

Summer 2019 Newsletter

Detroit Bible Students Ecclesia

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HEAVEN ?

***"The heavens are the heavens of the LORD,
But the earth He has given to the sons of men."***

Psalm 115:16 (NASB)

There have been many depictions of heaven provided by Hollywood — people sitting on ladders polishing stars, boarding a mystical ship on which their loved ones await, or standing at pearly gates. However, most representations merely show the deceased walking up into the clouds and the scene ends.

There are many questions regarding the heaven that Christians have been taught to expect after death. Does one arrive in heaven with the same appearance? If his body was maimed, is he given a new body? Will his family be able to recognize him? Will he be able to find family members or friends who have preceded him? Will he see the grief his family goes through at his funeral? Will he feel loneliness for the loved ones he had to leave behind? In heaven will he be able to enjoy the things he enjoyed on earth—bowling, golf, riding motorcycles? Will he be able to play touch football with Jesus? Is heaven like the earth but with streets of gold? Will everyone walk around in white robes and play harps or sing in a great choir all day forever?

Apart from the idea that heaven will mean sitting on clouds and playing harps, the questions people have about what they will be doing for eternity reflect their desire to hold on to the pleasurable things of their earthly life—being reunited with friends and family or being able to pursue some enjoyable hobby or activity. Even their concept of the appearance of heaven resembles earth. This is entirely understandable since mankind was created to live on the earth. The Apostle Paul wrote, "The first man [Adam] is of the

earth, earthy," (1 Corinthians 15:47) and God told him, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."(Genesis 1:28)

The earth was man's kingdom and the place in the universe specially designed for him. Humanity was created with all the renewable systems that would enable the race to live forever, but sin entered the world and Adam lost his life and with it the dominion of earth.

Although Adam was created a mortal being, God did not create him subject to death. Being mortal does not mean "dying." It means "able to die" but not necessarily "going to die." "Mortality" means that man's continued life is dependent on outside factors: air, food, water, and obedience to God's Law. Adam and Eve had the promise of eternal (everlasting) life if they obeyed and continued to obey. The Tree of Life would have kept them sustained forever.

Sin brought death into the world, and "just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." (Romans 5:12) Even in his apostolic office, the Apostle Paul did not suggest a change in this simple Genesis equation but confirms the original penalty for sin stated in the garden, "For the wages of sin is death." But, because "God so loved the world," he provided a miraculous hope through

Christ for life beyond the grave. "... But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (John 3:16; Romans 6:23) The Apostle Peter put the matter of salvation even more positively saying, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name [the name of Jesus] under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) All of Christendom once held this as a hard fact, but in our day the question is asked, "Do good, moral non-Christians have any chance to be saved if Jesus is the only avenue?"

In the 11th chapter of Hebrews, the Apostle Paul wishing to impress the Hebrew Christians with the great privilege they had in knowing Christ and the heavenly call, uses the prophets and faithful people of the Old Testament to illustrate true faith. After writing of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, to name just a few, he wrote, "These



all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth... wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God." Continuing, "Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.

They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. ... destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy ... all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised." (Hebrews 11:13, 16, 36-39, *English Standard Version*)

Jesus said, "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man." (John 3:13 *ESV*) Where does that leave all those faithful servants of God about whom Paul wrote? By this direct statement of Jesus, we learn that until Jesus' time, no one had gone to heaven. This means that none of the faithful servants of God who lived from Adam to Jesus are in heaven including John the Baptist of whom Jesus said, "Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." (Matthew 11:11)

According to traditional Christian dogma, when a person dies his body is buried but his soul goes to one of two places. Heaven or hell. [Catholics have a third option, not accepted by Protestants.] It is inconceivable to think that all these faithful ones of old would go to the hell that is preached in most churches, but Jesus' statement is clear that they had not gone to heaven. So, if these righteous men and women didn't go to heaven but were too good for hell, what did happen to them when they died?

The difficulty here lies in the failure to understand the nature of death, the penalty for sin. God did not create Adam under the curse of death. Death was the penalty for disobedience. Just as in our penal code, the ultimate punishment is the death sentence, so it was when God sentenced Adam. The penalty for sin is death! Absence of life. It does not mean life somewhere else or in some other form. God told Adam he would return to the dust. (Genesis 3:19) However, God already had a rescue plan in place. He told

Adam and Eve that although they and their family had been wounded by the Serpent Satan, one of their children—"the man Christ Jesus"—would one day deal him a death blow. (Genesis 3:15; Revelation 20:2; 1 Timothy 2:5,6)

There is no hint anywhere in Genesis that man possessed anything immortal that would live on after death. In fact, the words "immortal" and "immortality" do not even occur in the Old Testament. Even in the New Testament the only scriptures regarding immortality are regarding the reward for faithful overcoming. The idea that man has a soul that lives on after death arose from Satan's frontal attack on God's sovereignty with the lie, "You will not surely die."

Jesus called Satan "a liar from the beginning and the father of it." (John 8:44) The lie that death is not really death is the foundation of every life-after-death doctrine in every religion of man. Without it we would all realize that when we die, we would go out of existence except for the promise of a resurrection. But thanks be to God, because Jesus gave his life to take away the "sin" of the world, Adam's sin, annihilation has been turned into "sleep." (John 1:29)

The Bible is unambiguous. The ancients of the Old Testament are spoken of as "asleep" with their fathers. (1 Kings 2:10; 11:43; 14:20; 14:31, etc.) When Lazarus died, Jesus told his disciples "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." When his disciples misunderstood, thinking that he meant the healing sleep after a fever has broken, Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died." (John 11:11-14 *ESV*) In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-16 the Apostle Paul alternately refers to believers both as those "which sleep in Jesus" and the "dead in Christ." These are irrefutable authorities. We must be careful not to filter the words of the Lord and the Apostles through our own traditional biases.

