

## **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 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, jewelled 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).

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. (To better understand what the Scriptures teach about the Kingdom of God, be sure to read the 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 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!