

Is heaven the reward of the saved?

Salvation: Free Gift or Earned Right?

Some time ago, I joined five other members of God's church in one of the most solemn activities that a human being can ever experience... that of bearing the casket of a friend – in this case, long-time church member, Amanda Surette – from a funeral chapel to a hearse, and from the hearse to the grave.

Sweet little Mrs. Surette – who just a couple of weeks previously softly murmured the Canadian national anthem in French to my family and I – had died.

On the seemingly interminable walk from the hearse to the grave site, memories of old beliefs came flooding to my mind. And questions. And answers. Answers from God's Word:

"Has Mrs. Surette's soul gone to heaven?"

"No! It is her human spirit that has returned to God!"

"But how do we know that *our* doctrine is true?"

"We understand that Mrs. Surette and others will come up in the First Resurrection."

The encouraging words of I Thessalonians 4:17, often read at church funerals, speaks of this time – the time of the First Resurrection – and gives us an exciting description:

Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

But some churches use this verse in an attempt to prove that heaven is the reward of the saved... that upon their deaths, Christians will go immediately to heaven and that they will be there with Christ forever.

It is the purpose of this article to give you a clear explanation of this verse from the Bible.

Origin of false beliefs

First of all, where did the doctrine that heaven is the reward of the saved come from? Does the Old Testament teach it? Did Jesus and His apostles teach it?

I looked up articles on "heaven" in various encyclopaedias, and found that this doctrine originated hundreds of years before Jesus Christ walked this earth. It originated with the pagan, polytheistic Greeks and Romans. Their deified heroes and other favourites of their multiple gods were supposedly given admission to their "heaven" – which they called "Elysium."

Various races evolved their own versions of Elysium. The Germans and Scandinavians had their Valhalla. The American indians had their Happy Hunting Grounds. The eastern Buddhists had – and still have – their Nirvana, which offers the dubious promise of "the extinction of all desire and personality". But it is the western, professing Christian heaven that was – and still is – more similar to the original Greek concept.

As I was growing up in the Church of England, I never questioned the idea that one day, we would go to heaven – although it was never proved to us from the scriptures. What a shock I received when I first started listening to *The World Tomorrow* radio broadcast on Radio Caroline in 1966 – to learn for the first time, after fifteen years of church-going, that Christ will come from heaven to be with us – rather than us going from earth to heaven to be with Him.

What is the Kingdom of God?

First, we need to review what God's Kingdom really is, and what the reward of the saved really is. Let us look first at Daniel's prophecies on the subject:

This is the dream; and we will tell the interpretation thereof before the king. Thou, O king, art a king of kings: for the God of heaven hath given thee a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory. And wheresoever the children of men dwell, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the heaven hath he given into thine hand, and hath made thee ruler over them all. Thou art this head of gold. And after thee shall arise another kingdom inferior to thee, and another third kingdom of brass, which shall bear rule over all the earth. And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron: forasmuch as iron breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things: and as iron that breaketh all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise. And whereas thou sawest the feet and toes, part of potters' clay, and part of iron, the kingdom shall be divided; but there shall be in it of the strength of the iron, forasmuch as thou sawest the iron mixed with miry clay. And as the toes of the feet were part of iron, and part of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong, and partly broken. And whereas thou sawest iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men: but they shall not cleave one to another, even as iron is not mixed with clay. (Daniel 2:36-43)

These verses describe four major kingdoms, empires or governmental systems which have ruled over the greater part of the known, civilized world:

- i) The Chaldean-Babylonian empire which existed from 625 BC to 538 BC,
- ii) The Medo-Persian empire which existed from 538 BC to 330 BC,
- iii) The Greco-Macedonian empire which existed from 333 BC to 31 BC,
- iv) The Roman empire which began in 31 BC and which will return and rule until the end of the age.

It is clear that these were physical kingdoms and empires that existed on earth:

And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever. Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure. (Daniel 2:44-45)

These verses follow on to say that God's Kingdom will encompass all of these previous kingdoms – on earth!

These great beasts, which are four, are four kings, which shall arise out of the earth. But the saints of the most High shall take the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, even for ever and ever. (Daniel 7:17-18)

God here tells us, again through His prophet, Daniel, of four earthly kingdoms that were taken and given to the Most High God.

And the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him. (Daniel 7:27)

This scripture states that this kingdom, God's everlasting Kingdom, shall not be in heaven, but shall be "UNDER the whole heaven"!

