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Chapter 1

Verification of Heaven

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!"

Revelation 5:11–12

Heaven. There is simply nothing like it on the human plane of existence. It is dazzling in its perfection, with its brilliance unfolding with more majesty than a thousand peacocks. Color of a multitude of shades of familiar hues, and others not seen on our planet, exist in heaven. They shine in such a way the best comparison I can make is of a rainbow composed of hundreds of rainbows. This nearly indescribable palette covered every inch of heaven. Even if all I saw the day I went to heaven were its cornucopia of colors, I would sing its praises—and the God who reigns over it—for the rest of my days.

Yet there was more. So much more.

Music that pulsed with intensity, and yet soothed with perfect harmonies, wafted over me. As it reverberated in my spirit, I felt sensations and thrills rising within; I now knew what pure music felt like. Choirs stretching beyond the horizon sang in voices that can best be described as angelic. I joined in the melodious praise and worship, able to understand every song even if I had never heard it before. Joy flooded my spirit as I reveled in a newfound awareness

and sensitivity to everything around me. I could feel the love of God filling every fiber of my being.

Another thing that impressed me was the calm in the atmosphere. No one rushed around or looked over their shoulder with anxiety etched into their countenance. No one checked their watches, scanned their to-do lists, fretted about the bills, worried about tomorrow, or fought for a place at the head of the line. It was beyond wonderful. Imagine taking a vacation to a picturesque, luxurious Hawaiian island with weather so balmy you never need a jacket. And while you're there you stay in a windowless villa, dining whenever you chose from an endless buffet, as a retinue of servants wait on you hand-and-foot.

Heaven is a hundred times better.

Unexpected Trip

Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire; His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters; He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.

Revelation 1:12-16

My trip began with an unexpected interruption in the midst of a sunny July day in 1984 in Northern California. My beautiful wife, Esperanza—which means “hope” in English—and I went out for breakfast near our home in Los Gatos prior to heading to San Jose’s Spartan Stadium (since renamed CEFCU Stadium for Citizens Equity First Credit Union) to watch the Golden Bay Earthquakes play soccer. Near the end of the game, though, sudden pains shot through my stomach. They increased with such a velocity that I thought I would pass out.

After considerable groaning and slumping over in my seat, Espe rushed me out the gate and into our car before heading pell-mell down the highway to a hospital close to our home.

When we arrived, my wife's shouts brought some nurses running. After hooking me up to equipment and taking my vital signs, one told her, "Your husband's appendix is about to burst."

Shock washing over her, Espe struggled to grasp the significance of what she had just learned. She didn't want to believe it! When she regained her senses, she immediately began praying for my well-being and a safe surgery. God responded by giving her the kind of peace that passes all understanding. She knew her prayers would be answered.

I wish I could say I felt the same way. As a couple aides wheeled me to an emergency operating room, I struggled with fear and the worst case of nerves I have ever known. Like my wife, though, after regaining my senses I prayed and asked God for His help. I asked that He guide the surgeon's hands and that the operation would be successful.

No sooner had they administered the medication to put me asleep than I felt myself lifting up, up, and up out of the operating room. Unable to believe my eyes at first, I found myself in heaven. How did I know this? I just knew. For one, I felt complete peace of mind, tranquility, and a deep sense of belonging. It was unlike any place I had ever visited. I felt totally at home with being there, like one of countless kindred spirits. Joy and happiness overwhelmed me.

As I looked across a vast expanse of sky, my eyes widened. There were so many things to see all at once, and so much happening. While on an earthly plane there would be no way to absorb everything that was going on, in heaven it all felt normal. I felt very much at home. There was no worry, no fear, and no reason to get upset. I knew that everything was in God's hands and within His control. As I floated above millions of people, I heard them praising God in their native languages. Though I struggle to speak anything but English, I understood all their words! In fact, I joined in the praise with my own heavenly language. When I noticed they all were raising their hands, I raised mine too as we worshiped God Almighty.

A Place for Us

In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.

John 14:2-3

By now, you may be wondering: “So what’s so great about this guy’s experience? Haven’t we already had a flood of books about the beyond? Hasn’t *90 Minutes in Heaven* sold a truckload of copies? Even been made into a movie?” While I would answer “yes” to all those questions, I still feel compelled by the Lord to share what happened to me. Not just because I saw and felt such an awe-inspiring vision as I lay on the operating table. Besides that, my entire life has been an affirmation of the God who didn’t just create me but saved me—more than once—years before this experience. This is a memoir about Him and the incredible miracles I have seen Him perform throughout my more than seven decades on this earth.

