

THE TRIUMPHANT TRANSITION OF

*Shirley Williams*

TO HER HEAVENLY HOME



LAZARUS CARRIED TO HEAVEN.

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It is an honor to have a part in the celebration of the life of a godly friend, Shirley Williams. It occurred to me that I have known Shirley longer than any of you: 72 out of her 102 years.

I arrived by boat from Germany on Sunday, February 8, 1953. On the following Sunday, I attended church with my relatives in Springfield, Massachusetts. Pastor David Nettleton was at the door to welcome me. After the service, I met Art and Shirley who were members of Grace Baptist Church and the best friends my German relatives had.

## INTRODUCTION

It is a matter of great comfort and consolation that when a believer like Shirley faces death, the individual can know that death has lost its terror. The Apostle Paul expressed it by the frequently quoted questions and consoling answer:

**1 Cor. 15:55-57 O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? <sup>56</sup> The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.**

Someone has explained the experience of a saint at the moment of death thusly, that for the believer death is not like being run over by a truck but by the shadow of a truck. As Shirley left this life, for a fleeting, but only a fleeting, moment, death cast a shadow on her. And then she was surrounded by heavenly light and an experience of bliss totally unknown in her earthly existence.

The believer's transition from this earthly life to the eternal abode may be described in several discernible steps. But first we want to note that the death of a believer, whether that of Shirley or any of us, is precious to our Heavenly Father.

## 1A. THE AFFECTION OF OUR HEAVENLY FATHER'S HEART

The Psalmist reveals to the believer an amazing truth when he writes:

**Psalm 116:15 Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.**

The Hebrew word "precious" (*yaqar*) means "highly prized, highly valued" or "rare." In other words, it was precious and something very special to the Lord to welcome Shirley to her heavenly home.

Psalm 116:15 indicates that the death of the believer is not incidental. The term "precious" indicates that God does not treat the deaths of saints like Shirley with indifference. God cares so deeply for the lives of the saints that He allows no one to die apart from His plan.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, known as "The Prince of Preachers," writes on Psalm 116:15.

They (the saints) [and right now we are considering the passing of Shirley] shall not die prematurely; they shall be immortal till their work is done; and when their time shall come to die, then their deaths shall be precious. The Lord watches over their dying beds, smooths their pillows, sustains their hearts, and receives their souls. Those who are redeemed with precious blood are so dear to God that even their deaths are precious to him.

One the most capable expositors of the Bible, Albert Barnes, also emphasizes God's delight in the death of one of His saints:

. . .the act of removing a good man [including Shirley] from the world is, so to speak, an act of deep deliberation on the part of God; that good, and sometimes great, ends are to be accomplished by it; and that, therefore, God regards it with special interest.

## 2A. THE ASCENT TO OUR HEAVENLY FATHER'S HOME

While the transition from earthly life to eternal life in Heaven takes but a fleeting moment, it is well to consider separately some of the provisions the Lord had in store for Shirley and for all of us.

### 1b. The Lord of life concludes the life of every believer.

Our heavenly Father knows about our anxieties and fears, especially those of Shirley in the last few years, and always gives us the enablement to face hardships and difficulties. It is wonderful to realize that the Lord is with us in a special way at the time of death and delights to have His blood-bought child with Him in Heaven. He is the one Who gave Shirley life. He is the one Who determined that Shirley's long and rich life should be over and the specific time for her passing.

Death is defined by the dictionary as "a permanent cessation of all vital functions; the end of life." When the Lord stopped Shirley's heart from beating, two developments took place at that divinely ordained moment of death. One is that of cessation. At the moment of death, every function of the person ceases. The other development is that of separation. The immaterial facets separate from the person's physical body.

### 2b. Man's immaterial facets separate from his physical body.

We know through divine revelation that for the believer to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). Sadly, the unbeliever faces immediate judgment. The write to the Hebrews warns, **"As it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment," (9:27).** The decision where we will spend eternity is made in this life. At death, believers and unbelievers are separated. If you are here and have never yet confessed your sins and accepted Christ as Savior, then the time to do it is now. Because no one of us has assurance that we will live another day. If Shirley were here, she would urge you to trust in Christ. She would beg you to believe in Him and if you could see her, you would know how supremely happy she is.

At death, the body of the individual has ceased all functions but the true person, whether believer or unbeliever, departs with his spirit, soul, heart, mind, conscience, etc., to a different location. A believer also has seal of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30).

- 3b. At the moment of death, as the believer's immaterial facets depart from the motionless body, he is totally sanctified or glorified.

We know that sinful flesh and blood cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (1 Cor. 15:50), so Shirley became sinlessly perfect or glorified or totally Christlike at virtually the moment of her death, since immediately after that she and every believer is in the presence of the Lord in Heaven.

- 4b. Angels stand by to assist the believer.

It seems that every believer has at least one guardian angel assigned to him by the Creator (Heb. 1:14). The moment that Shirley passed away, she was embraced by the angels, perhaps including her guardian angel that watched over her throughout her 102 years.

