

SOMETHING ABOUT HEAVEN

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Heaven! Few speak about it and fewer think about it. Have you ever heard even one sermon about Heaven? I have listened to a good many sermons in my time, but never one about Heaven, although I can recollect several about the other place.

Speak to the average man about Heaven and you will be met with the futile remark: "Oh, we have not been told anything about it."

If, perchance, he has some acquaintance with the Bible he will most likely quote St. Paul: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has the heart of man conceived the things which God has prepared for those who love Him," as a conclusive proof that we can know nothing about Heaven. He overlooks the context which continues thus: "But He has 'revealed them to us through His Spirit, for the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God,'" which at least shows we can know something about Heaven.

It is only during the last hundred years or so that men have turned away from the contemplation of Heaven and absorbed themselves in the things of earth. The inevitable consequence of this has been that the things of earth have gone more badly since men have forgotten the end for which they were created. It is as if a man concentrated himself wholly on the voyage and completely forgot the end for which it was undertaken. As Lewis says so truly: "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. . . . It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in', aim at earth and you will get neither."

Let us raise our hearts and minds to the heavenly country and see under the negative aspect the things we shall not find there, and then under the positive the things we shall find there.

I. WHAT WE SHALL NOT FIND THERE.

The first and most arresting fact about Heaven is the absence of time there. Time only belongs to earth, not to Heaven. Time is the measure of things which pass, eternity the measure of those which endure. It is only in Eternity that we can say of a thing, it is, for in time everything is ceasing to be what it was, and becoming what it was not.

We are so habituated to measuring everything in the terms of time that it is not easy to visualize a country where the passage of time has no place. Is a work to be undertaken? The first question which arises is, how long will it take? Are we going to some distant place? Again we ask how many days or weeks will be required for it?

It is then necessary to be quite clear as to what eternity is. It is not, as some have thought, an unending succession of days and years so that when ten million times ten million have sped, you are no nearer the end than when the first had begun. Such a conception is merely an indefinite extension of time, not eternity. Neither is eternity an endless stretching back to an unbeginning past and reaching forward to an unending future.

Eternity is none of these! What, then, is it? Eternity is duration without succession.

'There is no past and no future in Heaven, only the eternal now in which all good is comprehended. Think for a moment. In Heaven our happiness will be perfect with all the perfection of God. Now, if in Heaven there 'was a past and' a future we should not be perfectly happy. Why? Because even if each successive day brought a joy as full as the one which had sped, we should regret the joys which were gone and no longer ours and eagerly look forward to those which were coming. As a consequence, the conflict between regret and expectation would never allow us any rest.

Eternity is the perfect possession, vision and love of God, and in Him of all His angels and saints. Our joy and happiness is thus full, perfect and complete because possessed all at once, without possibility of increase or diminution in the eternal now.

Could we but step off from time into eternity, past and future would cease to be, there would be only the now, the things of a thousand years to come, those of a thousand years ago, alike equally present.

How can we form some idea of this most tremendous wonder of the eternal now? Perhaps a human illustration may

help. Two who love each other passionately, have been, for long years, far apart. At last after what seems an eternity of expectation, the moment of their reunion has come. Clapsed in each other's arms, they give themselves up to the ecstatic joy which is thrilling them, a joy so great that time seems to stand still and all about them falls back into utter nothingness.

Like all human illustrations it falls infinitely short of the rapturous joy and radiant splendour of the eternal NOW of the Heavenly country, but it is at least a reflection, however feeble, of that eternal reality.

This brings us to the consideration of the second great difference between time and eternity. In Heaven there is no change, since their change is impossible. Once you pass from time to eternity, you pass from changefulness to changelessness, from mutability to immutability.

That is why the moment of death, of small import under one aspect, is all-important under another. For the moment of our passing seals our eternal destiny for weal or woe. There is no possibility of change for the soul that has passed into eternity, because in eternity there is no passage of time to bring change about.

