

August 22, 2021

HEAVEN ON MY MIND



I Can Only Imagine

Mercy Me

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GCkp69kC88>

Revelation 21:4

'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'

THE PROMISE OF HEAVEN

**The promise is
For no more tears,
No more sadness,
No more fears.**

**The promise is
For all things new,
No more aging,
A new overview.**

**The promise is
For death to cease,
For life eternal,
And constant peace.**

**I don't really care
About Streets of gold,
Pearly gates,
Or wealth untold.**

**I need no mansion.
I need no crown.
I need no robe.
Just truth unbound.**

**I'll find joy
And an end to grief.
Bathed in Love.
No more unbelief.**

**But most of all,
I'll dance in the light
Provided by Jesus
Who walks by my side.**

**Yes, give me Heaven,
My soul take wing.
Leave worry behind me
And enter the spring**

**Of new life
New joy,
New grace
To employ.**

**Thanks be to God
That there is such a thing
As Heaven above
And love everlasting.**

“I Can Only Imagine” was written by Christian singer/songwriter Bart Millard of Mercy Me. The back story for the song was made into a movie several years ago. Bart’s story is one of a dream coming true. He was a single child in a household where his mother left when he was young, and he suffered constant abuse at the hand of his father. He stayed at home until he graduated from high school and then took off to find his way, far away from his father.

Bart found his singing voice in high school. He learned how to play the guitar and started writing music. Joining with a band, they named themselves “Mercy Me” and traveled the B circuit doing youth camps and revivals, wherever they could find an audience. But anyone in the music industry will tell you that breaking the ceiling into becoming a respected artist is extremely difficult, and most artists never manage to accomplish that. They enjoy doing the B circuit, but it is a difficult way to make a living. The artists often need to engage in other employment to support their music careers.

The thing that held Bart back the most was his inability to forgive his father. We’ve all faced problems like that. There is usually someone in our lives who hurts us so severely (physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, or any combination thereof) that we don’t want to let go of our anger, hurt, or desire for revenge and retribution. We push that person away because we want to hurt them in the same way they hurt us. We don’t want to let them get close again for fear that we might continue to get hurt. We honestly believe this is about two people who cannot find common ground, even though it is more complex than that. There is some invisible wall we throw up where we refuse to interact.

But, just as Bart learned, we should also understand, it is not about the hurt, pain, or wall between two people. To accept that circumstance prevents any progress towards reconciliation. You see, when our lives include a relationship with Jesus Christ, He becomes a part of resolving this kind of conflict. Trying to forgive someone using our inner strength will generally fail. We don't have what it takes to mend that kind of problem in our lives. We are too close to it. The pain is too real.

I don't know if you ever did this as a child, but my youngest son once stuck a bobby pin in a wall socket. Although he remained unscathed, it was a long time before he would even go near a wall socket, bobby pin or not. If we have a toxic relationship, we need the peace, grace, and mercy of God to help us resolve it. When we look at the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross, we gain clarity regarding understanding. When we realize the nature of grace, we gain compassion. When we grasp the value of how forgiveness works, we can tap into that peace, grace, and mercy that God makes available to us through the holy spirit. We can then begin to forgive those who have hurt us. We can also pray for them that they gain the same understanding and forgive us for extending the pain in the relationship, for not reaching out sooner to take down the wall.

That is what happened in Bart's life. He realized that if he was ever going to break the bonds of what was holding him back, his lack of forgiveness for his father, that he would never be able to put the past behind him. It would always be a painful reminder of a time that he simply could not forget. Bart looked at the way Jesus forgave him; unconditionally, ultimately, consistently, and

consciously. For that reason, he chose to step into the power that Christ offers so that he could forgive his dad.

Forgiveness is never instantaneous. It's more like putting an antibiotic and band-aid on an open wound. Doing so makes the healing process much quicker and so much more complete.

I'm not naïve about this. I know there have been people in all of our lives that have wronged us to the point that we struggle with finding true forgiveness in our hearts. The old saying "I forgive you, but I will not forget" can become a mantra. It is like we only tear down a portion of the wall. Of all the things we have to forgive people of in our lives, the loss of trust is the hardest. It is challenging to learn to trust again, and it is almost impossible if we don't have the strength and love of Jesus to help us do it.

I have some glorious scars. Physical scars. Mental scars. Emotional scars. Spiritual scars. All reminders of various incidents that changed me in some way. I also have a few marks that I have no idea how I got them. But that is the way life works. My actions and words have left scars on other people through my negligence, stupidity, or lack of understanding. Sometimes my compassion has been less than adequate. I have left some scars on people that I never knew I hurt. But that is the way life works. We have all done this, intentionally or not. There are people that I reconciled with, and what a glorious moment that is when that relationship becomes healed. Some passed on before we could mend our relationship. Those are the hardest to deal with, the ones where we realize that

we have left things unsaid and unfinished, where the wall was still firmly in place while we contemplated how to go about regaining peace with someone.

