

The Meaning of the Eighth Day Feast – Part 4 – Heaven

sightedmoon.com/the-meaning-of-the-eighth-day-feast-pt-4-heaven/

By Joseph F. Dumond

December 8, 2014



News Letter 5850-036

5th day of the 9th month 5850 years after the creation of Adam

The 9th Month in the Fifth year of the Third Sabbatical Cycle

The Third Sabbatical Cycle of the 119th Jubilee Cycle

The Sabbatical Cycle of Earthquakes, Famines and Pestilence

November 29, 2014,

Shabbat Shalom to my fellow Kings and Priests in training,

All those who believe and keep the Torah no matter what nationality or what color of your skin is, are a part of Israel, either natural born descendants or grafted in by adoption. All of us striving to be part of that first resurrection. To all of you welcome once again to our study of the Eighth Day Feast we are commanded to keep.

Grafted olive-tree-of-israel

Grafted Tree menorah

Preamble to this week's Study

I want to just remind you all of what we have covered thus far in our study of this Eighth Day Feast.

Firstly that Yehshua kept it as we are told in John 10:22 and that this Eighth Day Feast was also known as the Feast of Dedication which came at the end of Sukkot. Although dedication means Chanukah in Hebrew, this day was in no way connected to the feast currently known as the Feast of Chanukah kept around Christmas (The false feast of Hanukkah is about 20 Days from now).

Next you learned about that in order to understand this Feast Day you had to ask for wisdom, knowledge and understanding in order to gain the righteousness you need to be in the Kingdom. All of this is given to you as you obey the commandment and this is how we show Yehovah we love Him, by keeping the commandments. These are the laws of that Kingdom, which you are as a Priest are going to teach, or as a King you're going to enforce those laws.

Next you were shown that Yehovah desires to dwell with us. But we must keep the rules of the Kingdom which are the Ten Commandments. We are to put sin out of our lives in order to be a part of that Kingdom as shown to us in the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Yehshua was the first fruit to come back to life from the grave defeating Satan who had the power of death and the grave until that time. The 24 elders are part of those first fruits who were once human beings on this earth and came out of the grave when Yehshua did as we read in Matthew 27. This is represented by the barley wave offering each year. The 7 days of Unleavened Bread are represented in the 7 millennial days leading up to the 8th Day Feast or the 8th Millennium. The 7 Millennium of man putting sin out of our existence.

The First Day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread we likened to when Adam was killed for sinning on the first millennial day in the same way the first born of Egypt died on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread otherwise known as Passover night.

The Seventh Day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread is represented by the time when the Egyptian armies were destroyed when the frozen walls of water came crashing back down on them after Israel had crossed over the Red Sea. This represents the time at the end of the 7th millennium when Satan will be cast into the lake of fire along with the grave and death after all of those who are going to keep the Torah also known as the Holy Spirit represented by the water cross over from sin in Egypt under Satan to rule under Yehovah.

The 7th Day weekly Sabbath is then compared to the 7th Millennial Rest. Again in all of this we are learning about the 8th Day Feast.

Last week we had to stop our teachings about the Holy Days in comparing them to the millenniums and address the false teachings about hell which cloud and confuse people about

the Eighth Day Feast. Once you remove these false teachings from your mind, then the truth will be more readily visible and the Eighth Day Feast more plain to understand.

Heaven and Hell go hand in hand and the false teachings about you going to heaven abound just as they do for you going to hell. Once again Satan is confusing the truth of Yehovah's plan of Salvation in order to keep you from being a part of it. This week we are going to look at Heaven and whether or not you or anyone goes there. Once we remove the false teachings, only then can we understand the truth of the Eighth Day Feast and the awesomeness of Yehovah.

Heaven will you be there?

Is Heaven God's Reward for the Righteous?

If heaven is the reward for good people, why does the Bible reveal so little about what they will do there for eternity? Could it be that this isn't our reward at all and that God has something far different in mind?

Is the reward of the righteous an eternity in heaven? It seems almost four out of five Americans believe it is (*National Review*, Nov. 9, 1998). Through the centuries this has been the hope taught by traditional Christianity.

What would going to heaven be like? What would we do there for all eternity? More fundamentally, does the Bible actually present heaven as the reward of those who are saved?

Human imaginings about heaven

Beliefs about heaven as the reward of the saved have varied considerably through the centuries. Traditional pictures of heaven sometimes show an entrance with a rainbow arching over it, perhaps marked by a bridge of gold or glass. St. Peter is usually represented as the doorkeeper. The inhabitants are shown accompanied by angels, or they may appear as angels themselves, having apparently sprouted a pair of wings.