Why then should we be surprised that God's Kingdom will be on earth when we read these scriptures, and when God tells us, through Moses, that ancient Israel was a type of God's Kingdom and, in fact, could have been God's Kingdom if they had obeyed Him:

Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel. (Exodus 19:5-6)

The very churches that misuse I Thessalonians 4:17 could better understand its meaning by really reading and studying the words of the so-called "Lord's Prayer" which many repeat every day:

**Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
(Matthew 6:10)**

Jesus Christ instructs His people to pray for God's Kingdom to COME!... not for God to take us away to it.

**But upon mount Zion shall be deliverance, and there shall be holiness; and the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions. And the house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau for stubble, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them; and there shall not be any remaining of the house of Esau; for the LORD hath spoken it. And they of the south shall possess the mount of Esau; and they of the plain the Philistines: and they shall possess the fields of Ephraim, and the fields of Samaria: and Benjamin shall possess Gilead. And the captivity of this host of the children of Israel shall possess that of the Canaanites, even unto Zarephath; and the captivity of Jerusalem, which is in Sepharad, shall possess the cities of the south. And saviours shall come up on mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau; and the kingdom shall be the LORD'S.
(Obadiah 17-21)**

These verses mention parts of the physical territory of Israel and who will possess them in the Kingdom of God. One of our most beloved scriptures shows that Jesus Christ will dwell on earth in Jerusalem and will be accessible to physical people and nations:

**But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow unto it. And many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken it.
(Micah 4:1-4)**

Verse 8 repeats that God's Kingdom will COME:

And thou, O tower of the flock, the strong hold of the daughter of Zion, unto thee shall it come, even the first dominion; the kingdom shall come to the daughter of Jerusalem. (Micah 4:8)

Returning to the New Testament, Matthew 24:3 shows that the disciples knew, and therefore were taught by Jesus Christ Himself, that He would come back to this earth:

And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world? (Matthew 24:3)

Jesus, in His reply to them continually repeated that He will COME back to this earth:

For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be... And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory... But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be... And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be... Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come... Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh... Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing... But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming;... The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, (verses 27, 30, 37, 39, 42, 44, 46, 48 and 50)

Some might argue, however, that because Jesus went to be with God the Father in heaven after His death and resurrection, we also must go to heaven to be with Him. The "Parable of the Pounds" gives the clear answer:

And as they heard these things, he added and spake a parable, because he was nigh to Jerusalem, and because they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear. He said therefore, A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return. And he called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds, and said unto them, Occupy till I come. But his citizens hated him, and sent a message after him, saying, We will not have this man to reign over us. And it came to pass, that when he was returned, having received the kingdom, then he commanded these servants to be called unto him, to whom he had given the money, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading. Then came the first, saying, Lord, thy pound hath gained ten pounds. And he said unto him, Well, thou good servant: because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities. And the second came, saying, Lord, thy pound hath gained five pounds. And he said likewise to him, Be thou also over five cities. And another came, saying, Lord, behold, here is thy pound, which I have kept laid up in a napkin: For I feared thee, because thou art an austere man: thou takest up that thou layedst not down, and reapest that thou didst not sow. And he saith unto him, Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee, thou wicked servant. Thou knewest that I was an austere man, taking up that I laid not down, and reaping that I did not sow: Wherefore then gavest not thou my money into the bank, that at my coming I might have required mine own with usury? And he said unto them that stood by, Take from him the pound, and give it to him that hath ten pounds. (And they said unto him, Lord, he hath ten pounds.) For I say unto you, That unto every one which hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away from him. But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me. (Luke 19:11-27)

Verses 12, 13 and 15 clearly show that Jesus went to heaven to receive His Kingdom, but then to return. The rest of the parable shows that there is a time lapse between the time He went to heaven and the time of His return.

In John 14:3 Jesus tells His disciples that He will COME again to earth and will here receive them to Himself to be with Him:

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

If He wants us in heaven, why would He have to come here to get us? After all of Jesus' teaching, the disciples, although still limited in their knowledge and wisdom, knew for sure that Jesus was to restore His Kingdom to Israel:

When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? (Acts 1:6)

Shortly after this, one of God's angels clearly states exactly where Jesus will to return to, and how:

And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven. Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a Sabbath day's journey. (Acts 1:9-12)

He will come down from heaven, through the clouds, and will set down on the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem. He will be clearly visible to human eyes. Zechariah agrees with Luke on this point, and shows how God's great power will be displayed at the instant of His "touch down" on earth by splitting the Mount of Olives in two:

And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south. (Zechariah 14:4)

Jesus Christ revealed to the apostle John that He will not return meekly or unnoticed to this earth:

And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself.

And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.

