

THE HOPE OF HEAVEN
by Lester J. Start
Undated

Text: Revelation 21:2.”And I John saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God, out of heaven....

These words express the ancient hope of heaven which has surged up in the hearts of all men who believe in God, in the essential rightness of things and who are undergoing moments or hours of stress and adversity. For what is the hope of heaven if not the firm conviction in the essential rightness of things because of a good God, even though the world may look for the moment as if God were dead, or at least the initiative. It is interesting to note that men have believed most firmly in the hope of heaven when mundane, worldly existence was most unheavenly; men have held most firmly to the hope of heaven when they have found a hell on earth or made one for themselves.

Carl Van Doren has said that it is unfortunate that men no longer believe in angels, for when they did they were better men since they tried to emulate, the divine creatures that they were not but hoped to be; and now that men have decided that they are members of the animal kingdom but a little higher than the rats which serve as experimental exhibits in their laboratories men seem content not to have any hopes or ideals which are not duplicated in the lower realms of animal life.

Similarly it might be said that when men believed in heaven, their earth was much more like heaven is supposed to be. Think for a moment of what has followed the great visions of heaven in men’s minds. We in America of all people should be keenly aware that our heritage has come from the vision of heaven in the minds of our forefathers. It is clear that the great colonization of this country was motivated by religious interests. The puritans living in a hell of persecution dreamed of a heaven where they might worship God in freedom and found that heaven in the new world. William Penn led the Quakers to build the great democratic colony of Pennsylvania which had such influence in the formation of our democracy. Visions of freedom, peace, equality were given form in this new country although when they first appeared they were visions of a new heaven, symbols of what might be. Similarly scientists in their laboratories have been moved by the hope of heaven, a heaven in which children are not struck down by disease, and have worked to bring this heaven to earth by controlling the diseases which destroyed lives.

If we can see so clearly how a vision and hope of heaven works in political and social spheres, how much more clearly should we see that the hope of heaven is essential in the field of religion: A man called John, living as a slave in the island of Patmos because he was a Christian, digging stone for the Roman overlords, caught a vision of heaven from his faith although he was living in a hell. He knew that the sacrificial love of the lamb of God, not the brute strength of the Romans. At a time when the faithful were growing weary wondering “how long, O Master . . . dost thou not avenge our blood?” he wrote the book of Revelation, the expression of a firm belief in the essential rightness of things, a conviction that love and goodness would eventually triumph.

It is difficult for us to understand this book, because it is written with the intention of hiding rather than showing its meaning. If you were predicting the downfall of Hitler in Nazi Germany and wanted your book to get by the Gestapo, you would hide the meaning also in figurative language. You can rest assured that fellow Christians whose families and friends had served as living torches to light the emperor Nero's gardens knew who the beast of the Apocalypse was. They knew Nero was the beast; they knew that the woman of Babylon on the seven hills was Rome. The important thing is, however, that the book served to remind people of the man on the cross who proved the triumphant power of good. It reminded them of the hope of heaven, and with this hope the world became more endurable and, also, more like heaven. It was the carpenter of Nazareth who, because he was the son of God, first portrayed authoritatively the hope of heaven, the hope of a life where love and goodness triumph. And whenever men have followed the Master the vision of has become more and more real, and the world has become more and more like heaven.

Yes, it might well be said that when men believed in heaven, their earth was much more like heaven is supposed to be. It is too bad that men no longer believe in heaven as they used to, because as the vision of heaven fades the reality of a hell on earth becomes all the more apparent. When the vision of a world ruled by love, not force, fades, how difficult it is to find peace. When the vision of freedom and equality fades, we can calmly view the sight of shiploads of refugee Jews kept from a possible haven in Palestine because their presence might cause political difficulties. It is extremely dangerous to lose the hope of heaven, for the reality of hell will take its place.

It is this very fact that affords the most hope for religious influence today. As we have noted, it has been in the periods in history when the world was most unlike heaven that the vision and hope of heaven have been so strong. The perilous nature of our present situation in the world is the best assurance that religious faith in the kingdom of heaven may be revived. Any sober reflection about our position socially, politically and economically today is likely to end in a depressing picture. We have just fought a war against a terrible, pagan philosophy of force to find that we must fight for peace as we did for war; to find really that war alone cannot ever be an answer that other forces embodied in our Christian faith must be brought into play. We see, for example, that all peoples are not yet free; we see the Jews at a new wailing wall, the locked doors of Palestine, and of every other country including our own. We see peoples used as pawns by the big powers in their struggle for power. Our more reckless and irresponsible papers are already talking openly about the next war. We see peoples still suffering from poverty and disease because of social distinctions; we see it clearly in India, less clearly perhaps in our own South. We cannot even feel a sense of financial security as we face an inflation.

This is a gloomy picture. It is good that it is so, for only as we see how desperate our situation is will we recapture the hope of heaven. We lost this vision we must remember in the last decades when we decided that because of our great advances in the fields of science we could get along without God. We found we could control nature; we forgot that it is much more important and essential to control human nature. Instead of worshiping a God beyond ourselves, we thought we were gods ourselves and worshiped our accomplishments. The sooner we realize how great a hell on earth such thinking makes, and with the atomic bomb to drive home the point all of us can

begin to understand, the quicker we can recapture the vision of heaven and make our earth more like heaven.

The hope of heaven can best flourish in just such times as these. Now is the time for a John to catch the vision of a new heaven and a new earth and proclaim freedom for captives, hope for the lost. Man's extremity is God's opportunity. The hope for heaven dawns when hell is unleashed on earth.

This is the lesson that the book of Revelation teaches. It is the most important lesson for us to learn today. It is a hard lesson to relearn for we have been used to a realistic, so-called, hard-boiled practical way of looking at life. This business of a dream of heaven has been criticized severely in our day. It has been called the opiate of the people. People have been taught to be content in the midst of suffering, it is argued, by holding up to them the hope heaven at some future date. This may be true sometimes. But what the hope of heaven really shows is the conviction that spiritual not material forces are in the end the strongest. This conviction history has proved again and again. The hope of heaven is a conviction which cannot be suppressed, a conviction that good shall prevail even though evil seems to rule. Why should men have the hope at all, if it were not supported by the essential rightness of things? The hope of heaven avers that good shall triumph, that love is stronger than hate, that God intends good for his children, and evil is an error.

[Today then, offers the best opportunity for a renewed hope of heaven.

What does it mean?

1. Traditional picture - green mansions - Bob Ingersall

meaning right prevails.

2. Heaven as a picture of ideals - but ideals are not man made.

Inge - but there is a God

3. Heaven as judgement beyond history - life to come

of inner convictions

Bach, Shakespeare, Jesus

story of woman at the well - prodigal son - Zaccheus

I know not what his islands lift

Their fronded palms in air

I only know I cannot drift

Beyond his love and care.]