Another common view in the popular consciousness has the inhabitants sitting about on clouds plucking harps. The decor of heaven often features jewels, stars, candles and trumpets. Theologians and philosophers have adapted their concepts of heaven through the centuries, influenced by the society around them. "Monks and friars, depending on whether they felt more at home in the countryside or in the city, preached a heaven defined primarily in terms of environment" (Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 1988, p. 108).

Based in part on their own experiences and

Angel on harp

preferences, some religious teachers have foreseen a rural setting while others have imagined an urban paradise. For the latter, “heaven became a city...or the visionary experience of celestial castles. Accounts of the other world resonate with descriptions of golden streets, jeweled buildings, and richly dressed residents” (ibid.).

Some in the Renaissance era envisioned a spicier paradise: “In its boldest form, the new theology envisioned heaven as a place of erotic human love in the bucolic setting of a comfortable natural landscape” (ibid., p. 112).

An eternity in heaven doing what?

The relationship the heavenly inhabitants might have with God has been debated. A modern author describes the way many people have imagined interaction with God in heaven: “There the saints shall eternally, without interruption, feast their eyes upon Him, and be ever viewing His glorious perfections” (John MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven*, 1996, p. 221).

Others believe that, if this is all they are to do forever, heaven may prove to be a pretty boring place. As the same writer just quoted from puts it, the prayer of many could be: “Please God, don’t take me to heaven yet...I haven’t even been to Hawaii!” (p. 49).

The modern Christian concepts of heaven present a diverse landscape. Another writer says: “I have a theory that heaven will offer faithful Christians whatever they sacrificed on earth for Jesus’ sake. My mountain-climbing friend who intentionally lives in a slum area of Chicago will have Yosemite Valleys all to himself. A missionary doctor in the parched land of Sudan will have her own private rain forest to explore” (Philip Yancey, “What’s a Heaven For?” *Christianity Today*, Oct. 26, 1998).

For many people the most important aspect of heaven is the opportunity to see their loved ones again: “By far the most persuasive element of the modern heaven for many contemporary Christians is the hope of meeting the family again. Countless ‘in memoriam’ sections of newspapers throughout Europe and America reflect the belief that families parted by death will be reunited” (McDannell and Lang, p. 309).

Heaven We meet

Heaven we meet soldier

God does have a plan that will reunite loved ones, as we will see. But the popular ideas of heaven fall far short of capturing the majesty and purpose of God’s plan.

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.

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.

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.

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 stair way to heaven that if it was the fate of the god Osiris to be resurrected after death, then a way could be

stairw to heaven 2

found to make it the fate of man, too...The bliss of immortality that had formerly been

stairw to heaven 3

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

Osiris Stairway to heaven

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"

Many have assumed from Paul's words in Philippians 1:23-24 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?

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

Elijah in the whirlwind-007

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.

Was Enoch Taken to Heaven?

Some people believe Genesis 5:24 and Hebrews 11:5 declare that God took Enoch to heaven. But is that what these verses say?

Genesis 5:24 tells us that "Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him." Hebrews 11:5 adds: "By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, 'and was not found, because God had taken him'; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God."

Some erroneously jump to the conclusion that Enoch was taken up into heaven, but notice the Bible nowhere says this. It simply says that God "took him." It does not specify *where* he was taken.

Jesus Christ later states in the Gospel of John that "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). One of the points He makes is that one passage of the Bible cannot contradict another passage.

This same Gospel of John reveals a startling fact very pertinent to this matter: “*No one* has ascended to heaven *but He who came down from heaven*, that is, *the Son of Man* who is in heaven” (John 3:13).

Clearly, Jesus Christ was the only human being who had ascended into heaven. The phrase “who is in heaven” lets us know that this was written by the apostle John after Christ’s return to heaven. So even as late as this statement, no human being—and that includes Enoch—had ascended into heaven.

We later read about Enoch’s faith in Hebrews 11:5: “By faith Enoch was taken away *so that he did not see death, ‘and was not found*, because God had taken him’; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God.” The word rendered “taken” can also mean “transferred elsewhere.” And the New American Standard Bible says this was done “so that he *would not* see death”—a better translation than “did not,” as we know from the same chapter of Hebrews that he died.

Notice in verse 13 the summary given of all of the men and women of faith listed here, including Enoch: “*These all died* in faith, *not having received the promises*, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13). So Enoch definitely died as well as all the rest.

How, then, can it be that Enoch was transferred elsewhere so he wouldn’t see death? God doesn’t give us all the details of what happened, but a few scenarios have been proposed that do not conflict with the fact that Enoch died as the Bible says.

