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# Heaven is My Home

BY SUSAN R. GARRETT

We may not talk about heaven because we place so much value on life here and now. And yet, even if we do not say that we long for “heaven,” do we not long for a deeper sense of the divine presence in our lives here on earth? We are heart-hungry for heaven on earth.

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*Exodus 34:29-35*

*2 Corinthians 3:17-18*

*Revelation 21:1-5*

*Mark 9:1-10*

**H**ave you ever been homesick? Have you ever had that aching, empty feeling of being in one place and longing for another? Have you ever craved the company of people who are far away? If you have, then you know that when you are homesick, nothing around you can fill up that empty place inside.

My grandma had Alzheimer’s disease. During her last years of living in her own home, sometimes she would grow restless when late afternoon rolled around. “I need to go home now,” I remember her saying once. “But you *are* home,” we told her. It was no use. I can still picture her sitting in her chair, leaning slightly forward with her purse in her lap, ready for someone to pick her up and “take her home.” Like Geraldine Page’s character in the movie, *The Trip to Bountiful*, she was seeking a home long gone, a home of her childhood or early married years. No present place on earth could satisfy her longing.

In earlier eras Christians sometimes spoke of longing for heaven in just this way. Heaven was not a place that they thought about only at funerals, but a destination that they anticipated eagerly all their lives, a place where they would truly be “home.” Elizabeth Yates wrote an award-winning biography of Amos Fortune, who was brought over from Africa as a slave,

learned a trade, bought his own freedom and that of several others, and lived out his days as an upstanding resident of the town of Jaffrey, New Hampshire. When Amos turned ninety, Yates writes, "As the days went on and he was aware of strength running from him gently like sap from a fallen tree, he felt heart-hungry for heaven. Sometimes it was like a hurt within him the longing was so intense." So, knowing that the end was near, one day Amos went to the deacon of the church to write his will.

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There are many reasons why so few of us are "talkin' 'bout heaven." For one thing, we are not ready to write off our lives in this world as if they were worthless. We don't want "pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by;" we want happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction here and now.

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After providing for his wife and daughter, he left \$100 for a silver communion service for the church and \$243 for the Jaffrey town school. As he walked home that day, Yates writes, "He was happy. He felt light of heart and a buoyancy came into his footsteps. 'You can come any time now,' he said, looking skyward, 'for I'm ready.'"<sup>1</sup>

He was "heart-hungry for heaven." How many of

us would use that kind of language today? Oh, it still crops up in country western and gospel music, as in the song "Angel Band": "O, come, angel band, come and around me stand; bear me away on your snow-white wings to my immortal home." Or, think of the old spiritual: "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home!" But against the backdrop of everyday conversation, such talk seems old-fashioned. Most of us just do not talk about heaven that way anymore. Heaven has lost its hold on our imagination. Even theologians and clergy seldom speak of it.

I suppose there are many reasons why so few of us are, as another spiritual says, "talkin' 'bout heaven." For one thing, we are convinced that life on this earth, in these bodies, ought to mean something; we are not ready to write off our lives in this world as if they were worthless. We don't want "pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by;" we want happiness, fulfillment, and satisfaction here and now. A few years ago, the television reporter John Stossel hosted a special entitled "The Mystery of Happiness: Who Has It . . . How to Get It." Stossel claims that in earlier times, no one took it for granted that "the pursuit of happiness" was our God-given right. This world was looked upon as a "veil of tears;" heaven was the only place where most people expected to find anything like happiness or contentment. But today, in America and some other developed countries, where at least some persons can forget about suffering for much of the

time, we take it for granted that we ought to be happy here and now.

Of course there are the notable exceptions. A few years ago, a man named Marshall Applewhite convinced thirty-eight other members of a group calling itself “Heaven’s Gate” that their existence would be meaningful only if they abandoned their earthly bodies, or “shells” as they called them, in order to join the “higher beings” who, they believed, were living on a spacecraft hidden in the wake of the Hale-Bopp comet. When these thirty-nine people killed themselves, we all commented on the tragic waste of human lives, lives that *should have meant something* to those who lived them. One reason we do not talk about heaven is because we place so much value on life here and now.

