



## HEAVEN: A SECULAR VIEW<sup>1</sup>

When it comes to reading, how many of us are imbalanced. For every pietist who reads nothing but the Bible and Christian classics, there is the self-consciously cultured who pride themselves on being in touch with their peers but have ceased processing their reading with biblical insight and zeal.

By contrast, the healthiest and most effective Christians track on the one hand God's heartbeat pulsating through Scripture, and on the other the ever-changing patterns of the cultures into which we are called to speak. Was it not Charles Spurgeon who said we are to have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other? To such readers, Paul's wonderful blend of biblical theology and cultural observation is programmatic. His Athenian sermon (Acts 17:16-34), for instance, influences what we read and how we witness to the unchurched.

The *New York Times* bestseller list is one obvious place to go for books which offer a gauge of where western culture is at. A number of titles come to mind: John Grisham's *The Testament*, Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life*, Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons*, and, more famously, *The Da Vinci Code*. We could also mention Karen Armstrong's more intellectual volumes *The History of God* and *The Battle for God*. Aside from these, I think of the British scene; specifically of A N Wilson's *God's Funeral* and Ludovic Kennedy's final stand *Farewell to God*. If we reject out of hand reading such books, or are all into reading them but have lost the apostle Paul's Spirit-filled reaction (what Luke describes in Acts as his paroxysm), then we have veered too far toward either pietism or worldliness (culture for its own sake).

Presently, Mitch Albom's number one bestseller *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (Hyperion: New York, 2003) is the subject of many a conversation "around the water cooler." It would be easy to write off the volume. We are good at that! But it is more helpful to discern its kernel of truth. It is this kernel which enables us to build a bridge across to the thought-world of society, introducing to our secularised peers a biblical

view of heaven at a time when they may be more open to forgoing a pooh-poohing of the idea.

### THE VERSION: A GUESS, A WISH

*The Five People* (for short) is a sweet tale of "Eddie Maintenance," a genial if depressed old man, who dies on his 83rd birthday saving a little girl from a falling cart at Ruby Point Pier—the fairground that has been his working life, his years in the military excepted.

The book records Eddie's first moments in heaven, setting this "journey" in the terrestrial context of his past life and the immediate aftermath of his death. What preoccupies Eddie on the other side is the success or failure of his life. It all hinges on whether, in death, he saved the girl at the pier. But this answer must wait as, in turn, he meets five of the many people whose paths he crossed during his earthly life. Each gives a perspective which prepares him for heaven's permanent tranquillity.

#### **First person: The Blue Man.**

The Blue Man has ended up a freak due to nitrate consumption. He died, though, suddenly breaking to avoid killing the young Eddie. The Blue Man explains that, "Death doesn't just take someone, it misses someone else, and in the small distance between being taken and being missed, lives are changed."

#### **Second person: The Captain.**

Eddie served with The Captain in the Philippines. Initially, he is angered to learn that it was his superior who shot and maimed him amid the frenzy of war. Yet his emotions subside as he discovers that the bullet that lamed him was his salvation, and that the Captain who fired it was later strewn by a landmine among the banyan trees. Sacrifice, Eddie must realise, was a part of life.

#### **Third person: Ruby.**

Ruby (after whom Ruby Pier is named) reveals to Eddie that while his father was a pitiful drunk, he possessed a hidden redeeming feature: loyalty. Why else would he have saved the equally pitiful Mickey Shea

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from the perils of the sea? From heaven's vantage point Eddie must see that earth's happenings were not always as they seemed. He must relinquish the poison of anger and forgive his father.

**Fourth person: Marguerite.**

Hopelessness must go too, says Marguerite, the love of his life. Despair was inappropriate in terrestrial life, for losing her was love nevertheless—a form of memory: a new partner to nurture, to hold, and with whom to dance. Certainly, then, despair is unbecoming of heaven, too, where life ceases to be “like looking over a fence.”

**Fifth person: Tala.**

Finally, Eddie encounters the shadow he had seen on the day during war that he had torched a barn. It was that same day his Captain's bullet prevented his rescue attempt. Now seeing Tala's charred body, and the opportunity she gives him to wash her, he is broken. Afflicted by feelings of worthlessness, the little Asian girl reassures him: “Eddie Maintenance, You keep [children] safe. You make good for me.” How so? Well, Tala tells Eddie, in his death he saved the girl at the pier, but her salvation was his redemption for earlier igniting Tala. Indeed, the last sensation he felt in this life was Tala's hands. “My hands.” Tala assures Eddie, “I bring you to heaven. I keep you safe.”

