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FOR HEARTS THAT HOPE

BY

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FOR HEARTS THAT HOPE

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SOME little time ago I was asked to visit an aged man who evidently was nearing death. He asked me about Heaven. He could not understand why a subject of such importance did not receive clearer and fuller treatment in the Book of God. He was a man of large intelligence, well versed in literature and very practical.

A few days later he fell asleep and dreamed. In his dream he saw Heaven, and entered it. It was very large, much larger

than he had anticipated, and many people were there. And still every one seemed perfectly at home and comfortable. His daughter, a young teacher of rare spiritual beauty, who had died a few years since, came to him and said that she "would teach him the ways of Heaven." He went with her, and presently he found himself among quite a little company gathered about his daughter, who were repeating after her the words of Heaven. He, too, learned them from her lips.

He awakened from this dream with a calmed mind. Then again falling asleep, he dreamed the same dream for the second time. Upon awakening from this repeated dream he ceased to

make further inquiries concerning the future, and became absolutely peaceful.

With this man's experience in mind, a man who never until that hour had allowed himself to be affected by a mere dream, I am moved to attempt such a statement of the nature of Heaven as is clearly warranted by the teachings of the Bible. For I am sure that if a few true words concerning that better world can be put on paper, they will be acceptable to very many people. Almost every week some one asks me about Heaven. The constancy and eagerness of these inquiries indicate how prevalent is the desire to know what is revealed concerning the life for which we hope.

One special declaration in the Scripture tells us all that we need to know concerning it, either for our comfort of heart or for our usefulness of conduct. John was heavenly minded and heavenly visioned when he said: "Beloved now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that when He shall appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

Hearts that hope do well to fasten in their memories three statements thus made by John concerning "the better world." One is, that there are persons to-day who so truly have some of God's traits in their hearts that they are rightly called "sons of God." The child of any kind

of a parent has the nature of his parent, the son of a wolf has a wolf's nature, the son of a man has a man's nature, the son of a God has a God's nature. As a drop of water has, at least in part, the nature of the ocean in it, so these "sons of God" have, at least in part, the very views, desires, and purposes of God in them. The second statement is this, that all the particulars concerning the eternal future of these sons of God are not revealed. We have no means of knowing either the exact spot where these sons of God are to live, or the detailed circumstances of their future doings; "it doth not yet appear [in all such particulars] what we shall be." And the third statement is, that although these particular features of their

future are unknown, one general feature is sure, they are to be "like Christ." The explanation of this likeness is given in the assurance that these sons of God, seeing Christ in His real beauty, shall be moved to admire and love Him more and more, and as a result of thus seeing Him, shall grow increasingly like Him.

Even though it is true that many of our possible questions about Heaven are unanswerable, still the thought of Heaven arouses and rightly arouses much inquiry. If we are to live after our breath ceases on earth, it really is most desirable that we should know what the general nature of our future life is to be. Besides, when our companions

pass from us into this unseen world, our unfaltering and even quickened affection follows them; and as we stand at the graves of children or friends, we try to peer as far as we possibly can into the hidden world, longing to see our dear ones and know of their welfare and surroundings.

This thought of Heaven has been a great power, and often an ennobling power, in many lives. Jesus Christ Himself was helped by the anticipation of Heaven's joy to despise the shame of His humiliation and endure the cross. Were the roll of the sweetest, strongest, most serviceable heroes of the Christian church called, it would be found that a very large proportion of them lived as seeing the

invisible Heaven. The Saviour assumed that the idea of Heaven would be a purifying power in men's souls, and so He constantly called His kingdom on earth the kingdom of Heaven; as though the possibility of the fulfillment and completion of His precepts in Heaven, thus suggested, would encourage people to start to do them on earth. The outcome of this assumption was marvellous; beautiful characters sprang up at its inspiration. Paul, with his eye on Heaven's "house not made with hands," fought his good fight against passions and weaknesses, and conquered. James victoriously endured temptations as he foresaw Heaven's "crown of life." Peter, thinking of Heaven as the place wherein righteousness prevails,

charged himself and others to consider "what manner of men ought we to be in all holiness and godliness." And John, the eagle-eyed, John who so often and so long fastened his gaze on Heaven's glories, himself became glorious by the things he saw.

