

“Expectation and Preparation”: Two Puritan Views on the Saints’ Happiness in Heaven

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Gary Smith, a historian at Grove City College, accurately captures the “splendor of heaven” in the Puritan imagination from his study, *Heaven in the American Imagination*: “At the heart of the Puritan view of heaven was its residents’ relationship with God. In the beatific vision, the saints experienced ‘the full fruition and the sweet embraces of the thrice Blessed Trinity.’ By beholding, adoring, and serving ‘the Great, the Glorious, and Immense God of all Perfection’...the saints [would] gain inconceivable pleasure.”¹ This article will compare the insights of two Puritans, Jeremiah Burroughs (ca. 1601–1646) and William Gearing (ca. 1625–ca. 1690) on the nature of heaven and the experience of believers in the future life. More specifically, my research has been guided by two questions: what is the happiness of the saints in heaven? And how can they best prepare for it?

The Life and Ministry of Jeremiah Burroughs

Jeremiah Burroughs was as a British Independent minister who studied at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where Thomas Hooker was his tutor.² He developed an early friendship with Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680) and William Bridge (1600–1670) and assisted Edmund Calamy (1600–1666) in his first pastorate. He was suspended in 1636 and deprived of

1. Gary Scott Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 13. Portions of this quotation come from a sermon by the Puritan James Hillhouse.

2. The following biography is drawn from Tom Webster, “Burroughes, Jeremiah,” s.v. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 8:1010–1011; James Reid, “Jeremiah Burroughs,” in *Memoirs of the Westminster Divines* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 155–61. Reid includes a complete list of his sermons; and Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, “Jeremiah Burroughs,” in *Meet the Puritans: With a Guide to Modern Reprints* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Press, 2006), 118–25.

his ministry in 1637 due to his dissenting convictions, manifested in his preference for extemporaneous prayer and his refusal to bow at the name of Jesus. He moved to the Netherlands in 1638. In 1639, he began ministering to the English Reformed church in Rotterdam, where William Ames (1576–1633) previously served. He remained there until his return to London in the winter of 1640 when he began his efforts toward godly reform. Burroughs served on the Westminster Assembly and represented the Congregationalist perspective. Richard Baxter (1615–1691) affirmed the irenic spirit of Burroughs when he claimed that “accommodation could have been reached if all the episcopalians had been like James Ussher [1581–1656], all the presbyterians like Stephen Marshall [1595–1655], and all the congregationalists like Burroughes.” He reinforced his willingness to cooperate with people of different views by the Latin phrase above his study door, “Variety of opinions and unity of opinion are not incompatible.”³

Burroughs was a popular preacher at two of London’s largest congregations, Stepney and St. Giles Cripplegate. His fruitful pastorate in London earned him Thomas Brooks’s (1608–1680) enthusiastic affirmation of him as the “prince of preachers.”⁴ Many of his prolific works, primarily devoted to practical divinity, are still in print today. While several of his treatises were published during his lifetime, most were not issued until after his death. Cotton Mather (1663–1728) observed, “Some things of a Burroughs, especially his *Moses’s Choice*, [released before his death] will not make you complain that you have lost your time in conversing with them.”⁵

The Life and Ministry of William Gearing

William Gearing was also a British Puritan. Despite his extensive writing, much of his background remains a mystery. There are no entries for him in either the *Dictionary of National Biography* or the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, nor does he appear in Benjamin Brook’s classic, *The Life of the Puritans*. However, Joel Beeke and Randall Pederson provide a brief entry of him in *Meet the Puritans*.⁶ His ministry included Lymington (1657–1662) and in 1671 he became the first incumbent at Christ Church, Southwark (near London). There is no record that he attended

3. Webster, “Burroughs,” 8:1010.

4. Beeke and Pederson, “Jeremiah Burroughs,” 119.

5. Reid, “Jeremiah Burroughs,” 158.

6. Beeke and Pederson, “William Gearing,” in *Meet the Puritans*, 259–60.

either Oxford or Cambridge, which suggests that he may have lacked a university education.

Despite his apparent lack of formal education, Gearing’s writings reveal a deep knowledge of patristic and medieval sources. Cotton Mather also displayed a knowledge of Gearing. On September 14, 1724, he recorded in his diary, “This Day I read over the Book which contains the Life of Mr. Gearing, and his Experiences; and the Marks of an Interest in Christ, that my Soul may further improve in experimental Piety.”⁷ Since he is not listed in *Nonconformist’s Memorial* by Edmund Calamy, it appears that he was a conformist. Although little is known of Gearing’s life, his writings have been included in secondary sources on heaven, while the more popular Burroughs has not.⁸

Beatific Vision

Burroughs spoke of God’s presence as the key to being in heaven. He proclaimed, “Heaven, it were not Heaven without the presence of God. The presence of God in the most miserable place that can be, were a greater happiness than the absence of God in the most glorious place that can be.” Using Luther’s famous maxim, he declared that he “would rather be in Hell with Gods presence, than in Heaven God being absent.” Burroughs extended his reasoning that “if the presence of God takes away the dread of the shadow of the valley of death, and makes Hell to be more desired than Heaven, what will the presence of God make Heaven to be?”⁹ Building on this principle, Gearing confessed that he would not attempt to describe the joy of heaven since it is difficult to imagine what the future life will be. However, he reasoned, if one considers the benefits that God has provided for his creation and this is just a temporary lodging, how can it be compared to “our eternall Mansions, where we must abide for ever?”¹⁰

However, numerous Puritans focused on the general topic of heaven but more specifically, on the nature and experience of the beatific vision

7. Washington Chauncey Ford, *Diary of Cotton Mather* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1957), 2:761.

8. See in particular Philip C. Almond, *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination*.

9. Jeremiah Burroughs, *Moses His Choice* (London: printed by John Field, 1650), 531. I am using the 1650 rather than the initial 1641 edition, as it corrected the numbering of the chapters.