And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the great God; that ye may eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men, and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, and the flesh of all men, both free and bond, both small and great. And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army. And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone. And the remnant were slain with the sword of him that sat upon the horse, which sword proceeded out of his mouth: and all the fowls were filled with their flesh. (Revelation 19:11-21)

His return will be witnessed by the whole world whose kings and armies (verse 19) will gather to battle against Him. No secret, quiet "rapture" whisking Christians off to heaven, but the most terrible battle in man's history. God again, through the book of Revelation, one of His main prophecies describing the end-time, clearly says that His Kingdom is to COME:

And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. (Revelation 12:10)

Kingdom of heaven?

Some scriptures speak of the Kingdom of heaven. But these mean just what they say – the Kingdom *OF* heaven, not the Kingdom *IN* heaven. Mr. Armstrong, in explanation of this point, often used to compare the grammar of the term "Kingdom of heaven" with that of the "Bank of Morgan." As many of us are not familiar with this bank, we could use the Bank of Montreal as an example. If I say that I'm going to do some business at the Bank of Montreal, you would assume that I will be going to the local Victoria branch on Douglas Street, *not* all the way to the bank's head office in Montreal, Quebec which is three thousand miles away! It is the Bank *OF* Montreal, not the Bank *IN* Montreal, although Montreal, of course, is the city where the bank's headquarters office is. Similarly, God's kingdom is the Kingdom *OF* heaven, not the Kingdom *IN* heaven, although heaven is where its headquarters is. But what about I Peter 1:3-4?:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, (I Peter 1:4)

Does this not state that our inheritance is in heaven? Yes, it does. Heaven is where our inheritance resides right now but, as John makes clear, it will not remain there:

And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. (Revelation 22:12)

Our place in God's Kingdom is, in fact, being reserved by Him in heaven right now, until Jesus Christ brings it with Him:

What is the reward of the saved?

There are so many, many scriptures that prove that Christ is coming to earth to stay with us – that when you put them all together and study them, it is astounding that any professing Christian who claims to use the Bible as his guide can believe the pagan idea that he is going to heaven. I only have space here to quote a few, but I would urge you to use a concordance to look up scriptures containing the words "kingdom" and "reward."

For the first one, we can return to our original *difficult scripture* in the fourth chapter of I Thessalonians. Let us look at the previous verse – verse 16:

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first.

This shows that the time frame is that of the second coming of Jesus Christ; not at the death of each Christian. Also that Christ will be descending from heaven at the time described. We will not meet Him in heaven, but in the air atmosphere of the earth as He is on His way down. Now comes the central question of this matter. We have just met Christ in the air! Here we are in the atmosphere of the earth! Where do we go from here? Up to heaven? Or back down to earth? Although the scriptures do indicate that we will be honoured with a brief visit to God's throne in heaven for the marriage of the Lamb, we will not remain there. Our *difficult scripture* clearly says that we are to be with the Lord forever. But where will the Lord be? Again, so many scriptures give the clear answer. Let us turn to Zechariah 14 beginning at the fourth verse:

And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south. (Zechariah 14:4)

Some more questions. And their answers from God's Word:

Could this be some "spiritual mount of Olives"?

No, it is the one "before Jerusalem on the east"!

Could it be some "spiritual Jerusalem"?

No. To show how physical and earthly it is, Jesus is going to split it in half! He will have arrived on earth.

Who will be with Him?

Continue in verse the second half of verse 5:

...and the LORD my God shall come, and all the saints with thee.

All the resurrected saints or holy ones will be with Him.

Will He stay on earth?

Jump to verse 9:

And the LORD shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one LORD, and his name one.

Yes, He will stay. The Kingdom of God and the reward of the saved is on this earth! Do you need more rock-solid proof? Again, we can choose from many verses:

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:5)

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: (Matthew 25:31-32)

Again, Jesus will come to earth. With His saints, yes, and with His army of angels too. He will take His rightful place on His glorious, earthly throne. Physical nations will appear before Him.

And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. (Revelation 2:26-27)

Jesus will share power with His saints – over the physical nations of the earth. Again God tells us through John in Revelation 5:10:

And hast made us [*the saints: verse 9*] unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth."

Can the truth be any clearer? Jesus Christ and His resurrected saints will reign on the earth.

Mrs. Surette and many others of our beloved brethren will take a well-deserved rest for a little while longer. The sadness of their deaths will soon be turned to incomparable joy when they are resurrected as Jesus Christ is on His journey back to earth. We will join them in a meeting with the Eternal God that is beyond human imagination. We will follow Him, flanked by a vast army of angels to our new set of exciting responsibilities, ruling with Jesus Christ – on earth!

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