To summon to our presence the men, women, and youth who in all ages and climes have been sweetened and cheered by the anticipation of Heaven, would bring before us the most helpful and hopeful of all God's people. Stephen looked into Heaven, and then he could pray for his persecutors. Margaret Wilson lifted her eyes above the incoming tides of Solway Firth, and seeing the Haven that awaited her soul, made no cry, but faced bravely

the waters as they crept to her throat for their fatal grasp.

Why is it that we or any others believe in a life lying beyond our present existence? The answer is, because, in part, our very natures seem made for such a belief. In all periods of history mankind has had a more or less clear expectation of living after death. It is at least an open question whether any mature and thoughtful person has ever trodden our earth who did not at times anticipate continuing to live, though his body should perish. I say "at times"; for it would be untrue to fact to fail to mention that there are moments, and perhaps even days, when, through disappointment or distress, many people are un-

certain whether death does not end all life. And still, in spite of this temporary uncertainty, it is the case that the conviction of the human race, when that conviction is normal and is not diverted by trouble (as the needle may be temporarily diverted from its pole by the proximity of iron), sets toward a belief in continued life in another world. "Every man hears in his own breast the drum-beat of eternity," as Henry Ward Beecher once said.

This anticipation has worked out different theories of the nature of the after-life according to the ideals that prevail in different parts of the earth. In India the conception of the after-life is of limitless transmigrations of the soul; in Persia, of a dwell-

ing in the "Isles of the Blessed"; in Greece, of an enjoyment of a merry Elysium; in Scandinavia, of a continued feasting and fighting in Valhalla; and in aboriginal America, in a wandering in the "happy hunting-ground."

But vary as this anticipation does in its details, this anticipation exists as a part of our natures. Christ found this anticipation in men's hearts when He came to Judea. How far it had moulded Jewish thought and character is uncertain—but that it had been a power, and still was a power, is sure. Men like Abraham had been sustained by it. Joseph had died in the faith of it. The Psalmists had felt its help as they were to pass through the dark valley of the

shadow of death; they expected to be received into glory; they looked forward to being satisfied when they awoke in God's likeness. It was of this anticipation that Christ spoke when He said: "If it were not so, I would have told you." Therefore He met this belief in continued life with assurances that it was well-grounded, and with assertions that such life would be to His followers a joy.

Right here we come upon our supreme, our satisfying reason for believing in a blessed Heaven. Once I would have said that the convincing reason is the Resurrection of Christ. I would have said that that Resurrection is our sole basis for believing in immortality. But now I say

that the convincing reason for that belief is Jesus Christ Himself, His being, His character. He is even greater than His Resurrection. That Resurrection is very great. It may well hold our attention—it is so sublime in itself, it is so wondrously attested, it has been so significant a factor in the history of this world since the first Easter. But that Resurrection, to those who grasp the significance of Christ's character, is just such an event as might be expected from such a character. One like Christ *could* not be holden of death. His Resurrection did confirm His word; it was a sort of credential. We needed the credential; therefore we had it. But when we have had it, when we have studied the credential and seen

that it is undoubtable, we lay it down and we give our attention to the Ambassador who has presented the credential. This Ambassador taught immortality; yes, and more: He lived immortality. We believe in Jesus Christ; therefore we believe in Heaven.

But what do we believe Heaven to be? Perhaps some one will say that even though Jesus Christ brought immortality to light, immortality is still encircled by darkness. He will say the truth. It is a fact that there is mystery—much, great, profound mystery—about Heaven. But it is not surprising that such is the case. Mystery could scarcely be spared from the thought of Heaven. Mystery,

in any matter, has a special mission of human helpfulness: it tends to make men careful in their judgments and reverential in their spirit. It sobers the mind which, were mystery lacking, would feel no sense of ignorance, and might rush headlong and heedless into the future. When the forest is unexplored and shadowy, the little child ventures into it with slow steps and wide-open eyes. Mystery always arouses thoughtfulness: it is a sentinel challenging "Attention!" It puts questions to the soul; it starts the soul upon investigation. We all are helped to be larger, wiser men because of the mystery that attends much of earthly life. The very mystery concerning the heavenly life is a blessing to us:

it tends to save us from flippancy and bravado.