10. William Gearing, *The Mount of Holy Meditation* (London: Francis Tyton, 1662), 146.

in the believer's life.¹¹ Among some of the notables were Isaac Ambrose (1604–1664), John Owen (1616–1683), Christopher Love (1618–1651), Thomas Watson (1616–1686), Richard Baxter (1615–1691), and John Howe (1630–1705).¹² According to Richard Muller, the “doctrine of the *visio Dei* or *visio beatifica*...was not mediated to the Protestant orthodox [post-sixteenth century writers] by the Reformers, who did not discuss the topic. Rather, the orthodox derived it from their reading of medieval systems.”¹³ Both Burroughs and Gearing confirm this by their abundant use of medieval Roman Catholic sources. However, Muller revised his earlier statement: “I would say ‘did not discuss the topic in their confessional writings and more systematic works’ given that there are exegetical sources for brief statements concerning the vision.”¹⁴ Three questions will guide our

11. Two detailed Puritan treatises on the beatific vision are John Owen, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ in His Person, Office and Grace*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, (London: Johnson and Hunter, 1850–1853), 1:273–415; and John Howe, *Blessedness of the Righteous* (London: A. Maxwell and R. Roberts, 1678). Some Puritans addressed this topic in their writings on the four last things. For example, see Robert Bolton, *Mr. Boltons Last and Learned Worke of the Foure Last Things* (London: George Miller, 1632); and William Bates, *The Four Last Things* (London, 1691), 267–489. Others, like Thomas Watson, examined this theme in the sixth Beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes, or A Discourse upon Part of Christ's Famous Sermon on the Mount* (London: Ralph Smith, 1660), 222–68. Watson also provides an extensive consideration in his treatise on the second petition of the Lord's Prayer (“thy kingdom come”). Thomas Watson, *A Body of Practical Divinity* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1692), 455–511. This is a selective list, and sources could easily be multiplied.

12. Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 315–38, 352–53; Tom Schwanda, “The Saints' Desire and Delight to Be with Christ,” in *Puritanism and Emotion in the Early Modern World*, ed. Alec Ryrice and Tom Schwanda (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 78–87; Suzanne McDonald, “Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ: John Owen and the ‘Reforming’ of the Beatific Vision,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2012), 141–58; and Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, “Christopher Love on the Glories of Heaven and Terrors of Hell,” in *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 820–30.

13. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:260; cf. Carl R. Trueman, “Heaven and Hell in Puritan Theology,” *Epworth Review* 22 (1995): 78.

14. Richard Muller, personal conversation with the author, March 27, 2024. For a recent summary of Calvin's teaching on the beatific vision see Carl Mosser, “Recovering the Reformation's Ecumenical Vision of Redemption as Deification and Beatific Vision,” *Perichoresis* 18, no. 1 (2020): 9–18; cf. Boersma, *Seeing God*, 257–78.

examination of Burroughs’s and Gearing’s treatment of the saints’ happiness in heaven: what is seen? How is it seen? And what are the benefits of seeing God? Not surprisingly, these three questions overlap with each other.

What Is Seen?

John Owen’s masterful study of the beatific vision in his *Meditations and Discourses of the Glory of Christ* was published in 1684—long after Burroughs’s death and over a decade after the publication of Gearing’s *Prospect of Heaven*.¹⁵ Therefore, these earlier treatments lack much of the depth and detail of Owen’s work. Chronologically, Burroughs’s works were published first and his initial treatment of the beatific vision which appeared in *Moses His Choice* was published in 1641. He compared the human perception on earth in which God is seen “according to his several attributes” in the heavenly vision of God’s unity. Similarly, the believer’s sight of God is muted on earth while in heaven his glory is fully manifested. This face-to-face sight of God is a vision of the Trinity in which the saints will “see how the Father begot the Son, and how the Spirit did proceed from the Father and the Son.” Burroughs illustrated this by contrasting the sight of God “at an ordinary time” on earth with seeing him in heaven, decked in his royal robes, in his glorious splendor, wearing his crown, and seated on his throne with his scepter. This spectacular display of his glory will create “great happiness” for the saints. Furthermore, our earthly understanding of God is partial. Using apophatic language, Burroughs depicted this through God’s “incomprehensible” nature. To say that God cannot be comprehended is a negation of the human ability to grasp God’s nature. In heaven, however, God is known by his “positive excellency.”¹⁶

Later, in 1647, Burroughs wrote his treatise, *The Saints Happiness*, a collection of forty-two sermons on the Beatitudes (it was not published until 1660). He devoted three sermons to seeing God as based on the sixth beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8).¹⁷ Bernard McGinn observes that this verse became one of the primary texts in the history of Christian mysticism that grew out of second century debates on what it means to “see” God. However, all recognized that contemplation

15. Owen, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*, in *Works*, 2:273–415.

16. Burroughs, *Moses His Choice*, 536–39. The quotation is taken from page 537.

17. All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

of God is the goal.¹⁸ Randall Pederson discerns that the beatific vision is a key indicator of the mystical strain within Puritanism.¹⁹