- 5b. The believer's immaterial facets are clothed immediately in a temporary, at first invisible, body.

The moment that Shirley left her old body, a new, temporary body was given to her. To be human is to have a body. We know from Christ's account of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16 that this is a historical narrative, containing reference to the historical persons of Abraham and Moses and an individual by the name of Lazarus. In none of Christ's parables does He refer to an actual historical person, nor does He give personal names to individuals. Thus, when we read the account, we are confronted with actual individuals. Lazarus is in Abraham's bosom and the rich man in hell, soon after their death. The rich man, an unbeliever, has a body (as suggested by his "tongue;" Luke 16:24) and Lazarus, a godly individual, likewise has a body (as indicated by his "finger;" Luke 16:24). I realize we hear little teaching on the intermediate or temporary body but the idea is solidly biblical. The body bestowed upon Shirley is a perfect body, fashioned in Heaven. And if you could have seen Shirley before she left this earth, she would have appeared very much like her earthly self, and yet totally free of all imperfections and infirmities.

Paul is certain that when his earthly tabernacle disintegrated, when he died, he would have a body suited in the heavens. He did not want to be found disembodied or "naked," as he wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:1-3. The believer's permanent body will be his transformed earthly body, presently buried somewhere on this planet, and resurrected at the Rapture.

- 6b. The believer is filled with indescribable joy.

As Shirley left us and anticipated meeting her Savior face to face, she was not filled with anxiety or fear but with exuberant joy that she had never experienced before. We know from Peter's writing that when we leave this life we are **"glad with exceeding joy"** (1 Pet.

4:13). Jude, the half-brother of our Savior, assures us at the conclusion of his short epistle, that we will be presented **“faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy”** (Jude 24). Many believers feel that they will be ashamed or anxious as they anticipate meeting the Savior face to face. Just the opposite is true. He loves the believer, has always loved him, as the prophet Jeremiah said, **“with an everlasting love”** (Jer. 31:3), and now He is delighted to have Shirley and any of His other redeemed individuals with Him in Heaven.

7b. The angels bring believers to the third heaven.

In the account of Lazarus and the rich man, angels carried Lazarus to Abraham’s bosom or paradise (Lk. 16:22), which apparently is located now in the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2-4)

As to the angelic actions, a very descriptive word is used. They literally “lifted up and carried” (*apofero*) Lazarus. If this happened to one of the lesser Old Testament saints, how much more do angels have a significant part in conducting members of the Bride of Christ to glory? Can anyone doubt that the angels gently bore Shirley over to her heavenly home?

While the distance from here to glory is infinitely far, the time involved is infinitesimally brief. Astronomers claim that our Milky Way is 105,700 light years in diameter. Our entire universe supposedly is 93 billion light years in diameter and expanded at the speed of light. The dwelling place of God, the Third Heaven, is beyond our vast universe. And yet, we are in glory in a fleeting moment (**“absent from the body [immediately] with the Lord,”** 2 Cor. 5:8; **“to depart and to [immediately] be with Christ,”** Phil. 1:23). Even before the nurse in the care center closed the eyes of Shirley’s earthly body left behind, the angels bore Shirley immediately to Heaven.

As mentioned, God selects angels, perhaps our earthly guardian angels, as our travel companions. Their task is two-fold. They present us perfectly sanctified to our Savior and they protect us as we pass through Satan’s domain. Until the middle of the Tribulation he is “the prince of the power of the air” (Rev. 12:1-4). Who knows what demonic devices Satan might otherwise have employed against Shirley to prevent her from reaching that delightful destination!

8b. The Savior welcomes the believer to the Third Heaven.

When Stephen, the first martyr, was about to die, he was afforded a glimpse into the Third Heaven where the Savior left His throne and stood in a welcoming posture, to embrace Stephen just a short while later. Dr. Luke records the riveting scene:

**Acts 7:55 But he, [Stephen] being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God.**

Our beloved friend Shirley had an identical experience, as less than a second after her death she reached Heaven’s shore. The blood-bought believer, like Stephen, may likewise expect a personal welcome by the Savior in Heaven. We know that this is the

glorious meeting that Shirley had with her Savior. He died for Shirley, He loved Shirley like He has loved all believers with an everlasting love (Jer. 31:3). For the joy that was set before Him, Christ endured the painful execution on the cross (Heb. 12:2). He shed His blood for the believers' redemption and personally welcomed Shirley as He does all other believers as members of His Bride.

- 9b. We will instantaneously recognize our loved ones, as well as the saints who have gone before and the angelic host.

Unquestionably, Shirley spotted her husband Art and son Peter immediately. We know that if our loved ones were believers and are in Heaven, we will recognize them from afar. We will also instantaneously recognize saints of generations ago and from biblical times. If that were not true, we would spend half an eternity introducing ourselves to that vast company. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Christ's three disciples immediately recognized Moses and Elijah, the two Old Testament saints who had lived centuries before (Mt. 7:3).

