

VISIONS OF HEAVEN AND HELL

by John Bunyan

John Bunyan was a 17th century English preacher who spent twelve years in prison for his Christian faith and wrote over 40 books. His best known writing is Pilgrim's Progress, one of the most famous and popular books in all of world history.

John Bunyan wrote the following account when he was a young man, of how an angel was sent by the Lord to take him to see heaven and hell. It is a true story, not an allegory or fictional book. While all visions must be judged by the Bible, these seem very scriptural and were used by the Lord to help transform young John into a mighty man of God. May this simplified account of his visions also help to transform you! - The Editor

CHAPTER 1: PLANNING SUICIDE

When evil persons have gone in a life of sin, and find that they have reason to fear the just judgment of God, they begin at first to wish there were no God to punish them. Then little by little they persuade themselves that there is no God, and look for arguments to back their opinion. I had the unhappiness to know someone like this, who would always be telling me there was neither God nor devil, and no heaven or hell.

It was with fear and trembling that I first heard him speak about these topics, but he spoke of them so often that I felt I must consider what he said. From this time I found my mind so confused that I could not remember the truths about God which had appeared so clear to me before. I could not think there was no God but with the greatest horror, yet I questioned the truth of His being. I would not have parted with my hope of heaven for all the riches of the world, yet now I was not sure whether there was any such place.

In my confusion I went to my false friend to see what comfort he could give me. He only laughed at my fears and pretended to pity my weakness. His talks only made me more confused, until life became a burden to me. It is impossible to tell you the agonies I felt, until I was pushed to the edge of desperation. I thought, "Why should I linger between despair and hope? Would it not be better to end my life and find out what is the truth?" So I decided to kill myself.

One morning I went out into a nearby woods, where I had planned to kill myself. But before I tried to use the knife I heard a secret whisper say, "Do not fall into everlasting misery to gratify the enemy of your soul. The fatal stroke you are about to give yourself will seal your own damnation. For if there is a God, as surely as there is, how can you hope for mercy from Him if you willfully destroy yourself who were made in His image?"

Where this secret whisper came from, I do not know, but I believe it came from God; for it came with so much power it made me throw away my knife, and it showed me the great evil of suicide. The horror of what I had almost done made me shake so much that I could hardly stand. I recognized my deliverance to have come from the Lord, and in gratitude I returned thanks. I knelt down on the ground and worshipped Him, asking that He would take away the blackness in my soul so that I would never again question His being or great power which I had just experienced.

Suddenly I was surrounded with a glorious light, brighter than anything I had ever seen before. I saw coming toward me a glorious person like a man, but circled with beams of light and glory which shined from him as he came nearer. I tried to stand up, but had no strength left in me, so I fell flat on my face. As he lifted me up and I was given new strength, I said to him, "O my shining deliverer, how shall I acknowledge my thankfulness, and in what manner should I adore you?"

With majesty and mildness he replied, "Pay your adorations to God, and not to me who am your fellow-creature. I am sent from Him Whose being you have so lately denied, to stop you from falling into eternal ruin."

This touched my heart with such a sense of my own unworthiness that I could only cry out, "Oh, how utterly unworthy I am of all this grace and mercy!" To this the heavenly messenger replied, "When God decided to show mercy He did not consult your unworthiness, but His own unbounded goodness and vast love. He saw how the grand enemy of souls desired your ruin, but He upheld you by His secret power. Through this, when Satan thought that you were destroyed, the snare was broken and you have escaped." These words made me break forth into song, and I praised my Savior and declared that He is God alone.

CHAPTER TWO: BEYOND THE SUN AND STARS

The heavenly messenger then said, "That you may never doubt the reality of eternal things, I have come to show you the truth of them: not by faith only but also by sight. I will show you things never yet seen by mortal eye, and to that end your eyes shall be strengthened and made able to behold heavenly things."

At these words of the angel I was very surprised, and doubted I would be able to bear it. I said to him, "Who is able to bear such a sight?"

To this he replied, "The joy of the Lord shall be your strength." When he had said this, he took hold of me and said, "Fear not, for I am sent to show the things you have not seen." Then before I was aware I found myself far above the earth, which seemed now to be very small.

