

ZONDERVAN

Heaven

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PART 1



WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT HEAVEN?

If God hath made this world so fair
Where sin and death abound,
How beautiful beyond compare
Will paradise be found.

—JAMES MONTGOMERY

I love thinking and reading about heaven. I have to confess, though, I've never succeeded in painting a picture of heaven. People have asked me why, and I haven't come up with a good answer, except to say that

heaven defies the blank canvas of the artist. The best I can offer are scenes of breathtaking mountains or clouds that halfway reflect something of heaven's majesty. I'm never quite able to achieve the effect.

And neither is earth. Actual mountains and clouds are exalting, but even the most beautiful displays of earth's glory—towering thunderheads above a wheat field or the view of the Grand Canyon from the south rim—are only rough sketches of heaven. Earth's best is only a dim reflection, a preliminary rendering of the glory that will one day be revealed.

Yet I've noticed as I've flipped through the pages of Scripture—our best resource about heaven—that its language is cryptic. You almost have to crack heaven's hieroglyphics before any of it makes sense. How can we pursue heaven through so much confusion or consider our future "marvelous" if we keep stumbling over word pictures of crowns and thrones?

These things only seem to be deterrents. They are actually incentives. The symbols Scripture uses of palms, crowns, streets of gold, and seas of glass are just that—symbols. They never quite satisfy our curiosity about heaven, and they're not meant to. They are only shadowy images of the real thing, as well as guides and signposts that point us in the right direction to show us the way home.

That's what the following pages are. Guides and signposts to point you to heaven, the real home of our heart and spirit. Like stealing a tiny sip of stew before dinner, it's meant to be a foretaste of what to expect when you get to the banquet table. Tune into heaven's melody. The real song is about to break into a heavenly symphony, and its prelude is only a few moments away.

A HEAVENLY CHORD



*On what were [earth's] footings set, or
who laid its cornerstone—while the
morning stars sang together and all the
angels shouted for joy?*

—Job 38:6-7

I huddled against the cold air to listen to my neighbor's whistling pine trees and gaze at the thin slice of moon smiling on the horizon. My eyes scanned the canopy of stars above to locate the constellation Ursa Major. —I knew the Big Dipper was part of it, but having only recently memorized it from a book, I had never seen the whole thing.

I searched and searched, and suddenly, there it was, the familiar arrangement of stars spread out grand and glorious across one-fourth of the sky. I had no idea it was so *big*. Nor had I realized how beautiful.

I shivered, feeling small and swallowed up underneath the starry dome that seemed to reverberate with a song. Yes, I could have sworn I heard a song. Was it the faint tune of a hymn in my heart? Was it the morning stars singing together? I don't know, but the song struck a chord in me, like a tuning fork resonating in my soul. The stars and music took my breath away, and before

the cold drove me indoors, my heart broke with joy, and I whispered toward the sky, “Jesus, I’m coming home; I belong up there.”

I wheeled out of that moment, through the garage door, and into the kitchen. The fluorescent light made me squint as I nudged the door shut. I breathed in the aroma of dinner cooking. The house was warm and softly lit, the television was droning in the living room, and my husband, Ken, was in the hallway talking to a friend on the phone.

Outside I had touched a moment of great happiness and wisdom, but I knew I was incapable of holding onto that heavenly moment. Few are skilled at holding themselves in a state of listening to heaven’s music.

Ordinary things—like kitchen pots clattering, telephones ringing, and TV commercials about frozen food and dishwashing detergent—drown out the song. It is too delicate to compete against mundane things. The music and the moment fades, and we become our ordinary selves, leaving the child outside, and shelving our fascination with the moon, the stars, and the night wind. We consign heavenly thoughts to some other time. Yet we live in the powerful memory of those moments.

Rather than let that song retire in the presence of mundane things like scratchy AM radios and grinding dishwashers, I hope the following pages will help you see something far, far beyond the constellation of Ursa Major.