- 10b. The believer is shown his living quarters in Heaven.

The night before His crucifixion, the Savior assured his troubled disciples that while He would depart, it was for a good reason. He would go to the Father's House and prepare their eternal home. Then He would return. The immediate event referenced will occur when our eternal home is complete and the Savior returns for His own. This is the glorious event we call the Rapture.

The believer who departs this life before the Rapture, such as Shirley, will be carried gently by the angels, in a fleeting moment of time, to the Savior in Heaven. The newly arrived saint, after a warm and personal welcome by the Savior, will perhaps have some angelic being show him his or her eternal living quarters. Christ promised ample space for the saints when He said, **"in my Father's house are many mansions"** (Jn. 14:2). Shirley's husband Art most likely went along.

- 11b. The saints will enjoy physical provisions promised to them and provide for them.

As Shirley arrived in Heaven, she found it to be a perfect, holy environment, void of all the evils, sins and inequities of this world. We know she is supremely happy in her new surroundings. Yet, to heighten the delight of believers like Shirley, the Lord promises numerous physical blessings. While in our intermediate or final resurrection body, we will not have any need for food or sustenance but the saints have the solemn promise of the Holy Spirit in Revelation 2:7.

**He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.**

The Lord will personally serve us food and drink. The promise is that Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, **"which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters"** Rev. 7:17.

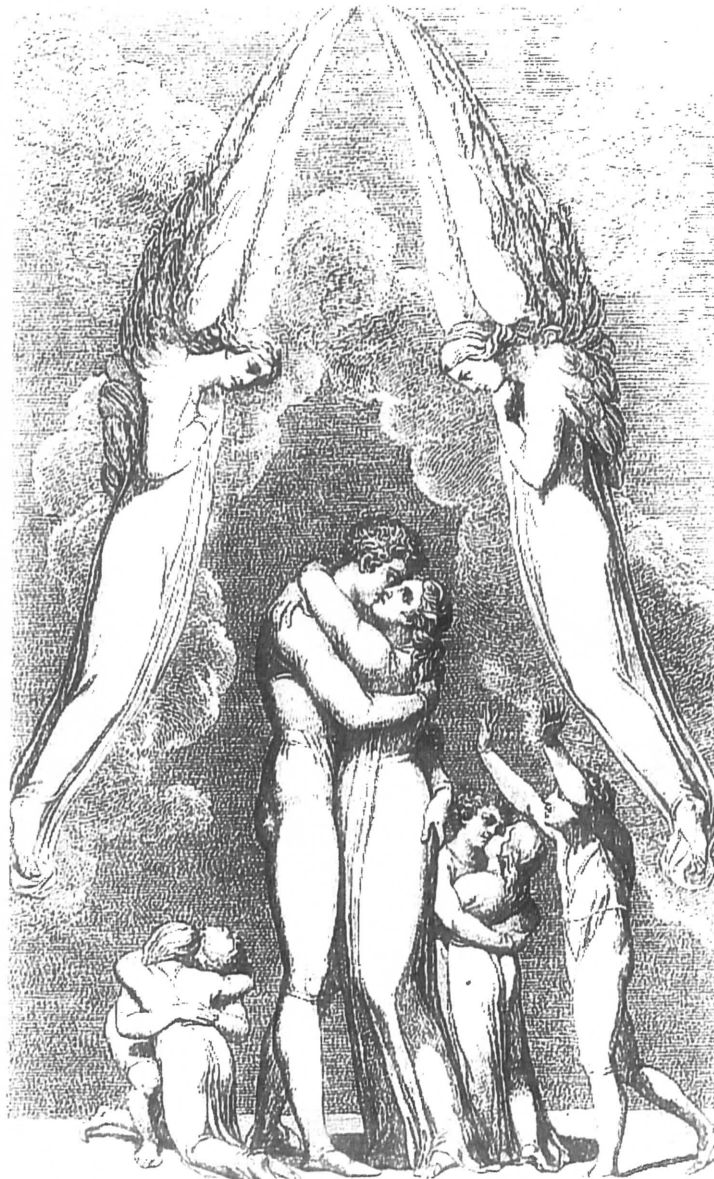


## CONCLUSION

We know from God's Word how believers like Shirley transition from earth to Heaven. God's plan as revealed discloses a number of details. The saint's spiritual and physical provisions continue after this life throughout eternity. Somehow, Paul's observation in Romans 8:32 takes on a new meaning: **"He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?"**

In light of the promised food and drink and abundant physical provisions, it may not be too far amiss to envision that when Shirley arrived in glory, there were welcome drinks. Perhaps the Lord had ready Shirley's favorite drink, orange juice.

We miss Shirley. We rejoice over her triumphant transition to Heaven. She is reveling in the glories of Heaven and in the company of her loved ones. Shirley, like her husband Art, loved her Savior and with their faithful godly life, left us a good example to follow. May our lives reflect the loveliness of the Savior, as did theirs.



*A family reunited in Heaven.*