And yet, even if we do not say that we long for “heaven,” isn’t it true that many of us are longing for a deeper sense of the divine presence in our lives here on earth? We are most certainly heart-hungry for *God*. Surely it is this hunger for God that is causing so many persons to embark on spiritual quests, to join new religious movements, to call up the Psychic Friends Network, or to buy the books of the latest spirituality-expert featured as a guest on *Oprah*. Surely it is this hunger for God that fuels the remarkable sales of books about angels and causes many millions of persons to tune in each week to the television show *Touched By An Angel*, which regularly assures us of God’s love for us. Persons are hungry for the good news that God is present with us, loving us, and working for good in our earthly lives. We may not be heart-hungry for heaven, but we do indeed long for *heaven on earth*.

In the movie *Michael*, John Travolta plays an archangel who is heart-hungry, not for heaven, but for earth.<sup>2</sup> The movie’s theme song, by Randy Newman, sums up the angel’s desire: “Though this world is dear to me, heaven is my home; this is where I long to be, but heaven is my home.” Michael’s character in the film represents the very opposite of the Heaven’s Gate cult members. The cult members sought to “storm heaven’s gate” by living harsh, Spartan lives here on earth and finally robbing themselves of bodily life. But in the movie, Michael *leaves* heaven so that he can relish and savor earthly pleasures. In one scene Michael is watching a little dog, Sparky, roll in the grass, and he says, “Now *that’s* my nature. I’m a grass roller! But I’m doomed to live in one place and crave the pleasures of another. This is my last blast—twenty-six, that’s all we get . . . only so many visits allowed. I’m gonna miss everything so much!” Notice the delightful twist on the theme of homesickness: Michael’s home is heaven, but he is not homesick for his home; rather, he thinks about how he *will* be homesick for earth.

Of course, we are not angels; we are humans. So where is our home? Is it in heaven, or is it on earth? Now, this question poses a dilemma. If we say that our true home is heaven, then we might be tempted to suppose

that we are just biding our time here on earth. We might be tempted to suppose that we, like Michael, are beings “trapped in one world but craving the pleasures of another.” But if we say that earth is our true home, then we might find ourselves asking, “Is this all there is? These bodies that grow old and can be injured or killed in the blink of an eye? These jobs or schools, and friends or spouses that sometimes excite and challenge us, but often do not? These unceasing worries we suffer about money, health, our children, or relationships? Is this all there is? What then is the point of it all?” So, here is our dilemma: the census-takers are at the door and we do not know what to say to them. Is our true home heaven, and we are merely sojourners on earth, strangers in a strange land? Or are we genuinely citizens of the earth? Where is our true home?

Try this for an answer: heaven is our home, but heaven *begins here on earth*. In the book of Revelation, the prophet John envisions heaven coming down to earth. Commenting on this passage, author and pastor Eugene Peterson writes, “Many people want to go to heaven the way they want to go to Florida—they think the weather will be an improvement and the people decent. But the biblical heaven is not a nice environment far removed from the stress of hard city life. It is the invasion of the city by the City. We enter heaven not by escaping what we don’t like, but by the sanctification of the place in which God has placed us.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, we enter heaven when this place and these physical things are made holy: this place where we live and play and study and earn our daily bread, this building where we come together to worship God, and these hands, bodies, and minds that we may use in so many ways. But who or what could ever make this physical world and these mortal bodies holy?

The apostle Paul helps us to answer this question. He teaches us that we who believe in Jesus Christ participate in two realms at once. On the one hand, in this earthly life we participate in the human or mortal realm, which is full of joys, wonders, and pleasures, but also full of pain, suffering, and death. So many of the recent self-proclaimed authorities on angels assure us that the angels will smooth out every rough place in our road, that they will make us happy all the days of our lives. One popular author even calls angels “happiness trainers.” But Paul offers no such quick fix to the problems of earthly life. Rather, he contends that because we still live in the human realm, because we remain mortal, the Christian life is one in which suffering certainly is present. Indeed, Paul says that Christians may suffer even *more* than those who are not Christians, because the forces in this world that oppose goodness and justice recognize Christians as their enemies and so will wage war against Christians all the more vigorously! Being a Christian doesn’t mean that one will escape from suffering. We live in the human realm, which brings us tremendous joy but also tremendous pain.

