

Charlie Makes It to Heaven

A Parable

By

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Charlie was very pleased to be in heaven.

Dressed in the same white gown as everyone else, he had tears in his eyes as he realized that he had made it. God had recognized his conversion and his life of faith had been impressive if not impeccable. He was not in hell, as he had often feared. But his self-control and dedication had won him the ultimate prize of grace.

He found his place in the great choir naturally. He just knew where to go. He simply knew what to sing. Every one of the hosts of the saved gathered around the image of God and sang from their deepest being. All their voices melded and blended into one great song that rose and fell, punctuated by deep silences, with song that moved between earth-shaking power and mystic sweetness. To the sound of each note God's very image danced and moved and the light from God changed hues and intensity. Such was the glory of God.

It was all wordlessly blissful and everything that Charlie ever dreamed of.

It seemed to continue for an eternity until his voice caught in his throat.

As he was singing from the core of his being in resonance with God and the entire heavenly host when he thought of Chandra, his wife.

Chandra had never felt the same way about religion as he. She had grown up in a family that used religion like a drug to mask the deep pain of her father's verbal abuse and to excuse it. As an adult she kept the church and even God at an arm's length, but was surprisingly tolerant of Charlie's newfound faith.

He knew she was not in heaven. It was easy to know. All you had to do was look at another person and you could read their life and being. You knew them. You could think of any person you knew on earth and you would find yourself, among all those millions of people, next to them.

But when he thought of Chandra, the life they shared, the love they made, and the friendship that grew between them, she was nowhere to be found. He could see, as if she were before him, her wedding dress on the day of their marriage. But she was absent and that is when his voice faltered.

This was not like some church choir where you could lip sing and not have anyone notice. Everyone was very much aware of every else's voice and saw how the image of God resonated with each one. When Charlie stopped singing a void developed in that mighty choir. Heaven itself was dimmed.

Everyone was looking at him. God's presence was focused on him.

With tears for his beloved wife he turned his back on the heavenly host.

He turned his back on God.

He didn't stop until he got to the central square of heaven, where two gold streets met. When he got the center of that square he sat down and wept. He had been so focused on his own salvation, he had forgotten all about her and the damnation she must be experiencing.

As the song ended he felt thousands and millions pass him by on their way home. When the crowds had passed he felt some others sit down with him. Twenty-three others were sitting in the square with him, tears streaming down their faces. No words were necessary. He could see, as if he were the other people, the ones they missed. He could feel their grief.

The image of God arrived at the square, waiting for an explanation.

Charlie said, "I can't sing while Chandra is in hell."

“I am a just God, and I cannot forgive those who have not accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior,” said God.

“You said that you would wipe the tears from our eyes, and yet here we weep for our beloved ones,” Charlie replied.

“There is no one more sad for Chandra than I am. But my justice cannot be questioned,” said God. “Without my justice the universe would cease to exist. Hell is the necessary consequence of choice. People must be held accountable for their choices. If you want someone to blame for Chandra’s punishment, it is Chandra. She made her eternal choice.”

Charlie felt suddenly enraged by this idea. “Eternal punishment is not justice, it is needless torture. You *are* responsible for creating a universe that is nothing but a rat maze with two exits: one good and one bad. You ask us to love our enemies, but you don’t. Hell is not accountability – it’s torture! I hate to say it, but I am ashamed I made it into your heaven.”

He looked at the others, got up, and they started walking. They walked right out of the gates of heaven and across the featureless plane until they came to the gates of hell. The walls of heaven were crystal and gold and jewels. The walls of hell were like vast piles of excrement – excruciatingly painful to look at.

“What do we do now?” the others asked. Charlie said, “Let’s sing.”

It was hard at first. They had no resonance with each other. Compared to the choir of heaven they sounded like the croaking of ravens and the squeaking of rusty hinges. But they kept singing their love for their beloveds.

Before long, others began to join them. Soon they were thousands strong. It made no difference to the walls and gates of hell, however. They still stood, impregnable, ugly, and cold.

But Charlie felt curiously relieved. Even without Chandra free from hell, singing his love for her healed some of his pain. Singing his love healed him. As their

pained love was expressed, the choir began to sing more freely, until heaven was emptied and hell was surrounded.

And then the image of God joined them.

Their song rose in volume of passion and the grief of love. As before, God's image changed and danced in front of the gates of hell. But now tears of heartbroken grief for all those lost were added to the dance. Suddenly the walls began to grow translucent and melt away.

Charlie saw a green country with deep blue skies touched by snow-tipped mountains. He saw the earth, healed and whole and restored. He saw it lovely.

And then he was surprised to see billions of people, dressed not in white but in the traditional clothing of every nation, tribe, and time walking outward toward where the wall had been. Walking toward their loved ones, millions of joyful reunions taking place at once.

And, Lo, he saw his beloved Chandra in her white wedding dress, running toward him with tears of joy streaming down her cheeks. He ran.

As they met she said, "Love always wins, dearest one, welcome at last to heaven."