

Heaven and Hell – Part 4

 sightedmoon.com/sightedmoon_2015/

By Joseph F. Dumond

August 22, 2009

Do people go to heaven at death?

The popular belief is that a good person goes to heaven immediately when he or she dies. But for the traditional Christian, things aren't quite that simple. According to this view, the body goes to the grave, but the soul ascends to heaven.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, written in the 17th century, states: "The bodies of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls, (which never die nor sleep,) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies." But does this concept agree with the Bible? Do the Scriptures indeed state that righteous people go to heaven when they die?

David, the king of Israel and author of many of the Psalms, whom God called "a man after My own heart" (Acts 13:22), did not go to heaven at his death. The apostle Peter, speaking under God's inspiration, states, "Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day" (Acts 2:29). He then adds that "David did not ascend into the heavens" (verse 34).

David is included in Hebrews 11:32 among those who died in faith, making him one of those of whom verse 39 says, "And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise."

The Gospel of John, written about 1,000 years after David's death, states, "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man [i.e., Jesus Christ]" (John 3:13). This means that Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets and all other righteous men and women who lived before Christ's first coming did not go to heaven. They were buried in the grave as David was.

The view that a person's soul goes to heaven at death—though held by many in good faith—cannot be found in the Bible. It results from a misunderstanding of the Scriptures and confusion over what the Bible teaches about the resurrection.

Why a resurrection?

Theologians widely acknowledge that the Bible speaks of a resurrection, even if they're not sure what it means or when it takes place. The most common view is that at the resurrection the body rises to be reunited with the soul in heaven. But, as we pointed out earlier, the

concept of the immortality of the soul—the soul as existing as something apart from the body—is not biblical. It takes its origins from pagan philosophy and tradition rather than the writers of the Bible.

We might pose this question: If it were true that at the resurrection the body is to rise to be united with the soul in heaven, why would God do things this way? What purpose would the resurrection serve? Why keep the body in the grave?

If the righteous immediately go to heaven at death, why wouldn't God send the complete being—soul and body—to heaven simultaneously, instead of keeping soul and body apart through the ages? For that matter, why even have a resurrection? If the soul goes immediately to heaven, why bother with bringing bodies back to life? The inescapable fact is that if popular teaching about heaven is true, there would be no logical reason for the resurrection. Why do we see so much confusion about how the resurrection fits with the traditional view of heaven? Perhaps it's because support for the idea of going to heaven at death is not found in the Bible! What is the Kingdom of Heaven?

Many people believe they will go to heaven because Jesus spoke repeatedly of the Kingdom of Heaven. In Matthew 5:3, for example, He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Three other verses in Matthew 5 refer to the faithful entering "the kingdom of heaven," and the phrase appears throughout the book of Matthew a total of 32 times.

However, note that while Matthew is the only biblical writer who uses the term Kingdom of Heaven, other Bible writers use the term Kingdom of God—which appears 69 times in the New Testament. A comparison between events described in Matthew's Gospel and the other Gospel writers shows that the terms are used interchangeably.

For example, Matthew 5:3 records Jesus' words as: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Luke, in describing the same blessing, records Jesus' words as: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20).

Similarly, where Matthew 19:14 records Jesus as saying, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven," both Luke 18:16 and Mark 10:14 use the term "kingdom of God" rather than "kingdom of heaven." You can see other examples by comparing Matthew 4:17 and Mark 1:14-15, Matthew 13:31 and Mark 4:30-31, and Matthew 19:23 and Luke 18:24.

So why do we see two different terms—"kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God"—used to describe the same thing?

To understand, we must consider an important cultural sensitivity and practice of Christ's day.

In obedience to the third of the Ten Commandments, which forbade taking God's name in vain (Exodus 20:7), it was common to avoid routinely using the word "God." Instead people would substitute another word that others would understand as referring to God.

Often this seems to have been Jesus Christ's practice too. For example, shortly before His crucifixion when He is challenged under oath to state whether He was truly the Son of God, He responds: "It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matthew 26:64). Here He clearly used "the Power" as a synonym for God—and this was obviously understood by the priests and religious authorities, who wanted to execute Him for blasphemy.