Then I said to my bright conductor, "Please let it not offend you if I ask a question or two." To this he replied, "Speak on. It is my work to inform you of what you ask. For I am a ministering spirit, sent forth to minister to you and to those that will inherit salvation."

Then I said, "Please inform me about that dark spot below, which has grown smaller and smaller as we have mounted higher, and which appears much darker since I have come into this region of light."

My conductor replied, "That little spot that now looks so dark and despised is the world which you have lived on. To obtain one small part of that spot of earth so many men have risked and lost their immortal souls; which are so precious that the Prince of Peace has told us that though a man could gain the whole world, it would not equal so great a loss. As you have ascended higher towards heaven, the world has appeared still smaller and more insignificant; and it will appear the same to all who can by faith get their hearts above it. If the sons of men below could but see the world as it is, they would not covet it as they do now, but alas, they are in a state of darkness. And what is worse, they love to walk in this darkness. For although the prince of Light came down among them and showed them the true light of life, yet they go on in darkness and will not bring themselves to the light, because their deeds are evil."

Then I asked him, "What are those multitudes of black and horrible forms that hover in the air above the world? I would have been much afraid of them, but I saw that as you passed by, they fled; perhaps not being able to abide your brightness."

To this he answered me, "They are the fallen angels which for their pride and rebellion were cast down from heaven. They wander in the air by decree of the Almighty, being bound in chains of darkness and kept unto the judgment of the great day. They are permitted to descend into the world, both for the trial of the elect, and for the condemnation of the wicked. And although you see that they now have black and horrible forms, yet they were once the sons of Light. They once were clothed in robes of glorious brightness, like what you see me wear. But the loss of this, although it was the result of their own willful sin, fills them with anger and hatred against the ever blessed God Whose power and majesty they fear and hate.

"Tell me," I said, "O blessed conductor, have they no hopes of being reconciled to God again, after some term of time, or at least some of them?"

"No, not at all. They are lost forever. They were the first that sinned, and had no tempter; and they were all at once cast down from heaven. Besides, the Son of God, the blessed Messiah by Whom alone salvation can be gained, did not take upon Himself the angelic nature. He left the apostate angels all to perish, and took upon Himself only the seed of Abraham. For this reason they have so much hatred against the sons of men, because it is a torment for them to see men made the heirs of heaven while they are doomed to hell."

By this time we were above the sun. My conductor told me this mighty globe of fire was one of the great works of God. Yet all the stars were not less wonderful; whose great distance away makes them appear like candles in our sight. They hang in their appointed places without any support. Nothing but His word that first created them could keep them in their station.

"These words are enough," I said to my conductor, "To convince anyone of the great power of their Creator, and to show the evil of that unbelief which questions the being of the God who has given so many evidences of His power and glory. If men were not like beasts still looking downwards, they could not help but acknowledge His great power and wisdom."

"You speak what is true," he replied. "But you will see far greater things than these. These are but the scaffolds and outworks to that glorious place that the blessed above inhabit. A view of it shall now be given to you, as far as you are able to comprehend it."

In a few moments I found what my conductor had told me was true. For I found myself transferred into heaven, where I saw things that are impossible to describe, and heard beautiful songs that I could never sing. Whoever has not seen that glory can speak but very imperfectly of it, and they that have seen it cannot tell the thousandth part of what it is. Therefore the great apostle of the Gentiles, who tells us that he had been caught up into paradise where he had heard unspeakable words which are not possible for a man to utter, wrote that "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man to conceive the things that God has prepared for those that love him." I will give you the best account I can of what I saw and heard, as near as I can remember.

CHAPTER 3: ELIJAH EXPLAINS

When I was first brought near this glorious place I saw innumerable hosts of bright attendants, who welcomed me into this blessed place of happiness. And there I saw that perfect and unapproachable light, that changes all things into its own nature, for even the souls of the glorified saints are transparent. They are not illumined by the sun; but all that light, that flows with such transparent brightness throughout these heavenly mansions, is nothing else but the shining forth of the Divine glory. Compared to this glory, the light of the sun is but darkness, and the fire of the most sparkling jewels are but dead coals. Therefore it is called *The Throne of the Glory of God*, where the radiance of the divine Majesty is revealed in the most illustrious manner. God was too bright for me to look upon as He was exalted on the high throne of His glory, while multitudes of angels and saints sang forth eternal hallelujahs and praises to Him. Well may He be called the *God of Glory*, for by His presence He makes heaven what it is. Rivers of pleasure continually spring forth from the divine Presence, and radiate cheerfulness, joy, and splendor to all the blessed inhabitants of heaven, the seat of His eternal empire.