Gearing, however, demonstrated a greater appreciation for the contemplative use of language and theology than Burroughs. Burroughs added very little to what Christians see of God in heaven mostly because he discussed what he called the “beatificall vision” from the earthly perspective. He concentrated on how to prepare to see God by a pure heart. To guide his auditors, he defined the beatific vision as “the very touch and close of the soule with the essence of God that shall be in heaven, there is some degree of it even here in the world, in the sight of God, but we are not able to express it.” Therefore, Burroughs asserted that God’s “excellency, and glory, and Majesty, and Greatnesse” would be seen and enable believers to know God’s “mind and heart.”²⁰

Gearing admitted that part of the challenge of seeing God is due to his “infinite Majesty... [which] Heaven cannot contain and hold the infinite being of the Divine Nature.” He claimed that God is not more present in heaven than anywhere else in his creation nor is he more absent in any place because he is “every where alike essentially present.” But he does reveal “more glorious demonstrations of his presence” in heaven than elsewhere.²¹ We will examine this more fully when we consider how God is seen.

How Is God Seen?

Two of the most frequently cited biblical texts used by Burroughs and Gearing, and for that matter, all who investigated the beatific vision, were 1 Corinthians 13:12, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face,” and 1 John 3:2, “but we know when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”²² But what does it mean to see God and how do we see him? Burroughs taught that the believer cannot see God with bodily eyes because God has no body and, unlike human beings, has

18. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 68.

19. Randall J. Pederson, *Unity in Diversity: English Puritans and the Puritan Reformation, 1603–1689*, Brill’s Series in Church History, vol. 68, ed. Wim Janse (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 73. Pederson’s specific interest is in Francis Rous (1581–1659). See *Unity in Diversity*, 153, 188–89.

20. Burroughs, *The Saints Happiness* (London: Nathaniel Brook, 1660), 416–17.

21. William Gearing, *A Prospect of Heaven* (London: printed for Tho[mas] Passenger and Benj[amin] Hurlock, 1673), 124, 236–37.

22. Burroughs and Gearing also frequently cite 2 Corinthians 3:18.

no shape. He maintained that believers “shall know God by the eye of their understanding, and they shall come to enjoy God, for so, *seeing* is taken in Scripture.”²³

Gearing agreed that bodily vision can only see the corporeal. This means that it is impossible to see a soul, let alone the divine essence of God. Without rehearsing the medieval debate, Gearing taught that since God’s divine essence is “purely spiritual,” the “sight of God is rather an act of the mind, then of the Body; intellectual knowledg, not corporeal light.” While the divine essence is not visible to those in heaven, “yet the Divine Essence will abundantly manifest it self in the Humane Nature of Christ now glorified to our eyes,” Gearing wrote.²⁴ Perceiving the glorified humanity of Christ reflects Jesus’s statement that if a person has seen him, they have seen the Father (John 1:18; 6:46; 14:9), for to behold Christ reveals all of God’s divine attributes. Gearing declared that this is most evident when one compared Christ’s “Body, which was so foully disfigured upon the Cross for our sakes” with its fully restored and glorified wholeness in heaven. He described it as ravishing and quoted Bernard of Clairvaux (or “devout Bernard,” as he called him), who earlier proclaimed this is a sight “full of all sweetness and delight.” Furthermore, Gearing attempted to illustrate the glorious nature of Christ’s body in heaven and affirmed that it was “a thousand times more bright then the Sun.”²⁵

Expanding on Burroughs’s and Gearing’s shared understanding that the perception of God is intellectual, Carl Trueman maintains that Puritans followed medieval scholastics. Trueman recognizes “that the vision is intellectual, a sign that the saint’s human faculties have been restored to their pristine order.”²⁶ Gearing argued that one would see God with “the eye of the mind, not to the eye of the body” because the divine essence is spiritual. Following the Second Coming, the sight of God is mental, not ocular, since the saints possess glorified eyes to see Christ’s radiated light that will ravish the souls of the saints.²⁷ Burroughs also connected seeing God with understanding and argued that purity of heart created a higher understanding of spiritual things because an unclean heart would produce an inaccurate understanding of God. He followed the apostle Paul’s assertion

23. Burroughs, *The Saints Happiness*, 404.

24. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 54.

25. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 108, 228, 231, 236, 371.

26. Trueman, “Heaven and Hell in Puritan Theology,” 78.

27. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 229–30.

that on earth we see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12) and that the clearer the glass the more the beams of the sunlight will radiate through it.²⁸

More impressive is that God will be seen in heaven as he is. On earth, we need to frame some “representations of him in our minds,” while in heaven we experience the “immediate presence of God.” In other words, on earth we know God through mediated means such as reading Scripture, receiving the Lord’s Supper, listening to sermons, and meditating upon creation. That will no longer be necessary in heaven since we will see God “as he is.”

