



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.*

*Ephesians 1:3-4 NASB*

These verses describe the finished picture, the portrait of each of us that God has seen all along. Throughout our earthly lives, through our struggles and yearnings, through all our "becoming," he sees us as we will eventually come to be in Jesus, for all eternity.



Artists, I've always thought, possess some of that divine farsightedness, that ability to see things that are "not yet." After Dad Sherrill's death, John's mother had stayed on at Union Seminary as Dean of Women. I was getting out of the car there one day when Mrs. Van Dusen, wife of the seminary president, caught sight of two-year-old Liz.

"I'll do a pastel of her!" she announced.

This was not a lady you argued with. We set a date and Liz spent an itchy hour on the Van Dusens' sofa, sitting as still as a two-year old can. At last Mrs. Van Dusen handed me the finished product.

I tried to hide my disappointment. Mrs. Van Dusen's work was highly regarded; everyone had told us how lucky we were to be getting an original by her. But... this wasn't Liz at all! It was a little blond child, pretty enough, but certainly not a portrait. Still, respecting the artist, I had the pastel framed and hung it in the TV room where, as with any familiar object, I soon stopped seeing it.

Four years later, rearranging pictures in that room, I stared at the drawing amazed. There was Liz! Liz to the last detail-eyes, cheeks, mouth, hair, even her customary expression! Liz at age six. Invisible to me in the two-year-old. Evident to eyes that saw more.

I like to think of God holding the completed portrait of each of us in his hand, as

he's held it in his mind from the beginning. Looking at the portrait of the person he is creating, and finding it good.

## **Wall Hanging**

*For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.*

*1 Thessalonians 4:16 RSV*

It hangs on the wall outside my study where I pass it a dozen times a day, a five-foot panel of linen depicting in needlework the resurrection of the dead. High in the sky a trumpet summons the faithful, who leave their graves and soar upward to the outstretched arms of Jesus. At the bottom of the panel is embroidered, '*Jezus Messias Wederkomst*,' Jesus the Messiah Comes Again.

The wall hanging is the work of an elderly Dutch lady who does needlework to raise money for Brother Andrew's current ministry to the Islamic world. It's her vision of the Second Coming when, the Bible tells us, Jesus will reappear on earth and the dead will rise. Our "Easter Day," C. S. Lewis called it in the poem he composed as his wife's epitaph:

*Here the whole world (stars, water, air, And field and forest, as they were  
reflected in a single mind)  
Like cast off clothes was left behind  
In ashes, yet with hope that she  
Re-born from holy poverty,  
In Lenten Lands, hereafter may  
Resume them on her Easter Day.*

When will this Easter Day occur? When will Jesus come again? For two thousand years Christians have asked this question.

"Hereafter" is the most Lewis or anyone else can say. For the Bible also suggests that, for an individual, death and Easter may occur simultaneously. "Today," Jesus told the repentant thief who was dying with him, "you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

When will the dead arise? Maybe the *when* of heaven, like the *where* and the *how*, has no answer we can understand.

## The Elixir

*When we've been there ten thousand years,  
Bright shining as the sun,  
We've no less days to sing God's praise.  
Than when we've first begun.*

*John Newton*

*Time* in heaven... how different from earth's time it must be! It was another of my early difficulties in attempting to form a concept of heaven-before-us: *Forever* lasts so long! Such an endless stretch of years, centuries, millennia... with never any fewer eons ahead. Mightn't eternity come not as blessing, but burden?

Leos Janacek's opera, *The Makropulos Case*, is about a woman enabled as a result of a chemical elixir to live on and on. That was all I knew of the story as John and I parked the car in the Lincoln Center garage in New York on January 5, 1996, for the Metropolitan Opera's first-ever performance of it, with the great soprano Jessye Norman in the title role.

But Ms. Norman never stepped onstage that night.

The house lights dimmed, the crystal chandeliers rose majestically to the ceiling of the four-thousand-seat theater, and the curtains opened on a larger-than-life office setting. A lawyer's clerk, alone on stage, mused on the meaning of life as he climbed a ladder set against a gigantic filing cabinet. Ten feet up, he paused. The words he sang, as translated on the monitor at my seat, were:

"Too bad you can only live so long."

As he finished the line, he released his grip on the ladder and fell backward. *What a dramatic opening scene!* I thought, probably along with the rest of the audience. *The fall so realistically done!*

Too realistic... falling too fast... landing on his back ... In the sudden silence of the orchestra, it took a moment for the thud to reach our seats at the back of the huge house.

The curtains swiftly closed. The audience milled for a while in the aisles. When the announcement came, it was simply that Richard Versalle was being taken to a hospital. But Mr. Versalle was dead, probably before he struck the floor.

The performance of course was cancelled. Back in our car, we wrestled all the way home with the extraordinary juxtaposition of stage fiction and real life we had just witnessed. A sixty-three-year-old tenor who, my choir-trained husband says, had just hit a beautiful high B, dying as he sang that life is too short. In an opera about a woman who's discovered, according to the program notes, that her life is too long.

A few days later I read the complete libretto. Elina Makropulos's age at the time of the story is three hundred and thirty-seven. If three hundred years has been an

unendurable lifetime -- as the dialogue indicates -- what about a life lasting three thousand, or three million years! Elina has not grown old as long-lived people do on earth. It's not infirmity that destroys her desire to live; the elixir has bestowed perpetual youth. It's simply the ceaseless succession of days, no matter how enjoyable each one in itself, that eventually becomes intolerable.

If a never-ending life is a promise rather than a threat, time in heaven must be experienced in another way.

### *Ahna*

I got a hint of this other way when I visited a friend of my mother's in a nursing home in Sudbury, Massachusetts. Mother had warned me that Ahna wouldn't know me. A brilliant woman, a pioneer in the education of learning-disabled children, Ahna Fiske's memory, Mother said, had failed.

Sure enough, this accomplished lady had lost all recall, even of events only minutes old. Over and over, Ahna welcomed me into her room as though I'd only then arrived.

Otherwise, though, her observations were as keen as ever. She was clearly aware that her memory no longer served her, for she kept asking, "Have I just told you that?" Nor had she lost any of her zest for life. As I stood up to leave, she apologized for not remembering the name I'd repeated a dozen times.

"I can't recall much of anything these days," she said. "I only have the moment I'm in, so I just enjoy that one."

*I only have the moment...* As I went out to my car, I wondered if heaven's "time" may be a little like that -- except with our memories intact! As William Blake reminds us in his poem "Eternity," to fail to live in the passing moment is to fail to live:

*He who bends to himself a Joy  
Doth the winged life destroy;  
But he who kisses the Joy as it flies  
Lives in Eternity's sunrise.*

"Kissing the joy!" Not trying to hang onto it or waiting for a joy that's to come tomorrow. Perhaps if we could learn to do this, we'd have a hint of what heaven's time is like.

Perhaps we'll know "forever" as *the moment I'm in*.