On the other hand, Paul teaches, we who believe in Jesus Christ already have one foot in the heavenly realm, along with full assurance that we shall one day enter that realm completely. Meanwhile, as we await full entry into the heavenly realm, we live in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. And “walking in the Spirit” enables us finally to rise above all the suffering and limitations that our physical, mortal condition brings. The Holy Spirit is *God present with us*—present with us in our times of transcendent joy, and also in our times of deepest despair; in our times of being together with those whom we cherish, and also in the times when we ache with homesickness for people and places that we love. The Holy Spirit is God present with us when we are in the strength of our bodies and in the health and vigor of youth, and also when we are physically limited or impaired, by whatever cause. The Holy Spirit is God present with us when we gather together in worship and praise of God, and also when we are solitary, alone before God, especially in those moments when words fail us, in moments of our deepest grief, guilt, shame, depression, or anger. In all these times the Spirit of God is with us, searching our minds and hearts, and bringing all our concerns before the Throne of Grace. The Spirit of God is with us, assuring us of God’s unceasing love for each one of us. The Holy Spirit bridges the gap between heaven and earth, brings heaven down to earth, and thus enables us to taste heaven even as we walk on the earth.

Moreover, this Spirit of God is a transforming presence, Paul teaches. It transforms places on earth into islands, or outposts, of heaven. You remember that when Moses had been speaking with God, Moses’ face glowed. It was as if the fullness of God’s glory had overflowed and spilled on-

to Moses. You also recall the accounts of the Transfiguration of Jesus, when he appeared with Moses and Elijah. Jesus’ face “shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white” (Matthew 17:2). In that event, Jesus, even more than Moses, was reflecting the brightness of God’s presence and glory. And through Jesus, Paul teaches, God is shining also in *our* hearts, to give us “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 4:6). Our beholding of that

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Is our true home in heaven, and we are merely sojourners on earth, strangers in a strange land? Or are we genuinely citizens of the earth? Where is our true home? Try this for an answer: heaven is our home, but heaven begins here on earth. In other words, we enter heaven when this physical world and these mortal bodies are made holy.

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light transforms us. “The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom,” Paul writes. “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

Am I walking in the light of the Lord? Am I allowing the Spirit to carry out its work of transformation in my life? We have to ask this question

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Many popular spiritual teachers today focus only on the individual, posing the questions: How can I be healed? How can I achieve peace? and How can my life be better? But the greatest mark of the Holy Spirit’s transforming presence is not my communion with the divine, as important as that may be. Rather, it is love manifested in community.

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not only of ourselves as individuals, but also of ourselves as a church. Are we, all together, keeping our eyes focused on Jesus, the glory? Are we, all together, praying unceasingly that Jesus will carry out his transforming work on our relationships? So many popular spiritual teachers today focus only on the individual, posing the questions: How can *I* be healed? How can *I* achieve peace? and How can *my* life be better? But the greatest

mark of the Spirit’s transforming presence, Paul teaches, is not *my* communion with the divine, as important as that may be. Rather, the greatest mark of the Spirit’s presence is *love manifested in community*. As a Christian community, as a church, we are called by Christ to pour out his love by honoring and serving the weak, rather than holding onto any privileges or prestige that set us apart. How are we and the other members of the church honoring and serving the weak, both those within the Christian body, and those outside of it?

The Holy Spirit’s work of transformation begins here and now, by enabling fellowship in which all are brothers and sisters, joined to one another in solidarity and love. Such a fellowship reflects the image of Christ, who gave up his godly status and bound *himself* to *us* in solidarity and love. And such a fellowship serves as an “island” or “outpost” of heaven here on earth. It is a place where the sacred meets and invades the everyday. It is a place where people can behold the divine glory, as it is manifested in human flesh and transformed relationships. *Here heaven has come down to earth.*

The home we long for is heaven, which is a place where the peace of God, the love of God, and the justice of God prevail. We are heart-hungry

for this heaven; we are homesick, longing to be in this place. The good news of the Gospel is that we do not need to wait for someone to pick us up and take us home. Heaven is our home, but heaven begins here and now, today.

#### **NOTES**

1Elizabeth Yates, *Amos Fortune: Free Man* (New York: Puffin Books, 1950), 174-180.

2*Michael*, produced by Turner Home Video and directed by Nora Ephron, 106 minutes, 1996.

3Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 174.

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