It may be that God transported Enoch elsewhere to keep him from being killed at a certain time—perhaps protecting him from martyrdom at the hands of angry persecutors who didn’t like his announcement of coming divine judgment (see Jude 14-16). God likewise supernaturally transported Elijah and Philip to other places on earth (see 2 Kings 2:11; Acts 8:39).

On the other hand, we should observe that Enoch died young for his time—at age 365 while those before and after him lived into their 800s and 900s. Because of this, some speculate that God “took him” from life prematurely so that he would not have to live out his remaining centuries in a miserable world (compare Isaiah 57:1-2). His next moment of consciousness will be the resurrection. In this case, “so that he would not see death” would refer to his not having to experience the process of dying—his life ending instantly.

Still others, putting the likelihood of Enoch experiencing persecution together with his early death, have concluded that Enoch was murdered—martyred for his preaching. Enoch being taken and not found would then refer to God removing his body and burying it—as happened with Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5-6).

In this case, Enoch being taken or transferred so that he would not see death is taken as separate matter—that of him being spiritually converted, transferred from the world’s ways to God’s way of living, so that he would not see ultimate death in the lake of fire (compare Colossians 1:13; John 8:51).

Again, we don't have enough details to know exactly what is intended. But we do know that Enoch did not skip death and go to heaven. He died, and no human being has ascended to heaven except Jesus Christ.

The Thief on the Cross

(We leave this in here for you to consider. We provide another explanation in next week's News Letter).

Many people think Jesus assured the thief on the cross that he would go to heaven with Him that very day. But is this really what Jesus Christ meant?

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?

Future Kingdom and paradise on earth

A fundamental principle for sound Bible study is to carefully check the context. Notice the specific wording of the man’s request: “Lord, remember me *when You come into Your kingdom*” (Luke 23:42). Notice that the thief expressed no expectation of immediately going to heaven with Jesus at the moment they died.

He may have already known something about the nature of the Kingdom of God—that it would be a literal kingdom to be established on earth by the Messiah, which many Jews of that day understood. Jesus Himself had previously given an entire parable “because they thought that the kingdom of God would immediately appear” (Luke 19:11). Jesus also taught His disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come” (Luke 11:2). This Kingdom, is the Kingdom that Jesus will establish *on earth at His return*, not a location in heaven to which we go when we die.

Notice also Jesus’ response to the man, telling him, “...you will be with Me *in Paradise*.” Understanding the nature of the biblical use of the term *paradise* is crucial to understanding this passage.

The Greek word here translated “paradise,” *paradeisos*, means an enclosed garden or park. In the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament in common use at the time of Christ, this same word was used in references to the Garden of Eden. Besides its occurrence in Luke 23, the word is used only two other times in the New Testament. In both cases it refers to the place of God’s presence.

In 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 Paul describes a *vision* in which he “was caught up into Paradise.” Paul says this paradise was in “the third heaven”—the dwelling place of God.

Jesus tells us that “the tree of life” is located “in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7). Revelation 22:2 explains that the tree of life is to be in the New Jerusalem. God will come *from heaven* with this New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2-3) after the resurrections of the dead mentioned in Revelation 20. Only at that time will men dwell with God in this paradise.

Furthermore, the restoration of the land of Israel that will take place under the coming reign of

Christ is compared in Isaiah 51:3 to the Garden of Eden—again, *paradeisos* in the Septuagint.

Putting together all these scriptures, we can see that the paradise Christ mentioned, in which men will dwell with God in His Kingdom, is to be *at a future time*.

How do we know this was Christ’s meaning? Again, as noted above, Jesus plainly said He was going to be dead and buried for the following three days and nights, after which He clearly told Mary that He had not yet ascended to heaven.

Some theologians and religious denominations try to redefine Christ’s use of *paradise* to say that this referred to where the righteous dead went before Jesus came—a sort of temporary “holding place” next to hell because heaven wasn’t available to them until Christ ascended to heaven after His death and opened the way for them to follow.

This concept, however, is straight out of pagan Greek mythology about life after death (the Elysian Fields as the section of the Greek underworld for good people) and not something taught in the Bible. The idea that the righteous dead of Old Testament times went to a place called “paradise” and later ascended to heaven after Jesus was resurrected is disproved by the apostle Peter’s plain statements in Acts 2:29 and 34—almost two months after Christ’s death and resurrection —that King David “is both dead and buried” and “David *did not* ascend into the heavens.”

Putting together the relevant scriptures, we can see here the truth of the matter. The robber, facing imminent death while being crucified alongside Jesus (Luke 23:39-41), sought comfort and assurance. Jesus provided it, telling the man, “Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise.” The “Paradise” of which Jesus spoke wasn’t heaven, but the Eden-like world to which the man would be resurrected according to God’s plan—as touched on later in this booklet.

