

## The Hope of Heaven

It may seem strange, but some people are not expecting to go to heaven when they die. There are actually people who expect to live forever on planet earth, and don't for a moment think that the hope of life in heaven is something available to them. The Scriptures have never come alive for them and testified to their spirit that they are in line for such a blessing.

Where did the concept of heaven as a hope originate? It is hinted at in Scripture when we read that "Enoch walked with God, and then he was no more, for God took him." (Genesis 5:24) Of course that in itself does not teach such a hope, but it makes you ask, if God took him, where did he go? The Bible also records that "Elijah was taken up to heaven in a whirlwind" in a fiery chariot, as his successor Elisha watched. (2 Kings 2:11) That is an indication that a human could achieve life in heaven.

### Jesus Revealed The Hope of Heaven

The concept of a place in the heavenly realm reserved for believers was instituted by Jesus Christ himself when he told his followers, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." (John 14:2, 3)

Jesus had already made reference to this in John 12:26 when he told the crowd "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant will be also." When Peter asked Jesus, "Lord where are

you going?" Jesus told him, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." (John 13:36) Since Jesus was to die and go to the heavenly realm with his Father, Peter could not follow until he too would die and be resurrected to heavenly life. That time would come, and Peter would follow. What a magnificent experience that will be! Jesus prayed in John 17:24, "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world."

Now there is something that can get your imagination moving! When we get to heaven, we will see the glory of Jesus, the glory of the Son of the Father! We can only imagine this. There is no way we can grasp the power of that statement while still in this life. One way to compare it to something we understand is to say, "Imagine being a few hundred miles from the sun and looking directly at it." His glory, the glory of the Lamb of God, will outshine even the radiance of the sun. In the vision of the New Jerusalem, John tells us, "The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp." (Revelation 22: 23)

### Fitted For Life In Heaven

The Apostle Paul described the change that will take place to equip us for life in the heavenly realm in 1 Corinthians 15:53, 54, "For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal

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with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'" This passage is similar to the one in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, which tells us, "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words."

## Those Who Oppose The Hope of Heaven

We see in the above words that not only are we to understand that there is a hope of a heavenly life for Christians, a wonderful expectation of being taken from death or life to be with Jesus, but that we are to specifically encourage each other with these words. We are to remind one another that heaven is waiting for us. Some would have us believe that there is no such promise. They are wrong. Since Paul tells us to encourage each other with these words, how is it that some try to convince us otherwise?

Being human, even though we have this hope, it is easy to get lost in the mundane and lose our awareness of the heavenly hope. In fact, some are adamantly opposed to our confident hope of one day going to heaven. Paul mentions this in Philippians 3:19-21. "Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies

so that they will be like his glorious body."

Paul reminds the Colossians of the same thing in chapter 3, verses 1-4, "Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

## The Down-Payment of The Holy Spirit

The hope of heaven is planted in our hearts when we acquire faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, accomplished when he died for our sins on the cross. Paul makes this point in Ephesians 1:13, 14 and introduces the place of the Holy Spirit in this promise. "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession -- to the praise of his glory."

What is that saying? Well, it is like entering into a business contract, where someone comes to you and says he is going to buy your land, and he puts down a deposit of say, ten thousand dollars, as a guarantee that he will come soon and pay the whole price and take possession of the land. When we place our faith in Jesus as the Savior and Lord of our lives, God seals it with the Holy Spirit, that Spirit of refreshing that assures us in our hearts that we belong to him. That wonderful experience of being baptized in the Holy Spirit seals in our hearts the confidence of our hope and

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fixes our minds on the glory of heaven.

Paul repeats the same ideas to the Corinthian church. “Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.

“Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.” (2 Corinthians 5:1-9)

## Wanting To Stay, Wanting To Go

Paul expressed a real conflict of desires when it came to the matter of going to heaven to be with the Lord. He was acutely aware that he had a job to do in teaching and guarding the faith of believers, and yet he yearned for the presence of Jesus. In Philippians chapter one, he opens up and grants us this personal insight into his heart. “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;

but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” (Philippians 121-24)

If, as some teach, Paul would simply go into unconsciousness and cease to exist upon dying, then the above verses make no sense at all. However, if we understand that upon dying in his body Paul knew he would then be ushered into the presence of the Living God, then those verses make perfect sense.

## Who Gets To Go To Heaven?

From the way some people talk, you would think that everyone who dies is automatically taken to be in heaven. The Scriptures don't give us that impression, however. On the contrary, we are taught by the Word of God that men and women of faith, who are judged righteous by God, receive that reward. In the great discussion of people of faith, this hope of a greater place, the heavenly realm, is described in terms of a city, or country that God has waiting for persons of faith. “Instead, they were longing for a better country -- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.” (Hebrews 11:16)

In the next chapter, the writer (whom I consider to be the Apostle Paul, due to the intellectual power of the book) contrasts the experience of the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai with the experience of the Church, saying, “But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.” (Hebrews 12:22, 23) This is a city, the heavenly city, reserved for the faithful, those

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righteous by faith in Christ.

The Apostle Peter agrees with this assessment, for he says, "But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness." Heaven is a place of righteousness. If we want to be there, we need to get in harmony with heaven, and lay hold of righteousness.

