

Hannah Halter
REL 227: History and Theology of the Early Church
Final Essay

Heaven: Defining the Undefinable

I was born into a spirited Christian family, so I was made aware of a place called heaven at an early age. I was told it was God's home, a paradise our loved ones went to after their lives ended. I grew up with heaven in the back of my mind, but recently I have been contemplating what heaven is on a more specific level, instead of accepting the broad, cheerful definitions I inherited. Becoming an adult has brought a high degree of spiritual growth into the forefront of my life. Among all this growing up, my own wonderings about heaven kept resurfacing. I, and perhaps every other human being, am naturally drawn to thoughts that capture my senses, and my musings about heaven are no different. What does it *look* like? How does it *feel* to be there? Questions like these almost sound juvenile now that I consider them, but, if given the chance, I trust that any believer would be ecstatic to experience the realm of God during their lives. I began searching for others' thoughts, and I came across an overwhelming number of people who claim to have taken trips to heaven by the power of Jesus and His angels. They recounted beautiful sensory details, like dazzling colors beyond those of the physical world, adorning a fantastic divine realm they saw with spiritual eyes. I spent hours listening to these stunning testimonies, not even considering if they were the truth or simply hopeful imaginings.

Whether or not these people have taken tours of heaven, their stories inspired me to seek more information, make connections, and attempt to get my own beliefs

straight. The logical starting point I have explored is the Bible, the cornerstone of Christian text. Heaven is mentioned well over 500 times within the pages of the Bible (Stewart). In nearly every case, heaven is referred to as a place in relation to God, Jesus Christ, the souls abiding there, and to the nature of heaven itself.

In relation to God the Father, the Bible declares that God “created Heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it,” and all His creation belongs to Him (*The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Rev. 10:6). Heaven is written to be the dwelling-place of God, a kingdom over which He rules, enthroned in glory. Not only does the Bible say God resides within and rules over heaven, but He “fill[s] heaven and earth” (Jer. 23:24). Through the faculty of His omnipresence, God answers the call of His people on earth, hearing “from His Holy Heaven with the saving strength of His right hand” (Ps. 20:6). The past prayers of God’s people have reached Him, and through His great compassion His people have been delivered from the threats of evildoers (Neh. 27). The Bible bears witness to God’s reign being perfected in heaven, His power and love reflected throughout it, reaching down to earth-dwellers from the heights of His Kingdom.

The significance of Christ Jesus’s part in heaven is also expressed within the Bible. Christ is shown to be a divine mediator between man and God, embodying “the way, the truth, and the life” as the only medium through which man can come to God (John 14:6). It is written that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to [Him]” by God (Matt. 28:18). Christ’s all-powerful nature is shown as a spotless reflection of His Father’s, whose dominion originates in heaven and flows outward, reaching the earth. During His ministry on earth, Jesus told metaphorical stories, or

parables, that reflected the nature of heaven. In the synoptic gospels (along with the gospel of Thomas), Jesus utilized such stories and images to help His followers begin to understand the “Kingdom of God,” as it is written in Mark, or the “Kingdom of Heaven,” as it is written in Matthew.

Scripture also gives testament to heaven being a paradise for souls. Saints are rewarded for faithfulness, receiving an “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” inheritance in heaven (1 Pet. 1:4). The faithful are encouraged to “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven,” where they are eternally safe from damage or thievery (Matt. 6:20). The apostle John reports his vision of the “holy city Jerusalem” in Revelation 21:10-14. He tells of its “radiance like a very rare jewel” from the light emanating from God’s glory, and continues to cite “a great, high wall with twelve gates” and “twelve foundations.” Among John’s visions are also river of life, freely flowing through heaven, and the fruitful tree of life (Rev. 22:1-2). The ultimate peace and safety of heaven is also expressed in Scripture, a peace built from unity to God. Along with being an eternal paradise for faithful souls of all nations, the Bible stresses the relationship between God and the residing souls as deeply loving and ever-present. Heaven will be a place where “they will hunger no more, and thirst no more” and “the Lamb... will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:16-17).