Hebrew idiom lost in translation

Part of His reply, “Assuredly I say to you today” was a “common Hebrew idiom...which is constantly used for very solemn emphasis” (*The Companion Bible*, Appendix 173, p. 192). Examples of this Hebrew phrase, worded very similarly to Christ’s statement, can be found in Deuteronomy 30:18 (“I announce to you today that you shall surely perish”) and Acts 20:26 (“Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men”—New International Version).

Many centuries later, when the punctuation marks we see in our English versions were inserted, Jesus’ meaning was distorted by the wrong placement of the comma, and this Hebrew figure of speech was obscured. (Several other Bible translations and reference works, among them the Rotherham Translation, *The Emphatic Diaglott*, The Concordant Literal New Testament and *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*, recognize the Hebrew idiom and correctly place the comma after “today” for proper punctuation.)

In conclusion, Jesus never said nor implied that the dying man would be in paradise or heaven on that very day. Christ was encouraging him by solemnly assuring him that a time would come, in God's future Kingdom on earth, when the man would be resurrected and would see Jesus again.

This dramatic event can be properly understood only when we comprehend the time frame of God's plan of salvation and the promised resurrections described in the Bible.

(again we have a different understanding which we will share with you next week. Then you be the judge of the two.)

Are There Saved Human Beings in 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? Have any human beings ever ascended to 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 Resurrection: God’s Promise of Life after Death

The Bible clearly teaches that the dead will be raised in a resurrection. But if their souls have already gone to heaven or hell at death, what’s the point? Could it be that popular beliefs don’t agree with the Bible?

If a man dies, shall he live again?” (Job:14:14). This question has intrigued the minds of men from ancient times to our day.

In the Bible God inspired the patriarch Job not only to pose this important question but to give us the answer. Responding to God, Job says: “All the days of [or from] my hard service I will wait, *till my change comes*. You shall call, and I will answer You; You shall desire the work of Your hands” (Job:14:14-15). Job affirmed that the dead *will* live again through a resurrection.

Other passages in the Old Testament also affirm the resurrection. Daniel:12:2, for example, prophesies of a time yet future when “many of those *who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake ...*”

But the way to eternal life was not fully understood in those days. It remained for Christ to come and fully reveal the truth. Jesus states: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live” (John:11:25). It is through Christ that we can experience our own resurrection from the dead. “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive” (1 Corinthians:15:22).

Let’s delve further into this matter of the resurrection. What is the impact of this teaching? And what lies ahead in terms of who will be resurrected and when?

More than a glimmer of hope

The teaching of the good news of the resurrection—that man can escape the power of the grave—set Christianity apart from other first-century religions and philosophies. Among Jewish sects the concept of a resurrection was a subject of controversy. Some dogmatically denied the dead would rise, and others said they would (Acts:23:8).

The world in which Jesus lived, besides being Jewish, was heavily influenced by the culture of the two empires—Greek and Roman—that had successively dominated the region for several centuries. The Greek and Roman religions held little hope for the dead.

“The old Greek belief, and its Roman counterpart, held that once the body was dead the disembodied soul lived in a miserable twilight existence...Sadness, silence and hopelessness seemed to brood over the life after death...Death was to men of those days the ultimate disaster” (J.B. Phillips, *Ring of Truth: A Translator’s Testimony*, 1967, pp. 40-41).

The *New Bible Dictionary* affirms the dreary outlook of the day and tells us that the resurrection of Christ gave men more than a glimmer of hope. “The most startling characteristic of the first Christian preaching is its emphasis on the resurrection. The first preachers were sure that Christ had risen, and sure, in consequence, that believers would in due course rise also. This set them off from all the other teachers of the ancient world...Nothing is more characteristic of even the best thought of the day than its hopelessness in the face of death. Clearly the resurrection is of the very first importance for the Christian faith” (1996, p. 1010, “Resurrection”).

A truth that launched the Church

The riveting truth of the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah launched the New Testament Church. Preaching on the day of the Church’s founding, as recorded in Acts 2, the apostle Peter thundered the good news:

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; *whom God raised up*, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it” (Acts:2:22-24).

The news of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth spread like a shock wave through the land. Jesus’ disciples were galvanized into action and began to preach with zeal. What had been regarded as a band of renegade Jews soon grew into the thriving Church.

In its early days the Church grew by thousands (Acts:2:41; 4:4). The young Church spread hope—hope of eternal life through the resurrection. The disciples taught under God’s

inspiration that all who accept Jesus as their personal Savior, repent, are baptized and receive the Holy Spirit will be resurrected (compare Acts:2:38; Romans:8:11).