For my own part, I was too weak to bear the least ray of glory that shot from that everlasting Spring of Light which sat upon the throne. I was forced to cry out to my conductor, "The sight of so much glory is too great for me to bear, yet it is so refreshing and delightful that I would desire to look, though I die."

"No, no," said my conductor, "death cannot enter this blessed place, nor sin nor sorrow can abide. It is the glory of this happy place to be forever freed from all that is evil; and without that freedom, our blessedness even here would be imperfect. Come along with me and I will bring you to one who is in the body, as you are. Talk with him for a while before I take you back again."

"O rather," I eagerly said, "let me stay here. There is no need of building tabernacles, for the heavenly mansions are already prepared." My shining messenger replied to this, "Here in a while you shall forever be, but the divine will must first be obeyed."

Swift as thought he conveyed me past thousands of angels, and presented me to that great saint, the prophet Elijah. Though he had lived in the world many hundreds of years ago, I knew him at first sight.

"Here is one," said my conductor to Elijah, "who by the commission of the Imperial Throne has been permitted to visit these realms of light, and I have brought him to you, to learn from you."

"That," said the prophet, "I shall gladly do. For it is our meat and drink in these blessed regions to do the will of God and the Lamb, to sing His praises, and serve Him with the humblest adoration, saying, 'Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sits upon the throne; and to the Lamb for ever and ever: for He has redeemed us to God by His blood out of every kindred and tongue, and people and nation, and has made

us unto our God kings and priests: even so, Amen.'" And I likewise added my "Amen" to that of the holy prophet.

The prophet then asked me why this great permission and privilege was given to me. (By which I understand the saints in heaven are ignorant of what is done on earth; so how can prayers be directed to them?) I then told him the events I have already written here, at which the holy prophet broke forth in praise, "Glory for ever be given to Him that sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, for His unbounded goodness and great condescension to the weakness of a poor and doubting sinner." After this he said, "Now give attention to what I shall speak. What you have already seen and heard I am sure you cannot make fully understood to those not yet translated to this glorious place, who have not yet been freed from their earthly bodies. Nor is my being here in the body any objection to what I say; for although it has not been subject to death, yet it has been equally changed. It has been made spiritual, and is no longer able to suffer. Yet in this full state of happiness I cannot utter all that I enjoy, nor do I know what shall yet be enjoyed, for here our happiness is always new."

I then asked the blessed prophet to explain himself. I did not understand how happiness could be complete, and yet still be added to. The following was his reply:

"When the soul and body are both happy, as mine now are, I count it a complete state of happiness. For throughout all the coming ages of eternity, it is the soul and body joined together in the blessed resurrection state that shall receive this happiness. But concerning the object of our happiness, which is the ever-adorable and blessed God, our vision of Him is forever new. For as the divine perfections are infinite, nothing less than eternity can be sufficient to display their glory. This makes our happiness eternally added to, as well as our knowledge of Him to be eternally progressive also.

"Therefore the apostle Paul said, 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor can it enter into the heart of man to conceive what God has prepared for those who love him.' Yet the human eye has seen many admirable things in nature. It has seen mountains of crystal, and rocks of diamonds, it has seen mines of gold, and coasts of pearls. Nevertheless, the eye that has seen so many wonders in the world below could never pry into the glories of this triumphant place. And though the ear of man has heard many delightful and harmonious sounds, even all that man and nature could supply him with, yet he has never heard the heavenly melody which both saints and angels make before the throne. The heart of man is so fine and imaginative that it can conceive almost anything that is, or was, or ever shall be in the world below, and even what shall never be. Man can conceive that every stone on earth shall be turned into pearls, and every blade of grass into the brightest of shining jewels. He can conceive that the whole earth be turned into a mass of pure gold, and the air turned into crystal. He can conceive every star to become as bright as the sun, and the sun to be a thousand times larger and brighter. But all this is infinitely short of what the eternal Majesty has prepared for all His faithful followers."

CHAPTER 4: THE HAPPINESS OF HEAVEN

The prophet continued, "I will briefly tell you about our happiness here, for ages spent on this delightful theme would only begin to explain it. That you may have the best understanding, I will first explain about what the redeemed souls have been delivered from, and secondly about the happiness that they enjoy here.

"Firstly, the souls of all the blessed are forever freed from everything that can make them miserable, which above all is sin. It was sin that brought misery into creation. The blessed God at first made all things happy, like Himself. Had not sin defaced the beauty of His workmanship, angels and men would have never known what is meant by misery. It was sin that threw the apostate angels down into hell, and spoiled the beauty of the lower world. It was sin that defaced God's image in man's soul, and made the ones who were to be the lords of creation into slaves of their own lust. It is sin which can also plunge them into an ocean of eternal misery from which is no redemption. It is an invaluable mercy that in this happy place all the saints are forever freed from sin through the blood of our Redeemer. In the earth below, the best and holiest of souls groan under the burden of corruption. Sin tries to cling to all that they do, and often leads them captive against their will. "Who shall deliver me?" has been the cry of many of God's faithful servants, who at the same time have been dear to Jesus. Sin is the heavy weight upon the saints while they live in their corrupted flesh. Therefore when they lay their bodies down, their souls are like a bird loosed from its cage, and with a heavenly joy they rise up to heaven. But here their warfare is at an end, and 'death is swallowed up in victory.' Below their souls were deformed and

stained by sin, but here their bright souls by the ever-blessed Jesus are presented to the Father 'without spot or wrinkle.'

"Not only are the saints here free from sin, but also from any temptation to sin. When Adam was in paradise, though he was innocent and free from sin, yet he was not free from temptation. Satan got into paradise and Adam fatally yielded to his temptations. Like a disease, sin has eaten into the human nature and corrupted all mankind.

"Here each soul is freed from this. Nothing but what is pure and holy can find admission here. That roaring lion who roams back and forth throughout the earth seeking whom he may devour, in respect to the saints in heaven, is bound fast in everlasting chains. The temptations of the world shall never again allure those who through faith and patience have overcome it and safely arrived here. In heaven we look with contempt on all earthly enjoyments. There is nothing here that can disturb our peace, but an eternal calm crowns all our happiness.

"Since we are freed from all sin and its effects, we are also rescued from punishment. After death, hell confines the sinner to eternal misery. Yet the blessed are delivered from all these things.

"However, these things are but the least part of the happiness of heaven. Our joys are positive, more than just the negative that we have been redeemed from. What these are I shall try to show you.

"Here we enjoy the sight of God, the blessed spring and eternal source of all our happiness. But what this is, I can no more fully explain than can finite creatures comprehend infinity. Yet the sight of God continually fills our souls with joy unspeakable and full of glory, and with a love so flaming that nothing but the blessed author of it can satisfy, nor eternity itself can end. It is that which makes us live, love, sing, and praise forever while it also transforms us into His blessed likeness. Beholding God's face, we enjoy His love. His blessed smiles make glad our souls, and in His favor we rejoice continually, 'for in His favor is life.' And by this blessed vision of God, we come to know Him far above how any had known Him in the world below. For the sight of Him opens our understandings, and 'gives us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.' Here we all enjoy Him face to face. Below the saints enjoy God in a measure, but here we enjoy Him without measure. There they have some sips of His goodness, but here we drink largely and swim in the boundless ocean of happiness. Below the saints have their communion with God broken off many times, but here it is uninterrupted. Below love is mixed with fear, and fear has torment; but here love is perfect, and perfect love casts out fear. In heaven we love God more than ourselves, and one another like ourselves. Here we enjoy the perfection of all grace.

"In heaven our understanding and knowledge is enlarged according to the greatness of what we can observe and think. In the world below light could only shine into our minds through the windows of our senses, so God had to condescend to our limited capacities when revealing His Majesty. Our purest ideas of God were very imperfect, but here the gold is separated from the dross and we can conceive the simplicity and purity of God. We understand about His decrees and counsels, His providence and dispensations. We clearly see here that from eternity God was sole existing, but not solitary, that the Godhead is neither confused in unity, nor divided in number. We see that there is a priority of order but no superiority among the persons of the Trinity, but that they equally have the same excellency and power, and equally are adored. Those ways of God that in the world below seemed unsearchable and beyond our comprehension, we understand so clearly here by His divine wisdom that the truth could not be made more simple.

"These are some of the things that make our souls happy. However, the happiness of the saints in heaven will not be complete until their bodies are resurrected and united with their souls. I will therefore show you what the resurrection body shall be like:

"First, the resurrection bodies of the blessed will be spiritual bodies, like mine. You may better understand this not only by seeing but by touch. (After saying this, the holy prophet was pleased to give me his hand.) They will be bodies that are purified from all corruption, yet will have substance. They will not be like wind or air, as people on earth sometimes foolishly imagine."

Then I said to him that I always understood spiritual as the opposite of material, so I thought that a spiritual body must be immaterial, and not capable of being touched or felt as I found his hand was.

To this the prophet replied that their bodies were spiritual, not only because they were purified from all corruption, but as they were sustained by the enjoyment of God without needing food, drink, or sleep.

Beholding the Lord is what supports both their souls and their bodies, and is what they live upon forever. "Have you not read," said the prophet, "that the blessed Jesus, after His resurrection, appeared in His body to His disciples when they were met together in a chamber and the doors shut about them? And yet He called to Thomas to come and reach forth his hand and thrust it into His side, which shows it had substance.

"Our bodies in the resurrection shall be immortal, and incapable of dying. Below their bodies are all mortal, perishing, and subject to crumbling into dust at any time. But here our bodies will be incorruptible and freed from death forever, for our corruption here shall put on incorruption, and our mortality will be swallowed up of life."

Here I desired the prophet to bear with me a little, while I gave him an account of my own ideas about these matter.

"Speak, for I am ready to remove your doubt," he said.

"I have learned," I said, "in the holy Scriptures that immortality belongs to God only, and not to men. Daily experience tells us that bodies of men are mortal, and die. Therefore Paul told Timothy that God only has immortality."

"When I say that the bodies of the blessed here are immortal, I am speaking about the bodies in their resurrected state, that then they are subject to death no more. Man in his corruptible state is mortal and subject to death. And there is nothing more evident to all that dwell in the world below. Even the bodies of all those glorified souls that are here in heaven are at this time still kept under the power of death. At the resurrection day, when they shall be raised up again, they shall then be immortal. And as to what you say from the Scripture, that the blessed God has only immortality, it is very true. He is most essentially so in His own being and nature; there is no angel or man that can, in that strict sense, be said to be so. We are immortal through His grace and favor; but God is immortal in His essence and has been so from all eternity. In that sense He may well be said only to have immortality. Whatever the blessed God is, He is essentially so in His own being. It can likewise be said that He only is holy, and there is none good but God, none righteous, nor none merciful but He."

CHAPTER 5: WE SHALL KNOW EACH OTHER

I remarked, "As I was brought here, I saw among the saints some that appeared to shine with greater brightness than the others. Are there among the blessed different degrees of glory?"

"The happiness and glory which all the blessed here enjoy is the result of their communion with and love to the ever blessed God. The more we see Him, the more we love Him; and love changes our souls into His nature, and from this results our glory. This makes a difference in the degrees of glory. Nor is there any murmuring in one to see another's glory much greater than his own. The ever blessed God is an unbounded ocean of light and life, and joy and happiness, still filling every vessel that is put therein, till it can hold no more. And though the vessels are of several sizes, while each is filled there is none that can complain. My answer therefore to your question is that those who have the most enlarged capacity do love God most, and are thereby changed most into His likeness. This is the highest glory heaven can give. Nor let this seem strange to you, for even among God's flaming angels there are diversities of order and different degrees of glory.

While I was talking with the prophet a shining form drew near. It was one of the redeemed. He told me he had left his body below resting in hope until the resurrection; and that though he was still a substance yet it was an immaterial one, not to be touched by mortal.

