

A VISION OF HEAVEN

This vision is attributed to William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army. He had several visions that were significant in shaping his life and ministry. While all visions must be evaluated and tested by the Scriptures, we feel that this condensed account of his vision could also bring a significant impact to your own life.

I felt as though I was in a dream. I knew I was ill – dangerously ill – because a relative insisted on my being told my real condition. And yet I was not disturbed about the fact. I thought I would recover. Most people do, I suppose, until the hand of death is upon them.

And if I did not recover, I thought I had no reason to be terribly concerned, because I was a Christian. Hadn't I been converted? Didn't I believe the Bible? Why should I fear?

But even so, disturbing thoughts crossed my mind about whether I had truly followed Jesus Christ. Had I done my duty to a perishing world with my time, influence, and money? These questions were very difficult for me to answer. Yet it was all in a dreamy way because of the burning fever that was numbing my brain.

Meanwhile a strange faintness seized me. I lost consciousness. My next awareness was altogether beyond description. It was the thrill of a new and celestial existence. I was in heaven.

After the first feeling of surprise had lessened, I looked around me. It was delightful way beyond anything on earth. And yet some of the more beautiful scenes and sounds and feelings of the world I had just left appeared to be repeated in my new experience, although in more wonderful ways. No human eyes had ever seen such perfection, such beauty. No earthly ear had ever heard such music. No human heart ever experienced such ecstasy as it was my privilege to see, hear, and feel in the heavenly country.

Above me was the loveliest of the blue skies. Around me was an atmosphere so pleasant that it made my whole body vibrate with pleasure. Flowing by the bank of roses on which I found myself was a river of clear, pure water that seemed to dance with delight to its own murmurings. The trees were full of the most delicious fruit that was sweet beyond all earthly sweetness. Just by lifting my hand I could pick and taste it.

In every direction the air was filled with not only the sweetest perfumes coming from the fairest flowers, but it was also filled with the fairest forms. Floating around me were beautiful beings whom I felt by instinct were angels and archangels, seraphim and cherubim, together with the perfect blood-washed saints who had come from our own world. They were sometimes far away, and sometimes they came nearer.

The whole sky at times seemed to be full of happy, worshiping, joyous beings. And the whole heavenly country, apparently of limitless size, was filled with a blissful ecstasy that could only be known by being experienced.

You may perhaps imagine my sensation. At first I was swallowed up with a sort of ecstatic intoxication, which was immediately enhanced by the consciousness that I was safe and saved, to suffer and sin no more.

Then suddenly, a new set of feelings began to come over me. Strange as it may seem, I felt somewhat lonely and a little sad, even in the midst of this infinite state of bliss. This was because, up to this moment, I was

alone. Not one of the bright beings who were singing in the bright skies above me, nor the ones who were coming and going on some high mission, had spoken to me or approached me.

I was alone in heaven! Then, in a still stranger and mysterious way, I appeared to feel in myself a sort of unfitness for the society of those pure beings who were around me in indescribable loveliness. How could this be? Had I come there by mistake? Was I not counted worthy of this glorious inheritance? It was indeed a mystery.

My thoughts went back to earth. Then before my eyes I saw the record of my past life. What a record it was! I glanced over it. And in a glance I seemed to understand its entire contents – so quickly that I became conscious of a marvelous quickening of my intellectual powers. I realized that I could take in and understand in a moment what would have required me a day to understand with my poor, limited mental abilities on earth.

With my quickened mind, I was delighted to see at a glance that this record of my earthly existence – the Divine biography of my life – contained no record of any of my sins before my conversion. Indeed, that part of my life seemed to be completely blank. I further saw that there was also no record of the sins I had done since that time. It was as if some friendly hand had gone through the roll and erased the record of the evil doings of my life. This was very gratifying. I felt like shouting praises to God, who had delivered me from the pain of having these things remembered in this beautiful, holy land, where it seemed that even the memory of sin would be a defilement.

Nevertheless, a further glance at my record shocked me, for there was written in it an exact daily record of the rest of my past life. In fact, it went much deeper, because it described in full detail the motives for which I lived. It recorded my thoughts, feelings and actions – how and for what I had used my time, my money, my influence, and all the other talents and gifts which God had entrusted me with.

I felt like putting my hands before my eyes and putting my fingers in my ears to shut these things out from sight and hearing. I became filled with sorrow and self-reproach, because I saw how I had wasted my life during the years I had lived after Jesus Christ had called me to become His soldier. Instead of fighting His battles and saving souls, I had been busy with earthly things, selfishly seeking my own advantage, while spending my life in practical unbelief, disloyalty and disobedience.

