

THE BEGINNING OF HEAVEN

You are admitted to enjoy the blessing because the righteousness which was His is now transferred to you that you may be blessed of the Lord world without end. Do let us triumph and rejoice in this evermore. Why should we not? And yet some of God's people get under the law as to their feelings, and begin to fear that because they are conscious of sin they are not saved, whereas it is written, "he justifieth the ungodly."

For myself, I love to live near a sinner's Saviour. If my standing before the Lord depended upon what I am in myself and what good works and righteousness I could bring, surely I should have to condemn myself a thousand times a day. But to get away from that and to say, "I have believed in Jesus Christ and therefore righteousness is mine," this is peace, rest, joy, and the beginning of heaven!

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

PART ONE

*The thought of God, the thought of Thee,
Who liest in my heart,
And yet beyond imagined space
Outstretched and present art—*

*The thought of Thee, above, below,
Around me and within,
Is more to me than health and wealth,
Or love of kith and kin.*

*The thought of God is like the tree
Beneath whose shade I lie,
And watch the fleets of snowy clouds
Sail o'er the silent sky.*

I T IS REALLY UP TO US, YOU SEE. Not the *collective* "we," not the fettered mass of humanity all lumped together atop this orb we call home, but each one of us as free individuals. We are free to choose our path, free to choose our friends, and unmistakably free to choose the perspective from which we will view and experience this life. It is really up to each one of us what we will gain from the remainder of our time on this earth.

Some people think that this world, as it is right now, is as good as it gets. Bound to the soil, they see bad events and bad people as only transient hiccups along the inevitable destination—a point somewhere in the future at which essentially good man will have evolved into his intended utopian state, a point when man will have finally realized the condition he has deserved all along. These individuals cling to the strata and structure of this world like a drowning man clings to the slippery boulder that affords only tenuous salvation from being rushed downstream toward the cataract, falls, and eventual death. This world is their preferred home, and they have invested all that they are in the hope of its redemption.

Some people, on the other hand, can't see very much good in this world at all, and, as they wait longingly for the next, stiffen their resolve and live one miserable day after another, toughing it out like the good and righteous scouts that they are. Every connection they have with the here and now is held lightly, vaporously, as something that just may—please, God!—be vaporized tomorrow. By choice they have few friends outside of their local congregation for, you see, those reprobates all belong to the "world"—sinners all, damned to eternal hellfire, every one of them—and just don't quite measure up to the blessed standards of those awaiting Their Returning Lord (please, God, let it be today!).

Jesus, too, chose His path—and He chose neither of the two extremes described above. Say what you will about Him, Jesus was no fool. As the agent-creator of this world, He believed no false propaganda about it or its inhabitants. He knew that it was not perfect,

but was redeemable; He knew it was no longer good, but that good still existed; He knew that this world was not heaven—but that heaven would one day be populated by its souls. And He knew that the Father had placed here, in profuse abundance, sufficient resources for anyone to experience—even while still earth-bound—the beginning of heaven.

THE FOOTPATH OF OUR TREK

There is no denying that for the believer there is an awkward and inelastic tension between the physical and the eternal world. Far worse it would be if there were none, however, for the believer is not *meant* to be at home here; it is not his home.

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

Hebrews 11:13

Something happens within the believer at the point of conversion. Because it is associated more with sanctification (progressive) than justification (immediate), it very often seeps into the consciousness over time—a gradual realization that she is dwelling in a foreign land, homesick for a place she has never seen. The conversation of her old friends begins to sound tinny, and strange; activities to which she was once drawn begin to interest her less; practices and concepts that were once utterly foreign, even comical in their strangeness, begin to seem comfortable—the start of new habits.

Though some may try, this metamorphosis is not from conscious effort. In fact, it doesn't work very well to mechanically speed the process along. It is a work of the Holy Spirit, not of flesh, and is best left up to Him.

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:16-18a niv

Yet the believer is not left in limbo. On the surface it may seem unkind of God to leave us down here, stuck between two worlds—an alien in one, without residence in the other. But in fact the terra firma (upon which we so often feel *persona non grata*) is less a gulag than a launch pad. Rather than wasting the hours in each day regretting the place of his residence, the believer should consider his earth-home, instead, the “first step up toward heaven.”

Many serious scientists remain in creative pursuit of the colonization of the earth's moon. They have devised fantastic means by which man might live there—not out of an unnatural desire to dwell in the gray dust that comprises its surface, but because the moon would supply a launch platform from which our kind could more efficiently explore the outer reaches of space. With its more modest gravitational pull, it would be far less expensive to initiate flights of discovery from the moon than it has always been from earth.

The Christian should not be in love with earth for its own sake, but should look upon it as—by the creative ministry of the Spirit—a new opportunity to begin the migration up to heaven. This world is not a dismal substitution for heaven, nor is it a barrier to it. This world is merely the physical path we take to get there. Mind you, earth is not the *means* by which we attain heaven. Far from it. There is only one way to reach heaven—and this world is not it.

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”

John 14:6

But this earth is the *footpath* of our trek. As much as is salvation through Christ, our journey on this globe is part of the Father's design—part of the process of sanctification. As such, it contains parts of Him. Look around; God and His handiwork are everywhere. More than that, however, this world can be a convenient place of transition: Finding reflections of heaven (dim though they may be) here on earth, and consciously beginning the transformation from earth-soiled believer to resurrected saint (not, as some believe, an angel), we are able to enjoy some of the actual benefits of that glorified state while still caught in the clutches of this world's leaden gravity.

*'Tis like that soft invading light,
Which in all darkness shines,
The thread that through life's sombre web
In golden pattern twines.*

*It is a thought which ever makes
Life's sweetest smiles from tears,
And is a daybreak to our hopes,
A sunset to our fears;*

*One while it bids the tears to flow,
Then wipes them from the eyes,
Most often fills our souls with joy,
And always sanctifies.*

*Within a thought so great, our souls
Little and modest grow,
And, by its vastness awed, we learn
The art of walking slow.*

*The wild flower on the mossy ground
Scarce bends its pliant form,
When overhead the autumnal wood
Is thundering like a storm.*

*So is it with our humbled souls
Down in the thought of God,
Scarce conscious in their sober peace
Of the wild storms abroad.*

*To think of Thee is almost prayer,
And is outspoken praise;
And pain can even passive thoughts
To actual worship raise.*

Frederick William Faber