous anticipation of the life to come, only one thing worried Therese. Because she'd thought about heaven so much, she feared the reality would not be enough of a surprise. That God *wanted* to surprise her, she was certain. Hadn't he forbidden St. Paul to reveal what he'd seen when he was "caught up into paradise"? Hadn't he warned Paul that "man may not utter" the glories there?

The next world was to be God's immense, joyful secret -- and what if she'd guessed too much of it already? "I've formed such a lofty idea of heaven," she said as her tuberculosis advanced, "that I wonder what God will do at my death to surprise me."

She would *pretend* to be surprised, she confided to her sister Pauline, even if she wasn't, so as not to disappoint him. It was God's delight, Therese believed, to astonish each of us, on our death, with the unimagined magnificence of his kingdom.

God of surprises ... I was meeting him all through the Bible. A chosen people sprung from a barren woman past the age of childbearing. A holy nation founded by fleeing slaves. The King of kings born in a stable. Eternal life won by a hideous death. And heaven itself the greatest surprise of all.

The Anchor

*We have this hope as an anchor for the soul.
Hebrews 6:19*

Suppose, just suppose, I thought, that this surprising heaven really exists!
All the "primitive" age-old questions would be my questions too. Where is it? Who gets to go there? Will we know each other? Will we have bodies? What would we do with an eternity of days!

My first question, though, was whether there was any point in speculating about such things at all. If the real heaven is unknowable, God's well-kept secret, how can we form any idea of it? In fact, should we even try?

In the years since I wandered the dusty basement of the Louvre, I've come not only to believe in an afterworld, but to feel that we Christians *must* try to picture it. Not to mistake our human projections for the reality, as the Egyptians did. But to give us that hope which Christians have always described as the anchor of the soul.

In the sixteenth century a woman expressed her hope in a poem:

*O Master and Maker! My hope
is in thee.
My Jesus, dear Saviour! Now set
my soul free.
From this my hard prison,
my spirit uprisen,
soars upward to thee.*

The woman was Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, awaiting execution in an English prison. Her serenity throughout her long ordeal, like that of Christians in every century, came from the hope of a better life to follow.

Faith. Hope. Charity For a long time after I started going to church, I was puzzled by the inclusion of "hope" in this great trilogy of Christian virtues. About Faith I heard many sermons. About Love even more. But scarcely a word about Hope.

Delighted at any excuse for research, I consulted the hefty theological tomes of various church libraries. Christian hope, it appeared, meant just one thing: the expectation of a glorious eternity in heaven. And for most of Christian history, it seemed to have been the *most* preached-about subject.

All very well, I thought, *in the past, when most people could hope for little on this earth*. Wasn't the historic emphasis on heaven simply escapism? Even, more ominously, a cynical ploy on the part of whatever group was on top -- "the opiate of the people," pie in the sky by and by? Weren't we right, nowadays, to downplay another existence? Hadn't focusing on heaven meant neglecting real needs here on earth?

No, thought C. S. Lewis. "It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world," he writes, "that they have become so ineffective in this." From the deeds of a small group of apostles to the handful of English evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, "all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven."