

How to Persevere in Heavenly Contemplation

~Other Speakers A-F: Richard Baxter:

The hardest part of heavenly meditation is bringing it into clear focus. It is easier to think about "heaven" as an abstract idea than to concentrate on the real heaven. Faith meets tremendous resistance in trying to view that which is supernatural. It grows tired quickly. The objects of faith are far off, but those of our physical senses are near. It is easier to rejoice in what we see than in what we have never seen. Our faith can be assisted therefore by calling upon our physical senses. Just as an earthly telescope can enable us to see far beyond the earth to glittering galaxies above, so also faith can use some help in meditating upon the things above. Our senses have sometimes been our enemies drawing us toward the sensual rather than the spiritual.

It is good strategy to make our senses allies in drawing us nearer to God. Why has God given us our senses if they might not be useful in His service? Why does the Holy Spirit describe the glory of heaven in terms that are appealing to the flesh? Is it that we might think of heaven to be made of gold and pearl; or that saints and angels eat and drink? No; but to help us to conceive of them as we are able. We use these scriptural pictures to aid our concentration and to make the things of heaven vivid until we come to see them perfectly in heaven itself.

Here are some suggestions for assisting your heavenly meditation with your physical senses.

First, think of heaven in as real a way as possible. Think of the joys above as boldly as Scripture expresses them. When we attempt to think of God and heaven without the Scripture's manner of representing them, we have nothing upon which to fix our thoughts. It is all abstract and vague. Our minds wander into thin air. Love and joy are promoted by familiar acquaintance. Therefore put Christ no further from you than He has put Himself. Think of Christ in terms of our own perfected nature. Think of the redeemed in heaven as people made perfect.

Imagine yourself surveying the New Jerusalem with John. You view the thrones, the heavenly hosts, and the shining splendor of what he saw. Imagine yourself as John's fellow-traveler into the celestial kingdom. See the saints in their white robes, like the Olympic champions of ancient Greece, waving palm branches victoriously. Imagine hearing the music of heaven. If you had really seen and heard these things, how excited you would have been. Don't try to paint the pictures, but just get as vivid, colorful, three-dimensional mental images of them as you possibly can. Do this by contemplating the scriptural accounts of them until you can say, "I think I see a glimpse of glory! I think I hear the shouts of joy and praise. I think I can even see the Son of God appearing in the clouds."

I confess that my very dreams of these scenes have sometimes tremendously inspired me. Should not these meditations based on Scripture stir me even more? What if I had seen, with Stephen, "the heavens opened, and the Son of God standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56)? Surely that sight was worth the storm of stones. What if I had seen, as Micaiah did, "the Lord sitting on his throne and all the host of heaven standing by him on his right hand and on his left" (1 Kings 22:19)? Such sights those men of God saw; and I shall shortly see far more, as they did also when they reached heaven.

Another way in which our senses may aid us in our meditation is by comparing the objects of sense with the objects of faith. Think—if it is such a delight for a sinner to do wickedly, how much greater delight will it be to live with God? If the way to hell can afford such pleasure, what must be the pleasures of the saints in heaven? If the covetous man has so much pleasure in his money, and the ambitious man so enjoys his power and fame; then what sheer ecstasy must the saints in heaven experience with their everlasting treasures and heavenly honors.

Compare—How sweet is food to my taste when I am hungry, especially if it be, as Isaac said, "such as I love" (Gen. 27:4). What delight then must my soul have in feeding upon Christ, "the living bread" (John 6:51), and in eating with Him at His table in His kingdom (Luke 22:30). How refreshing is a cool drink when my throat is dry as dust—the satisfaction can scarcely be expressed. O, how delightful will it be to my soul to drink of that fountain of living water, which whoever drinks of it shall thirst no more (Revelation 7:17). What fragrance exudes from "the precious ointment which is poured on the head" of the Anointed One, the Messiah, our glorified Savior, and which must be poured on the head of all his saints. It will fill all heaven with its odor. How delightful is the music of the heavenly host. How pleasing will be those real beauties above. How magnificent the "building of God—not made with hands" (2 Cor. 5:1), the house that God Himself dwells in.

Compare also the delights that go beyond the physical senses even upon this earth. The exhilaration, for

example, of working on an invention, can make a person forget about eating or sleeping. Should I not be much more absorbed in the delights of heaven? What exquisite pleasure it is to dive into the secrets of nature and make discoveries in the mysteries of arts and sciences! If human learning be so interesting as to make sensual pleasure seem secondary, how much greater must be the excitement of heaven where we shall know in a moment all that there is to be known.

Consider the sweetness of natural love, whether to children, parents, mates, or intimate friends. If the delights of close friendship be so great, what delight shall we have in the friendship of the Most High, and in our mutual intimacy with Jesus Christ, and in the dearest love of the saints! We shall then love a thousand times more ardently than we can now.

