



Heaven Begins Now

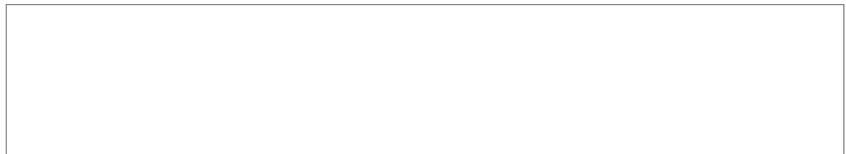
a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*I will forgive their iniquity,
and I will remember their sin no more.
Jeremiah 31:34 KJV*

And into this bright heaven,
who is admitted? Everyone?
An elect few? Christians only?
Good people only?



After *Return from Tomorrow* was published, a number of readers wrote to challenge me with such questions. Questions far beyond my ken! Even as respected a Christian theologian as Henry Ward Beecher, that nineteenth-century champion of freedom for slaves and votes for women, would venture no opinion on who goes to heaven.

"I'll probably have three surprises there," he said. "To find people I never expected to see among the elect. To look in vain for some I was sure would qualify. And the biggest surprise of -- to find myself there!"

In that realm whose signature is surprise, the population will probably astonish us all. That Christianity is the Way to heaven, I do not doubt. That in Jesus are many ways, I suspect. Ways where in his limitless humility he works unrecognized. Such theological depths I happily leave to those qualified to plumb them; the only one whose eligibility for heaven need concern me is myself.

Sin

When I first became a Christian, "sin" was as novel a concept to me as "salvation." As I slowly grasped its import, my misdeeds and failings loomed as impassable roadblocks on the journey so recently begun. I discovered the church's traditional list of "seven deadly sins" and pasted it as a checklist to the inside cover of my brand-new Bible.

Pride
Covetousness
Lust
Anger

Gluttony
Envy
Sloth

Struggling with new self-imposed standards of behavior, I could convict myself of several of them any day of the week.

I would repent, try harder, fail once more. The only thing that has changed through the years is my attitude toward this dismal record. What I began to notice was that those who'd walked this Way longest were also the ones most conscious of their own sinfulness.

And least troubled by it.

"No one is good but God alone," Jesus told a young man who wanted to lead a blameless life. And for these mature souls, God's goodness was enough.

One of my favorite stories about St. Francis records his response to a companion who feared he wasn't good enough to get into heaven. "I still have not attained purity of heart," Brother Leo lamented.

"And what is purity of heart?" asked Francis.

"It means to have no sins or faults to reproach myself for."

"But Leo," the saint replied, "we will *always* have something to reproach ourselves for."

"That's why I despair," said Leo.

"Leo, don't be so preoccupied with yourself! Turn and look at Jesus. Rejoice that he is your Friend and Savior."

"Still," Leo insisted, "God demands our effort."

"Certainly," said Francis. "But holiness is not a personal achievement. It is an emptiness you discover in yourself. Instead of resenting it, you accept it and it becomes the free space where the Lord can create anew. To cry out, 'You alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord,' that is what it means to be pure of heart."

Grace

This side of eternity, we will never unravel the good from the bad, the pure from the impure. But what I have come to see is that God is big enough to receive us with all our mixture. We do not have to be bright, or pure, or filled with faith, or anything. That is what grace means, and not only are we saved by grace, we live by it as well.

Richard Foster

To discover our emptiness ... To discard those extravagant expectations of ourselves. To accept the Way God has provided, rather than trying to forge our own route, however virtuous-seeming.

To "sin," said St. Augustine, is to wander from this Way that leads to joy. His own early wanderings are described in his *Confessions*. This man whose writings are second only to the Bible itself in their influence on western Christianity, started out as a Manichaeon, a sect that believed that the universe was ruled by two eternally warring natures, one good, one evil. The human body belonged to the evil side and was therefore despised by "spiritual" people.

When Augustine converted to Christianity, he rejected this dualistic picture. God is the sole creator, he declared, and everything he made is good. As for evil, it was merely a corruption of something good, like a hole in a piece of cloth, which has no existence of its own. Yes, he concluded, human nature suffers this corruption, but our own efforts at purity cannot put it right, as the Manichaeans thought. God's grace alone keeps us on the path to heaven.

The New Testament word for sin is *hamartia*, an archer's term for "missing the mark." Not the commission or omission of particular deeds, but being off target. Failing to do God's specific task for me alone at a given moment. Failing to be Zuysa. Failing to be Tib. No matter how praiseworthy an action, if it wasn't in his design for me, I've missed the mark.

Such sins, if I kept score, would far outnumber my bull's-eyes! I don't keep score, though. The more I know of God, the less my focus is on my own efforts, the more on the grace about which Augustine wrote so compellingly.

The Wooden Door

Near the end of that grueling pilgrimage route from Paris to Santiago de Compostela comes the most demanding stretch of all. For John and me in 1999, crossing the Cantabrian mountains meant no more than a day in the car on a winding road. For the medieval foot pilgrim, though!

For him it had already been a trip of many months, across swollen rivers, bandit-infested forests, the snowbound Pyrenees, and an endless arid plateau. Now before the exhausted traveler loomed this second, even steeper chain of mountains.

On their eastern slope, at the start of the long ascent, is the town of Villafranca del Bierzo. And there John and I discovered a tiny pilgrimage church standing forgotten in a weed-choked field. It was raining as we picked our way around it through the wet grass.

The church was locked tight, a squat gray-stone structure with mere slits for windows and what must be a very dark interior.

What we had come to see, though, was on the outside. The north wall of the little building is pierced by an arched doorway of weathered wood. To the foot-weary traveler of long ago, this was the gate of heaven.

It is the Puerta del Perdon, the Door of Pardon. Any pilgrim too old, too ill, or too lame to complete the last most strenuous seventy-five miles of the trek, could step through this door and receive all the blessings of those who made it to Compostela.

A door of pardon... the journey accounted complete, even for those of us who fall short. *For every imperfect traveler*, I thought, standing in the rain that afternoon, *what a symbol of hope!* I added it to Father Brinkerhoff's closet and Becky's smile in my mental picture of heaven. No pearly gates at heaven's entry! I see instead a scarred wooden door, hear a voice cry as it swings wide,

“All is forgiven! Come right in!”

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