

REFLECTIONS

By Ralph Kinney Bennett



What Will Heaven Hold?

Fish say, they have their stream and pond;
But is there anything beyond?
“Heaven,” by Rupert Brooke, 1915

“. . . The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. . . .”
Revelation 21:21, *New International Version*

What enters your mind when you think of Heaven?

How do you picture it?

When I was a child my imagination of Heaven was pretty much blue sky and clouds, the kind I saw on the most serene and beautiful days when I went out to play. Other than that there were glimpses of sorts, flashes in the imagination. In Miss Myers’ music class we would occasionally sing the Marine Hymn, and when we got to the last verse, the “Heaven’s scenes” I saw in my mind were vast and brilliant boulevards paved in golden cobblestones, guarded by Marines in dress blues, who stood along the white marble curbs.

We are all familiar with what might be called the folklore of Heaven—the harps and clouds and flowing gowns—the staple of cartoons, comedy skits, and numerous jokes (“A man arrives at the pearly gates, etc...”). And the wings. I am amazed at how many people seem to think that if they get to Heaven they will sprout wings and become angels. Read your Bible! Angels are interesting creatures, but they are a separate entity from us.

Most of what we know, or think we know, about Heaven is the product of our own yearning imagination colored by what we have seen of the world and, more especially, by the cultural circumstances in which we were raised. The Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold, for instance, wrote that the popular English concept of Heaven was, “a kind of

perfected middle-class home, with labor ended, the table spread, goodness all around, the lost ones restored, hymnody incessant.”

I love that last bit. “Hymnody incessant.” Will it be traditional or contemporary? Let’s not get into *that!*

What Scripture Says

Scripture tells us a lot about Heaven—and very little. In the end, I think, some of the details in Revelation finally overwhelm us because they are, after all, glimpses into what Paul called “inexpressible things.” We may be pardoned our all-too-human efforts to characterize a place that fascinates us so. Is Heaven real? (Elbert Hubbard, the self-styled arts and crafts philosopher of the early 20th century, dismissed Heaven as “the Coney Island of the Christian imagination.”) Perhaps, as some think, Heaven is merely a way of dealing with the inevitability of death.

And by the way, where is Heaven? We are intrigued by those biblical references that hint at a physical location, beyond the sky, beyond outer space. Paul tells us, in 2 Corinthians 12, that he may have been there in the body or perhaps out of the body, and that it is a place where he heard “things that man is not permitted to tell.”

Think of the most blissful moment in your life, and it will not do Heaven justice. It is, in the end, useless to compare, to speculate. Our minds are not equal to it. Martin Luther explained that when he lay feeding at his mother’s breast, “I had no notion how afterwards I should eat, drink, or live. Even so we on earth have no idea what the life to come will be.” As the 17th-century English poet John Suckling put it, “Heaven were not Heaven if we knew what it were.”

We should, it seems to me, be focused not so much upon a place, but upon a state, a state of

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being, that is. The poet Christina Rossetti wrote simply, "Heaven is the presence of God." But even that bare statement cannot be comprehended, let alone described, by us. We can merely put vast concepts into little words. Heaven will be the place of perfect fellowship with God. Because we cannot really conceive what it would be like to be completely free from sin, we cannot conceive this perfect fellowship.

The greatest love you have ever felt for another person will pale beside the fellowship of Heaven. No individual friendship, no happy camaraderie, can compare. In fact, every kind of relationship here on earth, no matter how perfected or idealized, is imperfect compared to Heaven. Thus, then, the sense of Christ's reply to the Sadducees in Matthew 22:30. The poet and satirist Jonathan Swift summed up both that reply and our knowledge of Heaven this way: "What they do in Heaven we are ignorant of; what they do not we are told expressly, that they neither marry, nor are given in marriage."

God's Companionship

I long ago gave up trying to picture Heaven. I concentrate my prayerful imagination on Revelation 21:3, that verse that comes like a majestic culminating trumpet call. The voice from the throne proclaims, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God."

All the yearning prophecy of Immanuel, "God with us," has its final fruition in this verse. Unencumbered by sin and ignorance, we will walk and talk with God as in the days before the fall of Adam. The companionship God envisioned when He created us will at last be realized. But these mere words, schematically describing the eternal fellow-

ship, cannot begin to picture it. Even John, writing Revelation with the Holy Spirit, could not adequately put into words what he had been given to see. His symbolic descriptions reflect the time and culture that he knew. To the modern ear and eye-informed and indeed overwhelmed by electronic imagery and a vastly greater visual knowledge of the world and the universe—John's words may seem quaint and mysterious.

To consider Heaven, it seems to me we must first understand that everything we "know" about time and space will no longer be operative. Everything we think we feel or know about contentment or joy or pleasure or peace is grossly inadequate to even begin to describe the nature of our culminating fellowship with God. Bought by blood on the

cross, we will undergo a transformation so profound, and enter a state of being so different, that our poor human intellects cannot compass it. Our immortal souls will exist in the utter clarity and truth that is possible only with the total exclusion of sin.

If I cannot imagine the total presence of God, I have a fearful imagination of His absence. In his play *Doctor Faustus* (1604), Christopher Marlowe observes, "When all the world dissolves and every creature shall be purified, all places shall be Hell that are not Heaven." Stop for a minute and try to imagine existence if we knew not God or His message or His sacrifice! What a dark abyss of chaos! We easily conjure folkloric pictures of hell—red devils, fire, pain and horror—but the greatest horror will be spending eternity in the absence of God.

"Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation 21:3).

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