The Scriptures also hint at a notable division between forms of heaven. Paul refers to “the third heaven” in Second Corinthians 12:2, making it rational to assume “heaven” can refer to more than one place. Also, Deuteronomy 10:14 refers to “heaven and the heaven of heavens” as belonging to the Lord. Many verses containing the word

“heaven” seem to refer to the sky, stars, and infinite space existing above and around the earth, while others hint at possible divisions between parts of heaven. Both interpretations are consistent with multiple verses, especially from the Old Testament, but in any case, the creation of the heavens in all their mystery is attributed to God.

With the assembly of points I have drawn from the Bible as my foundation, I continue to explore the delineation of heaven through the perspective of one of the most significant early church fathers, St. Augustine of Hippo. Augustine’s perceptions of heaven before his conversion to Christianity and in the earliest part of his Christian life were affected by Neo-Platonic influences, especially in his notions of God and the nonphysical soul (Casey 168). However, Augustine’s theology on heaven later conformed more closely to the Scriptures.

In a sermon given by Augustine, he expands on the scriptural idea that Christ Jesus is the only means by which any soul can hope to enter heaven. According to Augustine, “no one ascended into heaven except Christ,” but all hope is not lost for souls on earth because “although he ascended alone, we also ascend, because we are in Him by grace” (Sermo de Ascensione Domini). Augustine’s theology of heaven is inextricably linked to the saving power of Christ that is directed toward those souls faithful to Him on earth. With Christ the only one worthy of ascending to heaven from humanity, heaven is only reachable by His gift of grace. In the same sermon, Augustine speaks of Christ’s exaltation in heaven, but affirms that He still grieves over the pain “the members of His body” have to endure on earth. The faithful of Christ are joined to Him on earth, and that oneness is the hope for heaven Augustine speaks of.

Finding oneness with Christ on earth can only be the product of grace, according to Augustine. His theology on grace is based on a pessimistic view of human nature. In his work entitled, *A Treatise on the Grace of Christ, and on Original Sin*, Augustine declares that all people need the saving grace of God because of the evils entwined in the original sin all humans inherit, separating them from divine grace and seducing them to commit sin. The grace of God is not earned, according to Augustine, but given to those elected by God and predestined to have faith. It is through this grace that people find the capacity to have faith in God, without which there would be no faithful members of Christ on earth. Augustine's theology on grace and predestination on earth naturally correlate with his thoughts on heaven. Receiving the grace sent by God on earth is the beginning of the relationship that is fulfilled in heaven. The culmination of this relationship is achieved in heaven by means of what Augustine calls "The Beatific Vision."

In Book XXII, chapter 29 of his acclaimed work entitled *The City of God*, Augustine describes the Beatific Vision he believes will be experienced by those who reach heaven. By definition, the Beatific Vision refers to the immediate acuity of God relished by those in heaven. Souls are able to experience God's presence directly and instantly within this vision ("Beatific"). Augustine's examination of the Beatific Vision expands upon this definition. Souls in heaven will see the very face of God, he writes, in the peaceful perfection that is God's Kingdom. They will "always see Him with the spirit" by means of a spiritual body which will cease the growth and decay undergone by the physical body. Also, God's presence, he writes, will be apparent as "governing all things, material as well as spiritual" to souls in heaven.

As a whole, Augustine's *The City of God* is sort of a challenge to all people to put their alliance in one of two cities: the City of Heaven, prepared for those elect to salvation, or the City of the World, for those who turn away from God and choose damnation. Augustine proclaims that the City of Heaven and the Beatific Vision within is the zenith of Christian existence. Choosing to live for the sinful wiles of the City of the World threatens the salvation of souls. For this reason, Augustine conveys the importance of reaching for the City of Heaven throughout our earthly lives, and he describes in detail what heaven will mean for souls who reach it.