## Living In Paradise

There is another term which is used in reference to heaven, and we are introduced to it by the Lord Jesus himself. It is the occasion of his death on the cross, and the thief beside him asks Jesus, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus tells the thief, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:42, 43)

Some try to parse this sentence and rob it of its power, and make this paradise an earthly one, something to be enjoyed in the far distant future. Jesus, however, uses this term again in Revelation 2:7 when he says to John, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." These are words to the Church, the heaven-bound, and they are promised paradise.

We turn to the Apostle Paul again for clarity in this matter. He says, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know -- God knows. And I know that this man -- whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows -- was

caught up into *Paradise*. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell." (2 Corinthians 12:2-4) Notice that Paul calls "the third heaven" *Paradise*. This demonstrates that the Paradise Jesus spoke of is the realm of heaven, the abode of God, the angels and the Church. The thief on the cross, along with all who put their trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior, had heaven to look forward to. According to the words of Jesus, he is already there.

## A Great Multitude, A Great Crowd

The book of Revelation is an amazing book, and in some places difficult to understand, but one passage seems very clear, and that is in chapter 7. In verses 1-8 John talks about the 144,000, taken from the 12 tribes of Israel. It is from this passage that Jehovah's Witnesses deduce that only 144,000 are going to heaven. That creates the problem of all those other people that God saves. Where will he put them? Their response is that they will live on a renewed earth, and that they are the ones described in verses 9-17. Well, let's look at those verses.

"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that *no one could count*, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were *wearing white robes* and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out with a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" (Revelation 7:9,10)

Notice this is a group no one can count. So great a multitude that no census can be accurately taken. They are from every nation, tribe and

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tongue. They are *wearing white robes*. This is very important. This is a symbolism which Scripture uses for those who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. They have been declared righteous by faith in Christ. (Romans 3:21-26) When John acknowledges to the elder that he does not know who these people are, he is told, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them."

Not only are their robes white from the blood of the Lamb, but they are "day and night in his temple." As Paul says to the Church "we are the temple of the living God." (2 Corinthians 6:16) This "great crowd," this great multitude of people from every nation, tribe and tongue are "in his temple." They are also destined for heaven. Their realized hope is of life in heaven, sheltered by the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ. "The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 7:17)

This is no picture of uncertainty. These are not people who have to wait a thousand years to see if God will accept them and declare them righteous. They have a present certainty. God wipes away every tear from their eyes. No more sorrow, no more anxiety, no more dread of the future or the evil of the enemy. They are in heaven, in the comfort of God's love, preserved holy forevermore.

This blessed hope, this marvelous future, is re-asserted in chapter 21 of the same book of Revelation, in verses 1-4. After having described

the end of the world and the confinement to the Lake of Fire of Satan and all those who have not turned to Christ, we find, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'"

## Those Who Are In, Those Who Are Out

There follows a wonderful description of the glory of the New Jerusalem, and the rich blessings that flow from the person of God and the saints who now populate the Kingdom of Heaven. Then there appears a somber, sobering warning: "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood." (Revelation 22:15)

As Peter has told us, righteousness dwells in the new heavens and new earth. Those who refuse to embrace Christ and pursue righteousness are shut out of the Kingdom of Heaven. The sexually immoral, such as adulterers, fornicators, homosexuals; those who dabble in the occult; those who pursue drug addiction; unrepentant murderers, liars and thieves find no place in this holy realm.

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This is not a new observation, but a reaffirmation of that which God has declared over and over in his Word. Paul warned the Ephesians of these same things: "For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person -- such a man is an idolater -- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient." (Ephesians 5:5, 6) Are you not convinced? Need another reference?

Take a look at Galatians 5:19-21. "The acts of the sinful nature (read: flesh) are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."

So how does your lifestyle compare? Are you a pure person, moral and upright? Are you a believer in the Lord Jesus, having trusted in his provision for your salvation by dying on the cross for you? Have you asked God to forgive you for your sins and come into your life and make you over in the image of his Son, Jesus? Are the fruit of the Spirit manifest in you: Love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faith and such qualities? Have you turned away from such sinful practices as listed above and embarked on a holy journey by the power of the Holy Spirit? Where do your treasures lie, those things you consider truly important?

Jesus warned us, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up

for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:19-21) Where is your heart? How can you tell? What thoughts and desires dominate your thinking? Are they thoughts of righteousness, thoughts of Christ and his teachings? Are you concerned with the will of God and adapting to it? Or are your thoughts and desires bound to things and recognition from others?

Again, Jesus tells us, "Your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide for yourselves purses that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

It is time to abandon our own plans and direction in life, to turn to Jesus and commit our lives to him. It is time to lay up treasure in heaven by seeking first his kingdom and righteousness. Then we can be sure, no matter what others may say or do, that we have the hope of heaven.

If you feel led to contribute to this effort, or wish to comment, send correspondence to:

Jerry J. Mercer  
P.O. Box 121773  
Nashville, TN 37212  
USA

or email: [one@witnessforjesus.com](mailto:one@witnessforjesus.com)