

colashed, a broken gate held together with bailing wire, and maybe—just maybe—a huge, thickly-rusted steam engine standing in quiet dignity out past the chicken coop.

A Little Bit Of Heaven

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My Grandpa Thatcher told two kinds of stories—real life tales of the Old West and Bible stories. I sat politely through the latter so as not to hurt his feelings, but what I really wanted to hear when I pulled a hassock to his knee was how he almost drowned in the mill race when he was three, how he got caught once filling his pant legs with candy from the old ZCMI in Logan, how he baited his hook with squirrel tails and caught more fish than his horse could carry, how he survived a snow storm while tending sheep above Gentile Valley, how he got away from the U.S. Marshall on his twenty-first birthday and voted despite the anti-polygamy laws. To my mind, Grandpa's life had the wonder and rightness of scripture. I didn't care about David or Daniel.

Once in awhile, despite all my cousin and I could do, Grandpa would switch to the Bible. He would begin with a story from the Old Testament or a parable, then he would grow intense, plant one gnarled hand on the knee of each of us, and looking intently through the spiraling circles of his thick glasses, begin to quote whole passages from memory. Cataracts had left him nearly blind. He could just make out the day's headlines with the magnifying glass he kept on the radio beside his chair. Unable to read the scriptures any longer, he would call up whole pages memorized fifty or sixty years before. I was convinced he knew all four standard works by heart. I can still hear him reciting Malachi:

But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fuller's soap.

I felt scalded but somehow cleansed by those words. Even now I think of Grandpa first and Handel second when I hear that passage. I'm still not sure what fuller's soap is, but as a child I knew it had something to do with the way the veins stood out high and dark on Grandpa's mottled hands.

I disagreed with Grandpa but once. That was a day he ended his scriptural excursion with a description of heaven. "The whole earth will be resurrected and will become as a sea of glass," he said. I don't remember the exact words. He may have quoted from Revelation or from section 130 of the Doctrine & Covenants, but I will never forget the effect of the image. "But I wouldn't want to live on a sea of glass," I said firmly. Grandpa looked surprised and a little amused. "It will be beautiful. Like crystal. We will have everything we want; all we will have to do is pluck nourishment from the air." That did it. Here was a man who at ninety still relished "a little vinegar gravy" with his fish and wanted his stewing hens "good and fat" talking about plucking his nourishment from the air. I could see there was no point in arguing, but I had no intention of going to such a slick and glassy hereafter.

His "sea of glass" has come to mean something quite different to me now, but the skepticism I felt at Grandpa's knee has not left me. The scriptures tell us so little about the hereafter and what they tell us is so often figurative, that it seems futile to draw hard conclusions. I believe there is a heaven and I have faith that the best things in human experience foreshadow it, but beyond that I'm not willing to go. I am often surprised at the convictions of others. Not too long ago, I heard an earnest young sister stand in testimony meeting and say that she couldn't let another week go by knowing that her husband, the ward clerk, was writing down the names of those who had spoken and that her name was missing. "When I come to the day of judgment and Christ opens that record and asks why five months went by without my bearing my testimony, I won't know what to say." It must be comforting to ward clerks, whose job is tedious and often thankless, to believe that their minutes will survive the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap to be shelved in the heavens. But it's not very comforting to me. My testimonies are usually silent ones. I always thought they'd been heard.

Then take the matter of the eternal family circle. When we gather around the fire for family home evening on Monday nights in the celestial realm, will we be children of our parents or parents of our children? If both, won't that circle continue in an unbroken spiral from Adam to the last child of the millenium and thus cease to be a "family" in the private and exclusive sense? "Brother" and "Sister" will be more meaningful titles in such a setting than either "parent" or "child." It is easy to be sentimental about Mormon theology. Starry-eyed young parents look down on their newly blessed babe and want that precious relationship to continue forever. Grandparents look at a family portrait taken on their Golden Wedding anniversary and project the cherished image into the hereafter. I hope that at least some of these hopes are realized. I would like to be with Grandpa again, yet if I am ever ushered into the Celestial Kingdom, I'm not sure I'll be able to find him. In heaven he will not be a gnarled old man, nor will I be a little girl. As two adults, what will we say to each other on that sea of glass?

A friend of mine thinks the celestial kingdom will be largely devoted to reproduction. The husband and wife relationship will endure, as the scriptures say, and it will be polygamous. This is because one wife will not be sufficient to people the new earth which each exalted male priesthood bearer will inherit. "Reproduction will take place just as it does on this earth," she says quite calmly "Therefore, there is no other way." I admire her composure, especially since she is happily and monogamously married and has no intention of adding to her merely middlesized Mormon family. I know a lot of people who share her view, translating "eternal increase" into the celestial sphere quite literally. They may be right, yet if like begets like why does one need an exalted *physical* body to give birth to spirits? It's a puzzle.

The story is told of Charles Eliot Norton, renowned Harvard medievalist, who approached the pearly gates only to recoil in horror: "How gauche, how overdone, how Renaissance!" Each of us envisions heaven according to our own dreams. As we were driving along the capital beltway after our tour of the Washington Temple, I asked my husband and children how they pictured the celestial kingdom. My second son said he didn't know, but he hoped it had a library. My husband said he thought it would be much like this life; he didn't think there would be any sitting around and he planned on doing some engineering. An older son said he hoped it looked like the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Our daughter, who had

looked closely at the floral arrangements in the temple, said she hoped all the flowers would be real. Somebody else said they thought Heaven was a place where you could have a ten-speed bike without a padlock. I suppose few ordinary mortals are capable of imagining the divine. Most of us furnish our dreams of heaven with treasures laid up on earth.

I can understand how the pioneers of Utah could banish Adam and Eve into a world of sagebrush and endless sky, picturing the plan of salvation as it unfolds in the Salt Lake Temple as a progression from a wild and terrifying natural environment to an increasingly refined, sheltered, and luxuriously chandeliered heaven. The new temples are more efficient than the old, having departed from the pioneer floor plan in order to process more names, yet they still cling to that frontier image of heaven, a symbolic environment which has less meaning in a day when every suburban shopping center sells velvet cushions. I am waiting for the Church architect to discover section 130. Glass is at least as scriptural as marble. The celestial room of the Washington Temple, for example, might have opened into the tops of the trees with wide vistas of woods and sky. Rain and snow and changing seasons would have been no problem. The Mormon universe is not static.

As an apprentice historian I sometimes wonder about my own future in a realm of "glass and fire, where all things for their glory are manifest, past, present, and future," but I can't help hoping. The prophet tells us that:

This earth, in its sanctified and immortal state, will be made like unto crystal and will be a Urim and Thummim to the inhabitants who dwell thereon, whereby all things pertaining to an inferior kingdom, or all kingdoms of a lower order, will be manifest to those who dwell on it.

Grandpa's sea of glass may be a Gypsy ball or a heavenly video screen revealing without effort all that has been and all that will be. But then again, it may be more like his magnifying glass, a simple tool for enlarging the vision of the one who holds it. The Urim and Thummim metaphor is enticing, for on earth its powers were available only when the prophet exerted his own. Perhaps that heavenly crystal is only a larger historical perspective, giving us the distance between ourselves and our own experience which will allow us to give it form and meaning. I hope so. If in heaven I can come to know and love Grandpa in childhood, in maturity, and in age, that will be reward enough.