The Apostle John was exiled to the Island of Patmos by Roman authorities. He is the only Apostle believed to have not suffered a martyr's death. Being exiled was not uncommon at the time in the Roman Empire. Visionaries, dreamers, philosophers, and differing theologies were often punished by banishment because the Roman government believed that such things led to insurrection. There are differing conclusions on how long John was on the island. Most scholars believe John was only on the island for about a year, but no one is sure whether he died there or was released and returned to live elsewhere.

While he was on the island, he wrote down his dreams. Dreams that we find in the Book of Revelation. The Book of Revelation touches on many topics, one being the nature of Heaven. Revelations is probably the most controversial book found in the Bible, given the many different interpretations of John's dreams and what they mean. It is the only book in the Bible that contains prophecies that have yet to come to be.

Jesus often talked about Heaven and what it was like, but John's descriptions of Heaven are more about visualizing Heaven in his dreams. Remember, he hasn't been there, but his dreams, his imagination, took him there. That does not mean those descriptions are false or inaccurate. I love the way our verse today focuses on the spiritual rather than the physical. **'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain,**

for the old order of things has passed away.” This version of Heaven speaks to a state of being rather than golden streets, mansions, robes, crowns, or pearly gates. We have to free our minds enough to see that this describes how God wipes away our tears, takes our pain, relieves our mourning and crying. We can accept old things no longer matter; we are free to enter the next stage of our being.

Our humanity wants us to turn Heaven into a tangible world that reflects our life here on earth. But it was never meant to be like that. If we choose to allow God to take away our death, or mourning, or crying, or pain, then we have to be willing to let them go. We can't take them with us. There is no place for that side of us in the next phase of our existence. And in truth, why would we want to keep those things around us that brought us so much sorrow here on earth.

Several years ago, I changed the way I looked at Heaven. Self-reflection is a gift from God for each of us. I learned growing up that Heaven was a reward, something we earned. My parents and teachers led me to believe that we were charged with doing the right things on earth and, in return, Heaven is our reward. For St. Peter to find our names written in the Book of Life, we have to give more than we took. Helped more than we hindered. Forgave more than we accepted forgiveness. Loved more than we hated. I realized that I had to stop looking at that vast cosmic balancing scale that weighed the good in my life against the bad, hoping that the good outweighed the bad because that was how you got into Heaven and didn't get sent to Hell. I had a vision generated by years of poor theology. I honestly believed that when I stood before my creator as He

dissected my life, everything I did was like a coin dropped on one side or the other of the scale. One side represented the good things that I had accomplished. The other side contained all the bad things that I had proffered. The scale kept going back and forth with me in anticipation and hope that I had the correct amount of coins on the right side of the scale, that the good outweighed the bad. If this is true, the gates of Heaven should open before me

But you see, Jesus is not part of that scenario. You will notice I didn't mention Jesus at all when looking at that good versus evil scale and the Book of Life. That's because the rules changed. Jesus said, "This is not the way things are supposed to work." It no longer mattered. **"All things have become new."**

In my vision, He looked at me with unfathomable love in his eyes, tears running down His face as he matched the tears falling from my own eyes as I struggled to tip the scale in my favor; struggled to deal with the pain of my failures. He looked at me and said, "Stop! Don't do this to yourself. I have paid your debt. I have forgiven you. Your name is already in the Book of Life." And with that, He grabbed the scale I had been working so hard to balance and flung it into the fires of Hell, no longer to torment me.

And that allowed me to start healing a very open wound in my own life, the life where I knew how much Jesus loved me and how badly I had failed him. He forgave me for trying to do it all under my own steam. Jesus dismissed the wrong choices and the pain that I had caused to others. He had mercy me for straying from the path He had set me on. And He used it all to teach me how things are supposed to be, what it means to be loved by Jesus.

I'm not talking about a salvation experience. I am talking about gaining an understanding of how desperate Jesus was for a relationship with me; the most significant relationship that any human being can have when they stand in awe of God and the universe that He created. I came to understand that no matter how broken, beaten, torn, flattened, shredded, pounded, and scorned I was, my gracious God found value in me through Jesus Christ, His Son.

But we cannot get to that moment clinging to the things of this world. We all want God to wipe the tears from our eyes, but we want Him to do it our way, here on earth, here and now. We don't want to step into Heaven so that we can stand in His presence. We want Him to come to us. And you know what? Because He understood our obstinance, because He understood our warped value system, because we insisted on bowing down to that cosmic scale of good and evil, He stepped out of Heaven. He came to us in all His glory, bought and paid for us, sacrificed for us.