Then, too, this is true: the nature itself of the better world demands that mystery be about it. Heaven is indescribable to us. It is a condition of which we have had no experience. The man born blind cannot understand the nature of colors. He lives in a colorless world. Blue, green, yellow, mean nothing, can mean nothing, to him. He must have his eyes opened if he is to understand what is meant by colors. Unless our powers of understanding were enlarged beyond anything as yet attainable, any attempt to explain to us the mysteries of eternity would only confuse, benumb, or dazzle us; it would surely mislead us.

It is just here that the unique character of the Bible is seen. It never allows itself to attempt a description of the indescribable. If, for instance, it speaks of a time when "the elements shall melt with a fervent heat, and the skies shall be rolled together as a scroll, and the new heavens shall appear," and it thus arouses our whole nature by its description of this, the greatest catastrophe in the history of humanity, the Bible stops absolutely short after it has made this startling revelation, and says nothing whatever about those many queries which our curiosity would prompt us to put concerning this catastrophe. It states a general fact; it leaves the details of the fact unstated.

It may be—and there certainly

seems to be ground for saying so—that were a full description of Heaven given us, so that every item of information that we could desire were laid before us, that description might have a most unfortunate effect on us. When the spies went into the promised land, they saw the land exactly as it was. But the very giants who were meant to be their servants, and the very walled towns that were meant to be their refuges and strongholds, frightened them, and instead of being helped by the sight, the spies were actually terrorized by it, and incapacitated for the present duty. It is true of successes as well as of failures, that the foreseeing of them would prove detrimental to most men. Many a person

to-day is bearing honors and carrying responsibilities from which he would have run away had he known twenty years ago that these honors and responsibilities were awaiting him. Were God to show us what He has in store for us, the beauty of the surroundings, the nobility of the life, the wonder of it all, the sight might so overpower us as to unfit us for the service immediately at hand.

But though the mystery concerning the better world is a real blessing, the wish often asserts itself in our hearts, "Oh, that I could see a little further into immortality than I do!" It is not so much that we wish to have more definite information concerning our own future, as it

is that we are solicitous about our dead who have passed beyond our sight, and we feel that we would give all our possessions if we could know where they are and what their surroundings are. "What are they doing?" we ask. There is no answer to our question. As well might we ask what is our friend or our child doing who to-day is in the very heart of Africa, beyond the reach of any communication. We cannot tell what he is doing. Even on earth there are many occasions when we are obliged to leave our absent friend to the care of God, and to that care only. We can send him no message, we cannot hear from him, we are absolutely ignorant of his situation and condition. But we can say to our hearts:

“Surely, all God’s purposes are good, and God’s eye is always watchful, and God’s arm is always outstretched to protect.” And so we can tell our hearts to wait in peace until, some day, communication shall be opened between us and our friend. Similarly we can say—only with a far more restful conception of the divine protection as it prevails in Heaven—of our dead in Heaven: “God is with them; they see His face; they rejoice in His presence; all is well.” And then we can wait, whether the time be longer or shorter, for the communication to be opened between friend and friend.

So far in these words of mine I have spoken of Heaven as

attended by the shades of mystery. But immortality itself stands forth in clear light. There are some features of it that are perfectly definite.

One is, that immortal life is *presence with God*. This does not mean that God's presence is ever absent from us, or that any experience on earth is apart from His spiritual care. What it means is, that Heaven is God's home, the home where every object that surrounds Him is to His taste. On earth, mingled with the good, there is the imperfect, the transient, the disappointing; in Heaven there is only the good. All is perfect, lasting, satisfying. It is one thing to see a noble man as he walks where squalor and disease and vice

are; it is a far different thing to see that same man as he walks in his own house, where only the beautiful and the healthy and the holy are. It was this very idea of the difference between earth and Heaven that seems to have been in Christ's mind when He, who had been seen living among lepers and hypocrites, and among all sinful surroundings, prayed that His disciples might later be "where I am, that they may behold my *glory*." A condition of life in which all is "glorious," even to the eyes of Christ, must be most blessed. So long as we confine our imagination within the range of *the characteristics of God*, and do not let it run off into fancies apart from those characteristics, we cannot think too high and too

helpful thoughts of the beauty of Heaven.