On earth everything about us is changing from moment to moment, and we are changing too. There are moments in life when this ceaseless change weighs heavy upon us, and we long for that country where change can never come. The author of a famous hymn has expressed this thought very aptly:

*“Change and decay in all around I see,
O Thou that changest not, abide with me.”*

This same thought was present to the mind of St. Therese as a young girl: “My happiness was unalloyed till Compline, but when that evening Office was over, a feeling of melancholy invaded my soul. I felt myself as an exile upon earth, and longed for the rest of Heaven, the Sunday without evening of our true country.”

All things change in this world, some more quickly, some more slowly. A thing is no longer new, than it begins to grow old. The iron is scarce out of the fire 'ere it begins to rust. Brick, stone, marble all crumble and change with the passage of time. Even the affections change, and they who loved, love no longer. They who walked together come to the parting of the ways, take different paths, and walk together no more. All things are passing, all things changing in this world of change.

But in Heaven it is not so; there no change can ever come, for if change were possible the souls there would not enjoy perfect happiness, since every happiness would be shadowed by the fear of loss. - Heaven is the land of eternal youth, there everything is new. with a newness that is eternal, fresh with a freshness that is everlasting:

*“There everlasting Spring abides
And never-fading flowers.”*

In Heaven we shall participate in the Divine changelessness: we can never lose the possession of God, never be deprived of the enrapturing vision, of His infinite beauty, thrilling our being, to its' very depths with fulness of joy.

A third thing we shall not find in Heaven is death. “And there was no more death”; in that pregnant sentence St. John describes one of the most striking contrasts between earth and Heaven. On earth, willing or unwilling, we must become accustomed to the presence of Sister Death; in the world to come we shall never see her face.

The only absolute certainty in life, is death—uncertain of all else we are very sure that one day Sister Death, with her wan smile will come for us, and we cannot say her nay, for she is as imperious as she is inexorable.

Death is only sorrowful because it deprives us of the visible presence of those we love. How often I have been impressed by the ease with which the young affront death—some so thrilling with happiness at the thought of their going to Heaven, that to their great disappointment they get well.

The young Roman Virgin, Germana, has expressed this thought during her last retreat: “Death, this word which frightens so many, brings infinite joy to me. To die, for me, signifies to see You and love You. It implies immense joy. Jesus, make me soon ready to die, that so I may -come to be with You in Heaven.”

A fourth thing will not be found in Heaven. What is that? In Heaven there will be no incomprehension. “**Heaven,**” writes St. Teresa of Avila, “**is the country where Christians shall never misunderstand each other**”, and she knew but too well how very successful they are in doing so in this world To be misunderstood by the world is comprehensible enough, indeed we expect it, for: “the carnal man cannot understand the things of God,” hence - the, incomprehension of the worldly-minded in the natural order of things. But that good and holy people should be at such

pains to misunderstand each other, this is surprising, and unfortunately as frequent as surprising. Perhaps our greatest regret when we come to die will be in our having failed to comprehend some poor soul who stood in such need of comprehension.

In Heaven incomprehension can never come, for there perfect love will make perfect comprehension.

Indeed only love can give under-standing. Love produces a marvellous capacity for comprehending the thought and action of another. We never do really understand another unless we love. Hence understanding in Heaven is perfect, because love is perfect: there perfect love is joined to perfect cognition. One of the greatest joys of Heaven is the fact that we shall never misunderstand or be misunderstood. There no shadow of incomprehension can ever come.

Then a fifth thing. There is no suffering in Heaven. St. Therese of Lisieux had become so habituated to suffering that she could write; "For a long time suffering has been my Heaven down here, and I find it difficult to conceive how I shall become acclimatized to a country in which joy reigns supreme." Here on earth suffering is almost always present in one form or another. How much we suffer from the elements. One day almost paralyzed by cold, another prostrated by heat. How few those wonderful days when the temperature is perfect. True, like St. Therese, we have learned to accept both joyfully and willingly, but that does not make the suffering less.

There is physical pain, sometimes of such intensity that it seems as if we must die. Still more agonizing than the torments of the body are the sufferings of the soul. True, all this anguish of flesh and spirit peoples Heaven with Saints, but yet it is not the suffering which produces joy, but the thought of Him for whom we suffer; even while we suffer we long for Heaven when love will have its perfect fruition without admixture of suffering of any sort.

