

A Glimpse of the Eternal

Derek Elkins

Pondering the happenings of eternity is not at all a new endeavor for this veteran churchgoer. Perhaps, growing up in the conservative south, in the midst of the Bible belt, had a large impact on my interests and points of intrigue, but I truly believe that within each of us, regardless of our faith or faithlessness, there is an interest in most things ethereal. I even played in a band called *Ethereal* when I was in high school. And while not everyone is equally fascinated with spiritual and *otherworldly* happenings, we've all wondered what's left for us after all of this.

One of the most impacting ways I have ever read eternity portrayed is in *The Great Divorce*, by C.S. Lewis. In it, Lewis describes, first, a bus stop on a central street of what can best be described as a "gray town." There is a line of individuals expecting a particular bus to arrive shortly, on a route it has seemingly run for a very long time. Amidst the line of potential riders there is quarreling and bickering, the likes of which you might find at one of any city's bus stops. As a result, one by one, potential riders move out of the line and away from the bus stop. When the awaited bus arrives, the line consists of only a handful of riders, composing one motley crew. At the end of the first chapter, the bus moves away from the bus stop and soars upwards, into the clouds, immediately transporting the riders and the reader into that land of the unknown.

Lewis describes an amazing journey, out of the gray, into a place of light and reality. Over the course of the following chapters, Lewis gives a brief history of the "gray town" and explanation for how it is that this new land is so sharp and so real. Without giving away the magic of the story, it is important to know that the gray town is vastly large, and even more vastly empty. The inhabitants of the town, over the course of what could be imagined to be an eternity, have moved, street by street, farther and farther and farther from this central position where the bus stop is found. Quarreling, selfishness and an innate sense of isolation drive these indwellers farther away from each other and deeper into their own "self-created hell." Lewis imagines that inhabitants of the gray town, such as Napoleon, have driven themselves so far outward that

the thought of returning to the bus stop, this place of possible escape, has completely left them. The only thoughts left for them are of anger, envy and unimaginable loneliness.

On the contrary, the land the bus reaches is a place so distinctly “real” that the inhabitants of the gray town appear there as ghosts. The grass is like razors, slicing at the feet of the visitors, the rain falls like bullets and those living in the land of all that is real are like giants. Each visitor is met by a friend or family member who has come specifically to meet her, welcome her and teach her to live in reality. Yet, every visitor chooses, as is their right, to accept or reject this opportunity to step out the gray and ghostliness into all things real.

To anyone reading this fictional story from a Christian perspective, it quickly becomes clear that C.S. Lewis is portraying at least one idea of how eternity will play out. To put his story into Christian terms, souls would always have the opportunity to leave the hellish existence in the gray town and move toward a Heavenly reality. In fact, the only step necessary in this transportation is a conscious decision to move in the direction of the bus stop and to board. Knowing that the distance between the gray town and this “ultimate reality” is insurmountable to those confined to the gray town, there is a way provided out of the gray town and into reality.

It seems odd to talk about a way of existence, namely that which is described through the gray town and its inhabitants, as “unreal.” As living entities, we only know two ways of being. In fact, as famously put, our only option is “to be or not to be.” However, Lewis presents an idea that is not so new as it is unfamiliar. Philosophy buffs recognize Lewis’ portrayal of the distinction between Heaven and Hell as distinctly Platonic. And, while trying not to fly over my own head, it is important to recognize that, for a long time, people have considered the idea that there exist different realms of reality. For traditional Catholics, the middle ground is purgatory, for Plato and his followers, it was all physical objects, and for most traditional Evangelical Christians, this world is the land where all things exist as potential awaiting their completion in eternity. Those who pass on into Heaven await a supernatural or “glorified body;” one in which no disease or suffering can exist. All desirable things of this world appear as “glorified” versions. And, of

course, the spirit gloriously exists for eternity in the presence of God. As for those condemned to Hell, traditional Christians imagine that the exact opposite is their fate; an eternity of suffering and torment in a completely “unglorified” state. Bodies and surroundings of the most debase, undesirable type imaginable are the doom of the modern heretic.

Traditional, Evangelical Christian groups, especially those in the area of the country that I was raised in, offer only one picture of Heaven. Accept it or reject it, according to my evangelical counterparts, there *is* only one reality. Heaven is a place of streets of gold, seas of crystal and mansions for every member. Of course, before we are given the keys to our new estate, God does a quick security check to make sure that there’s nothing too abominable in our history as to tarnish His reputation, and, of course, to make sure he finds our name on “the list” of invited guests. Once inside, we are welcomed by a large gathering of our family and friends, those gone on ahead of us, at a family reunion of sorts. My evangelical friends who have dared to delve into the book of Revelation have added an important event to the Heavenly calendar, presumably taking place somewhere between the family reunion and the “New Jerusalem.” This Heavenly happening is the eternal worship service, at which all those who have been accepted through the pearly gates bow in worship and gratitude.