Instead of heaven's being a prize for souls who performed good works during their lives, Augustine writes in *The City of God* (Bk. 22, ch. 30) that heaven is the fulfillment of the love between God and his elect people. Heaven is not a reward in the form of a physical paradise, but an eternal spiritual existence in the perfect presence of God's divine love. Those given God's grace on earth are called home to Him in Augustine's vision of heaven. After experiencing the divine grace of God in part during an earthly existence, coming to heaven closes the gap only faith could bridge on earth. God will be ever-present and all-powerful in heaven, and through the Beatific Vision, souls will praise and love God in His perfect and direct presence. With this new vision of divine love, souls will live sinless, eternal lives of unwavering delight, choosing to follow God freely without the burden of past ills, offenses, and chastisements. In this same book, Augustine also writes of the condition of spiritual "bodies" in heaven. According to him, all human bodies on earth develop in response to an inner form (presumably the spiritual core). This inner form carries on after death and as a person takes on a spiritual body fit for heaven. Augustine stated earlier in 'The City of God' that these

bodies conform to the prime age of life and cease growing and decaying, as repeated in the Beatific Vision. All in all, the depth of Augustine's theology hearkens back to Scripture, but fleshes out major details that add to the vast picture of heaven he conceives.

The heaven conveyed in the Scriptures and through monumental Christian thinkers like St. Augustine certainly continues to resonate with people today. Those seeking insight into the Christian view of the afterlife undoubtedly study these texts. But there are those who claim to know heaven firsthand, and it was the fascinating testimonies from a few of these people that piqued my heaven-related interests as of late. The two foremost figures in my mind are Anne, an anonymous lay apostle, and Oden Hetrick, a reverend.

Anne is a married woman from Ireland who has published a repertoire of texts documenting what she has seen and learned through "interior locutions," or mystical communicative insights from God (Direction). Anne claims to have been given firsthand messages from Jesus, the Blessed Mother, God the Father, and a multitude of saints. One of the most monumental insights Anne reports is her series of spiritual trips to heaven between the dates of September 1 and September 9, 2005. In her book, *Climbing the Mountain*, Anne gives detailed accounts of her journeys into heaven orchestrated by Jesus Himself. Anne writes that these short foretastes of heaven are meant to "inspire man to service and to help us to reject the fleeting material things that the world offers" and instead understand that "what will endure will be our service, our love, and our devotion to duties" (45).

Anne reports the amazing variation she claimed to have observed in the features of heaven. She describes forests, mountains, valleys, gardens, cosmoses, and multiple cities throughout her visits. She witnesses worshipping on feast days and “museums” devoted to the saints. During most of her visits, Anne observes one heavenly city in particular that is home to saints with whom she was able to converse. Anne is astounded by the beauty of sound in heaven as she observes a river’s flow in a heavenly forest and cricket song in the soft darkness of heaven’s night (39). She recalls being taken up into the cosmos alongside Jesus and seeing the earth within view (40).

The focus of Anne’s description is on the souls she met in heaven, and especially on Jesus. She receives tremendous theological insight from her conversations with Jesus. He tells her every soul on earth has a path “traced out” by Him and His Father, including culture, family, and era of life. Jesus tells her that He has planned a reward for every soul in heaven to live free of all “physical infirmity” and become a member of the heavenly family (23). He says “each detail has been planned” by Him and his heavenly advisors to advance the will of God on earth by means of humanity, stressing that “the world is truly in the hands of heaven” (43). Anne is stunned by the peace and love she feels when she is with Jesus, who she says “mystically never leaves” the souls in heaven (46). Anne also spends a large portion of her time in heaven with Mary, the Blessed Mother of Jesus. She never fails to mention the love and comfort she feels with the Blessed Mother. In the company of Mary, Anne meets a few female saints gathered together. She learns from Saint Anne that the members of heaven constantly intercede in the lives of those on earth. She says that in heaven “we work together and draw on

the experiences of many to assist us in answering the prayers of God's earthly children... We pray with you and for you" (36).