As recorded in Matthew's Gospel, on about half the occasions when Jesus refers to God the Father, He substitutes another word. When speaking of the Kingdom of God, which was the core of His message (Mark 1:14-15), He nearly always uses the term "kingdom of heaven" instead. He isn't talking about a kingdom that existed in heaven to which believers would go, but rather using a term that was synonymous with "kingdom of God," as is clear from the other New Testament writers.

The other writers, who focused more on non-Jewish audiences in their books, use "kingdom of God" to make plain what Jesus meant. Thus, Christ's use of the phrase "kingdom of heaven" does not mean the Kingdom is in heaven, but that it is of God, who is Himself in heaven. At the same time, however, the term is also accurate in the sense that this Kingdom will be established from heaven—as Jesus will bring it to earth from there, as we will see.

Jesus' followers will join Him on earth

Jesus did not tell His disciples they should expect to dwell in heaven. He spoke instead of a kingdom belonging to God in heaven that is to be established on the earth at Christ's second coming. Notice Jesus' explanation that He would come to join His followers on earth at His return rather than have them come to live with Him in heaven where He currently resides. After Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, He spent 40 days teaching His disciples, instructing them about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). After this He joined His Father in heaven. Notice the instruction His disciples received after He rose into the sky:

"Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven'" (Acts 1:9-11).

Jesus speaks repeatedly of His return to establish the Kingdom of God on earth (Matthew 25:31-34; Luke 21:27-31). He will return to earth and establish His Kingdom here—not in heaven. In what is commonly called the Lord's Prayer, He instructs His followers to pray to

their heavenly Father, “Your kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10; Luke 11:2). That kingdom is the true goal of every Christian (Matthew 6:33); we are to pray for its arrival.

In Luke 19:12 Jesus speaks of Himself in a parable, comparing Himself to “a certain nobleman [who] went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return.” The “far country” is His Father’s dwelling place, which is in heaven. Jesus will bring the Kingdom of God to earth at His return. (To better understand what the Scriptures teach about the Kingdom of God, be sure to download or request your free copy of our booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom*.)

Our eternal abode is to be here

One Old Testament prophecy is so specific about Jesus’ return that it tells us exactly where He will arrive back on earth to establish His Kingdom: “And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east...And the LORD shall be King over all the earth” (Zechariah 14:4, 9).

The incident we read about in the book of Acts that describes Jesus’ ascension tells us that it was on the Mount of Olives that He last talked with His disciples, and it was from the same mountain that He rose into the clouds before their eyes. He will return to the same mountain to begin His reign in the Kingdom of God.

Recall again that in Matthew 5:3 Jesus said the poor in spirit, the humble, would inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. Then consider that just two verses later, in verse 5, Jesus states, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” How do we reconcile these statements? By understanding that the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God, will be established on the earth.

This verse and many others describe the saints ruling on earth in God’s Kingdom. For example, Revelation 5:10, speaking of the resurrected saints, says: “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth” (NIV). Even beyond that, Revelation 21 and 22 state that ultimately God the Father and the heavenly city of God, the New Jerusalem, will descend to the earth, then renewed. The earth, then, will be the place of God’s throne. And the repentant of mankind, then glorified, will dwell with Him forever.

Yet we will not then be confined to the earth but will inherit the entire vast universe and spirit realm as coheirs with Jesus. This amazing truth is explained in our free booklet *What Is Your Destiny?* Be sure to request or download your free copy.

The reward of the saints is eternal life in the Kingdom of God. This will be given when Christ returns, but, as we have seen, Jesus will reign with His faithful followers on the earth rather than in heaven. And in the end, even God the Father will dwell with the saved here. The glorious future God has planned for us is far beyond any human dreams of life in heaven!

Ancient Pagan Belief in Heaven?

The idea that “souls” go to heaven at death originated in pagan religion, not the Bible. A brief look at ancient history reveals that the people of Babylon, Egypt, and other kingdoms imagined such an afterlife.

According to *This Believing World*, by Lewis Browne, the Egyptian god Osiris was thought to have been killed, resurrected and taken to heaven: “Osiris came to life again! He was miraculously resurrected from death and taken up to heaven; and there in heaven, so the myth declared, he lived on eternally” (1946, p. 83).

Browne explains: “The Egyptians reasoned that if it was the fate of the god Osiris to be resurrected after death, then a way could be found to make it the fate of man, too...The bliss of immortality that had formerly been reserved only for kings was then promised to all men... The heavenly existence of the dead was carried on in the realm of Osiris, and it was described in considerable detail by the Egyptian theologians. It was believed that on death the soul of a man set out at once to reach a Judgment Hall on high...and stood before the celestial throne of Osiris, the Judge. There it gave account of itself to Osiris and his forty-two associate gods” (p. 84).