I have to admit; the worship service is the only part of this Heavenly model that sounds like it even *might* be enough to keep this hyperactive person busy. Seriously, I grew up thinking, only to myself of course, that if Heaven is only a place where we get to have a mansion and an eternal vacation, then I wasn’t interested in having an afterlife at all. I have always had a deep concern for the souls who are lost into eternal fire. The distinct moment at which I started to seriously question eternal damnation was when I saw *Gandhi*, in the seventh grade. Even at that young age, it occurred to me that if this great man was going to Hell because he happened not to follow Jesus’ teachings exclusively, then I was not likely to keep very good company in Heaven. After all, if Heaven is all about whose mansion is next door, this is a serious matter. I was relieved, as an eighteen-year-old newly reborn person, to learn that Heaven was not, in fact, only a place of mansions and streets of gold, but more importantly, a place of worship. This still appeals to me so much more than the

supernatural country club. I can easily imagine the “voices” of countless souls lifted in praise to God on high. As angels flutter `round the clouds, our faces meet the floor in humility and our voices ring out in thanks to our God who has delivered us from sin.

Still, I am troubled. What of Gandhi? How is it that a man who lived his life so much more nearly to Jesus’ than I have done so far would be lost to the lake of fire while I am only lost in song? And the same goes for a history of other people who lived more Godly lives than I. My evangelical minister tells me that in this the mystery and grace of God are revealed. I can easily find God’s mystery, but where is there grace in an all-knowing, all-powerful Father who gives life to his child only to snatch it away and banish him forever?

C.S. Lewis gave me great comfort while I was struggling with this dilemma. It was evident in the pages of *The Great Divorce* that Lewis, also a Christian, had struggled to resolve this contradiction. Lewis offered “a way out.” Now, some are saying, “Jesus is the way. God provided Jesus.” But, Lewis described a way out in the midst of eternity, and I believe that God does as well. It can only make sense that, even after this life has ended for each of us, God still pursues us as *his* children and *his* friends. Drawing us close, reconciling his creation to himself has been God’s first order of business for all of eternity. In the life of Jesus, this is most clearly evident. Sending his son as an example of the fullest life, allowing him to die, raising him from the dead and yet forgiving and reconciling his murderers to himself for all eternity is God’s greatest work. And I believe this work goes on into eternity.

Lewis describes a way of moving out of the gray town and into reality. In the same way, it occurs to me that we too might have that chance, as Lewis’ characters did. For those intensely committed to the will and the ways of God, eternity is the continuance of a pursuit founded in a faith and a lifestyle established on earth. With the great light of His glory, friends of God move ever closer, joyfully, peacefully, in complete satisfaction singing praise to the God who moves and leads them throughout eternity. For foes of God, eternity will be something quite different.

Imagine standing alone, in darkness, at a great distance from your goal, with only a slight glimpse of your target and a hope that cannot be subdued and most often clashes with the very essence of your existence. All the veils of

this life have been lifted and all that remains is the truth of the life you led and that hope, which is beyond comprehension. For a while, your skin writhes in agony, as everything within you seems to be in complete commotion. Your mind scrambles to plan your escape, but no escape can be planned. Your heart is beyond heavy with regret from your earthly failings. Your body is paralyzed because it cannot bear the weight of your soul. Then, for only a short moment, you choose to step toward the goal. Then, you choose another step. Now, having chosen a great distance worth of steps, your soul seems lighter, your heart less troubled. Now, your mind is, if only a fraction more, able to focus on the goal.

After what seems like forever, you choose a step unlike any other. Now, with your mind even freer and your soul even lighter, music can be heard. At a great distance, there is singing. This singing is beautiful and helps you focus even more. Now, this hope seems less nagging and increasingly like your own. Feeling less like the self you have always known, you choose another step.

After another forever, your lips part like the sea and a smile emerges like the dawn. The music is even louder now. And there, to your left, someone is singing. This is the first time since your life on earth, which is now a distant memory, that you have not been alone; at least to your knowledge. The other person seems so far away. You signal to her, but she seems to be absorbed in her song. In fact, in a way never experienced, it is hard to tell where she ends and the song begins.

Your goal is growing so much closer now that you cannot remember what He looked like from where you began. Now, there are people all around. Song after song rolls off the lips of these sojourners. Some, having joined hands, walk side by side with this radiant light bouncing off of them like the sun. Others are dancing now. For the first time you realize that you have stopped choosing your steps, yet you cannot remember when, or how. Now, it would take a choice to move away from Him, and that is nearly inconceivable.

From this great glory, I cannot imagine where one might go next. It seems so unimaginably grand to come close to the Father, that I dare not say anymore is possible. Yet, it very well may be with a God who loves and invites his children to draw close.

I will not even begin to say that my ideas are new or unique. Countless

theologians, philosophers, teachers and custodians before me have spent countless hours imagining the ways in which we might spend all of eternity drawing nearer to God. My simple point is that as God is merciful and just, we will always have that opportunity. I also will not say that my ideas do not conflict some of the words of the Bible. The story of the rich man and Lazarus comes to mind. Yet, even in Jesus' parables and teachings, Paul's great words and the countless number of times that the Israelites were restored to God's favor, the Bible also tells us that God is "slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness." Even in his most angered moments, seldom an earthly father could imagine banishing his child for life, much less eternity. And so, I imagine all this to be, and hopefully so much more, through our heavenly Father, who helps us and guides us, loves us and protects us through all things, for all time. What do you imagine?