Oden Hetrick's account of heaven is similar to Anne's in that he claims to have taken journeys to heaven. Hetrick reports that he was taken to heaven by an angel on many occasions. As Anne's accounts focus mostly on her interaction with Jesus and His heavenly family, Hetrick's are about his experience in "The Holy City of God." He gives a basic layout of heaven, writing about the outer "suburbs" and familiar natural features, but the real details of his experiences are rooted in the main city of heaven. He refers to the city as the "Holy Place," within which God sits on his throne at the "Most Holy Place" (Hetrick, ch. 3). Right down to a specific number of miles, Hetrick describes the "foursquare Holy City" whose outer suburbs are "much larger even than the earth" (4). In describing the parameters of the city, Hetrick parallels his observations with those of St. John, telling of twelve multicolored gates and foundations that give off the colors of a rainbow (9). In the courts of the city, Hetrick claims to have seen the golden streets, Tree of Life, and River of Life, just as St. John wrote in the Scriptures. With rich detail, Hetrick describes a multitude of the city's features, from the splendor of mansions and banquets, right down to the specific garments worn by residing souls. One especially interesting point he reported on was the "screening rooms" in the city, within which any point of any earthly life can be reviewed (15).

Hetrick's most memorable experience takes place near the Throne of God. The River of Life begins at the Throne of God, Hetrick writes, flowing out into the city fountains, continuing through twelve "spirals" around God's Temple, through the eastern gate, into the river, and all the way to earth to bless the faithful (20). Before the Throne

of God, Hetrick observed the “Sea of Glass,” a place where saints came to habitually worship before God. With awe in his words, Hetrick writes of the depth of love and kindness he could sense in the eyes of God. “I lost all my fear,” he writes. “His love made me feel free... Light was shining from His face... Being in His presence has not only changed my idea of Him but has also changed me – forever!” (21).

Attempting to prove or disprove either of these accounts is not my intention. Either way, simply recounting their experiences is enough to inspire me to reflect on mysteries of heaven. From what I can gather, none of Anne’s or Oden Hetrick’s observations go against the teachings of heaven within Scripture. Hetrick’s accounts, especially, seem to follow those within Revelation almost seamlessly. From my perspective, there is no harm in taking their stories to heart, seeing how closely their messages follow renowned sources such as the Bible and the reflections of thinkers such as Saint Augustine. In any case, the depth of the human desire for heaven cannot be expressed any more vividly than in stories such as these.

In terms of Christianity, heaven is the hope of all the faithful. We have inherited a vivid foundation of what heaven might hold and, as evidenced by those who have visions today, we continue to search for enlightenment. In my mind, having even the smallest bit of heavenly knowledge would be priceless. But no matter how far my imaginings take me, the words of Anne from *Climbing the Mountain* will always resonate: “The greatest understanding of man on earth cannot compare to the smallest kernel of understanding in heaven” (59).

Work Cited

Anne, a lay apostle. *Climbing the Mountain*. Justice IL: Direction for Our Times, 2008.

Print.

Augustine, Saint. *The City of God*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. Penguin, 1972. Print

---. *A Treatise on the Grace of Christ, and on Original Sin*. Print.

---. *A Treatise on the Predestination of the Saints*. Print.

---. Sermo de Ascensione Domini, Mai 98, 1-7: PLS 2, 429-495. Sermon.

“Beatific Vision.” *New World Encyclopedia*. New World Encyclopedia, 2008. Web.

10 Dec. 2011.

Casey, John. *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, & Purgatory*. New York: Oxford

University Press, 2009. Print.

Direction For Our Times. *Direction Four Our Times: Official Resources for Lay Apostles*

of Jesus Christ the Returning King. DFOT, 2011. Web. 14 Nov. 2011.

Hetrick, Oden. “Inside the Gates of Heaven.” *LoisHetrick.com*. N.d. Web. 14 Nov. 2011.

Stewart, Tom. “What the Bible Says about Heaven.” *WhattheBibleSaysAboutHeaven*.

N.d. Web. 2 Dec. 2011.