LORD, I THANK YOU for the promise of heaven and the unexpected moments when you touch my heartstrings with that longing for my eternal home. Cause me to look beyond my everyday experiences to focus on a glimpse of heaven. Help me to capture those moments with delight. Keep my ears of faith tuned to the heavenly song as you guide me each day. ✨

A HEAVENLY ECHO



Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

—James 4:14

Whether we are adults or children, our best memories are usually the sort which, like a tuning fork, strike that resonant chord in our souls. It's a song we never quite forget and recognize immediately whenever we catch its echo. We recognize it because it is so full of heartbreaking beauty. Like deep calling to deep, it is stamped with His imprint; and since we bear His image, the memory is sealed in that deepest, most profound part of us. Such moments cast soundings and plumb the real depths of who we are. We live in the powerful memory of those moments. And what we hear is a heavenly echo.

We may hear the haunting echo under a night sky or even in a symphony, a poem, or catch it in a painting. In fact, it is singers, writers, and painters who most often try to capture the echo, this heavenly music that compels us to sing, write, or paint something truly beautiful.

Words and even paintings, like the one I did to go at the front of this book, can sometimes strike a resonant chord, helping us hear that ancient and heavenly song which the morning stars sang together.

Trouble is, we rarely let that fact sink in. We consign heavenly thoughts to some other time. That is, until we are stopped short by one of those brilliant nights when the air is clear like crystal and the black sky studded with a million stars. It takes such a moment to make us pause, watch our breath make little clouds in the night air.

Then we rush indoors to catch the six o'clock news or referee an argument between our kids. The heavenly moment is lost and we think, *Life doesn't seem like a mist that quickly vanishes.*

We really don't believe it's all going to end, do we? If God hadn't told us differently, we'd all think this parade of life would go on forever.

But it will end. This life is not forever, nor is it the best life that will ever be. The fact is that believers *are* headed for heaven. It is reality. And what we do here on earth has a direct bearing on how we will live there. Heaven may be as near as next year, or next week; so it makes good sense to spend some time here on earth thinking candid thoughts about that marvelous future reserved for us.

LORD, I HEAR AN ECHO, a heavenly echo. At times it is so faint that I'm not even sure that I've heard it. But you have told me that this life will be over one day and that haunting echo will become a reality. Make these heavenly moments become more real in my heart and life as I learn more about you. Let me recognize that heavenly echo for what it is—my call to come home with you. ✨

A HINT OF HEAVEN



But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.

—*Philippians 3:20*

The first time I heard that haunting heavenly song, so ancient and so new, was in the summer of 1957. My family and I had packed up, piled into our old Buick, and were heading west through the country roads of Kansas. Daddy pulled the car over onto the gravel shoulder to stop by a roadside ditch so my sister could go to the bathroom. I jumped out of the sweltering backseat and wandered beside a barbed wire fence along the road. It was a chance to dry the sweat off my back, as well as to explore.

I stopped and picked up a piece of gravel, examined it, and then heaved the stone beyond the fence far out into the biggest, widest, longest field I had ever seen. It was an ocean of wheat, waves of golden grain rippling in the wind, all broad and beautiful against a brilliant blue sky. I stood and stared. A warm breeze tossed my hair. A butterfly fluttered. Except for the hissing sound of summertime bugs, all was quiet, incredibly quiet.

Or was it?

I can't remember if the song came from the sky or the field, or if it was just the sound of crickets. I tried hard to listen, but instead of actually hearing notes, I felt . . . space. A wide-opened space filling my heart, as if the entire wheat field could fit into my seven-year-old soul. I rolled my head back to look up at a hawk circling overhead. The bird, sky, sun, and field were lifting me in some heavenly orchestration, lightening my heart with honesty and clarity like an American folk hymn in a major key, pure, upright, and vertical. I had never felt—or was it, heard?—such a thing. Yet as soon as I tried to grasp the haunting echo, it vanished.

I was only seven, but standing there by the barbed wire fence of a Kansas wheat field, I knew my heart had been broken by God. No, I didn't actually know Him at the time, but I wasn't so young that I couldn't sense the occasional stirrings of His Spirit. I kept staring while humming an old Sunday school favorite: "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passin' through." For me, the moment was heavenly.

Daddy honked the horn and I ran back. Our family drove away with a slightly changed little girl in the backseat. I was only a little girl, but heaven seemed so close to me then.

This world is not my home, I'm just a passing thru,
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue;
The angels beckon me from Heaven's open door,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.
O Lord, you know I have no friend like you.
If Heaven's not my home, then Lord what will I do?
The angels beckon me from Heaven's open door,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

—Albert E. Brumley