



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*My desire is to depart and be with Christ,
for that is far better*

Philippians 1:23

Christians share another hope -- more fundamental even than that of meeting one another, which after all is common to many religions. To us, to "go to heaven" means above all, to be with Jesus.



Embarkation

In "Crossing the Bar," that beautiful meditation on his own death written at age eighty, England's poet laureate, Alfred Lord Tennyson, likened death to setting out to sea. This poem, he stipulated, was always to be placed at the end of any collection of his works. In its last two verses -- the final word, therefore, that Tennyson wished to leave with every reader -- he looks forward to that most important of all reunions.

*Twilight and evening bell
And after that the dark:
And may there be no sadness of farewell
When I embark;*

*For though from out our bourne of Time and Place.
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crossed the bar.*

In the 1970s I wrote a book about a young man who came to the very brink of that sea. Return from Tomorrow recounts the experience of George Ritchie who, in 1943, at the age of twenty, was pronounced dead of influenza in an army hospital in Texas. In the more than ten minutes before his heart started beating again -- a medical "impossibility" -- he had an experience so vivid and detailed that it launched three

decades of life-after-death research.

The Threshold

Unlike John's and my heaven game, George's vision of another world was completely unsought. Since the book appeared, other Christians have shared similar experiences with me -- none of them intentional. Images of the afterlife catch these people by surprise, in fact are usually contrary to their previously held ideas.

Their reports are no more "factual" of course than those of any subjective experience. But subjective experiences have their own truth. George Ritchie -- Dr. Ritchie by the time I knew him, a medical doctor and psychiatrist -- has based his entire life, his choice of career, his extensive volunteer work, on those few minutes spent in a different kind of consciousness.

He was absolutely sure -- "surer than I am that I'm sitting here with you right now," he'd say -- that he'd spent those moments with Jesus. Like John's experience in the recovery room at Memorial, Jesus came to George as light. "Like a million welders' lamps all blazing at once," George said. *I'm glad I don't have physical eyes, he remembers thinking. That light would destroy the retina in an instant.*

"The light was a Man, and this man loved me unconditionally He knew every unlovable thing about me, every mean, selfish thought and action since the day I was born, and loved me anyway"

Jesus' total knowledge, George went on, was simply an observable fact. "For into that room along with His radiant presence had also entered every single episode of my entire life. Everything that had ever happened to me was simply there, in full view, all seemingly taking place at that moment."

Thousands upon thousands of simultaneous happenings. How this was possible, George didn't know. He saw himself in a classroom at the University of Richmond before enlisting in the army. And at the same time -- "there was no earlier, no later" -- saw his own birth and the ill and dying young mother he'd never known. He watched himself go forward at a church service at age eleven to ask Jesus to be his Lord -- and watched churchgoing swiftly became a dull routine.

Illuminated by that same all-seeing Love were "future" events, fragments of the life that follows earthly death. It was only the outskirts of heaven he was shown, George believes: a region where men and women seemed engrossed in self-forgetful tasks of many kinds.

Reluctant Return

What strikes me most about all these near-death experiences, however, is not the details, but the emotional response of the individuals to whom they occur. The "dying" person, revived by medical intervention, is grief stricken at leaving the glorious realm he

seemed to be entering. He fights his enforced return to an existence drab and dull by comparison. He pleads to stay with a presence so overwhelmingly loving that even the closest earthly relationship seems a mere shadow of the real thing.

Fond husbands, mothers with small children, young people with beckoning careers -- people with literally everything on earth to live for -- want only to go back to the heaven they've glimpsed however briefly. "I cried out to Jesus not to leave me," said George, "not to abandon me in this dark and narrow place!"

It's so completely the opposite of the usual view-- earth the sunlit realm, death the dark one -- that I'm struck by the universal agreement of Christians who've stood at that threshold. Are their experiences simply the result of illness or trauma? Drug-induced delusions, perhaps, or a delirium caused by fever? They themselves, at least, say no. For the rest of their earthly lives, they continue to believe in a bright afterworld no skepticism of their hearers can tarnish.

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