



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*Let no one mourn that he has fallen again and again,
for forgiveness has risen from the grave.*

St. John Chrysostom

The lack of action in celestial imagery may also stem from thinking of heaven as the end of the story, a showcase for perfected souls, rather than a realm of ongoing growth and service. We give its citizens halos or crowns or martyrs' palms, but nothing to do, their work finished forever. It's a vision not of eternal bliss, but everlasting boredom.



The Patriarch

"Heaven as conventionally conceived," observed George Bernard Shaw, "is a place so inane, so dull, so useless, so miserable, that nobody has ever ventured to describe a whole day in heaven." A life without challenge... It's a state of being we can't relate to.

Hell, on the other hand, has always been sadly recognizable. We live in a world of evident evil -- war, disease, cruelty. We all know pain and grief; we all know our own propensity for sin and the weakness of our best resolutions. If I hope for heaven instead of hell, it's because a power stronger and more consistent than mine is conniving at the outcome!

Sixteen hundred years ago, a man wrestled with these issues and concluded that, real though hell was, it was a pitiful and defenseless place confronted with the might of heaven.

In an age of ostentation, John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople, lived frugally. Instead of spending the church's revenues on palaces and vestments, he ministered to the poor. In A.D. 400, shortly before he was banished by the empress for rebuking her lavish court, he preached an Easter sermon.

"Let no one fear death," he began, "for the death of our Savior has set us free." As for hell ...

He destroyed Hell when He descended into it.
He put it into an uproar even as it tasted of His flesh.
Hell was in an uproar because it was done away with.
It was in an uproar because it is mocked.

It was in an uproar, for it is destroyed.
It is in an uproar, for it is annihilated.
It is in an uproar, for it is now made captive.
Hell took a body, and discovered God.
It took earth, and encountered Heaven.

It's the opposite of the aggressive hell, the sweetly passive heaven, of later art. Heaven, in John Chrysostom's view, is the formidable force!

A Crack in the Ground

In C. S. Lewis's novel *The Great Divorce*, hell is a gray urban wilderness of nearly empty streets, since its quarrelsome inhabitants are constantly moving farther from their neighbors. Any time they choose, these lost souls can board a bus for heaven. Ascending hour after hour through an infinite abyss, they arrive at last in a land of radiant beauty. Beside its solid residents, the busload of new arrivals are frail ghostlike creatures, too weak even to bend the grass of heaven.

"You'll firm up when you've been here awhile," the heavenly greeters assure them, trying to persuade the newcomers to stay. Most of them, however, for the very reasons that put them in hell, insist on returning there. The book's nicest touch comes when Lewis, as narrator, returns to the brink of the chasm through which he and the other passengers on the bus have ascended. The great abyss he remembers is impossible to find. From heaven's vantage point, it's an infinitesimal crack in the soil.

"All hell," Lewis's heavenly guide explains, "is smaller than one pebble of your earthly world. But it is smaller than one atom of *this* world, the Real World."

Hell a tiny, insignificant place even in comparison with earth! And earth infinitesimally small, set beside heaven ...

"Let us not look back upon the world and fancy we have given up great things," wrote a man who in the third century gave away an earthly fortune to live in a desert cave.

Born in AD 251 two wealthy Christian parents, Antony of Egypt was twenty years old when in church one day he heard a reading from the Gospel of Mark. "Go," Mark records Jesus saying to another rich young man, "sell what you have and give to the poor... and come, follow me" (Mark 10:21 RSV). Antony took the command personally. For the rest of his life – he lived to be a hundred and five! - he devoted himself to prayer, fasting, and self-denial.

And to his remote cave came everyone from peasants to Emperor Constantine, seeking his wisdom for their worldly problems. How did Antony understand this world we're in so well? Because he looked at it from the standpoint of an infinitely greater one.

“For the whole of earth,” he said, “is a very little thing compared with the whole of heaven.”

The Weaver

*My life is but a weaving between my God and me,
I do not choose the colors He works so steadily.
Oft' times He works in sorrow, and I in foolish pride,
Forget He sees the upper, and I the underside.
Will God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why
The dark threads are as needful in the Weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned.*

On a card distributed at the Corrie ten Boom House
Haarlem, the Netherlands

Antony looked at earth from a larger perspective.

In her suitcase, Corrie ten Boom carried a little piece of handcraft to illustrate the two different viewpoints. It was a scrap of cloth, embroidered with multicolored threads -- red, purple, black, metallic gold. Displaying it before an audience, she would explain that it represented the glorious life awaiting us in the next world. Puzzled faces would look back at her. The cloth showed only an untidy tangle of snarls and loose threads.

"Oh, I forgot!" Corrie would exclaim. "You're seeing it from the wrong side!"

Turning the cloth around, she'd hold it up again. From "heaven's side" it revealed a magnificent crown, the design God was weaving for eternity with the seemingly mismatched threads of an earthly lifetime.

I first saw this little visual aid as Corrie was unpacking her bags at our house. Thirteen-year-old Liz had given Corrie her bedroom, and she and I were helping Corrie put things away. The cloth, folded wrong side out, was at the bottom of the suitcase.

"What are you making, Tante Corrie?" Liz asked eagerly. Unlike her all-thumbs mother, Liz enjoys handwork.

"Oh, that's not mine," Corrie said, picking it up. "That's the work of the finest weaver there is."

I probably looked as dubious as Liz did. "I suppose it would be neater," Corrie admitted, "if we undid the snarls. But then..." with a flourish she unfolded the cloth, "God's beautiful picture wouldn't hold together."

Earth's side, heaven's side. Different views of the same material.

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