



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*New mercies each returning day,
around us hover while we pray;
new perils past, new sins forgiven,
new thoughts of God,
new hopes of heaven.*

John Keble

How can we take our eyes off the snarls and see our lives from "heaven's side"? Saints have a single answer.



Prayer.

"Prayer is the gate of heaven," wrote Thomas Brooks, and those least upset by their trials are those who step through that gate every day.

It was David Wilkerson who introduced me to the concept of prayer not as an impulsive emotional appeal to God, but as a discipline. In 1961 John and I interviewed David for a *Guideposts* article that became two articles, then three, and eventually a book called *The Cross and the Switchblade*. David was working in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, scene of heroin addiction and gang violence that was as close to hell as anything I'd been exposed to. How did he keep going, month in, month out, we asked him, without getting discouraged?

"I couldn't," he said, "without prayer."

He prayed with pimps and the pushers and the gang warlords? Yes, if possible, he said. But what he meant, he explained, was the two hours he spent in prayer each morning before he set out.

Two hours?

We had some idea by then of the grueling pace David maintained, following him about the city as he went from hideout to jail cell to street corner. At home were the demands on a husband and father. Why would he take two hours from a schedule like his?

Because if he didn't, he said, the other hours would be wasted. "I can only see one step ahead. God sees the end of the road."

After the book was finished, we kept up with David, visiting Teen Challenge centers around the country and the world, as the road led to places none of us could have imagined. Later we stayed with him and his wife, Gwen, at the Texas ranch where they brought inner-city kids to learn new lifestyles. And each time we got together we'd ask, "David, are you still praying two hours a day?"

The answer was always yes.

The Move

Then in 1986, David and Gwen moved back to New York to work in Times Square, then the heart of the city's pornography and prostitution trade. As he pursued his vision of a church in that place, we asked as always, "Still sticking to that two-hour daily prayer time?"

And for the first time, David answered, "No."

Uh-oh, I thought. By then John and I had watched too many ministries go wrong in just this way. An overambitious goal, a leader caught up in the pressure to achieve, neglecting his spiritual life. Temptations, greed – an all-too-human pattern.

"No," David went on, "here in Times Square I couldn't possibly get by on only two hours of prayer."

Nowadays, he said, he was praying three and four hours a day. As we watched David transform a Broadway theater into the Times Square Church where thousands worship each week, and the entire area become the family-friendlier place it is today, we thought we caught glimpses of an embroidered crown there in the streets of New York

Bodies

*Death is a dialogue between The spirit and the dust.
"Dissolve," says Death; the spirit, "Sir, I have another trust."
Death doubts it, argues from the ground. The spirit turns away,
Just laying off, for evidence, An overcoat of clay.*

Emily Dickinson

It was the Sunday morning Bible study at St. Mark's led by Rector Bill Heffner. The Scripture appointed for that day was 2 Corinthians 5: 1. Our study group was using The Living Bible:

For we know that when... we die and leave these bodies, we will have wonderful new bodies in heaven.

"Now of course," Bill began, "when the Bible speaks of the 'body' we will have in heaven, it doesn't mean the word literally." Our resurrected "bodies," he went on, will be spiritual entities -- our individual identities that live on after death.

In the sanctuary an hour later, the assistant rector, Bill Rhodes, who hadn't been present in the Bible class, mounted the pulpit to give the sermon.

"Let's not make the common mistake," he cautioned, "of spiritualizing the concept of the resurrection." When the Bible promises that the body will be raised, he said, it means just what it says. We will have bodies -- "transformed, glorified, made perfect" -- but bodies nonetheless.

Two seminary-trained men in the same church on the same Sunday. Two views of heavenly existence. To me it said not that one was right, the other wrong, but only that the heaven they both believed in is very big. Larger, more multidimensional than we can perceive from "the wrong side."

What form will our heavenly bodies take? Even St. Paul who was "caught up," still living, into heaven, was not sure in what manner he'd had the experience. "Whether in the body or out of the body I do not know -- God knows" (2 Cor. 12:2).

Jesus' own resurrected body, during the forty days before his ascension, was apparently both solid --he walked with his grieving followers on the road to Emmaus, broke bread at supper -- and immaterial: at the moment of recognition he "vanished from their sight." He seemed to partake during this time of two kinds of being at once.

He passed through a locked door into the room where his fearful disciples were huddled, yet to satisfy literal-minded Thomas, invited him to touch the physical reality of his hands and side.

Location

The *where* of heaven, too, which so preoccupied our ancestors, is no more answerable from our present vantage point than what our bodies will be like. In a smaller, earth-centered universe, people liked to assign heaven a location. The Egyptians placed the afterworld beyond the western horizon. The Greek "Isles of the Blessed" were across the sea, though the poet Hesiod, writing in 700 B.C., believed that heaven was in the sky, so high "it would take a blacksmith's anvil nine days to fall to earth." In Dante's *Paradiso*, the nine levels of heaven correspond to the spheres of the nine planets thought to orbit the earth; the better the soul, the higher the sphere.

Today, when we know ourselves to inhabit only one of billions of galaxies, in a universe where distinctions between "up" and "down" no longer hold, such speculations seem merely quaint. Heavenly logistics are probably nothing we can visualize. The Bible's own images of heaven are so wildly diverse as to suggest a reality we have no real parallels for. A city built on gemstones. A banquet. A sea of glass. A mustard seed.

©Elizabeth Sherrill 2008