Think how God has blessed you over your life time, and you can exclaim, "If my pilgrimage and warfare have seen such mercy, what shall I find in my home and victory? If God helps me so much while I remain a sinner, what will He give when I am a perfected saint? If I have had so much at a distance from Him, what shall I have in His immediate presence?" Think how the Bible has blessed you, and say, "If His letters are so comforting, what will the glory of His presence be? If the promise is so sweet, what will the performance be?"

How often we have read and heard of dying saints who have been full of joy; and when their bodies ached with pain, they had so much of heaven in their spirits that their joy far exceeded their sorrows. If a spark of this fire be so glorious even amid the suffering, what then is heaven itself? Think of the joy that the martyrs have felt in the flames. What filled their spirits with such joy while their bodies were burning? It must have been some fantastic foretaste of glory that made the flames of fire easy. What must the glory itself be!

How often, when I have thought of my conversion, have I cried out, "O happy day! Praise God for redeeming me!" How much more shall I cry out in heaven, "O blessed eternity! Praise God who brought me to it!" Did the angels of God rejoice to see my conversion? Surely they will congratulate my arrival in heaven.

Hasn't God sometimes revealed Himself in a special way to you? Haven't you known times when God let a drop of glory fall upon you! Think to yourself, "What is this 'down payment' compared with the full inheritance? All this light, that so amazes and delights me, is but a candle lighted from heaven to lead me through this world of darkness." Or, if you have not yet felt such sweet previews of glory—then make use of such peace, love, and joy as you have felt, to look forward to what you will hereafter experience.

Preserve heavenly meditation from a wandering mind. You will find your mind backward and resistant to this work. O, what excuses it will make; what evasions it will find. Either it will question whether it be a duty or not; or if it be so for others, whether it is for you. It will say, "This is a work for ministers who have nothing else to do, or for people who have more time than I." If you are a minister, it will say, "This is the duty of the lay people; it is enough for me to teach them." As if it were your duty only to cook the meal and serve it to them, and they alone must eat it, digest it, and live upon it!

If these tricks don't work, your mind will remind you of other business that needs attention; for the mind would rather do almost anything else but this. Perhaps it will say, "Other duties are more important, and I haven't time to do everything." As if there were any better way to fit us to be useful to others, than by fixing our mind on the goal of life. Certainly heaven is the best fire at which to light our candle, and the best book for a preacher to study.

If your mind has nothing to say against meditating on heaven, it will trifle away the time in delays. Do it tomorrow or the next day. So far as the mind is carnal, it will seek such escapes. But so far as it is spiritual, it will find this to be a most satisfying activity.

What is to be done? Will you do it if I tell you? What if you had an employee who would not work? You would surely take decisive action. Have you no command of your own thoughts? Have you become a slave again to your depraved nature? Resume your authority! Call on the Spirit of Christ to assist you. Say to Him, Lord, You gave my reason the command of my thoughts and desires. The authority I have received over them is from You. Now, look, they refuse to obey Your authority. You command me to set them to the work of heavenly meditation; but they rebel and stubbornly refuse the duty. Please enable me to exercise that authority which You have given me. O send down Your Spirit, that I may enforce Your commands, and effectually compel them to obey Your will. Then you will see your mind submit. Its resistance will be overcome, and its backwardness be turned into cheerful compliance.

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Your emotions may also betray you. They persuade you that you don't feel like meditating on heaven, and that you should wait until your love of God motivates you to engage in such meditation. That would be like waiting until you feel warm before going into a heated home. Go inside, and then you will feel warm around the roaring fireplace. So also, start contemplating heaven, and the result will be a rising of your emotional temperature. You will then find God's love exciting you to think still more of heaven.

The wandering mind will also turn to other subjects as an escape from disciplined concentration. It will be like a lazy employee who stops his work to visit with anyone who will talk. When there should be nothing in your mind but heaven, it will cheat and peek at lesser things. The cure is alert discipline. Say to your truant mind, "See here! I did not come here to think of worldly business, of people, places, news, or passing events. I came to think of heaven alone. Can you not 'watch one hour?'" (Mark 14:37).

Tell yourself off. Say, "Would you leave this world and dwell forever with Christ in heaven, and yet you will not leave it one hour to dwell with Christ in meditation? Whom are you fooling? Is this the love you have for your Friend? Do you love Christ and your eternal home no more than this?"

One more trick the mind may play on you. It will seek to end your meditation before your spirit is really warmed up. Your mind will weary of the work and beg you to stop too soon. But if you stop before the end of your journey, is not your travel wasted? You come to spy out the land of promise. Don't go back without a "cluster of grapes" to show your brethren for their encouragement (Numbers 13:21-24).

The heavenly fire needs time to operate. Given time it will melt your frozen heart and refine it. Pursue the work until your soul is refreshed with the delights above. And if you cannot attain these goals at first, try again until you succeed. "Blessed is that servant, whom his Lord, when he comes, shall find so doing" (Matt. 24:46).