



Heaven—More Than a Memory

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

Somewhere beyond the blue there's a mansion for me. Those lyrics, sung at vacation Bible school, rang through my consciousness as a child. I was at times almost obsessed with heaven, looking up into the blue sky and imagining that, beyond the puffy cumulus clouds, there were heavenly mansions.

Heaven is not so real to me now as it was then. I am a spatial person; I hover over maps and amateur astronomical charts. I want to know where things are. Where, I ask, amid the millions of light years of space is the geography of heaven? There almost seems to be no real estate to be had for such a paradise—a tropical terrain of rivers and rain forests and meadows and mansions.

Many centuries ago, before the scientific revolution, heaven was just outside the dome covering the earthly terrain. But as the galaxies have grown in numbers and size, the location of heaven has interestingly moved closer to home. The earth itself, many argue, will one day be restored to its primal perfection, and heaven will be right here on the third rock from the sun.

It is difficult for me to situate the whole of heaven here on earth. Will lightning strikes and hurricanes simply stop? Will perpetual sunshine compete with rain to nourish weed-free flower gardens? I cannot wrap my mind around such concepts. Theological constructs do not help, nor do ninety minutes of someone's post-operative experience—or hallucination, whatever the case may be.

For me, heaven is at least partly memory—even as is hell. Where exactly Adolf Hitler is at this very moment is beyond my understanding, apart from the fact that his decayed body and bones lie somewhere in Europe. There is no doubt, however, that Hitler is in hell—at least in the collective memory of most people who have ever heard

of him, there with Stalin, other despicable dictators and terrorists, most notably Osama bin Laden.

In the same sense, my mother is surely in heaven. So also, Myra Jean, my husband's second dearly departed wife who was a friend of mine. How often our memories of her surface and find sanctuary in a heavenly realm far beyond our knowing.

She is there and she is here and we will never forget. Our memories in the form of tender mercies surround her in this indefinable heavenly sanctuary.

But heaven for me is more than memory. I go back to my childhood and find heaven in song, particularly in the hymns we sang in the little country church that nourished my faith. *Shall We Gather at the River* was a favorite, as was the last verse of *Amazing Grace*:

*When we've been there ten thousand years,
bright shining as the sun.*

*We've no less days to sing God's praise than
when we've first begun.*

Spirituals also speak to the heart and bring the reality of heaven home. *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* carries the believer to heaven on a joy-ride reminiscent of the prophet Elijah.

There is a Balm in Gilead also draws from the Old Testament. The balm is to heal the "sick soul"—healed so that *"One of these mornings bright and fair, I'm gonna lay down my heavy load."* Heaven for the slave was often equated with freedom—freedom on the other shore... of the Ohio River.

My favorite gospel song of heaven is Ralph Stanley's *Going up Home to Live in Green Pastures*. Recently on the *Prairie Home Companion*, Garrison Keillor added some new phrases, one of which truly brings heaven home with tender mercies: *Even the Lord, in shorts and a t-shirt, sits on the shore enjoying the breeze.* □

—Ruth Tucker

Excerpted from Ruth Tucker's new book, *Tender Mercies: 52 Weekly Meditations*, available at our book page, www.ptm.org/books.