



# Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

## All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.*

*1 Timothy 1:15-16*

The door swings wide, not because we've earned entry, but because Jesus has paid the awful penalty for our sins and flung it open. Even someone living as self-forgetful a life as Catherine of Siena knew her deeds could not "earn" heaven.



"Lord," she cried, dying in pain at age thirty-three, "you call me to you and I come, not in my own merits, but in your mercy, which I ask in virtue of the most precious blood of your dear Son."

Heaven, for saints as well as sinners, God's gift of grace. Costly to him. Free to us. Unearned. Undeserved.

In 1978 John and I joined hundreds of others waiting to enter Canterbury Cathedral in England for an evening service, the culmination of a week-long conference. The crowd was so large that we were admitted by number, according to where we were housed in the nearby University of Kent. John and I were in the last group to be called. By that time, every seat in the vast nave was taken, the choir stalls were full, and even the extra chairs set up in the aisles were occupied.

Ushers led some forty of us up to the very front, where on the broad steps leading to the high altar was the only unoccupied space. We sat down on stones cold with the chill of centuries, and the service began.

Every ten years Anglican bishops from all over the world gather at Canterbury for the Lambeth Conference. This was to begin the following week, and some fifty bishops had

already arrived in the city. They sat on bishops' "thrones" in a semicircle just above us, their colorful robes a bright rainbow around the altar.

The great organ played, the hymns rang among the ancient arches. My spirit soared with the music, but as the minutes passed the ice of the stone beneath me crept into my bones. I tugged my raincoat tighter and sat on my hands.

### *Elevation*

At a tap on my shoulder I turned around. The bishop seated just above us was leaning down to me. I learned later that he was Chiu Ban It, Bishop of Singapore; what I saw was a smile and an insistent gesture at the empty throne beside him. I protested, shook my head, but Bishop Chiu took my arm and pointed firmly at the throne.

And there I sat for the next hour and a half, elevated in an instant from a shiverer on the steps to a seat among the great. I was aware of curious eyes upon me. This was before there were female priests in the English church, let alone bishops. Many must have wondered why the woman in the tan raincoat was sitting with that splendidly garbed assembly.

None wondered more than I. *Was this*, I was thinking, *how our election to heaven will be?* Suddenly raised to a seat of honor not our own? Even those late to enter, lifted high? No effort, no virtue of ours involved, simply the compassion of someone greater.

### **Hell**

*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.*

*2 Corinthians 5:19*

Something in us rebels at this undeserved favor! If heaven's an unearned gift, where's our accountability? Do we bear no responsibility for the way we live our lives? Are there no consequences for the evil we do? What about those biblical references, so beloved of medieval painters and reforming preachers, to a hell of eternal punishment?

Long before I took either heaven or hell seriously, I'd observed that artists have a much easier time depicting torment in the fiery pit than joy among the fleecy clouds. Medieval and Renaissance paintings show every barb on Satan's instruments of torture, every clawed monster and fanged demon, in hideously believable detail.

Portrayals of heaven by these same artists are not nearly so convincing. With its leaping flames and frenzied figures, hell is at least a lively place. Depictions of heaven, on the other hand, are strangely static. There stand the saints in regimented rows, gazing motionless at a solemn Christ, rigidly seated on a throne.

Every Christmas Eve, John and I tune in to the service broadcast around the world from King's College Chapel in Cambridge, England. Though the other music varies from year to year, the opening hymn is always the same: Cecil Frances Alexander's haunting "Once in Royal David's City," sung in the angelic treble of boys' voices. The last verse looks forward to heaven:

*Not in that poor lowly stable,  
With the oxen standing round,  
We shall see Him, but in heaven,  
Set at God's right hand on high,  
When, like stars,  
His children crowned,  
All in white shall wait around.*

Waiting around. It seems to be the only heavenly activity painters and poets can envisage.

And waiting with such somber faces! *Why*, I wondered as I learned more about the Christian faith, *should depictions of heaven be so grimly serious? Why not merrily alive?* "If we aren't allowed to laugh in heaven," pronounced no less a theologian than Martin Luther, "then I don't want to go there."

Our sober-sides picture of heaven may be a carryover from an era of lengthy sermons and Sundays when "frivolous amusements" were forbidden. But as anyone who's been to a Jewish wedding knows, the Bible's image of heaven as the marriage supper of the Lamb evokes a feast, a dance, a celebration, a shout of joy

Angels can fly, someone has said, because they take themselves lightly. Everlasting bliss surely includes that absorbed contemplation of the Beloved portrayed in sacred art – but also mirth, merriment, high-spirited good humor! The Banquet of the Lamb will be fun!

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