In Heaven there is neither extreme heat nor cold, no storms, no wars, nothing which can mar its marvellous tranquillity and perfect peace. Liberated from the body the soul cannot experience physical pain, and when re united to the body, that body spiritualized and glorified will be incapable of suffering.

Neither can the soul experience the spiritual anguish which is often her lot on earth for in the heavenly country sorrow and anguish can never come: "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, for the former things have passed away."

The sixth thing we shall not find in Heaven is Faith. So accustomed are we to living by Faith down here that it is not easy to envisage - a country in which it has no place. The gift of Faith is the first of the three great theological virtues which a man receives and the last which he loses: Hope and Love may die, but if he still clings to Faith both can revive again.

But in Heaven we shall have no need of Faith, because all we have believed upon Earth we shall see in unclouded vision in the Heavenly Land. On earth we believe; in Heaven we see. How inexpressible our joy in this marvellous beholding wherein all we have believed upon earth shall be perfectly seen. Faith accompanies us all through life, right up to the portals of eternity; there she leaves us because her work is done.

The seventh thing we shall not find in Heaven is Hope. Hope plays a great part in our life in this world, not only in the supernatural order, but also in the natural. Hope in the supernatural order is a reaching forth by longing desire to possess that which has been promised. What has God promised? This! If we persevere till death the eternal sight, Love and possession of Himself, participation in the very life of the Blessed Trinity. Not some of our hopes but all will be realized in a degree far exceeding all we can imagine in via. Hope sustains us all through this mortal life, but does not enter Heaven with us because like Faith her work is done. There in Heaven possession takes the place of Hope, because all we have hoped for we have in a possession that is eternal.

The eighth thing which we shall not find in Heaven is Patience. True, "Patience has a perfect work," but only in time. "God is a strong God, strong and patient," but this patience of God is manifested in time; not in eternity. We have constant need of patience in this world because nothing great, nothing worthy can be accomplished without it. Above all we need patience in suffering, on which St. Therese makes this penetrating remark: "When all is pure suffering, then I make that my joy."

In Heaven we shall have no need of patience to bear with the imperfections of others or our own, because there will be none in them or us to call for patience. The more patiently the soul endures suffering down here the more gloriously shall she be crowned up there. The principal cause of impatience arises from the presence of things we do not desire, and the absence of those we do.

But in Heaven everything we desire is present and nothing present which we do not desire

In Heaven to will and to have is one and the same, for there:

“Wish and fulfilment can severed be never

Nor the thing prayed for, come short of the prayer.”

The ninth thing we shall not find in Heaven is night. On earth night follows day, and day night in uninterrupted succession, till the great Day of eternity ends the passage of time and with it the night.

In Heaven the radiant splendour of eternal day excludes the darkness, for that Day is unbeginning and unending in the eternal now. Nothing is or can be wanting to the perfect clarity of that Light indefectible which there rejoices all God's elect.

“Infinite Light excludes the night

And pleasures banish pain.”

On earth the most brilliant light is not without its shadows; there Light's infinite splendour illumines with its glory in a way which transcends all the light of earth. There each one is partaker of the Light which casts no shadows.

“There dawns no sabbath

No sabbath is over,

Those sabbath keepers

Have one and no more

One and unending

Is that trumpet song

Which to the angles

And men shall belong

II. WHAT WE SHALL FIND IN HEAVEN.

Our entrance into Heaven has been likened to what we experience when, after passing through a long dark tunnel, the train comes out into a blaze of dazzling sunshine. At first we are only aware of the light, then, as our eyes become accustomed to it we take in the form of things nearest to us and finally extend our vision to those afar off.

Well our entrance into life will be something like that: but not quite! There will be one very great difference. At the first instant of our entry we shall see God perfectly and see also perfectly everyone and everything in Him. It will not be a gradual apprehension but instantaneous. We shall see everything. Of this Cardinal Wiseman writes: “The acquaintance and close friendships which we shall make with the Blessed will not be a work of time, or a feeling of gradual growth but complete from the first instant. The very first moment of admission to their company will give the key to the thoughts and affections of all, and place each and all in a complete equality of communion. Oh, what a Paradise of delights must Heaven be, where such unimaginable participation of happiness is ceaselessly carried on, where each one has nothing that is not the property of all, and where millions of souls contribute the sum of unconceivable bliss to form the portion of each.” How can this be? It will be thus because we shall be endowed with the Light of glory, which enables us to see God without being blinded by the seeing: “In Thy Light shall we see Light.” God, so to speak, gives us His own sight to see Himself with, else we could never bear the blazing splendour of that eternal glory.