The resurrection the disciples expected was not some sort of substandard half-life, such as the Greeks and Romans believed lay beyond the grave. The disciples were called to “take hold of the life that is *truly* life” (1 Timothy:6:19, NIV).

Jesus had told them before He was crucified, “Because I live, you will live also” (John:14:19). Jesus had also shared with His disciples His intention for all of mankind: “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John:10:10). Though we may enter into the abundant life of which Christ spoke in this life, it reaches its full realization in the resurrection from the dead.

The resurrection gives meaning to life

The first-century world held many conflicting ideas about life after death. Pagan philosophies had clouded the understanding of most people.

Our situation is similar. In the Western world a significant number of people believe nothing lies beyond the grave. Atheism and agnosticism have left their marks. The world needs to hear and understand the original resurrection message of Christ and the apostles.

Many people, like those of the ancient world, are anxious about the matter of death. The truth of the resurrection proclaimed by God’s Word can counter the anxiety and hopelessness inherent in any approach that excludes God.

Speaking of the return of Christ and the accompanying resurrection of the faithful, Paul encourages believers to “*comfort one another with these words*” (1 Thessalonians:4:18). The truth of the resurrection provides comfort for our natural anxiety about death.

The resurrection: historical fact

Why should we believe in a resurrection from the dead? We should take heart because the resurrection of Christ, in whose steps we follow, is a biblically and historically confirmed *fact*.

After being executed and entombed, Jesus’ body disappeared, and even His enemies who wanted to refute His resurrection could not explain away the empty tomb. Jesus’ resurrection was confirmed by many witnesses—including on one occasion 500 people (1 Corinthians:15:6). Peter, speaking on behalf of all the apostles, triumphantly proclaimed, “We are His *witnesses* to these things”—to the fact that “the God of our fathers *raised up Jesus*” (Acts:5:30-32).

Years later Paul similarly said of Jesus that “God raised Him from the dead [and] *He was seen for many days* by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are *His*

witnesses to the people” (Acts:13:30-31). The apostles and other members of the early Church gave *their lives* as willing martyrs for this truth—for they knew for certain that it was indeed the truth.

Every person in his own order

The fact that Jesus was resurrected as a forerunner of the future resurrection of His followers is understood by many Bible readers. What is not so clear to many is that the Bible describes *more than one* future resurrection.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes: “But now, Christ is risen from the dead, the *first-fruit* of those who have fallen asleep . . . For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ *all* will be made alive.

But each in his own order; Christ the first-fruits, then those who belong to Christ at his appearing. And then the end, when he shall hand over his kingdom to God his Father” (verses 20-24, Montgomery New Testament).

The reference to firstfruits indicates that *other* fruits are to follow—Jesus here followed by those who are His at His return. Paul specifies that God has set an order in His plan by which He will bring up everyone—“all,” as it says—in a resurrection. And in this order, not everyone will be resurrected *at the same time*.

Notice that Jesus is here called the firstfruits. Yet His followers are elsewhere called firstfruits themselves—and firstborn (James:1:18; Revelation:14:4; Hebrews:12:23). Thus Christ is the first of the firstfruits. The implication is that yet others will follow as later fruits—at “the end,” as we saw in 1 Corinthians:15:24. And other scriptures confirm that, as we will see.

Those who believe that people go to heaven or hell at death have been troubled at the indications they see in Scripture that comparatively few will be saved. They frequently base this assumption on such passages as Matthew:7:13-14: “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

In these verses Jesus explains what happens in “this present evil age” (Galatians:1:4), in which

God is not calling everyone to be converted *now*. We read in Revelation:12:9 that Satan “deceives the whole world.” John writes, “We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 John:5:19).

Mankind as a whole is deceived— *for the time being*. Jesus states, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John:6:44). Jesus plainly indicates here that only certain ones will be in the resurrection to which He refers—those who are specifically called by God. The Bible teaches that in this particular age—the

age preceding the return of Christ—God is calling only a small portion of mankind to enter and partake of His Kingdom.

“This is the first resurrection”

The coming resurrection of those who are called now in this age is further described in the 20th chapter of Revelation.

Let’s notice how John describes that resurrection: “I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. *They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.* (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) *This is the first resurrection.*”

“Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years” (Revelation:20:4-6, NIV). Notice that some are resurrected at the beginning of the 1,000-year reign of Christ—at “the first resurrection.” Those in this resurrection of the faithful will be raised immortal and incorruptible to reign with Him, never to die from then on.

But notice that the use of the term *first resurrection* shows that at least one more must follow!