If able to satisfy the gods, “the soul was straightway gathered into the fold of Osiris. But if it could not, if it was found wanting when weighed in the heavenly balances, then it was cast into a hell, to be rent to shreds of the ‘Devouress.’ For only the righteous souls, only the guiltless, were thought to be deserving of life everlasting” (pp. 86-87).

This idea of men being able to follow their savior-god into heaven was a central focus of the ancient mystery religions. Browne continues: “Mankind everywhere, in Mexico and Iceland, in Zululand and China, makes more or less the same wild guesses in its convulsive effort to solve the riddle of existence...

“In very early times that idea flourished not alone among the Babylonians and Egyptians, but also among the barbaric tribes in and around Greece...These mysteries [came] down from Thrace or across the sea from Egypt and Asia Minor...They declared that for every man, no matter how poor or vicious, there was a place in heaven. All one had to do was to be ‘initiated’ into the secrets of the cult...then salvation was assured him, and no excess of vice and moral turpitude [i.e., depravity] could close the gates of paradise in his face. He was saved forevermore” (pp. 96-99).

Man has always wanted to live without ever dying. This world and all it offers has never satisfied humanity. For centuries mankind has searched for security and happiness in the hope

of going to heaven at death. Regrettably, too many have embraced beliefs that cannot be proven true.

God alone knows the answers to the mysteries of life and death, and He reveals them in His Word, the Holy Bible. Contrary to what so many think, God does not promise eternity in heaven as the reward of the saved. Instead, Jesus says those who overcome will reign with Him in the coming Kingdom of God, which will be established on earth at His return (Revelation 3:21; 5:10; 11:15). Ultimately, they will inherit the entire universe and spirit realm as coheirs with Christ (compare Romans 8:17; Hebrews 1:1-2; 2:5-11; Revelation 21:7).

Paul's Desire to 'Depart and Be With Christ'

The apostle Paul dedicated his life to preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). In the process he was subjected to persecution, beatings and several periods of imprisonment. When he wrote his letter to the Philippians, he was enduring a period of house arrest in Rome. Paul knew that the Roman government had authority to put prisoners to death. Paul knew what the future might hold for him, whether it be execution on the one hand or his release on the other.

In Philippians 1:23-24 he writes of the two possible outcomes: "For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you."

Many have assumed from Paul's words here that he believed that at the moment of his death his consciousness would leave his body to join Christ in heaven. But is this the case? Before focusing on what this scripture says, let's notice what it does not say. It does not say when or where Paul would be with Christ if he departed. Neither is the terminology of departure intended to be geographic—as in leaving the earth to go to heaven. There is no reference to heaven in these verses. To conclude otherwise is to read assumptions into Paul's words. Paul is simply referring to departing from his present, physical life—leaving it behind through death. When writing to the Philippians here, Paul was struggling with two desires. He wanted to be done with his fleshly life and be with Christ, but he also wanted to remain with God's people. In his second letter to Timothy he speaks dogmatically of what lies ahead, knowing the end of his physical life is near and he is ready to depart: "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Paul, then, understood that he was not to receive his reward immediately at death. He knew that if executed, he would go to the grave, and there his remains would lie until the time of his resurrection. He understood that, since the dead have no thought processes whatsoever, in

his next waking moment he would be with the returning Messiah, Jesus, joining Him along with the other saints at the time of the resurrection.

As he wrote to Timothy, he knew there was laid up for him a crown of righteousness that he would be given “on that Day” of Christ’s appearing—at Jesus’ second coming. As Paul noted, Jesus will bring Paul’s reward with Him. Paul will receive it at that time, not before, along with all others who will be resurrected at Christ’s return.

Describing this resurrection, Paul explains to the church in Corinth: “Behold I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). Paul knew he would receive his reward—his “change”—at Christ’s coming. He also knew that death before that time would mean “sleep,” unconsciousness, until the resurrection.

The time from Paul’s death until his resurrection at the same time as all of Christ’s followers will seem to him but a mere moment. He will be with Christ as a glorified son of God in the next moment of his consciousness. No wonder Paul, weary of his sufferings in this life, desired to depart from it and to be with Christ!

