

CELESTIAL REALTY: A PARABLE, OF SORTS

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The preliminary resurrection was a rush. Bob Markham and his wife, Mandy, stood next to their graves in the Alpine, Utah, cemetery, as instructed, and waited. Quite gradually, atoms and molecules started rising out of the ground and attaching themselves randomly to their spirit bodies. As the elements fused together, Bob and Mandy experienced an almost overwhelming sensation of, well, sensation. Their fingertips tingled, their noses discerned pungent scents on the light breeze, and their hearts throbbed with biological passions they had almost forgotten during their sojourn in the spirit world. But this was only the beginning. The preliminary resurrection gave them only a basic glorified, indestructible body, one that would serve them until the Final Judgment, after which they would be assigned to a kingdom of glory and be transformed further into either telestial, terrestrial, or celestial beings.

Bob was rather certain that they were destined for the celestial glory. He had been a stake president, after all, not to mention CEO of DermRenu, a multilevel marketing enterprise that sold skin-care products based on a highly secret molecule that Bob's brother, Jim, a chemist, had created and that the two brothers had patented. Jim was content to tinker in the lab with new applications for his chemical concoction and enjoy the fruits of his half stake in the business. But Bob was the business genius who had turned a molecule into a multilevel mountain of cash. Consequently, the Markhams had done very well for themselves—a mansion in the hills above Alpine proper; private schools for their six children, all of whom had married well and in the

temple and had prospered in the family business; topped off with an early and well-funded retirement, during which they had served four temple missions to exotic locations. What a life.

After their preliminary resurrection was complete, Bob and Mandy spent the thousand years of the Millennium doing odd jobs in the spirit world, awaiting the Final Judgment and their assignment to the celestial kingdom. And odd jobs they were. Mandy had always had a knack for genealogy, so she became an expert in figuring out what to do with some of the tough cases that came up, like divorced parents whose children had joined the Church and then sealed them to each other in the temple, even though spending eternity together was almost as appealing to them as an eternal root canal. Bob, of course, was a master at management, so he quickly found himself in high demand as an organizer of the house of Israel, which was still in quite a state of disarray. After almost four thousand years of intermarriage and gene pool dilution, it wasn't easy to determine who exactly *was* of the blood of Israel. Did 10 percent Israelite DNA qualify? Five percent? One percent? Initially, Bob believed that identifying the "elect" would be easy, but some of the elect were anything but exceptional. Still, he felt he was doing a bang-up job.

At last, however, the great day drew near. Lucifer was let loose, Michael led his troops in battle and subdued the old devil, and then the earth was burned to a crisp and quickly refurbished into a spectacular orb filled with magnificent splendors and celestial wonders. And one fine day, the Markhams were called in to an appointment with Simon Peter, chief of all Jesus's apostles.

"Bob, Mandy," said Peter, reaching out a hand to each of them. "Come with me. I need to show you your new eternal home." Bob had met Peter a couple of times in his "odd job" and found him to be, well, rather unremarkable. He seemed just a little out of touch. One of Mandy's friends had told them Peter had never even learned to use a computer. "Still stuck in old Palestine, I suppose," she said with a giggle.

Once a fisherman, always a fisherman, Bob had thought when Mandy told him what her friend had said. But now Peter was apparently Jesus's main representative in parceling out celestial real estate.

Peter ushered Bob and Mandy onto a disk of gold that immediately sped off toward the rising sun. After a few minutes, the disk slowed. They passed gleaming neighborhoods of cozy little bungalows. When they finally stopped, however, they found themselves staring up at a massive, radiant castle, somewhat similar to Mad King Ludwig's Neuschwanstein, only much larger, much brighter, and much more elegant, with its roofs and turrets of gold, its crystal windows, and its sprawling gardens.

"So," said Simon Peter, gesturing toward the mammoth palace, "what do you think?"

"I'm speechless," answered Bob, somewhat disingenuously, because he certainly wasn't speechless. After an inner fist pump, he said, "It's perfect. Couldn't ask for more." What he didn't say was that he probably could have afforded to build such a mansion in mortality, but a nineteenth-century Bavarian fairy-tale castle would have clashed with the more modern mansions in their neighborhood. His neighbors probably would have thought it gaudy.

Bob had grown up in a modest suburban Utah neighborhood in West Jordan, so he knew what it was like to be, well, not poor but certainly not well off. He had never forgotten his roots, but he was certainly glad he had outgrown them. Mandy, on the other hand, was the daughter of a respected oral surgeon who had owned a large house, a couple of Mercedes, a boat, an RV, and a spacious cabin in the Uintas, so she had certain expectations when she met Bob. At first, he had seemed too ordinary, and she wondered if she loved him enough to spend the rest of her life in a neighborhood like the one where Bob's parents had raised him and his four siblings. But as she got to know him better, she saw something in him—call it potential. So she took a chance. Call it faith. And her faith had paid off handsomely. She was proud of the man Bob had become. And now she was especially proud of her astute

choice as a somewhat naïve young woman. *What a reward*, she thought. *Lots better than even I had hoped for.*

As Peter turned his eyes from the castle to Bob and Mandy, they looked around and noticed that their new home was surrounded not by castles of similar architecture but by small, pleasant-looking bungalows like the ones they had passed on their way to this location.

“So,” Mandy asked, “who will our neighbors be?”