Another resurrection follows

Indeed, as we can see, the same passage explains in a parenthetical note, “The *rest* of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.” Clearly there is another resurrection 1,000 years *after* the first, and in this resurrection *others* will have the opportunity to receive salvation. They will be called to understand God’s truth and His plan during a period sometimes referred to as the “great white throne” judgment (verse 11).

This time of judgment is further described in verse 12: “And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.”

Those resurrected in this group have never completely understood the truth of God. Consider that *the majority of all people who have ever lived have never heard God’s truth.* Rather than condemn such people to eternal suffering in a fiery hell, the God of the Bible is much more comforting and encouraging. He will extend the opportunity for eternal life *to everyone* —to relatively few in this age, but to billions of people in the coming second or general resurrection.

Judgment is much more than a final decision to reward or condemn. Judgment is a *process* that takes place over time before a final decision is rendered. Those brought to a temporary, physical life again in this resurrection (see Ezekiel:37:1-14) will, for the *first* time, have their

minds opened to the truth of God's plan. They will have the opportunity to decide whether they will accept and follow God's instruction or not.

After coming to see the truth, they will be judged according to their response to their new understanding. Many will accept that truth, repent and receive God's gift of eternal life—joining those made immortal in the first resurrection.

Past generations will be resurrected together

Jesus Himself spoke of this second resurrection period when He said that even the sinners of the long-destroyed city of Sodom would have the opportunity to repent in a future judgment. As He sent His disciples out on a mission to preach the gospel (Matthew:10:9-14), He told them that some they would encounter would reject their message. Of these Jesus said, "Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city" (Matthew:10:15).

That there is room for tolerance in that day toward Sodom and Gomorrah shows they will have opportunity to repent and enter God's Kingdom. This is because, when they formerly lived, they either never had opportunity to know God or His way or never fully understood what they heard. The time for their calling and judgment is *yet future*. This is not a *second* chance for salvation, as some might view it. Rather, this will be their *first* chance—their first opportunity to act on a clear understanding of God's truth.

In a similar example, Jesus said the long-dead people of the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh and the biblical "queen of the South" from Solomon's time "will rise up in the judgment" alongside those from Christ's generation (Matthew:12:41-42). The people from those generations had lived and died many centuries earlier, never having understood the true God or His plan to offer eternal life through His Son Jesus the Messiah.

Having great mercy toward all people, God will offer salvation to all who lived and died in all ages without ever really knowing Him. The Bible tells us that God does not play favorites (Acts:10:34; Romans:2:11). He calls all at the time that is appropriate for them, and eventually all will be given the same wonderful opportunity to receive His gift of salvation.

Evidence of a third resurrection

Other scriptures indicate that a third group, the wicked who refuse to accept God and His way of life, will be resurrected just before final destruction in the lake of fire.

Jesus explained that some would deliberately and knowingly despise God's truth and spiritual understanding. These individuals, He said, will not be forgiven "either in this age or in the age to come" (Matthew:12:31-32).

Yet "*all* who are in the graves will hear [Christ's] voice and come forth" (John:5:28-29). Even those who will not be forgiven are to be resurrected from the dead.

This group will consist of those who have deliberately rejected God's way of life even after they have been "once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit" (Hebrews:6:4-6). These few are people who were once forgiven and converted but later chose to reject the Holy Spirit and priceless knowledge God gave to them.

Because they "trampled the Son of God under foot,...treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and...insulted the Spirit of grace," for them "no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (Hebrews:10:26-29, NIV).

As we saw earlier, God has revealed that the ultimate fate of the incorrigibly wicked is to be burned up: "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,' says the LORD of hosts, 'That will leave them neither root nor branch'" (Malachi:4:1).

This will be the end for those few who stubbornly have or will have refused to repent of their own self-willed rebellion in spite of all the opportunities made available to them by God. They will be destroyed in the lake of fire, dying in "the second death," from which there will be no resurrection (Revelation:20:13-14; Revelation:21:8).

We are even told that death itself and hades (the grave) will be destroyed in this fire (Revelation:20:14). That is because the judgment of God will then be complete. Those who are saved will never again have to fear death. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians:15:26 will have then come to pass: "The last enemy that will be destroyed is death."

Your Awesome Future

A careful study of the Scriptures reveals major problems with popular beliefs about life after death. Sadly, these misguided ideas have masked the truth about the incredible future God has planned for us!

In light of these biblical truths, where does that leave us? As we have seen, the beliefs of people about the nature of heaven and hell have ranged over a broad—and confusing—spectrum. But there is one thing on which we all should agree: "The living know that they will die" (Ecclesiastes:9:5).