Another distinction is that the beatific vision enlarges the understanding of the mystery of God’s counsels. On earth, we might not grasp the nature of God’s election or providence but, citing Augustine, Burroughs declares that these mysteries will be opened and resolved for believers in heaven. Burroughs used another analogy to teach the blessings of the saints’ beholding of God in heaven. On earth, it is like a stranger seeing a king without any relational connection or experiential awareness, but in heaven it is similar to the queen looking intimately at the king. The stranger might grasp something of the “Beauty and Majesty in the King,” but it will be abstract and have little impact upon them. For the queen, however, this majestic perception is personal. Consequently, when the saints see God in heaven, they can relate to God personally, and this produces great happiness in their souls.²⁹

Another dimension of the blessedness of the soul is that this knowledge would be a direct and unmediated experience of God or, as Gearing stated, God’s “immediate communications of himself.” Seeing Christ would not be limited to bodily eyes, for now the saints would perceive Christ “with the eye of their inner man,” unlocking the mysteries of the incarnation and the various aspects of the hypostatic union of humanity and divinity in Jesus Christ. Other mysteries of the faith would also be clarified, including justification, glorification, and “all the Prophecies, all the Figures, Types, and Symbolical shadows, all the mystical Senses” of Scripture. But Gearing adamantly affirmed that human understanding would never approach God’s infinite knowledge. Even if a person studied God for all eternity, he or she could never fully comprehend his infinite nature. He added to this an exclamation point affirming Aquinas, who taught that the glorified saints would never see God wholly.³⁰

28. Burroughs, *The Saints Happiness*, 405, 414.

29. Burroughs, *Moses His Choice*, 539–42.

30. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 53, 258, 287, 280. Gearing also proclaimed that the renewed, glorified sight of Christ would transform the affections and the will, thereby

Although the beatific vision is about seeing God in the language of sight, this can be restrictive of the other ways to perceive God’s presence. Gearing taught that seeing Christ in the fullness of his glory removed the earthly restrictions of the dimness of sight and deafness of hearing. This enlargement of the senses enables the saints not only to see but also to hear Christ verbally express his love to them. Gearing also acknowledged that the senses of touch, smell, and taste, which were often considered inferior in ancient and medieval times, will be rehabilitated. In heaven, Gearing wrote, taste will be “satisfied with incredible sweetness and delights” and, figuratively speaking, the saints will “have an experimental taste in themselves of the efficacy of his blood.” This reminder of Christ’s sacrificial death should inspire those in heaven that Christ “be eternally honoured as a Redeemer.”³¹

What Are the Benefits of Seeing God?

Perfection of Union with Christ

Central to the believer’s relationship with Christ is his mediatorial role that began on earth (with the justification of the believer and his engrafting into Christ) and will continue in heaven. Burroughs taught this when he claimed that if believers desire to walk with God, they must take Christ with them, and this is only possible with him as their mediator.³² Gearing added that even after Christ raises the saints to glory, he continues to exercise his mediatorial role; believers, then, never reach a point where Christ is no longer needed.³³

Gearing also claimed that the human soul is “alwayes empty till it got possession of Christ” because he is the *summum bonum*. Therefore, as the soul delights in Christ, it desires greater union and communion with him.³⁴ The Puritans often spoke of this union with Christ as a spiritual marriage.³⁵ Gearing followed that practice and proclaimed that Christians were “united

enlarging these faculties and raising them to glorious perfection. See Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 299, 301.

31. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 241–42, 244–45. The quotation is taken from pages 245 and 335.

32. Burroughs, *Walking with God*, 322. *Walking with God* is combined with *On Conversing in Heaven*. Following page 116 in *Of Conversing in Heaven*, the page numbers increase by 100. Page 117, for example, is misnumbered as 217. Since this continues throughout both books, I will follow the printed page number, not the actual pagination.

33. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 281.

34. William Gearing, *The Love-sick Spouse* (London: Nevill Simmons, 1665), 4, 23.

35. Tom Schwanda, *Soul Recreation: The Contemplative–Mystical Piety of Puritanism* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), chapter 2.

to Christ” and that he is “their Husband, they are his Spouse” and the “time of the Marriage solemnity shall be at the appearing of Christ.”³⁶ In his sermons, *The Love-sick Spouse*, he counseled his listeners, “A Love-sick soul desireth nothing more than the presence of Christ here and in Heaven.”³⁷

According to Gearing, one of the primary benefits of heaven is that the saints who are “espoused to the Lord Jesus Christ” on that “great day” when they are received in glory will experience the “full consummation of the marriage.”³⁸ The fulfillment of marriage, then, awaits the final resurrection, when the bodies and souls of believers are reunited to join Jesus. Jesus offers the members of his church (his bride) abundant love to satisfy them from the long separation that existed from their conversion to the present. Turning to Augustine, Gearing’s most popular extra-biblical source, he instructed his auditors that since their marriage is consummated, the saints were fully satisfied, and their “perfect enjoyment of God” would no longer desire anything more than they had already experienced—for what could be added to a perfect relationship?³⁹ Burroughs echoed the same message that “the marriage of the Lamb” is solemnized only upon the day of judgment.⁴⁰

Burroughs expanded the nature of the believer’s relationship with God. First, it is a union initiated by God. Second, when God gazes upon his saints, he sees “nothing but himself in [their] souls.” Third, while the initial benefits of this union begin on earth, it will be perfected in heaven and enlarged by “an infinite inflamed love.” For all these reasons, it will be a “most glorious union.”⁴¹

Union with Christ overflows into communion with the Triune God. Burroughs defined communion as a mutual interaction in which the person’s soul approaches God and in response receives “the influence of the goodness and love and mercy of God into the soul.” Additionally, there is a “mutual imbracing and opening of hearts one upon another for the satisfying of the Spirits one of another.” More directly, “The Saints they see the face of God, and God delights in the face of the Saints.”⁴² Burroughs employed the same language of “mutual opening” earlier in his *Moses His Choice*, but added to this concept, “Why the bride was “brought into the

36. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 32.

37. Gearing, *The Love-sick Spouse*, 36, cf. 37.

38. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 171–72.

39. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 316–17.