Did Elijah Go to Heaven?

A biblical event many cite to support belief that the righteous go to heaven when they die involves the prophet Elijah. Elijah was a prophet of God in the ninth century B.C. The Bible states that “Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2:11). But does this contradict the testimony of John’s Gospel, which stated some 900 years after Elijah’s time that “no one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man”? (John 3:13).

How can we explain this seeming biblical discrepancy? A closer look shows that the two passages can be reconciled easily enough.

Careful study shows that three “heavens” are actually discussed in the Bible. One is God’s dwelling place—the place of His throne—and the heaven where the resurrected Jesus is today. Speaking of Christ, who is our High Priest, the Bible says, “We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens” (Hebrews 8:1). Heaven is specifically called God’s dwelling place (Deuteronomy 26:15). The apostle Paul calls this heaven the “third heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:2)—showing, as noted, that there are two others. It’s described as the “third” because, being in the spirit realm, it is beyond the other two, which are in the physical realm.

Another heaven discussed in the Bible, second in proximity to us, is what we call outer space. It is the domain of the moon, planets, comets, asteroids, sun and stars. David spoke of this when he reflected on the awesomeness of God's creative handiwork, which he described as "Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained" (Psalm 8:3). Many scriptures mention "the stars of heaven" (Genesis 26:4; Deuteronomy 1:10; 28:62; Isaiah 13:10).

Yet another heaven, closest to us in proximity, is the envelope of air that surrounds our planet, consisting of oxygen and other gases. This heaven—earth's atmosphere—is mentioned in such passages as Genesis 7:11-12, which describes the great flood of Noah's day: "The windows of heaven were opened. And the rain was on the earth forty days and forty nights." The Bible also speaks of "the birds of heaven," those that fly overhead (Job 35:11; Jeremiah 16:4).

To determine which heaven is meant in a Bible passage, we must carefully consider the context. It was into the lower reaches of this first, closest heaven—the earth's atmosphere—that Elijah was taken. Let's notice the proof.

God had earlier told Elijah he was to anoint a man named Elisha as a prophet to succeed him (1 Kings 19:16). Later, as the two men walked together, Elijah said to Elisha, "What may I do for you, before I am taken away from you?" (2 Kings 2:9). This led to a discussion of God's gifts to Elisha that would allow him to fill Elijah's role.

"Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (verse 11). Elijah was now gone. The former followers and students of Elijah were now to look to Elisha as their new leader. "Now when the sons of the prophets who were from Jericho saw him, they said, 'The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha'" (2 Kings 2:15).

Many readers assume that Elijah at that point was made immortal and taken to the heaven where God resides. This was not the case. The sons of the prophets knew otherwise. They knew the whirlwind had simply removed Elijah to another location on earth. They exclaimed to Elisha: "Look now, there are fifty strong men with your servants. Please let them go and search for your master, lest perhaps the Spirit of the Lord has taken him up and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley" (2 Kings 2:16).

The disciples were concerned for Elijah's safety, so they sent out a party of 50 men to search for him. The 50 searched for three days but did not find him (2 Kings 2:17).

Another passage proves conclusively that Elijah was not taken up to live in heaven. The Bible records that Elijah wrote a letter to Jehoram, the king of Judah, several years after he was removed in the whirlwind.

Notice the sequence of events recorded for us in the Bible. Elijah's last recorded and dated act occurred during the reign of the Israelite king Ahaziah when Elijah told the king he would die for his sins (2 Kings 1:3, 17). Ahaziah's reign lasted only about a year, ca. 850 B.C. Elijah's removal and replacement by Elisha is then recorded in the next chapter, 2 Kings 2. The story continues with incidents from Elisha's life, including an encounter with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah (2 Kings 3:11-14). Several years later Jehoram, son of Jehoshaphat, succeeded his father as king of Judah, ca. 845 B.C. (2 Kings 8:16).

Jehoram proved to be a wicked king, leading the nation of Judah in rebellion against God's commandments. A few years into Jehoram's reign, and several years after Elijah's removal, Jehoram received a letter from Elijah warning the king of dire consequences because of his sins. This letter is recorded in 2 Chronicles 21:12-15.

This letter proves that the prophet was still alive and on earth some years after he was removed by the whirlwind and replaced by Elisha. God had chosen Elisha to succeed Elijah as His prophet, so He bodily removed Elijah to another place, where he continued to live for at least several more years—as his letter to Jehoram demonstrates.

