



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

*No more will time be broken into bits,
No summer now, no winter, all will be
As one, time dead, and all the world transformed.*

Petrarch "The Triumph of Eternity"

All experience present tense. This was only an abstract concept to me until, in 1989, our granddaughter Sarah Elizabeth was born. Sarah is the eighth in an unbroken line of Elizabeths, mother to daughter. Looking at the tiny face in the pink blanket at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, I thought, *In a few years we'll have to reframe those photos!*



Photographs

There are five of them now in a wooden frame in our living room, five Elizabeths photographed on our high school graduations. I'd often smiled at the fussy clothes, the beribboned hairdo, of my great-grandmother -- and wished the camera had been invented when the first two Elizabeths were in school.

Back home from Boston, I picked up the frame and studied the pictures again. Liz's is the most recent: the long straight hair, the makeup-less look of the early 1970s. What will the style be, I wondered, when Sarah Elizabeth graduates in 2006?

Then I looked at my own graduation picture ... and for the very first time saw it as Sarah Elizabeth's granddaughter will see it one Day -- a faded print from unimaginably long ago. The old-fashioned tailored jacket of 1945, the dark lipstick, the shoulder-length curls achieved at the cost of sleeping nightly on rollers. My time on earth as remote to her as *my* great-great-grandmother Elizabeth's is to me.

"It was real!" I wanted to tell that teenager of the 2050s. The war that ended two months after my graduation -- dry statistics in her high school history books -- was lived out day to day in the present.

Standing there holding that picture frame, "past" events sprang to pulsing life for me. World War I ... the Civil War ... dry statistics in my own history books, and yet ... *My*

mother, I thought for the first time, graduated as the First World War ended, my great-grandmother at the close of the Civil War. I looked out the window and saw, not our driveway with the trash can waiting to be brought in, but the farmer's field that was here before our suburban street was put through. The Indian trails that wound across this land before that. All in the present. Like time in heaven, I thought, where all experience is embraced in an eternal Now.

The Coin

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard.

Matthew 20: 1

For me it was the most uncomfortable of Jesus' parables, an episode so unfair by any earthly standard, that for years it said to me only that heaven played favorites. Of all my puzzlements as I tried to envisage heaven -- so many of us to attend to! eternity so long! -- none perplexed me more than this seeming lack of justice.

At 6:00 A.M. the landowner signs men on for a twelve-hour day, agreeing to pay each one a denarius -- a small coin worth about twenty cents, the standard daily wage at the time. It's hot, backbreaking work and around 9:00 the owner recruits additional help. At noon he hires still more workers; at 3:00 he does the same. Finally at 5:00, with the weather cooling and only an hour left in the workday, he hires the bunch who've been standing around doing nothing, and sets them digging and hoeing too.

At 6:00 P.M. when they all line up to be paid, these johnny-come-latelies, whose hands are barely soiled, are each given a denarius! The weary full-day toilers are jubilant: With so generous a boss, they're sure to get a big bonus. But when their turn comes, they too each get one denarius. Not only does the landowner make no excuses for treating all alike, regardless of their contribution, he reproaches these exhausted men for supposing they deserved anything more.

For me, as I say, it was a parable that rankled. Was Jesus really saying that God, the "landowner" of the story, will not reward lives of sacrifice in his service? I'd think of the Christians I was meeting around the world in the 1960s and '70s, people whose faith was incalculably costlier than mine. The family in Prague. Christians in Cuba who'd turned down offers of asylum in the U.S., to stay where they were needed. Members of house churches in China, where simply to possess the Bibles John and I were carrying in was to risk arrest.

And of how I would make a few notes about their experiences ... and walk away. Back to my comfortable church, my shelf filled with Bibles. Back where writing Christian stories took no courage.

Frank

I'd think of our friend Frank Alarcon, who gave up his job with the post office in El Paso to live across the border with the ragpickers on the Juarez dumps. Would Frank, in the next world, receive no greater compensation than someone like me?

The missionaries and martyrs down through the ages, the twelve-hour-day workers, would they really receive only a denarius like the rest of us?

I remember the morning when this seeming injustice cried out for an answer. John and I had just come back from another visit with Frank Alarcon in the floorless, windowless hovel he's pieced together from scraps of metal and wood in order to share the lives of the people he serves. Frank, it's true, in his lean-to on the dump, is one of the happiest people I know. Still, when he gets to heaven I wanted Frank to have an extra-stately mansion!

Where's your justice, God! I asked. And as I did, that morning, an answer came. I knew, all at once, what the denarius stands for.

That little coin is all there is.

Once more Jesus is trying to convey to his disciples the nature of heaven. *How* and *where* and *when*, he cannot tell them, just that they will be with him. He will give them himself -- more is impossible. In him they will possess all things. They will know the Father as he does. For ever and ever they will know the perfect joy of heaven.

Though I've worked only an hour in the cool of the day, this much is offered me! The reward for those who've labored heroically and long can be no more.

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