

Reclaiming HEAVEN

Mark Ralls

As a pastor, I am uncomfortably aware of my own reticence to speak of heaven. Like a lot of mainline pastors I know, I'm caught between honest belief and embarrassment. The result of this uneasy truce is silence. Several forces have led to this ambivalence. Most obvious is that mainline clergy have reacted against heaven's being used for manipulation: the ultimate carrot dangling on the stick of conversion—or worse, used as a crass fund-raising tactic by televangelists.

A few months ago, a man who had lost both his wife and son to cancer spoke up in a Bible study group: "I remember hearing a preacher say that we would recognize our families in heaven but we would not have any family relations. They would be familiar, but we wouldn't share intimately as we had done on earth. And I thought to myself, How awful! I would hate to pass my son or my wife on the street in heaven and then go back to my own little house. I know this is a terrible thing to say, but if that is true, then heaven sounds a lot like hell to me."

He was obviously looking for some guidance, but I had no idea what to say in response. I wish now I had simply assured him that heavenly union with God will not wipe out our essential identities. Every part of us worth saving—

every relationship worth preserving—will be mercifully affirmed. This experience taught me that if I present heaven only as an abstract realm where we are lost in wonder, love, and praise before God, I may have said what is most important, but I have not said enough.

A robust theology of heaven for our time would attempt two things: It would articulate the yearning beneath the culture's preoccupation with heaven, and it

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would seek to address this yearning with the hope that arises from the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The desire [for heaven] is not merely a wish to survive death or to be compensated for earthly struggles. It is more substantial, more vital than that. It is a desire for true fulfillment, an indescribable fullness that will somehow make sense of the emptiness of our existence.

What is different [today] is that people are likely to interpret this desire through the dominant cultural metaphor of our age—the therapeutic. So when they experience this universal, timeless yearning,

they are likely to envision the therapeutic ideals of deep consolation and genuine human flourishing—two worthy goals that the forces of this world and the conflicts in our hearts do not seem to allow.

Christians can help people recognize that embedded within this desire is a longing for God. The desires to be consoled and ultimately to flourish are good. God has implanted them in our hearts. Yet they will remain unfulfilled if oblivion is our end. True consolation and genuine flourishing call for the merciful presence of God. This is the yearning that God addresses in the resurrection, the one event that is central to all Christian hope. As Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams reminds us, the

message of the risen Christ is not only "I am risen" but also "I am with you." Thus, at the point where our yearning is most acutely felt, we also receive the promise that Jesus' resurrection is the sign of our own, that those who "hunger and thirst" will ultimately be satisfied.

This is why one can't help noticing that missing from best selling novels such as *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* by Mitch Albom and *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold is the central character—God.

That is a troubling omission, and it represents in part an indictment of Christians. When there is more talk of

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heaven in novels, television shows, and pop songs than in sermons, Christians must shoulder some of the blame for the fact that visions of life beyond death fail to include God.

It is also a sign of how thoroughly contemporary culture has misunderstood the essence of human flourishing. Augustine puts the Christian alternative best in his oft-quoted words at the beginning of the *Confessions*. “O Lord,” he prayed, “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is forever restless until it rests in you.” With this prayer, Augustine points to the *summum bonum* of both this world and the next: not the only good,

but the highest, the one that gives life to all the rest. On earth and in heaven, we thrive and grow ultimately in relationship to God. People need this reminder. They need to consider the possibility that their desire for heaven is a kind of homesickness, a restlessness of soul that will remain unfulfilled until we are united with the One who created us—the One who remains the source of all true consolation and genuine flourishing.

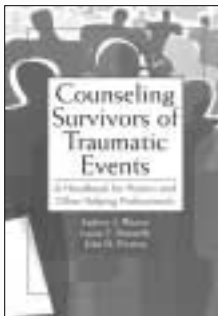
I believe our culture is ready to hear this message. Perhaps, as Paul put it, they are even “standing on tip-toe.” For me, the only question that remains is whether I will be too embarrassed to tell it. □



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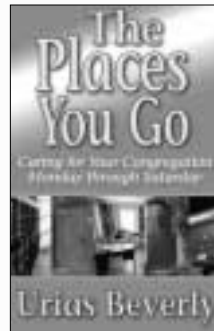


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