The first thing we shall find in Heaven is everything perfect, not with relative but absolute perfection, one that excludes the possibility of a greater. On earth nothing is or can be absolutely perfect. Some things are more perfect than others, but absolute.

Perfection there is not. The characteristic of a true artist is this: he is never satisfied with his work. Each new achievement leaves him more unsatisfied than the last. Before it is fully realized a greater has been formed in his mind. Dom Mellett, the famous French architect, on the day his greatest work, the Abbey of Solesmes, was inaugurated, turning to the Abbot say: “Now, Father Abbot, if you will let me pull it all down I can really build you a monastery.” There speaks the true artist. The artist who is satisfied with his work is either no artist at all or a very poor one indeed.

The second thing we shall find in Heaven is everyone absolutely perfect with all the perfection of God. On earth

even the holiest souls have some imperfection mingled with their perfection. The closer they approach perfection, the more their small defects stand out in high relief because in contrast with so much that is holy. Such faults in one less holy would not be observed at all. Of the souls who have entered Heaven we can say with St Bernard: "They have left behind them their infirmities but not their love."

Each one that we behold there will be absolutely perfect and we shall be perfect too. There will be nothing in them to displease us, and nothing in us to displease them.

A third thing we shall find in Heaven: perfect knowledge. We shall have a perfect knowledge of every-thing we see there, and of everyone we meet there. How little we know of the material world in which we live, and of the vast universe outside this world still less.

How very little we know of each other, even of those with whom we are most intimate and in daily contact. We can only know them in so far as they reveal themselves to us, and how very imperfect that revelation is.

We see something of their external activities, and from them form an idea of the motives which inspire their action, but even thus we cannot be quite sure of our conclusions. Not infrequently another action of theirs completely upsets the opinion we had previously reached about them. But in Heaven we shall know each one of the millions of angels and saints with a knowledge so perfect, that it surpasses in an infinite degree the most intimate relationships of earth. Then each one not only knows perfectly the others, but is interested in them with an intensity in which love and knowledge adequate each other. Each one there has the most perfect comprehension of the other. There the interest of one is the interest of all, the joy of one the joy of all. There we shall see at the same instant all the angels and saints, all without a single exception. If it were not so our happiness would not be complete, because something would be lacking to our knowledge which would not be absolutely perfect.

A fourth thing: In Heaven love will be perfect. We shall love each angel, each one of the saints with an intimate particular love far exceeding the most wonderful love of earth. And we in turn shall be loved with the most tender affection by each one of the angelic host, by each one of the redeemed. We shall love and be loved in a ceaseless flow and re-flow of love, compared to which the highest love we have experienced on earth will seem as nought.

Love is imperfect in time because knowledge is imperfect. The more we know a person, the more we love. For love to be perfect the one loving and the one loved must be perfect as their knowledge of each other must be perfect. But this can only *be* verified in Heaven.

On earth greater or lesser knowledge, and hence greater or lesser love, there may be; but perfect knowledge and perfect love, never!

In Heaven lover and loved will both be perfect, know and love each other perfectly. As the love between all the elect is perfect, so also is the love between God and the soul. This perfection of the soul in love is due to her being in God, possessing and being possessed by Him, and the love with which she loves Him is His own Love burning within her. St. John of the Cross says: "You shall see me in Your beauty and I shall see myself in Your beauty, so that I shall seem to be Yourself in Your beauty."

A **fifth** thing we shall find in Heaven. Every happiness of earth is fleeting; every love shadowed by fear of loss, but in the Divine changelessness of Heaven our happiness will be such that it is full to overflowing, and can never increase or diminish. All seek for happiness in this world, but can never attain it save for a brief while, because the passage of - time brings continual change, consequently the things that made our happiness at one time fail to do so at another.