I felt sick at heart. Oh, if I could only slip out of heaven and go back to the world of darkness and sin which I had just left! If I could just spend another lifetime among the lost and dying, and truly follow my Lord!

But that could not be. My opportunities on earth were past. Heaven must now be my dwelling forever. And as contradictory as it may seem, this thought filled my soul with unspeakable regret.

While I was thinking about these things, as quick as a lightning flash, one of those bright inhabitants that I had watched afar off descended and stood before my astonished gaze.

I can never forget the awe-struck feelings with which I beheld this heavenly being. He was at the same time angelic and human, earthly and yet heavenly. I felt that the being before me was a man, a redeemed and glorified man.

He looked at me, and I could not keep from returning his gaze. I could never have believed the human face could ever bear so grand an image of dignity and grace. But far beyond the beauty of his face, as I looked into his eyes I could see the depths of his pure, kind, and tender soul.

I don't know how I looked to my beautiful visitor, but it was clear that he had a deep interest in me. Yet this interest seemed to bring sadness to him. His features seemed to me to grow almost sorrowful as I sat there with my eyes fixed on him in wonder.

He spoke first, otherwise I would never have had the courage to speak to him. His voice was soft and musical, and fitted well with the seriousness of his bearing. I could understand him almost before I heard his words, although I cannot tell now what language he spoke. I suppose it was the universal language of heaven.

This was the substance of what he said: My arrival was known throughout that area, and the ransomed saints had gathered together who had come from the earthly neighborhood where I had lived. All who had known me on earth, all who had any knowledge of my family, desired to see me and hear me tell of the victories that I had won and the souls that I had blessed while on earth. They were especially anxious to hear if I had brought salvation to the loved ones they had left behind.

All this was poured upon my soul. I didn't know which way to look. Again and again I remembered my life of ease and comfort. What could I say? How could I stand before these waiting ones with the poor record of my life? It was only a record of self-gratification. I had no martyr stories to tell. I had sacrificed nothing worth mentioning for His dear sake!

As I was thinking in this direction, my visitor must have understood my thoughts and felt pity for me. Seeing my concern, he spoke again.

"Where you find yourself is not actually heaven," he said, "This is only its outer court. Soon the Lord Himself, with a great procession of His chosen ones, will come to take you into the Celestial City itself. There is where your residence will be if He judges you worthy; that is, if your conduct on the battlefield below on earth has pleased Him.

"Meanwhile, I have obtained permission to come and speak to you concerning a soul who is very dear to me. I understand he lives in the neighborhood from which have just now come. Our knowledge of the affairs of the earth is, for our own sakes, limited, but now and then we are permitted to get a glimpse.

"Can you," he said, "tell me anything about my son? He was my only son. I loved him dearly. I loved him too much. I spoiled him when he was a child! He had his own way. He grew up willful, passionate and disobedient. And my own example didn't help him."

He completed his story. He, the father, had been rescued, washed, and regenerated. He had learned to fight for souls, and had won many to Christ. Then he had suddenly died by an accident at his workplace and was taken to heaven.

"And now," he added, "where is my boy? Give me news about my son! He lived near you, and had business dealings with you. What did you do for him? Is there hope? Tell me what his feelings are today."

He stopped speaking. My heart sank within me. What could I say? I knew the boy. The story of this prodigal son and his father's death had been told to me. But I had never spoken one serious word to the boy about his soul or about the Savior. Now, what could I say to his father, who stood before me? I was speechless!

A cloud came over the face of my visitor. He must have guessed the truth. He looked at me with an expression of pity and then left.

I was so intently looking at his departure that I didn't notice a second fair being who had descended from above, and who now stood where my last visitor had just been.

I turned and looked upon the newcomer. This was also one of the ransomed multitude who once were dwellers on the earth. But in this case there was a beauty beyond which I could have imagined. My former visitor, I have said, was a glorious man – this one was evidently the glorified form of a woman.

She told me her name. I had heard it on earth. She was a widow who had struggled through great difficulties. Her husband's death had resulted in her conversion to Christ. After her salvation she had totally dedicated herself to fight for the Lord. Her children had been her first concern. They had all been saved, and were fighting for God, except for one.

The mention of that one for a moment brought the same sadness on her lovely face that had dimmed the bright face of my first visitor. But the cloud vanished almost as soon as it came. That unsaved child was a girl who had been her mother's delight. She had grown up very beautiful but had gone astray. It was the old story of a soul that was seduced into evil ways, then became abandoned to that lifestyle, and then reaped all the miserable results of that sin.