He said, "We here behold a sight worth dying for- the blessed Lamb of God, the glorious Savior. Here we see Him in His kingly office, on account of which He is called King of kings and Lord of lords. But all the glorious greatness of our blessed Redeemer does not make His kindness seem distant, but only more precious. It makes heaven more than heaven to me to find Him reigning here, Who suffered so much for me in the world below. And our Redeemer's great happiness increases our own, as He invites each faithful servant to enter into his Master's joy.

"Here we see not only our elder Brother, Christ, but also our friends and relatives. Although Elijah lived in the world below long before your time, you no sooner saw him than you knew him. And so you will also know Adam when you see him. Here we communicate the purest pleasure to each other, a sincere ardent love uniting

our society. And oh, how happy is that state of love! Where there is love like this, all are filled with delight. How can it be otherwise, since in this blessed society there is a continual receiving and returning of love and joy.

“But besides all the happiness that comes to us by our communion with God and with each other, it is to me a mighty happiness to understand all the deep mysteries of religion which the wisest in the world below could not fully understand. Here we discern a perfect harmony between those scripture texts that in the world below seemed to oppose each other. And here we are especially filled with wonder and gratitude at discovering the divine goodness towards each one of us in particular. In respect to my former life on earth, I have seen the mercifulness of those very afflictions that I once (when upon earth) thought to show His anger. I am now fully convinced that no affliction that I met with in the world below (and I met with many) either came sooner or fell heavier or continued longer than was needful. My hopes were not disappointed, but God used all things to prepare me for a better eternal reward than what I had hoped for.

“But I remember that you are still in the body, and may be tired with hearing what I could forever tell, so great is the happiness that I possess. I shall only add one other thing about our happiness: though a vast multitude of blessed souls partakes of this joy and glory, this does not make less of what each receives. For this ocean of happiness is so bottomless that the innumerable company of all the saints and angels never can exhaust it. Nor is this strange, for in the world below everyone equally enjoys the benefit of light. There is no one that can complain that they enjoy it less, because another enjoys it also. All enjoy the benefit of light as fully as if no one else enjoyed it but themselves. If a multitude of persons drink of the same river none of them is able to exhaust it, even though each of them has the liberty of drinking as much as he can. So whoever enjoys God enjoys Him as much as he can contain, according to his capacity.

“Thus I have given you a brief account of our heavenly Canaan. It is not the thousandth part of that which might be said, yet it is enough to let you see it is a land flowing with milk and honey.” In this happy place worldly relations cease. Nor is there male and female here, but all are like the angels. For souls cannot be distinguished into sexes, and therefore all relations are here swallowed up in God.”

He had no sooner spoken than he took me by the hand. Then, far swifter than an arrow from a bow, we passed by several shining forms clothed in robes of immortality, who looked at me as I passed them. He said, to me, “Farewell, my friend, your guardian angel will shortly come and bring you back to the world below.”

I drew near the shining form of a redeemed one that stood before me, who appeared extremely glorious, encircled with rays of dazzling luster. I hardly could behold her for the exceeding brightness of her face.

She said to me, “For what I am, to Him that is on the throne be all the praise and glory. The robe of glory which you see me wear is only the reflection of His own bright beams!”

“You appear to be one who feels the mighty joys that you speak of.”

She replied, “You should not think this strange. The mighty wonders of divine love and grace will be the subject of our song forever. Here all human relations cease and are swallowed up in God Who is alone the great Father of all this heavenly family. As for the members of the family that I left behind in the world below, I have committed them to God. I shall be glad to see them all heirs of this blessed inheritance. But if they should join with the grand enemy of souls and refuse the grace offered them, and thereby perish in their unbelief, God will be glorified in His justice, and in His glory I shall still rejoice.”

Then I desired to know whether the saints in heaven understood and were concerned for what was happening in the world below.

To this she replied, “As to the affairs of particular persons, we are not concerned with them and are ignorant of them. Only God is present in all places and sees all things. But the struggles and the victories of the church below is told to us by the angels, who are ministering spirits sent forth to minister to those that shall be heirs of salvation. From what they report we are excited to renew our praises to Him that sits upon the throne.” - TO BE CONTINUED