Now, obviously, we balk at Albom's view of heaven. Yet, contrary to Dan Brown, who presents fiction as fact, Albom admits up front that his version “is only a guess, a wish.” Heaven, where God is peripheral and Christ is unmentioned, is a humanistic and a universalistic version of utopia. This utopia is a “heaven” we enter by human hands and in which our scars are washed away by each other; where it is explained to us that our good deeds have cancelled out our bad ones, and where our assurance and answers come not from God—the parent at the far end of a house — but from five of the people who significantly shape our lives, whether we know it or not. This is a guess at heaven where there is hope for man, but no glory for God.

THE VERSION: AN OPPORTUNITY, AN OPENING

It is not difficult to debunk, biblically, Albom's secular guesswork. What is more challenging is the utilization of the commonalities we share with Albom's vision of life after death.

First, *The Five People* indicates that in an age of celebrity, there is widespread fear of being insignificant. Our sophistication and autonomy notwithstanding, it matters to us that we are loved; that our lives count (our deaths too). Whether understood in terms of the Islamic hope of seventy virgins or of Albom's celestial Pleasantville, heaven offers us hope—an other-worldly explication, compensation and counteraction of the severity and mundaneness of the present with all its guilt and frustrations. In this sense, *The Five People* is a variation on James Stewart's film *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Second, Albom illustrates the post-9/11 re-entrance of death into our vocabulary. No longer are preachers alone in complaining of Eddie, that he “went about his dull routine as if all the days in the world were still to come.” Death is an unavoidable reality we all must face and do so, in Eddie's view, with either smart words or stupid. And if we reject Albom's assumption that heaven is awaiting us all, we may at least latch on to his view, expressed through the Captain, that “what happens on earth is only the beginning.”

Third, *The Five People* is really a commentary on providence. It speaks to life with its innumerable sub-plots amid the meta-narrative (big picture) of history. The end of one sub-plot is simultaneously the beginning of another. “No story sits by itself. Sometimes stories meet at corners and sometimes they cover one another completely, like stones beneath a river.” Heaven, we anticipate, will unpack the goodness and wisdom of God in these stories. Says the Captain, “You get to make sense of your yesterdays.” In the beatific vision of Scripture, however, we shall understand, as we can but begin to here, that focal to life and to all of history is the self-sacrifice of Christ. Those sacrifices of the Christian are significant but as a response to Christ's self-giving love and not as an attempted replacement of it.

Finally, there is Albom's portrayal of heaven. Not only does he conceive of it as timeless—allowing for duration but not for clocks and their dictates—he believes it to be a place inhabited by the psychosomatically healed. We might protest that in Albom's version healing goes on in heaven. Yet, who is to say that it does not.

Certainly, justification, occasioned once-for-all through faith in Christ, does not continue in heaven. The Bible affords no place to a doctrine of purgatory (implicit to which is the idea of a purging of yet to be forgiven



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sin). The Day of Judgment does but broadcast across the cosmos the verdict already rendered in fulfilment of the promise of forgiveness granted to the sinner (1 Jn 1:9). We are talking rather of healing, that is to say of sanctification. On the one hand, David says that he would be satisfied when awakening with the Lord's likeness (Ps. 17:15), and yet Paul writes that the work the Lord has begun in us continues until the day, not of our deaths, but of the Lord Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6). This is not the place to resolve the tension. I simply want to acknowledge its existence.

Less debatable is the way in which Albom's tangible version of heaven counteracts the frequent lopsided and short-sighted emphasizing of heaven's present ethereal form: a realm of disembodied spirits awaiting, in Jesus' company, the regeneration (*paliggenesia*) of the cosmos and, with it, the consummation of heaven.

Albom thus challenges us to make more of the redemption of the body (*cf.* Matt. 19:28; Rom. 8:22-23). All the Fall's effects on both our bodies (sickness, tiredness, and death) and souls (sorrow, sin and separation from God) will be no more. All pains and scars, psychological and physiological, will be history (Rev. 21:1-7). Heaven in its final state is the eternal home God wills us to enjoy in body and in soul, forever. The new earth promises to be the place where, to quote the Captain, smoking is absent, but it will also be the place where meaningfulness abounds all the time and in every sector. Our God, who is the author and substance of meaning, shall forever and immediately be present through his renewed cosmos, but the sin in us which grieves his Spirit and obstructs our sense of God's presence will be no more. We shall see God's triune glory through redeemed eyes, and, get this, we shall be like him (1 Jn 3:2)!

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