40. Burroughs, *Moses His Choice*, 523.

41. Burroughs, *Moses His Choice*, 551–52.

42. Burroughs, *Of Conversing in Heaven*, 109–10.

Chamber spoken of in Cant. 1:4:⁴³ He concluded in his work, *Of Conversing in Heaven*, by proclaiming this refreshing truth, that in heaven the soul will enjoy full communion with God and will “enjoy all that he hath purchased by his blood” for his saints.⁴⁴ Gearing provided an important corrective to the common contemporary concern that the spiritual life is often individualized when he articulated “that our Communion with Christ is furthered by our spiritual converse one with another.” He noted that this is particularly true when a person is struggling with a “weak and fainting heart.”⁴⁵ This is not intended to diminish the believer’s intimacy with God but to expand the understanding of the communion of saints. Likewise, he wrote, “in heaven you shall enjoy communion and fellowship with God, with Christ, with an innumerable Company of Angels.”⁴⁶

Fruition and Blessedness of God

Second, the *visio Dei* enables the saints to experience the abundance of God’s love and full enjoyment of him. Gearing cited Bernard twice to reinforce his teaching. First, he claimed that all earthly hindrances have been removed in heaven so that nothing can “oppose our happiness.” Next, he asserted that the human preoccupation with self-love that plagued our earthly lives has been banished from our souls so we can love God perfectly without any limitations.⁴⁷ He further taught with the validation of Augustine, that the “principal employment of the Saints in Heaven is to love God.”⁴⁸ This results from receiving God’s love first, and makes the saints reciprocate his love. Gearing’s treatment of the beatific vision is sublime. He claims that the saints in heaven “love as they see, and so much do they rejoice as they love.” Since God is the “chief object” of their sight, and because he is of “infinite goodness, beauty [and] sweetness,” the resulting joy is infinitely sweeter and more desirable than anything known on earth.⁴⁹ Gearing dovetails here with Burroughs, who cited Augustine’s *Confessions*: “O Lord, thou hast made us for thee, and our hearts are unquiet till they come to enjoy thee; and when the soul comes to rest in God.”⁵⁰ Burroughs returned to the

43. Burroughs, *Moses His Choice*, 565.

44. Burroughs, *Of Conversing in Heaven*, 259.

45. Gearing, *The Love-sick Spouse*, 13.

46. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 82.

47. Gearing, *The Mount of Holy Meditations*, 152–53.

48. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 302.

49. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 307.

50. Burroughs, *Moses His Choice*, 573.

theme of love by playing off of Bernard of Clairvaux's four degrees of love without directly referring to him. He reduced Bernard's quartet to three degrees: "loving God for our selves, and loving God for himself, and loving ourselves for God." The third and highest expression of love is possible only for the "glorified Saints." The believer who experiences this deep love for self because of God's love for them will "be ravished with God, and be in a kinde of extasie eternally."⁵¹

According to Burroughs, tasting the depth of God's love formed the foundation for the "Work of Heaven" which is to "continually blesse, and magnifie, and praise the Name of God whom they see to be so infinitely worthy of all praise." Another way in which the saints are employed in heaven is by "the keeping of a perpetual Sabbath." The proper honoring of the Sabbath provides a context for this desired praise and blessing of God.⁵² Additionally, he recognized that the unlimited sweetness in "my Husband Jesus Christ" inspires believers to cultivate close communion with God.⁵³

While meditation is essential to prepare the believer for heaven, the primary work of heaven will be contemplation. Gearing distinguishes between meditation which searches for what is hidden, and contemplation which admires what has been found. Meditation is like the *preparation* of a meal, while contemplation is like the *savoring and enjoyment* of that meal. Meditation is like fanning the fire while contemplation is like the resulting flame.⁵⁴ Gearing taught that contemplation is basic to God and that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit engage in perpetual contemplation of themselves. In other words, they engage in mutual enjoyment of each other as members of the Godhead. This pattern provides a model and motivation for the saints of heaven to join in the "everlasting contemplation of the God head."⁵⁵

For Christians to cultivate a contemplative attitude and gaze at God—and especially upon his truth—would result in "sweet satisfaction."⁵⁶ The Puritans frequently stressed the importance of contemplation as a means of grace on earth since it would be a common practice in heaven. But contrary to the efforts to practice contemplation on earth, there would be no

51. Burroughs, *Moses His Choice*, 575–76.

52. Burroughs, *Of Conversing in Heaven*, 115.

53. Burroughs, *Walking with God*, 211.

54. Gearing, *The Mount of Holy Meditation*, 22–24.

55. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 296, 302.

56. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 275.

hindrances to the enjoyment of God in heaven with unlimited “contemplation, love, and fruition of God.”⁵⁷

A significant component of the fruition of God includes heavenly visions that, according to Gearing, ravish people into ecstasy while they are still on earth. One example he cited is the transfiguration of our Lord when Peter, James, and John beheld the transfigured radiance of Christ upon the mount (Luke 9:28–36). This momentary encounter on earth is but a pale comparison to what the saints will behold in heaven as they continually gaze upon the glorified presence of Christ.⁵⁸ Gearing’s treatment soared to a more ecstatic pitch as he continued to expound the saints’ enjoyment of God in heaven. Nine times he used some form of the word ravisment as he spoke of the “full fruition” and “extasie of Joy” that awaits the glorified saints.⁵⁹