There is one point, however, that here needs guarding; while Heaven is the place and the condition of the perfect, we must not think that Heaven means cessation of growth. The seed is perfect as a seed; but it has capacity for development, and it answers to its full opportunity only when it—perfect in itself—perfectly develops. The soul of man may be guileless and yet may grow. Every faculty may be healthy to the degree of development it has yet reached and still be capable of enlargement. So far as we know, stagnation is death; and accordingly we believe that the perfect soul goes on forever, developing in the

power of its capabilities, and increasing more and more in its comprehension of all the truths of God.

Such ability to lay hold of the truths of God will enhance the joy of fellowship with Him. That fellowship is perhaps the supreme privilege of immortality. "I will come again and receive you unto myself," Christ said. To Christ true comradeship in Heaven was to be at once His reward and our happiness. He looked forward to having His disciples associated with Him in unrestrained intercourse—heart open to heart, and mind to mind. As there is no pleasure that so satisfies and stimulates pure souls on earth as fellowship, one with the other, so there can be no

sweeter anticipation of Heaven than that which suggests our companionship with God. They who walked with Christ on the way to Emmaus were strangely happy and strangely intelligent. They, too, who walk with God in Heaven will find their heart burning within them, and their whole intellectual life quickened. Nor is it possible for us to think of a life wherein such fellowship exists between God and ourselves without thinking also of a condition of our minds which implies the possibility—yes, and the necessity—of fellowship with our friends who are in Heaven. Christ talked with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration, and they with Him. Moses and Elijah evidently knew one another and had interests in

common. Human hearts will find one another in Heaven, and will have fellowship in congenial themes.

“Has it never struck you that when One rose from the dead and appeared to His friends by the lakeside, He did not tell them how trifling earthly matters now appeared to Him? His first question was, ‘Children, have ye any meat?’—the most ordinary question of daily life. I always recall this when people try to convince me that those beyond the veil no longer take any interest in the commonplace affairs which interest us; and I think what a comfort it is to know that those who have passed through the grave and gate of death are still too human

and too natural and too intimate with us to be indifferent to any trifle which concerns our welfare, even in the smallest degree."

This is the second feature of immortality that is definite: those who enter into immortality see things *as they really are*. This feature is wondrously significant. A person's eyes may be holden so that he cannot see things as they are. Such was the case at first with those very disciples on the way to Emmaus: they saw Christ, and still they did not see Him. They had no comprehension of who He was. Later their eyes were opened, and then they saw Him as He was, their glorified Lord. So an untaught child looks at the written paper that tells him of the gift his father

wishes to make to him, and tells him, too, of the love of that father for him; he sees the paper and the writing that is on it, but the paper has no meaning at all to him. Only when he has learned to read can he really see the paper, and then, seeing the paper as it is, he learns the preciousness of its writing.

This promise, that we shall see things as they are, has far-reaching possibilities. It means that we shall be free from the power of all those biases and prejudices that so often make objects appear different from what they are. This will be particularly true of our conception of God. The sorrow and anxiety of our earthly life are largely due to our misunderstandings of God. It

has always been so. The story of the coming of sin and distress into the world tells us that their coming was due to man's misjudgment of God; man took it for granted that God was not good enough to be trusted, and therefore he disobeyed Him. All our discouragement, all our peevishness, and much of our grief are caused by our failure to see that God is always wise and loving, and is always managing the events of human life. We think of Him as hard or partial or unconcerned, and then we become unhappy. "My way is hid from the Lord," we say, and so we grow bitter. Or we say, "God sends me more than I can bear," and then we give up our restful confidence in Him.