On the Day of Judgement our glorified body will be reunited to our soul. The body will not add to the glory of the soul, but the soul will impart glory to the body.

The glorified body will share in the immortality of the soul, and be endowed with four special gifts. Impassibility, by which it is incapable of any trouble, pain or suffering. Clarity, by which it will shine with a splendour like the sun. Agility, by which it can pass from one place to another with a swiftness greater than lightning. Subtlety, by which it responds instantly to the command of the soul, and can pass through material bodies without leaving any impression, as did the glorified body of the Saviour after the Resurrection.

In the **sixth** place, we shall find in Heaven all our loved ones who have died in the grace and friendship of God. We shall see our earthly mother, who has loved us and sacrificed herself for us to an unbelievable degree, whose love

has never once faltered amidst all the changes and chances of this mortal life. We hope to see her in glory, shining with all the splendour of her great reward. So, too, we hope to find all who on earth have been dear to us, united in the country where separation can never come. There we shall find all the angels and all the saints, and know and love each with an intimate knowledge and love transcending anything we have experienced in time, even at its highest and best. By the uncounted millions who -form the heavenly court, and of whom we have known nothing until the moment of our entry into life, we shall be received with the most surpassing tenderness and love.

The **seventh** joy which awaits us in Heaven is the Madonna'. We shall see the sweet Mother of God in all the radiant splendour of her eternal glory—she who is the gate of Heaven itself; since through her we receive Him Who wrought salvation for us on the Hill of Calvary.

At that tremendous moment in *time* when the sacrifice for all the sin of all the world was consummated we hear from the lips of the Divine Victim those amazing words: Behold your Mother.

And through all the ages since she has played a mother's part to all the children of her Son. Yes, I, too, have known her tender care all through the days of my pilgrimage; now - they are over and I behold our Mother face to face. How shall tongue describe the joy of this meeting when I kneel at the feet of her whose love has sustained me so marvellously through all the chances and changes of time: "Mother, now I am home with you for ever, for ever!" Queen of eternity, Virgin and Mother, we shall be there!

The **eighth** joy which we shall find in Heaven is the glorified body of our Saviour, and our whole being will be ravished with joy unutterable at the seeing. Listen to Ruysbrock: "We shall be eternally with Him, each of us adorned with the glory which is ours, clothed in our own works, glorified and perfected in love and virtue. And Jesus will show us His glorious Face, brighter than the sun, we shall hear the sweetness of His voice, far exceeding every melody. . . . That will be the supreme beatitude in which we shall rejoice with our adorable Saviour, Jesus Christ, in His eternal Kingdom."

We shall see Him no longer suffering, no longer the Man of Sorrows, but glorious, radiant, triumphant, His wounds shining with a splendour no words can tell: "Yes, my Jesus, I see you face to face in the joy of the eternal now, united to You in a unity which shall never be broken."

But there is yet something else we shall find in Heaven, far more marvellous than anything we have so far tried to describe. **In Heaven we shall see God face to face, as He is in Himself**, without the help of any medium. What does that mean? Take this for an example. We cannot look at the sun with our naked eye, we must have some sort of medium through which to do so—a piece of coloured glass, for instance, or, as the astronomers do, see the sun reflected in the water. But the vision of God in Heaven is not like that. There the sight of God is direct and immediate, with nothing however transparent to stand between us and Him.

The Holy Trinity is the greatest mystery of the Christian religion. There is one substance of the Godhead, in this one substance there are three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, each and all identified with this one substance, but not identified with each other. The Father is God, understanding and mentally speaking the Word, which represents the infinite perfection of the Godhead. The Son is that spoken Word. We know that such a Word in the Divine Mind could not be a fleeting image, a mere quality as it is in our case, for there are no parts in God, Who is unchangeable and simple in His Essence. It must be subsistent.

The Person speaking and the Word spoken, are not identical; there is a relation of opposition between them, as between what originates and what is originated. God, understanding Himself, originates the perfect image of Himself, the figure of His substance, His Son by a real though spiritual generation.

Given the existence of these two Divine Persons we can see they must love each other with an infinite love, because God is infinitely lovable, containing all possible perfection, without a shade of defect.