Transforming Sight of God’s Glory

Most significant in Burroughs’s treatment of the beatific vision is that the “blessedness of the sight of God” is a “transforming sight.” As one beholds God, his divine light shines into the believer’s mind. Burroughs clarified that this is not a “meer notional sight” or only mental; rather, the person who sees God gains more than simply new knowledge about God, for their minds are transformed “into the same likeness with God.” This led to his claim, “there is a great deal of difference between the notional vision of God, and the Deifical vision of God; for it is not only beatifical, but deifical; for it does transform a man into the likeness of God.” As Burroughs often did, he employed an analogy to reinforce this. A deformed person may see a beautiful sight without changing his condition, but the soul of the saint who beholds God will become “glorious.” The result is that “the sight of God will be a full sight.” The believer’s vision of God will be elevated “to see God in his excellency” and to gaze fully upon his face. This, writes Gearing, will be the reward of faith for the godly. Moses never experienced this desire (Ex. 33:18–23). Burroughs concluded this section by quoting 1 John 3:2, “We shall be like him.”⁶⁰

Earlier, Burroughs traced the same measure that the saints would be “partakers of the Divine nature” by using 2 Corinthians 3:18, where Paul writes, “We beholding as in a Glasse, with open face, the Glory of the Lord.

57. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 218, cf. 257.

58. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 233–35.

59. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 233–38, 242, quotations at pages 235–36.

60. Burroughs, *Moses His Choice*, 542.

We are changed into the same Image, from Glory to Glory.”⁶¹ Burroughs is clear that to be like God does not mean that one is equal to him, since the saints in glory would not be changed into the divine nature.⁶² Nonetheless, some people today are nervous about the language of deification because its meaning suggests “being made *like* God.” It is critical to grasp the term *like*. No form of Christianity teaches a merging of our humanity with the divinity of God. Rather, the doctrine of deification reminds us that we have been created in the image and likeness of God and will recover what was lost in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 1:26–27). Eastern Orthodox theology makes the helpful distinction between the essence (or divine nature) and energies (or grace) of God. Even a glorified saint will never share in God’s essence but will experience the grace of God.

Moreover, this vision of God requires no effort on the believer’s part. Even better, the saints would never lose sight of God because “the eyes of the soul shall be eternally opened” to have a “continual view of God.” The overwhelming nature of seeing God is so spectacular that Burroughs concluded this chapter by declaring that if people understood what they would lose because of their sins, they would quickly cast them off.⁶³

Gearing’s development of this aspect of the beatific vision took a different path heavily dependent upon Christ’s resurrection as recorded especially in 1 Corinthians 15:13 and 19. He devoted over twenty-five pages that follows the reasoning of the apostle Paul: “If we deny the resurrection of the believers’ bodies, we deny Christ to be risen.” Gearing goes on to say that Christ “rose not as a private, but as a publick Person,” preparing for the resurrection of the saints. Consequently, the sight of Christ will restore the resurrected bodies of believers. In this glorious resurrection, writes Gearing, Samson will have his vision restored, and Mephibosheth will not be lame. Beyond restoring what humanity has lost, this transforming sight will also involve “glorified eyes” that can see more clearly.⁶⁴

This newly transformed “sight” allowed the saints to echo Job 42:5, “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee” (KJV). This new knowledge will confirm what Christians have heard on earth and validate not only who God is in his nature, but also in his unlimited goodness to believers. Furthermore, this awareness of new knowledge

61. Burroughs, *The Saints Happiness*, 426. This is Burroughs’s own translation.

62. Burroughs, *Moses His Choice*, 575.

63. Burroughs, *Moses His Choice*, 543, 546.

64. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 179, 191, 213, 222.

extends also to Jesus since the saints “shall have a perfect knowledge of him as God and Man, as Mediator between God and Man.”⁶⁵

Preparation for Heaven

Given this expectation of Burroughs and Gearing regarding the saints’ happiness in heaven, how did they train believers to prepare for it? Three basic principles are evident in their sermons: being intentional about walking with God, promoting purity of heart, and cultivating a desire for union and communion with Christ.

Walking with God

Getting to heaven is not automatic; it requires intentional effort and discipline. Thomas Hooker once observed that none will “go to heaven on a feather bed.”⁶⁶ Burroughs’s sermon on Genesis 5:24 provided one popular Puritan metaphor for the preparation for heaven. One quality that distinguished Enoch from his generation was his righteousness and holiness. Later, in a rare reference to a secondary source, he cited Augustine for his comments that Noah also walked with God and that his life reflected similar holiness and reverence to that of Enoch. Burroughs characterized his own cultural milieu as a “declining, Wanton, Christ–denying age” that was parallel to that of Noah and Enoch. The context in which he found himself likely inspired his preaching of this text.⁶⁷

The action inherent in the metaphor of walking with God can stimulate the growth of the soul and deepen a person’s relationship with God, such that one “gets neerer and neerer to Heaven every day.” This is a primary way to prepare for heaven and the communion that awaits the believer. It is a “blessed thing to walk with God now,” writes Burroughs, since the believer’s blessings will expand into the enjoyment of God in heaven. Earthly friendship with God “is but as the forerunner of that glorious Communion that you shall enjoy with him...to all eternity.” To encourage the Christian’s earthly pilgrimage, God often sends a “Heavenly thought” to stimulate walking with him. Once a person recognizes the joy and sweetness of communion with God on earth, they know that it will be expanded exponentially beyond their imagination in heaven.⁶⁸

65. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 274, 278, 281.