I am starting with my trip to heaven because it is such a stirring, almost unbelievable story. Were it not for living through it, I would be as skeptical as some of you reading these words. I might be wondering if you had made it all up, eaten too much pizza the night before, or had strange hallucinations while on anesthesia. I assure you: it was real. Every time I think about it or my wife brings it up, I go back in time and a smile crosses my face—feelings of joy dance through my heart and spirit.

We have to understand God created this earth and prepared a place to spend an eternity for those who truly believe in Him, as Jesus assured His disciples in John 14:2–3. For some reason, which I assume will be revealed to me when I enter heaven for the last time, God blessed me with this preview of my final resting place. I have led a fairly long life, one that has included some pretty tough years, as well as rewarding times. Yet nothing that takes place on this planet can match the grandeur of heaven.

Heaven is where everyone wants to go at the end of life (especially when the other choice is hell). It offers perfect peace, tranquility, and the sense of belonging and community that so many spend years of their existence desperately hoping to discover. In heaven I felt love emanating from God that was far superior to any earthly kind.

Entering the Throne Room

Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne. And He who sat there was like a jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads.

Everything in heaven was so natural, including the lighting, that it felt like living through a cinematic experience. It was more lifelike than any IMAX theater or Dolby Atmos surround-sound system. Earlier I mentioned the breathtaking rainbows in heaven. Not surprisingly, since God gave Noah the rainbow a sign of His covenant to never again destroy the earth with a flood (Genesis 9:13–16), they occupy a dominant place in heaven. That includes in God’s throne room, a place so magnificent that words can’t fully capture its full dimensions. It is filled with majesty, royalty, and beauty—a true feast for the eyes.

As I reached the throne room, I tried to imagine who could be there. I could envision Old Testament leaders and prophets like Moses, Abraham, Joseph, Joshua, Noah, David, Solomon, and Daniel. And such New Testament figures as Paul, Peter, James, and Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And, course, Jesus the Christ, our Savior.

Ironically, the solid glass enclosure and the brightness and dazzling rainbow of colors made it difficult to discern exactly who was there. Yet through the wide opening I could see there were people walking around. That I couldn’t identify them didn’t upset me. I knew heaven was where I belonged. I was a part of everything happening in heaven. Because of that trip, Colossians 3:1 has become one of my favorite Scriptures: “If you then were raised with Christ, desire those things which are above, where Christ sits at the right hand of God” (MEV).

These words have fascinating meaning to mean for several reasons:

1. I rose up to heaven
2. Things on earth are no longer that meaningful by comparison
3. The only disappointment I experienced afterward was coming back to earth

The heavenly music was so intense it felt like an orchestra of millions were playing in perfect tune, accompanied by a similar-size choir singing every song to perfection. As a boy, I like lush movie musicals big orchestras, great singing, and fantastic ending numbers. No matter how much money, what famed composers, or what stars they employ, no Hollywood production could ever hope to match the music in heaven.

Equally amazing is how I was able to absorb all the sight sounds. I was prepared for anything God allowed me to see, feel, or be a part of there. My senses were heightened at a level unheard of this world, all rolled up into a ball of happiness and natural joy. While the music

pulsated throughout my being, I followed everything with my eyes, and could understand everything without any struggle. I sang and worshiped in tune and knew all the words so I never distracted the worship. While that may not sound that impressive, you need to appreciate in real life I cannot hold a note with both hands.

Affirming the Vision

Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created."

Revelation 4:9-11

I went to heaven about five years before Don Piper's visit in January of 1989. He later wrote *90 Minutes in Heaven* (and several succeeding titles) with prolific ghostwriter and author Cecil Murphey. Although Baker Publishing's Revell imprint only released 7,500 copies initially, since then it has sold more than five million. I am a huge fan of the book and used to buy them in lots of ten to hand out to nonbelievers.

One reason I absorbed the book so intently was because I could relate to a succession of Piper's experiences. Having lived through what I did, his book had the ring of authenticity. For example, in chapter two, he writes of how time had no meaning. Bingo! There are no clocks in heaven, no rush to get across town or pick up your kids or make it to a doctor's appointment or any of a dozen different reasons we dash around like the proverbial chicken without a head. Just total peace and harmony, all under God's control.

