



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

The Church blesses some things, not because some things are holy and others are not, but so that we will know that everything is holy.

David M. Allen

I've been in heaven all along, I know now, only the signposts that could tell me where I was were written in another language. I thought heaven came when problems were behind me. But the signs, as I've learned to read them, say heaven lies right in the middle of them.



### The Prayer Closet

I remember, years ago, arriving at 7:00 in the morning at the California home of Roy Rogers and his wife, Dale Evans. This was the time in our family when seven-year-old Scott spent ten minutes before the mirror each morning adjusting his cowboy hat and six-shooters to match the photo of Roy on his wall. I'd come west with a Roy Rogers songbook and a dozen reminders from Scott to ask Roy to sign it.

It wasn't Roy I'd come to see, though. I was there to interview Dale on a subject seldom discussed in the 1950s: how to mix career and family -- seven children in Dale's case! I wanted answers not merely as a reporter but for myself. I had only three children, and work I could do for the most part at home, but still felt tugged in many directions. Here at last was someone with experience. I'd heard that strength for Dale's many-sided life came from daily prayer. When? I intended to ask. How did she ever find the time?

The door of the rambling ranch house was opened by a teenage girl. "I can't find my gym shoes!" she wailed.

As I stepped inside, a plastic airplane sailed past my knees, followed by a tow-

headed boy in blue pajamas. "Mom's in the bathroom," he said.

Dale had asked me to come at this early hour because she and Roy had a recording session later that morning. I found her dabbing a piece of cotton on the mouth of a sobbing five-year-old. "Debbie cut her lip on the washstand," she said.

The little girl comforted, Dale looked at her watch and sprinted for the kitchen. While she cracked eggs into a bowl and fed slices of bread into a toaster, I poured orange juice into a row of glasses lining the counter.

"Sandy!" to the youngster in pajamas, "why aren't you dressed?"

"Because Dusty has my pants."

And so it went as children appeared, ate, dashed out the door. It was like a whole week of crises at our house -- the missing note for school, the juice spilled on the only clean shirt, the scuffle that the other one started. And in the midst of it all, Roy's voice from somewhere in the back of the house, where the phone had been ringing nonstop. "It's the studio. Can we come an hour earlier?"

When the last child had been inspected, kissed, and waved to the bus stop, Dale sank with a sigh into a chair. It seemed a cruelty to press questions on her now, but... how in the world did she manage a prayer life? Did she have a place apart somewhere -- someplace away from pressures?

Yes, she said. "Come on, I'll show you."

She led me outside and around behind the barn. There, out of sight of the busy household, was a jumble of giant boulders honeycombed with hidden nooks. It was the hideaway of my childhood dreams. I could understand, I said a little enviously, how she'd feel close to God in such a setting.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? But I never did."

I had asked, she reminded me, if she *had* a place to escape to, not if she used it. "At one time I did. I used to come out here a lot. I had the idea that prayer meant time apart."

## **The Peas on the Floor**

But sitting here among the silent rocks, she'd heard only her own spinning thoughts. *Why wasn't Linda eating? Was Dodie napping or getting into mischief?*

"Then of course, I'd feel guilty because I wasn't praying. God seemed a million miles away, and I knew it was my fault."

Seeking answers, she'd joined a group of women on a three-day silent retreat at an Episcopal convent up in the mountains. In that serene and holy place God did indeed speak to her. And what he said was, *Don't look for me here. This is where I am for those I've called to be nuns. For you, I am in the noise and the bedlam and the peas on the floor.*

And that's where she'd found him, Dale said, ever since. We went back to the kitchen, where she showed me Scripture cards in a little loaf-shaped box. "My 'daily bread,' " she said. Instead of waiting for that imaginary free hour when she could read the Bible, "I need just a free second. While I wait for the cereal to boil I'll draw out a verse and memorize it."

Prayer had become a constant thing, she went on, woven through the day's busyness -- driving the car, waiting for a child at the dentist. "Heaven, I've learned," said Dale, "is not up on that mountaintop or hidden away among the rocks. It's not me getting off to be with God, but God beside me every hour of every day"

## Light Show

In growing fields of corn,  
The lily and the thorn.  
The pleasant and forlorn,  
All declare God is there.

Elder Hibard

Heaven every hour. Even an hour of physical pain?

I think of another car trip, this one in Germany, when I was aware of existing in two seemingly incompatible worlds at once. It was five days before Christmas, 1973. Our college-age kids were flying over to join us for the holidays in Europe where John and I were working. Their flight was due in Luxembourg at 4:00 that afternoon.

And I woke up that morning in Munich, 300 miles away, pain stabbing my chest and arms, and a 104-degree fever. There was no postponing the drive to Luxembourg: the flight's arrival was our only contact point. "We'll stop at the first town we come to after doctors' offices open," John said.

He lowered the passenger seat of our rented Renault to almost flat and half carried me to the car in the predawn dark. Head throbbing, muscles burning, I felt every bump in the pavement, every turn of the wheels as he steered through the streets of the city and onto the highway.

And then the sun came up.

During the night, a freezing fog had settled over Germany. Every tree limb, every bare branch and twig, was wrapped in a sheath of ice. Lying nearly prone, the tops of the trees lining the autobahn were all I could see.

But these were not shapes of wood and bark! They were trees of fire, dazzling diamond bursts of sheer color. Overhead they passed, a never-ending stream of flashing rainbows ... more colors than I knew existed ... more splendor than my mind could grasp.

Hour after hour, mile after mile, the celestial ice show continued. John, eyes on the road and German drivers, could only steal glances at the glory erupting around us. But I lay bathed in it, feasting on light and beauty and joy.

And hurting. That was the mystifying thing about the experience. I was in as severe pain as I could almost ever recall, sick to my stomach, too, in the rocking car, physically miserable. And yet simultaneously, on a totally separate level, entranced, delighted, supremely happy.

We stopped in Augsburg, where a doctor diagnosed pneumonia and put me on medication that by evening had lowered the fever. But all that long day, two realities, misery and bliss, coexisted.