66. Cited by Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination*, 20.

67. Burroughs, *Walking with God*, 263, 274, sig. A2.

68. Burroughs, *Walking with God*, 283, 299, 304.

Perhaps God limits the depth of the earthly experience of him so that Christians do not become overly satisfied with him before heaven. This spiritual plateau is a wise reminder of the greater joy and communion with God that awaits believers in eternity. Or, in the words of Burroughs, “in Heaven we shall be able to improve our converse with God.” As Burroughs treats our heavenly enjoyment, his language soars to a high register of delight and enjoyment of God that one seldom sees in his writings. He quotes Bernard of Clairvaux: “How sweet if it were not so little!” (*rara hora brevis mora!*).

Knowing God on earth produces “soul-ravishing joys” that are rare and brief, but not sustained. In heaven, this will grow infinitely as Burroughs joyfully reported, “He shall have communion with God, and all those soul-ravishing comforts that he hath had in the presence of God in this world, he shall have them all together, and infinitely more than them. Oh this is that that will make their soul long after Heaven, and set a prize upon it.” His use of bridal language is often limited but, in this section, he continues his elevated language as he rejoices: “Oh what comfort is there in the comforts of my Husband Jesus Christ!”⁶⁹

Central to walking with God is the use of holy duties, for it is through them that the soul meets God. Burroughs infrequently used the Song of Solomon in comparison with Gearing. However, he included two citations that the king is in the galleries (Song 7:5) and that when the soul “is exercised in the Ordinances, it hath converse with Christ” and recognizes the voice of Jesus inviting the believer into deeper communion (Song 5:2).⁷⁰ Burroughs typically spoke in general terms in regard of the means of grace, but he emphasized Isaac who withdrew at night to meditate in the fields (Gen. 24:63). He stressed the importance of withdrawing from the world to better focus on God and to the use of meditation and prayer as a guide for walking with God to prepare for heaven.⁷¹ Gearing asserted the essential importance of the means of grace on earth that would no longer be necessary in heaven. “[I]n this life the Ordinances are a Glass to give us the sight of God; in Heaven the Humane Nature of Christ is a Glass to give our bodily eyes the sight of God.”⁷²

69. Burroughs, *Walking with God*, 305–306, 311. For the reference to Bernard see Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Songs of Songs II*, trans. Kilian Walsh (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1976), sermon 23, 6.15.

70. Burroughs, *Walking with God*, 280–82.

71. Burroughs, *Walking with God*, 212–13.

72. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 54.

Purity

Burroughs's analysis of the sixth beatitude extended to the opposite meaning of the text as well. If the pure in heart are blessed to see God, then it stands to reason that the impure person will not see him. Burroughs wrote that after death and the day of judgment, the one who "continue[d] in his sin" will have no sight of God. He went on to pity those who are consumed with their lusts instead of the prospect of seeing God. Earlier in these sermons, he develops this further and maintains that if anyone has unclean hearts, "then their spirits will not be able to have that right understanding in spiritual things." He quoted Daniel 9:13, "That we might turn saith Daniel from our iniquities, and understand thy truth" (KJV). He stressed that iniquities defile the soul and prevent the person from grasping the truth. According to Burroughs, "The Lord takes no delight at all to reveal himself to one that hath an unclean heart." From God's perspective, "a filthy defiled conscience or heart" had rejected God and is not receptive to his truth. He continued that the reason for such ignorance is not because God's truth is difficult to grasp, but due to the "filthiness of their hearts" they were unable to recognize it or grasp its meaning. The reason for their deafness is that their sins and lusts had carried them away and their minds were overwhelmed by corruption.⁷³

Burroughs insisted that one reason why people did not understand God or Scripture is due to errors that distorted their understanding. This error affected two types of people: those who were older and had failed to continue walking in faithfulness due to their carnal and sensual minds, and those who were younger and never took sin seriously. The teaching of Paul in 2 Timothy 3:8 supports this understanding: "As Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses, so do these also resist the truth, men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith" (KJV). This passage illustrates the seriousness of corrupt thinking and how it affects a person's faith and relationship with God. This produced a warning to discern and recognize false teachers and to avoid their preaching. Burroughs concluded this section by challenging his auditors that the best way to avoid error is to "purge your hearts, walk before God in uprightness, and the Spirit of God shall guid[e] you then into all truth." Only in this way will a person create and maintain a purity of heart to see God.⁷⁴

It is interesting to observe that Burroughs employed only four citations from secondary sources in these three sermons: two from Augustine, one

73. Burroughs, *The Saints Happiness*, 439, 405–407, 409, incorrectly numbered 490.

74. Burroughs, *The Saints Happiness*, 411–12.

from Ambrose, and one from a Greek philosopher. This follows the typical Puritan pattern that when preachers revised their sermons for publication, they often added additional quotations. Since *The Saints Happiness* was published after his death, this is likely the reason why the editors did not expand Burroughs's use of secondary sources.