Like Piper, I have to use earthly terms to describe the unimaginable excitement, warmth, and happiness in heaven, but they pale by comparison to the real thing. As Paul wrote in the apocryphal "love chapter," 1 Corinthians 13: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known" (v. 12). When it comes to heaven, while on this earth we can only see in a dim mirror what awaits us. If more people fully grasped the awesomeness of what awaits everyone who follows Jesus as Lord, the lines of those seeking to enter heaven would stretch around the globe.

Piper also writes about a first-class buffet for the senses. I know exactly how that feels. Even though I found myself floating above millions of people, my senses and eyes could absorb everything with fantastic visual intake. It felt like zeroing in with crystal clear vision on a top opera singer while mired in the back row of the balcony. It wasn't just my keen eyesight. I found myself with an extraordinary ability to smell, hear, perceive, and experience everything around me. It left me with a lasting catalog of memories.

With all five senses dramatically multiplied, I could see the brilliant light and rainbows emanating from God's throne room as I drew closer to it. I believe its brightness was the reason I couldn't determine who was present. I know it all sounds unbelievable, but how can one adequately explain living in another dimension? It is strange being in the hospital for surgery and an instant later being in heaven. But it was . . . well, heavenly. Piper talks about every feature being perfect and beautiful—wonderful to gaze at. As he writes: "Everything was perfect. I sensed that I knew everything and had no questions to ask."¹

Indeed, everything had an order and structure to it like nothing we can see on earth. This is one of the most difficult things to explain; when people hear my descriptions, many scoff, "No one and no thing is perfect. All I can say in response is: "God is perfect, so He created a perfect heaven." How else can I explain being able to sing in perfect voice and rhythm when down here I sound like a screech owl whose feathers are getting plucked? How could I have been part of something greater than anyone can explain?

Being magnificent in love, worship, and praise is not bragging about my abilities, but the God who made it possible. It was an overflowing feast for my ears. I didn't make a decision to follow Christ until my late thirties. Yet, after only four years of walking with Christ, I was participating in the greatest concert of all time. If it sounds unbelievable to you, imagine how I felt! It's nearly impossible to explain in the natural, but heaven is where God allows His children to experience the supernatural organized by our divine Creator. Everything in heaven is perfect, even a thousand songs playing simultaneously. Imagine the cacophony of discordant sounds if you tried that on earth.

Longing for Home

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38–39

In the tenth anniversary edition of *90 Minutes in Heaven*, Don Piper wrote a personal update about the millions of miles he had traveled, people he had met, and the countless prayers he had seen answered since the book's original release in 2004.

A paragraph near the end of this section particularly stood out to me: “And finally, I stood there at the gates of heaven, more alive and complete than I have ever been here on earth. I was surrounded by those who had helped me get to heaven by their words and actions. This remains the most real experience of my entire existence. Though I chose to keep it a sacred secret for a while, I now happily and without reservation shout, ‘Heaven is real and Jesus is the Way!’”²

I know just how he feels. Although it has been more than thirty-five years since my trip to heaven, my mind thinks of it as clearly as if it happened yesterday. I have cherished it ever since and can hardly wait to go back. Among the many things I anticipate is being able this time to determine exactly who was walking around in God's throne room. That day in 1984, I was home. Just as Piper says, I wanted to be there more than anywhere else I had ever been on earth. It is where my spirit belongs.

Whenever the subject of heaven arises up in conversation, what immediately comes to mind is *perfection*. Invariably, my mind goes back to that day in the hospital and all the joy rushes back as I focus my thoughts on the experience. One reason I am convinced of the reality of this is what my wife told me later, about how I had gone through surgery with my arms locked straight up, pointing to heaven. The nurse tried several times to lower my arms, but she couldn't budge them. Finally, she asked the doctor what to do and he replied, “I'm operating down here. Forget about the arms.”

Everyone has a fear of dying, as I once did, but after seeing heaven I look forward to the day of my return. I truly thank God for what He showed me. Indeed, I long for my return to where my spirit belongs. My human body is slowly getting weaker and slowing down, but I know heaven is my final resting home.

Not everyone can understand this kind of longing. When I awoke after my operation and expressed my overwhelming desire to be back in heaven, Esperanza responded with hurt in her voice, “Well, thank you very much.” It took awhile to fully explain what I had seen, heard, and sensed before she developed the same kind of excitement about her future trip to heaven. If you knew what awaits everyone who professes the name of Jesus as Savior and Lord, you would too!

Endnotes

1. Don Piper with Cecil Murphey, *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death and Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2014—10th Anniversary Edition), 47.

2. *Ibid.*, 25.