Bart Millard came to understand this, and it changed his life. It changed his perspective. Bart realized he could see the world through the eyes of Jesus if he only rearranged his viewpoint. And when he did, a light bulb went off. It was a quantum moment that transcended human logic. It allowed him to step into the world of his dreams and write "I Can Only Imagine," the highest-selling Christian song of all time; a song that he sold to Amy Grant because he felt that it would never find its place or reach as many people if he sang it. But Amy Grant knew that song for what it was and gave it back to Bart. It allowed Bart and Mercy Me to rise to a new level and break through the ceiling holding them back.

I want to stop for a moment and tell you that there is no shame in playing the B circuit. Blessings and spiritual fulfillment can come through participation in camps, revivals, gatherings. We are all called according to His purpose. All callings have value. Sometimes, God expects and gives us the skill to step up our game. We would be wise to listen when God speaks into our dreams and leads us to where we are best suited to advance His Kingdom.

I want to explain one last thing regarding what we are talking about today. Heaven doesn't just exist in our imagination. It is genuine. God uses our vision and the vision of others to show it to us, but that makes it no less tangible. In many ways, Heaven is more genuine than the world around us.

The world around us is temporary. God created it. It has a beginning, and it will come to an end. It is limited and finite. The universe remains governed by laws that God crafted at the time of creation. Our corporate bodies are a part of that universe. We are physically limited to what we can experience and know about our physical world.

But God did a great thing when He created humanity. He didn't limit us to what we can feel, hear, touch, see, and smell. God did not leave us constrained by our five senses, bound by the laws of the universe, stuck in our tracks with no way out.

Instead, He left a back door into our minds, planted in our subconscious, for Him to speak into us. We tend to see that as folly. We read about Daniel and his dreams and think that was probably possible at that time in history. We

examine scripture about Jacob and his ladder and wrestling with the angel. Again, we believe it was possible back then. We look at John dreaming his dreams on the Island of Patmos. Once again, we think that was probably possible at that time. But we tell ourselves that this is now, and God doesn't work that way anymore.

Why do we think that way? Why do we accept the notion that God doesn't speak to us in our dreams or imaginations anymore? Why do we believe that people who communicate with God through their dreams and vision must be off-kilter or maybe a little crazy? Plenty of well-respected Christians claim that God has spoken to them in this way, even today. And yet, we seem to hold such people at arms-length, even if they have a beautiful story to tell.

I am not asking everyone to believe all we read and hear. But I would encourage us all to open our minds to the possibility that God can speak to us this way. It's not mysticism. The Holy Spirit dwells within us. Is it so difficult to believe the Holy Spirit can reach into us this way, just like he did with John, Daniel, or Jacob?

If we can find our way to allow God to reach into us this way, perhaps, just perhaps, we can start to envision the reality of Heaven and not leave it as just a possibility. We often think of Heaven as something ethereal and the world we live in as reality. I propose to you that the opposite is true.

Yes, it is a somewhat lofty thought, but aren't we fortunate that God encourages us towards lofty thoughts? Can He use our imagination to show us

the truth? I have often heard the term 'infinity' used with regards to our physical universe. But the universe that abides in this construct is created out of the mind of our creator. In that sense, it is finite. It had a beginning. It will have an end. And before it existed and after it is gone, God will remain. Heaven will remain. We will remain. We cannot see, hear, feel, touch, or smell God. The same is true of Heaven and our spirits, but that does not negate the reality of that existence.

Paul tells us in Colossians 3:1, **“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”**

Long after everything we sense as reality ceases to exist, Heaven will still be a reality. And is it such a bad thing to put our faith in something that we cannot experience with our senses? We often talk about today's scripture in the context of loss or grief. But is it so wrong of us to embrace, **‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away?’** Shouldn't that be where our thoughts are grounded? Shouldn't we acknowledge that vision of Jesus sitting at the right hand of God wiping away our tears, removing death as an obstacle, letting Jesus bring us healing for our pain? And should it matter to us if people think we are a little strange, not quite together, given to flights of fancy, if the reality of Heaven is more believable to us than the reality that surrounds us?

We don't draw our strength from this world but the cross. The cross is a bridge between both realities. We know that we have a vested interest in the world surrounding us where we interact with our fellow humans. A world we God

charged us with appreciating and protecting. But do we grasp that we are also vested in a plane of existence beyond this world? A presence promised to us by our loving Heavenly Father; an inheritance due us because of our relationship with our Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to remove the barriers between us and this place we call Heaven?

It's true! I have Heaven on my mind. The path lays before us as we embrace the bond that Christ shares with us as He leads us to that place where He will wipe the tears from our eyes and **“there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”** Are we willing to let go of this world ruled by our senses and enter a place of perfect joy when we are called home, A place where Jesus calls to us with the words we hear in Matthew 25, **“Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”**
(Matthew 25:23 NIV)

AMEN

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