The Bible tells us nothing more about Elijah's life following his writing of the letter. But he eventually died, just like the other prophets and righteous men of the Old Testament, who all died in faith, not yet receiving the eternal life God had promised (Hebrews 11:39). Again, a careful reading of the Scriptures shows that Elijah's miraculous removal by a fiery chariot involved transporting him to another location on earth, not to eternal life in heaven.

Are There Saved Human Beings in Heaven?

In Revelation 19:1, relaying what he experienced in a spiritual vision, the apostle John states, "After these things I heard a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, 'Alleluia! Salvation and glory and honor and power to the Lord our God!'"

Must the great multitude praising God here be throngs of saved human beings now living in heaven? Have any human beings ever ascended to heaven?

The popular teaching is that when Christians die they immediately go to heaven, where they take up residence in their permanent abode. But can we find such a teaching in the Bible? To understand the truth on any biblical teaching, we must consider all the passages on a subject. When we do, the truth then usually becomes clear. We must also look at plain biblical statements and passages first, and from them understand the meaning of those that are less clear.

Notice one such clear statement in John 3:13: "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man [Jesus Christ] who is in heaven." John

wrote these words decades after Jesus died and ascended to heaven—and well after many of Christ’s followers had died—but he still affirmed that no one other than Jesus had gone to heaven.

Whose voices, then, could John have been hearing when he recorded in the book of Revelation what he heard and saw? He refers to voices many places in the book. Let’s notice one example in particular:

“Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!’” (Revelation 5:11-12). So there are at least hundreds of millions of angels, and the voices in Revelation 19 could well be theirs.

Moreover, we should remember that John in the book of Revelation was receiving a vision of the future—with Revelation 19 concerning events at the time of Christ’s return and the resurrection of His followers. Even if verse 1 were referring to saved human beings appearing briefly before God in heaven and praising Him at that time (just after their resurrection), this would not mean that they are doing so today.

Indeed, those who have died are still dead and in the grave—unconscious and unable to praise God (Psalm 6:5; 30:9; Isaiah 38:18). Scripture, as we have seen, shows that no human being except Jesus Christ has ever entered heaven, and that remains so today. The voices referred to in Revelation 19, then, cannot be those of saved human beings now in heaven.

The Thief on the Cross

As Jesus Christ hung dying, He told a convicted criminal being crucified with Him, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Many people think Jesus assured the man he would go to heaven with Him that very day. But is this really what He meant?

The placement of the comma after “you” and before “today” would certainly seem to indicate this. However, notice how an entirely different meaning is conveyed if the comma is placed after “today” rather than before: “Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise.”

No punctuation in the original Bible texts

We need to first understand that original texts of the Bible (Greek for the New Testament and Hebrew and some Aramaic for the Old Testament) used no punctuation.

As Dr. E.W. Bullinger explains in The Companion Bible: “None of our modern marks of punctuation are found [in Bible texts] until the ninth century...The punctuation of all modern editions of the Greek text, and of all versions made from it, rests entirely on human authority, and has no weight whatever in determining or even influencing the interpretation of a single passage” (1990, Appendix 94, p. 136, emphasis in original).

In most cases translators and publishers of the Bible have done an admirable job using punctuation to clarify the meaning of the Scriptures. But this is one case where their doctrinal bias has regrettably obscured the meaning of Christ’s words. By placing a comma before “today” in Christ’s statement to the dying man rather than after it, they have Jesus saying something He never intended.

We know this because the Bible clearly says Jesus Himself did not go to paradise or heaven on the day He died! Instead He died and was buried in the grave. Notice the apostle Paul’s clear statement in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”

Notice what Christ told Mary soon after He had been resurrected: “Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father” (John 20:17). A full three days after His death, Jesus Himself clearly said that He had not yet ascended to heaven.

Jesus had earlier plainly said that He would lie in the grave for three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40). The Scriptures nowhere say that His body was buried while His soul went elsewhere. Jesus died and was buried. He went only to the grave. Therefore the dying criminal could not have been with Jesus in heaven that day, because Jesus Himself did not go there then.

If Jesus was not telling the man he would be in heaven or paradise on that day, what was He telling him?

Continued on https://sightedmoon.com/sightedmoon_2015/?page_id=534