I listened. I had known some of the woman's sad story on earth, but I had turned away from hearing about it because I thought that it was no concern of mine. Little did I ever think that I would be confronted with it in heaven!

And now the bright spirit turned her eyes on me that, beaming with love and concern, were more beautiful than ever. She said again: "My daughter lived near you. You know her. Have you saved her? I don't know much about her, but I do know that one determined effort would win her to Christ."

And then again she asked me, "Have you saved my child?"

I felt as though I was in agony. I know I put my hands over my eyes, because I could no longer bear to meet her intent gaze, which now turned into one of pity for me.

How long she continued to look at me, with an expression of concern almost greater than she had shown for her lost child, I do not know. But when I uncovered my eyes, she was gone.

Then I cried out, "Oh, my God, is this heaven? Will these questionings go on forever? Will the meanness and selfishness of my past life haunt me throughout eternity? What shall I do? Can I not go back on earth, and do something to redeem myself from this wretched sense of unworthiness? Can I not live my life over again?"

This question had hardly passed through my mind when down beside me alighted another form, resembling the first man that had spoken to me. He introduced himself much in the same way as my former

visitors. He had been a famous singer who was won to Christ only a short while back. Having been much forgiven, he loved much. All his desire after his conversion was to get free from the entanglements of business and to devote himself to the saving of the lost.

Just when he had almost completed his plan, he had died and went to heaven. And here he was, a spirit of glory and joy, who had come to ask of me about his church group he had worked for, and about the companions he had left behind. Was I acquainted with his little church? Their place of worship was near my place of business. Had I helped them in their difficulties and in their service to Christ? Had I done anything for his old companions who were drinking and cursing their way to hell? He had died with prayers for them on his lips. Had I stopped them on their way to ruin?

Again I could not speak. What could I say? I knew his church, but I had never given them any encouragement or help. I knew where his old companions lived, and the dens of hell in which they spent their time and money. But I had been too busy, or too proud, or too cowardly to seek them out with the message of the Savior's love.

I was utterly speechless. He guessed my feelings, I suppose, because with a look of sympathy he left in as much sadness as is possible in heaven.

As for myself, I was in anguish – strange as it may appear, considering that I was in heaven. But so it was. Wondering whether there was something that could comfort me, I looked around. And I saw a marvelous sight on the horizon at a great distance. All that part of heaven appeared to be filled with a brilliant light, surpassing the blaze of a thousand suns at noonday. And yet there was no blinding glare making it difficult to gaze upon, as is the case with our own sun when it shines in its glory. Here was a brilliance far surpassing anything that could be imagined, and yet I could look upon it with pleasure.

As I continued to gaze, wondering what it could be, it appeared to come a little closer. Then I realized it was coming in my direction.

Soon I could hear the sound of the music. The distance was a great many miles, after the measurement of the earth, but the atmosphere was clear, and I found my eyesight was so strong that I could easily see far away objects which on earth would have required a powerful telescope.

The sound came closer. It was music – and such music as I had never heard before! There was a multitude of musicians, along with shouts and songs that came from innumerable voices. This multitude rapidly approached until I was able to make out what it was. It was astounding, but who could describe it? The whole surroundings were filled with innumerable people, each of a beauty and dignity far beyond those saints I had already met. Here was a portion of the aristocracy of heaven accompanying the King, who came to welcome into heaven the spirits of men and women who had left the earth and had fought the good fight, had kept the faith, and had overcome as He had overcome.

I stood filled with awe and wonder. Could it be possible? Was I at last actually to see my Lord and be welcomed by Him? In the thought of this rapture I forgot the sorrow that only a moment before had reigned in my heart, and my whole nature swelled with expectation and delight.

And now the procession was upon me. I had seen some of the pageants of the earth that had displayed the power of mighty rulers. Yet these earthly parades, all combined together, were only like the feeble light of a

candle compared to a tropical sun, when compared to the tremendous scene which now spread itself before my astonished eyes.

Onward it came. I had fallen prostrate as the first rank of these shining heavenly spirits neared me. Each one looked, to my ignorant eyes, like a god, so far as greatness and power could be expressed by the outward appearance of any being.

Rank after rank swept past me. Each turned his eyes upon me, or seemed to do so, and I could not help feeling that I was somewhat an object of pity to them all. Perhaps it was my own feelings that made me imagine this. But it certainly appeared to me as though these noble beings regarded me as a fearful, cowardly soul, who had only cared for his own interests on earth.

Onwards they came. Thousands passed by me, yet there appeared to be no less of the great multitude that was yet to come. I looked at the procession as it stretched onwards, but my eyes could see no end to it. It was indeed a "multitude that no man could number."