The prospect of death has hung over the heads of mankind as long as human beings have existed. When people do not understand God's truth, they are gripped by the fear of death and enslaved in a cruel and unforgiving bondage.

The Expositor's Bible Commentary summarizes how the truth of the resurrection, exemplified in the resurrection of Christ, transformed the outlook of many: "In the first century this [fear of death] was very real. The philosophers urged people to be calm in the face of death, and some of them managed to do so. But to most people this brought no relief. Fear was widespread, as

the hopeless tone of the inscriptions on tombs clearly illustrates. But one of the many wonderful things about the Christian gospel is that it delivers men and women from this fear... They are saved with a sure hope of life eternal, a life whose best lies beyond the grave” (Leon Morris, 1981, Vol. 12, p. 29, note on Hebrews:2:14-15).

The Bible reveals that the best that man can experience lies beyond the grave. It shows us that converted Christians will inherit eternal life at the first resurrection and that death will never again lay a claim on them: “So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (1 Corinthians:15:54).

The life to come will be vastly superior to this present, temporary existence. It will be a life abounding in both purpose and pleasure: “In your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore,” wrote David (Psalm:16:11).

Let us now catch a glimpse of what awaits those who receive eternal life in the first resurrection.

What will we be like?

We can know in general terms what we will be like in this resurrection because the Bible tells us we will be like the resurrected Jesus. “The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven...And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man” (1 Corinthians:15:47, 49).

We learn that in the resurrection we will take on the same image, or likeness, that Christ has. This includes becoming a spirit being with a spirit body rather than flesh and blood (see verses 45, 50).

Moreover, Paul tells us that true Christians will “share the likeness of his Son,” who is “the eldest among a large family of brothers” (Romans:8:29, Revised English Bible). Did you catch that? We will be Jesus’ brothers and share His likeness. Though Christ has eternally existed and we have not, we will be elevated to a plane so high that we are called *children of God* and *brothers of Jesus Christ*.

The apostle John confirms these same two truths—that we’ll be children of God and that we’ll have the same glorified form as Jesus Christ. “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us,” he writes, “that we should be called *children of God*” (1 John:3:1). And in the next verse he tells us, “We know that when He is revealed, *we shall be like Him*, for we shall see Him as He is.”

Raised in unimaginable splendor, we will share the divine glory and dominion of Christ (Romans:8:16-18; 2 Corinthians:3:18; 2 Thessalonians:2:14; Hebrews:1:1-3; 2:59; Revelation:21:7)—though we will never equal Him. He is the one Son of God who has always existed, superior to all but the Father.

The glory of Christ

What is the glory of Christ like? During His physical ministry on earth, He gave three of His disciples a preview of His appearance in this glorified spiritual state. “He was transfigured...His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light” (Matthew:17:2).

Years later, at the writing of the book of Revelation, John saw a vision of the resurrected, glorified Christ. Notice how John describes His awesome appearance: “His hair was as white as snow-white wool, and his eyes flamed like fire; his feet were like burnished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of a mighty torrent...His face shone like the sun in full strength” (Revelation:1:14-16, REB).

This language describes Jesus Christ, the glorified Son of God, as a being of awe-inspiring brilliance. We, too, will share that dazzling appearance!

After His resurrection Jesus had the ability to take on the appearance He had when He existed in the flesh. Early on the morning after He rose from the garden tomb, Mary Magdalene visited His grave. When she saw the tomb was empty, she began to weep (John:20:11).

Then “Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?’ She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, ‘Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away’” (verse 15). So Jesus appeared to Mary as a normal human being rather than in His radiant state. She at first mistook Him for the gardener.

On another occasion Jesus appeared from nowhere inside a closed room where His disciples were meeting: “And after eight days His disciples were again inside...Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, ‘Peace to you!’” (John:20:26). After His resurrection Jesus was able to pass through solid barriers—such as the walls of a building or the stone enclosure of His tomb.

Like Jesus, when we are changed to spirit we will not be limited by the laws that govern physical things. With the ability to simply materialize as Jesus did, we will not be subject to restrictions on physical objects. As part of this change we will no longer need to eat to survive, but apparently will have the option of eating for pleasure and fellowship if we choose. In two of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances He shared a meal with His disciples (Luke:24:28-30; John:21:9-15).

Those to whom God gives eternal life in the resurrection will forever possess these supernatural characteristics. Notice the description of the resurrection in the book of Daniel: “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise *will shine like the brightness of the heavens*, and those who lead many to righteousness, *like the stars for ever and ever*”(Daniel:12:2-3, NIV).

To better understand just what all this means, be sure to read our free booklet [What Is Your Destiny?](#)

What will we do as spirit beings?