Love does not tend to create within us an image of what is loved, as understanding tends to produce an image of what is known. Love is rather a going out of ourselves to the object of love as it is in itself. This flight of the affections towards the beloved. where the love is real, is not a matter of momentary impulse; it results in a permanent leaning of the soul towards the beloved.

From the Father and Son loving each other with an infinite love, there proceeds this mutual leaning, a reaching out or breathing forth of themselves to each other. This subsistent, mutual love of the Father and the Son, as it were, their

eternal, mutual sigh of love, is the Holy Ghost, Who is breathed forth, the third Person of the Blessed Trinity. He is the third, while the Father is the first and the Son second, not because there is an order of precedence amongst them, for they are equal in dignity; but only an order of origin, love presupposing knowledge and the spoken Word the Speaker, yet without any idea of succession.

The Father speaking and the Son Who is the spoken Word, the Father and the Word loving each other with an act of infinite eternal love, the spiritual leaning of love towards each other arising therefrom are so many terms which cannot be understood except as co-existent with each other.

Then there is the interpenetration of the three divine Persons. The Father is wholly in the Son and wholly in the Holy Ghost. The Son is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost is wholly in the Father and wholly in the Son.

From the unity of the Divine Nature it follows that there is only one operation of the three divine Persons. What the Father does that likewise does the Son and Holy Ghost. What the Son does that likewise does the Father and the Holy Ghost. What the Holy Ghost does, that also does the Father and the Son.

There is a Trinity of Persons in the Godhead that love may have place for the mutual flow and reflow of love between them that constitutes their essential beatitude.

Now our essential blessedness in Heaven consists in the love, vision and possession of God, our accidental blessedness in the vision of the Sacred Humanity of Christ, the Blessed Virgin and all the angels and saints.

Through sight or vision we shall know God perfectly to the fullest extent of our capacity. In that beholding we shall love Him perfectly because it will be His love in us loving Himself.

Love always desires to possess, the one loved. On earth two lovers in the ardour of their desire for mutual possession would pass into and become one another, but love in the natural order can never attain such a unity.

What natural love can never attain, will be attained by supernatural love in the eternal now. That is why in Heaven we shall not only see and love God, but possess Him. We are His and He ours in the eternal embrace of eternal love. We must not think that beholding God we are not beholding His Saints. It is not like on earth where if we are looking at the King we do not notice His soldiers, or if looking at His soldiers we are not looking at the King.

Beholding God, in Him we behold all else: the Sacred Humanity of the Saviour, the Madonna, all the angels and saints in one single act.

Heaven is seeing, loving and possessing all at once. We must be very clear as regards the fact that there is no succession in eternity, it is only the NOW.

God speaking to St. Catherine of Siena about the joys of Heaven said:

“The soul always desires Me, and always loves Me. And her desire is not in vain: hungry she is satiated, and satisfied she is hungry, but the tediousness of satiety and the pangs of hunger are alike far from her. In love the blessed rejoice in the eternal vision of Myself, participating in that Good which is Myself.”

Ruysbrock writes: “This simple unity can be had of none save those who stand before this immense Brightness and before—Love above reason and without restraint. In this Presence the soul is ceaselessly inflamed with love. In the glow of this love she finds neither beginning nor ending, and she seems to be one with this burning fire of love. . . . There will be eternal fusing and transfusion, absorption and re-absorption of the soul in the glory of God.”

In Heaven love has no alloy; no passing shadow, no fear, nothing comes or can come to molest the sweet peace and secure joy of love triumphant. In that ageless eternity, in the supernal splendour of eternal light, with the eyes of eternal love, the soul shall gaze upon the Blessed Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost:

There love attains her perfect triumph.

*‘Those eternal bowers
Man hath never trod;
Those unfading flowers
Round the throne of God!
Who may hope to gain them
After weary fight;*

*Who at length attain them
Clad in robes of white?*

*“He who gladly barterers
All on earthly ground,
He who with the martyrs
Says: I will be crowned,
He whose one oblation
Is a life of love,
Clinging to the nation
Of the blessed above!”*