But such misconceptions of God and of God's actions are never to have place in Heaven. How the change will come about that will cause this true view of all things is not revealed. We are simply told that such will be the case, but the method by which it will be wrought out is left unexplained. It is not difficult, however, to believe in this change. We often witness changes that are similar in kind if not in degree. Once Washington's soldiers looked on him as their selfish oppressor. Ambitious officers had misled them, and had persuaded them even to plot against Washington. When Washington knew the situation he called the soldiers together. Then he told them the simple, plain facts of the war, told them

the condition of the country as it was at that hour, and told them, too, the meaning of his actions as their commander. Immediately the scales dropped from their eyes. In an instant they saw him, not as their oppressor, but as their benefactor and friend. They rushed forward with tears upon their cheeks to tell him of their gratitude and devotion.

So it was in the case of the leper whom Christ healed; immediately he was made whole. The disease that had been working in his system, perhaps for years, instantly, at Christ's touch, disappeared. "We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye." It will be like stepping out of gloom

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into light; one step may be enough, and with that step every object will appear as it is. We shall see God without a blur on any of His perfections; we shall see all His dealings, and all His truths, as wise and beautiful.

“I’ll bless the hand that guided,
I’ll bless the heart that planned,
When throned where glory dwelleth
In Emmanuel’s land.”

There is still a third feature of immortality that is definite: it secures to all who have part in it *likeness to God*. This likeness to God follows almost as a corollary from presence with Him and true view of Him; fellowship and admiration combined produce likeness. We often see this law, for law it is, exem-

plified on earth. Close, devoted friends come to think alike, to have the same tastes. The nearer and dearer their association the more speedily does likeness of soul appear.

This law has wide application. The contemplation of bright things makes our hearts bright, of sober things makes them sober. If we give ourselves up to our surroundings admiringly and absorbingly, we take color from them. Even in this lifetime, to look at Christ with unswerving and affectionate loyalty is to be changed into His likeness from glory to glory. To look at Him when He stands before us in the clear light of immortality, and then to have our whole being go out toward Him in gratitude

and love, will be to change with far increased rapidity into His likeness. Every beautiful trait of the Lord of Heaven will be reproduced in us. Not only shall we drop off the feebleness, weariness, and sorrow of sin, but we shall also put on the strength, peace, and gladness of holiness. In the highest sense we shall become "partakers of the divine nature," and all our tastes, affinities, delights, shall be like those of God.

There remains one more clear feature of immortality to be mentioned: it is *the perfect satisfaction* of Heaven. All through our earthly lives this element has been lacking. It is a part of human existence to be restless and to have unmet longings. We are like the vines with their

tendrils; the vines are always stretching out those tendrils in every direction in search for support. So the outreachings of our hearts for something different, something better, are continual. We are dissatisfied with anything and everything we rest our souls upon.

But these dissatisfactions are foretokens of immortality. Just as the branches of the trees that came floating out toward Columbus when he was approaching the new world told him that that new world existed and was awaiting him, so our unmet needs, our unfulfilled longings, assure us that the better world is at hand, and that in that world, when we awake in God's likeness, we shall be satisfied.

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At this point, after so many words of description, I feel sure that I hear some one say: "You have not told me what I want to know. Tell me, if you can, about my friend for whom I am so lonely, my child whose absence is my constant grief."

There are hundreds of questions about the better world that no one can answer, because there are no data wherewith to answer them. We must leave the questions all unsolved. But let this be borne in mind: we do not leave these questions to themselves, we leave them to God. God knows the answer to every one of them. To Him our darkness is light. To Him our dead and our living are equally in His light and in His care. "*I am the*

God of Abraham and of Isaac.” Abraham and Isaac are not dead to Him, and He *is* their God, and the God also of all our absent ones.

Now if the question arises, “Who are to be in Heaven?” the answer is at hand, “The sons of God.” Not that we can specify every particular person, but that we can say, “All who have God’s nature on earth are to be with Him in Heaven.” It makes no difference whether they always use the catch-words that are dear to some saints of God or not, nor whether they carry or fail to carry in their hands man-made passports to immortality. Their future state depends entirely upon the nature of their hearts and lives; they

that begin to be like God here are the heirs of Heaven.