As spirit beings in God's family, we will live and work at the highest possible level and environment. Jesus said, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John:17:3). We will spend eternity with God in His environment—the world of spirit and unimaginable power. We will not sit idle in our new life. We will be positively occupied. Jesus said, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working" (John:5:17).

When Christ returns to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, those in the first resurrection will serve as judges (Revelation:20:4) and priests (verse 6) and will "reign on the earth" (Revelation:5:10). We will not go to heaven to live passively and idly.

Jesus will return to a world that has largely destroyed itself by living in opposition to the commands of its Creator. He will teach people to obey God's laws. He will begin a massive reeducation process to help people *un*learn their old ways of doing things and for the first time learn to do things God's way.

Notice Isaiah's prophecy of this future rule of Jesus as Messiah and King over the earth, wherein "mountains" and "hills" are symbolic of larger and smaller kingdoms or political states respectively:

"Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, 'Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

"He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Isaiah:2:2-4).

At that time Christ will teach all people who have not known God's way. He will be assisted in this by all who are changed into glorified children of God in the resurrection at His return (see Luke:20:36).

If we enter that new life we will be endowed with great power and unlimited energy. As immortal members of God's family we will be like "the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, [who] neither faints nor is weary" (Isaiah:40:28).

A change for the better

Describing the event that will change our mortal bodies, Paul writes: “The sun has a splendor of its own, the moon another splendor, and the stars yet another; and one star differs from another in brightness. So it is with the resurrection of the dead: what is sown as a perishable thing *is raised imperishable*. Sown in humiliation, *it is raised in glory*; sown in weakness, *it is raised in power*; sown a physical body, *it is raised a spiritual body*” (1 Corinthians:15:41-44, REB).

God will give us bodies that will never tire nor grow ill—and minds having the kind of supernatural abilities He has. Reigning with Christ (Revelation:2:26; 3:21), we will help bring about worldwide peace. We will assist in spreading the knowledge of God to the most distant lands in His globe-spanning program of reeducation. “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain,” He tells us, “for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah:11:9).

Those changed at Christ’s return will include all His faithful followers at His return as well as the dead who were called, had repented and who lived in faithful obedience to God. It will include all of the faithful listed in Hebrews 11, who “died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (verse 13).

Those who died in faith include Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (verses 17-21). The promise they have not yet received is the promise of the Kingdom of God. As Jesus says, “I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew:8:11). Remember that the Kingdom of Heaven is synonymous with the Kingdom of God, which Christ will establish on earth at His return.

Responding to God’s invitation

You can be among those who arise from all parts of the world in the resurrection to be with Christ in His Kingdom— *if you respond to God’s invitation*. God is issuing that call through the preaching of the gospel. This very booklet you are reading is part of that effort.

The calling of God is not offered to everyone in this age. Jesus told His disciples that the understanding of God’s truth is not yet available to many: “It has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (Matthew:13:11).

The Bible speaks in several places about God’s “elect” or chosen people. They are called to understand these things now, in this present age, but the rest—the vast majority—will not be called until later.

Most of the people of Israel, God’s nation spoken of extensively in the Old Testament, were not called to understand the Kingdom of God during their lifetimes. Their hearts were hardened, their minds blinded. But the opportunity for most of them will come in the second resurrection. “Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded” (Romans:11:7).

Yet as Paul explains in this same chapter, the time is coming when “all Israel will be saved, as it is written: ‘The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob [i.e., Israel]’” (verse 26). God’s calling is carried out according to His timetable. When all is said and done, His plan is entirely fair to everyone.

Peter explains that those who now become a part of His Church are chosen in this age to receive salvation in the first resurrection. Peter says of them, “You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter:2:9).

The good news is that God eventually will offer eternal life to everyone who repents. He desires that everyone enter His Kingdom. He wants to share this opportunity for eternal life with all (2 Peter:3:9).

In a final, breathtaking view of what God has in store for those who serve Him, the apostle John was inspired to write this glimpse of the future in Revelation, the last book of the Bible: “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away...He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son” (Revelation:21:4, 7).

The future God has planned for us is fantastic beyond belief! It is far superior to the fanciful heaven of men’s imagination. God will share the real future with all who repent and turn from their sins. As for those who willfully refuse to repent, they will not suffer forever in hell. They will simply cease to be. But this need not happen to you.

You may share in the eternal Kingdom of God if you heed the words Jesus spoke when He began His ministry: “The time has come...The kingdom of God is near . *Repent and believe the good news!*” (Mark:1:15, NIV).

Take comfort in the truth of God. There is no need to fear death if you turn your life toward Him. After all, He wants you to live with Him in abundant joy forever and ever. And He’ll make that happen—if you let Him!