Confusion regarding the promises of the Old Testament and those of the New also has led to the sort of questions with which this newsletter was opened. In order to understand the relationship of such promises as "every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree," and shall "long enjoy the work of his hands" (Micah 4:4; Isaiah 65:22) it is necessary to appreciate that there are heavenly promises for the followers of Christ and earthly promises for everyone else. That salvation is not only for disciples of Jesus today, but also for the yet unconverted world during Christ's kingdom, is confirmed by the statements of the Apostles. Paul wrote: "We trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe." (1 Timothy 4:10) The Apostle John called Jesus, "... the propitiation (satisfaction) for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:2)



Jesus said he did not come into the world to condemn the world because it was already condemned in Adam. He came to save the world. (John 3:17,18) By his sacrifice, Jesus purchased Adam's race for his own. Therefore, "As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." (1 Corinthians 15:22)

The promises recorded by Micah, Isaiah and all the prophets of old are of an earthly restoration for Israel and resurrected humanity, but not for Jesus' followers. For us, Jesus said he was going to prepare a new place in his Father's house on high. (John 14:2,3) The Apostle Paul called it "a new and living way" consecrated for us, through Jesus' flesh which he gave for the life of the world. (Hebrews 10:19,20; John 6:51) Until Jesus died as "the Lamb of God" to "take away the sin of the world," (John 1:29) heaven was not open to any of Adam's family.

Now we can understand why it is that from Genesis to Malachi there is not one suggestion of a heavenly or spiritual hope for any natural man. This present age, from the cross to the present, has been the time when God has been calling out from among men "a people for his name." (Acts 15:14; 1 Corinthians 1:26-29) To these belongs the promise that they will have part in "the first resurrection" and they will be "priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years." (Revelation 20:6) The scriptures call this a "high calling" or "heavenly calling." (Philippians 3:14; Hebrews 3:1)

These are also promised that by "patient continuance in well doing" their reward will be "glory and honor and immortality, eternal life." (Romans 2:7) In the resurrection, Paul said, "this mortal must put on immortality," because "flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God," (1 Corinthians 15:50,53) If the Scriptures say immortality is a reward and something that must be "put on" by mortal man, it is obviously not an inherent part of him.

Paul admonished the Corinthians, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves." (2 Corinthians 13:5) We all need to ask ourselves, "Why am I a Christian?" Is it because I was baptized when I was a baby? Is it because my family has always attended church? Is it because I fear hellfire? Or, have I made a conscious decision to follow Jesus? Do I love the Lord God with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my mind? (Matthew 22:37) Is my only desire to be with my Lord, not even knowing what heaven will be like, or do my hopes really reflect a yearning for a continuation of earthly things?

These are important soul-searching questions. The churches today rarely mention the cost of discipleship but being a "true Christian" is costly to the flesh. Our brethren of past ages often sealed their faith with their lives. Jesus said, "If any man come to me, and hate [*Gr. miseo, in the sense of relative disregard for them in comparison with his attitude toward God*] not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26,27 *Amplified Version*) "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." (Matthew 16:24,25)

The Bible makes no real attempt to describe heaven itself, nor its inhabitants except in symbols drawn from earth. Jesus knew that

humans could not comprehend heavenly things. He said to Nicodemus, "If I have told you of earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things?" (John 3:12) We are merely told that "God is a Spirit," "dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto, whom no man hath seen, nor can see." (John 4:24; 1 Tim. 6:16; Exodus 33:20-23) The most that His Word declares is that "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him." (1 Corinthians 2:9) John said the only thing we know about our future state is that "we shall be like him [Jesus]; for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2)

Paul referred to the difference between the hopes of the spirit-begotten Church, founded at Pentecost, and those of the faithful of the past, when he declared that although they had God's testimony to their faithfulness, nevertheless, they "received not the promise, God having **provided some better thing for us**, that they, **without us**, should not be made perfect." (Heb. 11:38-40) As soon as we get our "better thing," our higher reward of "glory, honor, and immortality," in joint-heirship with our Lord as kings and priests in His Kingdom then the worthy ones of ancient times will get their reward of resurrection to human perfection as "princes in all the earth" in Messiah's Kingdom. (Psa. 45:16) Then the rest of mankind will be brought out of their tombs to experience the blessings and instruction that will descend to the ignorant, superstitious world to help them walk up the "highway of holiness." (Zephaniah 3:9; Isaiah 26:9; 35:8) The Apostle Peter called this era, "the times of **restitution** of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of **all** his holy prophets since the world began." (Acts 3:21; 1 Peter 1:18-20)

Restitution means the return of something lost. The perfect earth and perfect human life were lost through sin, but when God's judgments are once again in the earth, "the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness." (Isaiah 26:9) Then all the obedient will return to the perfection lost by Adam through sin. Conceptions of heaven that mimic earthly scenes and pleasures reflect humanity's natural longing for the blessings God has provided for restored humanity in Christ's earthly kingdom – "in due time."

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