So long as the prodigal boy tries to satisfy himself away from his father, and has his part with swine, he is not like his loving, pure father. But when he comes to himself, and seeing the wrong of his purposes and conduct, turns penitently from them toward his home, then he is like his father, and being like his father, he has his own safe place at home. Until a man means to get the better of his sin, until, when knowing Jesus Christ, he means to fashion his life according to the pattern of the Saviour, I do not see how he can be a son of God and so be prepared for Heaven. But when, even with the mustard-seed of

faith, he turns his face and soul toward the Home of God and starts to conform to the will of God, his path can have but one ending—the ending of entrance upon immortality.

“ *Who* will be in Heaven?” There will be countless children there, great multitudes of them coming up out of all the tribes of the earth, whose infant spirits, trustful and dependent, God has taken into His special keeping for time and for eternity. There will be all those who picked their footsteps in the light God threw upon their pathways and were loyal to His revelation of His will, great, diversified multitudes, who will find Heaven’s gates opening welcomingly in opposite directions, south as well as north,

east as well as west. The song of Heaven will be a hosanna sung by a host so large that no man can number it.

In that Heaven, we look for what we can best designate as a "natural" kind of life, though in spiritual surroundings. There we expect to recognize our loved and lost, and enjoy their company, though not in any frivolous and selfish way. They will have their high duties, and we shall have ours also. There, too, we expect merriment and feasting and all good cheer, but all these are to be without alloy of any kind. There, too, we expect to grow. Daily, hourly service of the will of God shall be ours, and in that service, a service that necessitates effort,

even as a bird must beat its wings to fly, we expect to reach higher and higher intellectual and spiritual power.

Let me then tell, in conclusion, what I think should be the resolves to which this study of Heaven should lead us.

First, to keep mindful that we are here on earth for a little time, and then immortality becomes ours! That immortality is the highest, happiest, noblest vision ever set before the heart of man; immortality is a surpassing privilege, it is a limitless opportunity. The soul that fails to attain it fails of its grandest possibility. Well may we rejoice that we ever were born into this life of struggle, since im-

mortality stands waiting for us; and well may we press onward in those ways of present duty that most surely lead to Heaven's open door.

And second, to hold fast to this vision of Heaven, and not let it escape from our thought. Ideals determine our character and conduct. Ideals for such a life as to-day we ought to live, who perhaps to-morrow are to be associated face to face with God, are the most inspiring, purifying ideals that can come into human minds. One of the best helps to be patient, to be brave, to be unselfish—yes, to be magnanimous—is to fix the eyes on the land where “sons of God” are forever with their Father.

And then, third, to shape our estimate of right character and our estimate of true success by the standards that prevail in Heaven. Let us call that and only that good which is good according to the judgment of Heaven; let us call that and only that worthy which Heaven approves. Wise will it be for us if we test our motives and our behavior by the wishes of Him who is Heaven's center and Heaven's joy. So may it come true for us, that, having the hope of Heaven in us, we shall strive more and more to be pure even as God Himself is pure!

“O Paradise! O Paradise!
I want to sin no more;
I want to be as pure on earth
As on the spotless shore.”

When very old, Victor Hugo wrote:

“I feel in myself the future life. I am rising, I know, toward the sky. The sunshine is over my head. Heaven lights me with the reflection of unknown worlds.

“You say the soul is nothing but the result of bodily powers; why, then, is my soul the more luminous when my bodily powers begin to fail? Winter is on my head and eternal spring is in my heart.

“The nearer I approach the end, the plainer I hear around me the immortal symphonies of the worlds which invite me. It is marvelous, yet simple. It is a fairy tale, and it is a history. For half a century I have been

writing my thoughts in prose, verse, history, philosophy, drama, romance, tradition, satire, ode, song—I have tried all. But I feel that I have not said the thousandth part of what is in me. When I go down to the grave I can say, like so many others: ‘I have finished my day’s work,’ but I cannot say, ‘I have finished my life.’ My day’s work will begin the next morning. The tomb is not a blind alley. It is a thoroughfare. It closes in the twilight to open with the dawn. I improve every hour because I love this world as my fatherland. My work is only a beginning. My work is hardly above its foundation. I would be glad to see it mounting and mounting forever. The thirst for the infinite proves infinity.”