Desire

Burroughs taught that one way to increase the desire for heaven is to remind Christians that the "communion with God, and all those soul-ravishing comforts" which were experienced on earth, would be "infinitely more" in heaven. There is a principle of magnification or amplification here. The more one can taste and see the Lord's goodness, the more that person thirsts to experience God more deeply.⁷⁵ Gearing approached this from a different perspective and preached from Song of Solomon 2:5, "Stay me with Flag-gons, Comfort me with Apples, for I am sick of Love" (KJV), a passage which focuses on the nature of longing for Christ. These four sermons are significant since the desire for Christ is only satisfied once a believer reaches heaven. Burroughs distinguished between earthly and heavenly desires and articulated that once an earthly desire is satisfied, it no longer motivates a person to seek the object. But heavenly desires are never exhausted, for the initial enjoyment inspires continued longing. Gearing proclaimed that no Christian ever thinks that they have enough of Christ because "the more he hath, the more he doth desire."⁷⁶

One of the practical means that God has provided to facilitate this desire is through the means of grace. Gearing stated that the ordinances create communion with Christ and will enlarge our hunger for Christ. The use of these "holy dut[ies] should be like wings to raise us up to God, and as chains to fasten us to him." While the term "ordinance" can cover a wide range of devotional practices, he singles out public worship as a means to meet God and asserted that it should "lift up our hearts to God, and mount up to heaven upon the wings of faith, and an holy affection." The disposition of a person's attitude is critical. If it is inspired properly it "would raise our hearts, [and] our desires and affections." This is related to the reason why God ordained the means of grace to assist believers to "climb up to heaven" and to enjoy "a strong intercourse with God." While nothing is automatic or guaranteed about the use of spiritual disciplines, God often

75. Burroughs, *Walking with God*, 306, 314.

76. Gearing, *The Love-sick Spouse*, 8.

uses them to draw nearer to believers. From the human perspective, when a person reads or hears the words of Scripture or prays, they believe it will provide them with a “fuller taste of [God’s] love in Christ.”⁷⁷

Gearing also stressed the importance of cultivating an attitude of *contemptus mundi* (contempt of the world). He warned his auditors that they could not be heavenly-minded if they were consumed with the fleeting pleasures of the earthly life.⁷⁸ In *A Prospect of Heaven*, he reiterated this: “We mind Earth so much, therefore do we expect Heaven so little.”⁷⁹ But if a person practiced meditation with focused attentiveness, it would not only prepare them for heaven, but it would also create a prelude and open the door to introduce them to “Heaven upon earth.”⁸⁰

In a display of God’s gracious accommodation to his creation, Gearing recognized that not all people had the equal benefit of faithful ministers. In such situations, he believed that God might comfort Christians in an “immediate way” without the use of the means of grace. This is a surprising provision, since the immediate experience of God is frequently reserved for heaven unless it is used in a more mystical sense.

Additionally, Gearing warned his listeners not to be content with a meager experience of Christ. He compared the afterlife with Luke 16:19–31, when the rich man, eternally banished to hell, begged Lazarus for a small drop of water, and with the spouse from the Song of Solomon who extravagantly desired the abundance of flagons. While sometimes this passage might be translated as raisin cakes, Gearing appears to be thinking of a large pitcher of wine. He continued by citing Ephesians 3:20, warning that human requests are often too modest when one considers the length and breadth and depth and height of God’s love.⁸¹

As he examined the nature and dynamics of love more closely, Gearing taught that the goal of love is to desire greater union and communion with Christ. When this love is hindered, it creates a sickness within the soul. Hence arises the need for vehement love to overcome any human restrictions or resistance. More specifically, he insisted that love created a “desire to be united to Christ, to enjoy the comfortable presence of Christ, to have fellowship and communion with him.” The goal of this intensity is fruition,

77. Gearing, *The Love-sick Spouse*, 9, 11.

78. Gearing, *The Mount of Holy Meditation*, 179.

79. Gearing, *Prospect of Heaven*, 80.

80. Gearing, *The Mount of Holy Meditation*, 198–99.

81. Gearing, *The Love-sick Spouse*, 16.

for love “is never at rest, till it can join it self to the object that it loveth; till it gets to enjoy and possess it.”

Since only Christ can ultimately satisfy the soul, the believer seeks to rest in Christ. This prompts him to speak more fully about lovesickness which he defined as “a strong impulsion of love in the soul after Christ, and a most vehement thirsting after him.” Solomon employed this term twice in Song of Solomon, once when the bridegroom is absent from the spouse, and the other when he is present with her. The former is a sickness of hope, the latter one of desire. Regardless, a person who is lovesick for Christ desires nothing more than his presence and a practical way to engage this while still on earth is through reading and meditating on Scripture and participating in the sacraments.⁸²

In comparing these sermons with others from Gearing, one immediately notices the scant use of secondary sources which is abundantly evident in his other writings. However, he does reference Bernard of Clairvaux with the reminder that love for Christ must be chaste and not adulterous. He pointedly asked whether we love Christ for *himself* or only for his *gifts*. This volume concludes with directions on how to prepare one’s heart to long for Christ with a consideration of what life might be without Christ and a careful reflection on the human need of Christ.⁸³

Conclusion

Jeremiah Burroughs claimed that while the fullness of communion with God would not be experienced until heaven, there is “some degree of it here in this world.” He also admitted that we could already catch a glimpse of the “beatificall vision,” which he defined as “the very touch and close[ness] of the soule with the essence of God that shall be in heaven.”⁸⁴ William Gearing concluded his *The Mount of Holy Meditation* by quoting Bernard of Clairvaux which he intended as both a challenge and an invitation to his readers. Through meditation, he taught, the believer “mounts up to Heaven by his desires” and receives a “large tast of the sweetnesse of heavenly pleasures” and happiness for those who are in Christ Jesus.⁸⁵

82. Gearing, *The Love-sick Spouse*, 23, 26, 28, 36.

83. Gearing, *The Love-sick Spouse*, 32–33, 42–43.

84. Burroughs, *The Saints Happiness*, 417.

85. Gearing, *Mount of Holy Meditation*, 199.