Peter pointed to his right. “That house over there belongs to St. Francis of Assisi and his wife, Mother Teresa. The one next to it is where Spencer and Camilla Kimball will live. Next to them will be Mohandas and Kasturba Gandhi.” Pointing to the left, he said, “That house is Albert and Elsa Einstein’s. Next door is Abraham and Mary Lincoln’s place. Across the street will be J. R. R. Tolkien and his wife, Edith. Next to their house will be their good friends Clive Lewis and his wife, Joy Davidman. Down the street a bit is Florence Nightingale’s place. She had several marriage proposals in the spirit world but turned them all down.”

“Wow,” Bob exclaimed, “what a neighborhood.” But to himself he thought, *I guess none of these great people knew how to make a buck. Looks like my business acumen is paying off big time.*

“When do we move in?” Mandy asked. “I’m sure I’ll want to do some redecorating.”

“All in good time,” said Peter. “First there’s that little matter of the Final Judgment.”

A few weeks after the home show with their apostolic realtor, Bob and Mandy were summoned to the judgment bar. It was ten feet high, made of solid, sparkling diamond, and behind the bar sat Jesus, smiling broadly. Bob and Mandy stood in silent anticipation. Jesus looked down at them for a long while.

“Brother and Sister Markham,” he said finally, “I’m afraid I have some bad news for you.”

Bob’s brow furrowed. Mandy emitted a high-pitched gasp. “What sort of bad news?” Bob asked.

"Well, somehow you seem to have flunked the final exam."

"Final exam?"

"The castle tour," Jesus explained.

"But we were told that would be our mansion for eternity."

"Oh, you were? I'll have to have a word with Peter about his 'sales pitch.' Anyway, how did you respond?"

"With gratitude?" Bob guessed, hoping he'd given the right answer.

"I really like you, Bob," Jesus replied. "You're quick on your feet, and you have a good heart . . . when it's not distracted."

"We've always treated others generously," Mandy insisted. For years after they made it big, they had donated money to several charities, including the local children's hospital, which even boasted a Markham wing for children suffering from polio, a disease that had made a comeback in Utah after so many parents stopped vaccinating their children.

"I'm afraid you didn't read your Doctrine and Covenants very thoroughly," Jesus answered. "Or that little sermon I gave on a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. There's also that, um, matter of the camel."

Bob and Mandy both looked confused. "The camel?" Bob queried.

"You remember," Jesus prompted, "about the eye of the needle and such."

"Oh," said Bob. "I thought that was just hyperbole."

"Well, maybe a little bit," Jesus hedged, "but I *was* making a point. At any rate, for now you'll be assigned to the terrestrial world. There you will learn all about camels and needles and a lot of other important lessons. Maybe in time you'll be ready to live in this nice little neighborhood."

"But . . ." Bob and Mandy stammered.

Jesus smiled and said, "Next."

One of Peter's assistants led Bob and Mandy away to the terrestrial resurrection chamber, and Peter brought Steve and Marla Newquist before the bar. Steve had been a custodian at a junior high school. Marla had taught kindergarten. Steve had never been made a high priest in the

LDS Church. The most prestigious calling he had received was elders quorum secretary, where he had served faithfully for four years. Marla had been a Beehive adviser before the Church deep-sixed some of its more unique monikers, served as an adequate Primary pianist, and taught in all of the auxiliaries. They had raised three children, all of whom had struggled, partly because their parents had been too busy trying to make ends meet to give them certain advantages. Eventually, though, the kids had recovered from their drug addictions, their impulsive marriage choices, and their wandering ways and had returned to activity in the Church, or at least partial activity.

When Steve and Marla came before the judgment bar, both fell instinctively to their knees, not daring to look up. Jesus climbed down from the bar, reached out a hand to each of them, and raised them to their feet. He then hugged them tightly.

"You passed the test," Jesus said with a laugh. "You'll be assigned to the celestial kingdom, and you will live in the house you requested."

Steve and Marla looked up at Jesus in disbelief. The Savior loosed them from his embrace and waved his hand in the air. Suddenly a vision of their castle tour with Simon Peter appeared before their eyes.

"So, what do you think?" said Peter, pointing to the gleaming castle.

"Why, we could never live in a place like that," said Marla. "For one thing, it would be a beast to keep clean. And, well, it's just not us."

"Especially when it's surrounded by all these ordinary little homes," added Steve.

"Don't you want to know who will be living in those homes?" asked Peter.

"It doesn't really matter," said Steve. "We don't want to live in a big castle while our neighbors live in modest homes. We'd feel more comfortable if we lived in one of the smaller homes."

"Well, if that's the way you feel," Peter replied, feigning disappointment. He turned away from the Newquists and winked at the "camera."

The vision closed, and Jesus looked at them again. "You gave the right answer," he said.

“We weren’t trying to give a right answer,” Marla answered. “It’s just who we are.”

“I know.”

“But I do have one question,” Steve said, looking perplexed.

“Ask away.”

“Who *will* be living in the big castle?”

Jesus laughed. “Why, nobody. If you think you deserve to live there, you don’t. And if you wouldn’t feel comfortable living there, we can’t force you to. So, in the end, nobody can live in it. We’ll just leave it there as a reminder about what qualifies a person to live in the celestial kingdom.

“But . . .” Steve stammered, “where do you live?”

“Oh,” Jesus laughed, “I travel a lot, but when I’m in town, I’ll stay in a nice little place next door to Florence Nightingale. She’s a hoot.”

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