All were praising God, either in hymns expressive of adoration and worship, or by recounting the mighty victories they had witnessed on earth.

And now, the great central glory and attraction of the splendid procession was at hand.

I gathered this from the still more dignified character of the beings who now marched by, and by the heavier crash of music with the louder shouts of exultation which came from all around.

Before I could prepare myself, the King had arrived! He was in the center of the circling hosts which rose level above level into the blue skies above. I then beheld the heavenly form of Him who once died for me upon the cross. The procession halted. Then at the word of command, they formed up instantly in three sides of a square in front of me, standing opposite the spot where I had prostrated myself.

What a sight it was! Worth working a lifetime to behold it! Nearest to the King were the patriarchs and the apostles of ancient times. Next, rank after rank, came the holy martyrs who had died for Him. Then came the army of the warriors who had fought for Him in every part of the world.

And around and about, above and below, I beheld myriads and myriads of saints who were never heard of on earth outside their own neighborhood, or beyond their own times, but had with self-denying zeal labored to extend God's Kingdom and save the souls of men. Encircling this glorious scene above, beneath, and around, hovered shining angels, who ministered to the happiness and exaltation of these redeemed saints.

I was overwhelmed by the scene. The songs, the music, the shouts of the multitude that came like the roar of a thousand waterfalls, echoed and re-echoed through heaven. The magnificent and endless multitudes of happy spirits overwhelmed my senses with passionate delight. All at once, however, I remembered myself, and was reminded of the High Presence before Whom I was bowed. As I lifted up my eyes, I saw Him gazing upon me.

What a look it was! It was not pain, and yet it was not pleasure. It was not anger, and yet it was not approval. I felt that in that face, so inexpressibly admirable and glorious, there was yet no welcome for me. I had felt this in the faces of my previous visitors. It felt it again in His face.

That Divine face seemed to say to me, for language was not needed: “You will feel yourself little in harmony with these, once the companions of my tribulations and now of My glory, who counted not their lives dear unto themselves in order that they might bring honor to Me and salvation to men.” And He gave a look of admiration to the hosts of apostles and martyrs and warriors gathered around Him.

Oh, that look of Jesus! I felt that to only once gain such a look of admiration, it would be worth dying a hundred deaths at the stake. It would be worth being torn apart by wild beasts. The angels felt it too, for their explosion of praise and song shook the very skies and the ground on which I lay.

Then the King turned His eyes on me again. How I wished that some mountain would fall upon me and hide me forever from His presence! But I wished in vain. Some irresistible force compelled me to look up, and my eyes met His once more. I felt, rather than heard, Him saying to me in words that engraved themselves as fire upon my brain:

“Go back to earth. I will give you another opportunity. Prove yourself worthy of My name. Show to the world that you possess My spirit by doing My works, and become, on My behalf, a savior of men. You will return here when you have finished the battle, and I will give you a place in this victorious procession. You will share in My glory.”

What I felt from that look and those words, no heart or mind could possibly describe. They were mingled feelings. First came the great anguish arising out of the full realization that I had wasted my life on worthless ambitions and earthly pleasures, while it might have been filled with deeds that would have produced a great heavenly reward. My life could have won for me the approval of heaven’s King, and made me a worthy companion of these glorified heroes.

But combined with this self-reproach there was a gleam of hope. My great desire to return to earth was to be granted. I could live my life again! True, it was a high responsibility, but Jesus would be with me. His Spirit would enable me. And in my heart I felt ready to face it.

The cloud of shining ones had vanished. The music was silent. I closed my eyes and gave myself completely to my Savior – to live, not for my own salvation, but for the glory of my Christ, and for the salvation of the world. And just then the same blessed voice of my King spoke to my heart as He promised that His presence should go with me back to earth, and make me more than a conqueror through His blood.

The story of William Booth’s life has been written in many books. He became a zealous evangelist and started a mission that reached out to the poor and lost in London. Many began to turn to Christ, and the group was reorganized and renamed the Salvation Army, while he, as their leader, became known as General Booth. They wore their own army uniforms with hats that were specially made to protect them from stones, as William Booth and many of their street preachers often had their heads bloodied by stones thrown at them. They endured many persecutions and some were martyred as the movement spread from city to city, and from nation to nation.

During General Booth’s lifetime the Salvation Army spread to 58 nations and led hundreds of thousands of souls to Christ. When William Booth died at age 83, kings and presidents mourned his death. His funeral procession was led by 10,000 soldiers of the Salvation Army along with 40 brass bands, while 150,000 mourners attended the funeral proceedings. Ah, but what a greater reception he must have had on the other side, when he was welcomed into heaven!