



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

Metaphors like these are the best -- probably the only -- way to get at a truth beyond language. I remember my early quandary about numbers. How could God attend individually to billions of men and women! Then a few years ago I heard a story that gave me my own metaphor.



I can't remember where I heard it, just that it concerned a young mother so totally wrapped up with her first child that when she became pregnant again, she was afraid she could never love the new baby as much. "There's just no room in my heart," she worried over the phone to a friend in another town.

Some months after the second child arrived, the friend came to visit. The new child was obviously the delight of her mother. "So you found room in your heart after all!"

"Not at all." The young mother shook her head. "There wasn't room, just as I knew there wouldn't be."

The friend stared at her. "Then how are you handling it?"

"I grew another heart."

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Yes! I thought. That's what it was like for me with our second child! The total love I felt for newborn Donn subtracted nothing from my love for three-year-old Scott. The new member of the family occupied his own inviolable space labeled *Donn's alone*. And when Liz arrived a few years later, so did a special heart filled only with love for her.

Not long after hearing this story, I stopped to look at a display of religious pictures in a window on Lexington Avenue in New York. One was the familiar image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus -- the kind of too-sweet, too-literal Christian art that I've

always especially disliked. Pleading eyes fixed on the viewer, Jesus points to his breast where a heart burns with flames of love.

Turned off by the style, I'd never asked myself what the image stood for. But that day I found myself remembering the young mother's answer. Perhaps, I thought, what's true of physical birth is true too of each New Birth. *This is the heart I grew for you alone*, the garish painting seemed to say. *Without you this heart would be empty*.

I went inside and bought the picture.

### *The Sea Shore*

Metaphors. Efforts to lay hold of realities too big for definition. Our friend Bill Bair told us about taking a little boy to see the ocean for the first time. Seven-year-old Ted, Bill said, stood speechless on the New Jersey shore, staring out across that limitless, ceaselessly moving panorama, a million flashes of sunlight glinting from the surface. For perhaps five minutes the boy simply gazed without a word.

"And that," Ted pronounced at last, "is just on top."

It's only the "surface" of heaven we glimpse from earth -- and even this as different from anything in our experience as the dynamic ocean from the fixed land where young Ted stood marveling.

We're like the famous blind men arguing over an elephant. "A spear," said the man by the tusk. "A snake," insisted the one at the trunk. From a leg, "a tree," the tail, "a rope," the flank, "a wall," the ear, "a great leaf."

And all were right.

### **The Cup of Coffee**

*Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known.*

*1 John 3:2*

God can't show us heaven's side of the cloth yet, but we can seize on what he *can* tell us. With or without literal bodies, what kind of creatures does the Bible say we will be in the life to come? Not angels, certainly, that totally separate creation.

I have a shoe box where I keep cartoons about heaven, departed souls decked out with wings, white robes, and halos. Behind two of these comic conventions are good

biblical concepts. Wings because in the next world we'll be free of physical limitations. White robes because in his Revelation, St. John saw the redeemed clad in robes "made white in the blood of the Lamb."

But a halo above my head? A holiness of my own? Wholly good, pure, loving? Would this be a self I could recognize?

When John had his first cancer surgery, I stayed at a friend's apartment near the hospital. There were two other out-of-town guests there that week, young women about my age. I've long since forgotten their names, but never the impression they made.

Or... did not make. How can I describe two people who scarcely seemed to occupy the space through which they moved? They belonged to a movement based, they earnestly explained to me, on the "Four Absolutes." Absolute Honesty. Absolute Purity. Absolute Love. Absolute Trust. They had erased -- at least, apparently, from their conscious minds -- all negatives. No selfishness. No fear. No anger. No sorrow.

The world they described over the breakfast table was a million miles, not a few blocks, from the pain-haunted corridors of Memorial Hospital.

And far more terrifying.

There was one moment so uncanny I can feel the fright of it still. My third morning at the apartment, there was a soft knock at my bedroom door. I opened it to see one of the young women kindly holding out a cup of coffee. I could smell the brew, feel the cup's warmth as I took it from her. But though I could see her gently smiling face perfectly clearly, I was suddenly certain that she was not there.

*I could walk straight forward, I thought, and encounter only air.*

A person without personality So yielding, so self-effacing, there was no identity to respond to. Eliminating negatives, she had eliminated some core of selfhood.

### *Whole Picture*

This can't be what our redeemed selves will be like! Their efforts at perfection had made them *less* than full human beings, is what I felt about my apartment mates. The modern-day saints it's been my delight to know -- people like David Wilkerson, Dick Riley, Catherine Marshall, Corrie ten Boom, Molly Shelley --are complex, gutsy, many-faceted folks, full of contrasts and contradictions. They get angry, they get tired, they get discouraged and confused and out of sorts. They're not absolutely anything, except absolutely sure of God's strength and their own weakness.

Denying our humanity cannot build a life substantial enough to stand up to eternity. The larger life promised in Jesus must somehow incorporate the failures and pain of each of our stories. The dark threads of Corrie's embroidery.

When I look at Andrew Foster's portrait of St. Paul in the church on Nantucket, I think back to that experience in the apartment. Not only the gold of heaven, in the painting, but the saint's black beard, his swarthy skin, his dark clothing, *all* seem to shimmer with light. And I recall what Andrew said about the way icons are painted. Western artists, he said, lay down the lighter tones first, then add dark ones for contour. With an icon, it's the reverse:

"The blacks and browns and purples go on first. Then the surface is built up, layer by layer, each succeeding color lighter and brighter, until the whole picture seems to glow."

The *whole* picture... "Then shall I know," wrote St. Paul on one of the pages of the book that heaven has clothed in jewels, "even as also I am known" (1 Cor. 13: 12 KJV)

And what will he see as he looks at himself with that total comprehension? A flawless person? Or a person whose somber shades too glow with the "lighter tones" added by the brush of perfect understanding? Perhaps in heaven we will see ourselves, virtues and faults, joys and sorrows, in the radiance of the picture completed.

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