

# Do Christians Literally Go to Heaven?

by Raymond C. Faircloth

## Heaven as Man's Destination Originated from Pagans Rather than the Bible

The theory of going to heaven at death resulted from the development of pagan Greek philosophy. Because, in Greek philosophy, all matter was viewed as evil it meant that one must escape it. According to this theory when the body dies the soul separates and goes off to heaven. However, the Bible presents a holistic view of man; so that body, soul and spirit are inseparable at death. (Please see STUDY 3, HUMAN NATURE). The Church Fathers, Clement of Alexandria (c.150-215) and Origen (c.185-254) seem to be the first who studied the theoretical roots of this pagan Greek Stoic asceticism which renounced earthly things. By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, Christian asceticism was entrenched and led to the idea that the everlasting home of the believer was *heaven*, a spiritual place devoid of earthly influences.

### THE ASSUMPTION THAT CHRISTIANS GO TO HEAVEN

It is only by assumption that heaven is thought to be the destination of Christians. Yet a search of an exhaustive concordance reveals that the word *heaven* is never shown to be the destination of Christians. The texts of John 14:2; 2 Corinthians 5:1-9; Philippians 1:21-23; 3:14 and Hebrews 6:19-20 are only assumed by tradition to refer to going to heaven. In fact, the word *heaven* is not mentioned in these texts. Furthermore, it has been assumed that because Jesus offered his disciples "*the kingdom of heaven*" he was offering heaven as a destination. However, this was not the case as we shall see, along with noting that the Apostle Paul did not expect to go to heaven.

### HEAVEN IS NOT INDICATED IN THE SCRIPTURES AS MAN'S DESTINATION

As shown below the phrase "*the kingdom of heaven*" means exactly the same as the phrase "*the kingdom of God*," which was linked with things that to a Jew and to Jewish Christians would be on earth—paradise, Israel and Jerusalem. This is because God never intended for humans to live in heaven, just as he stated that: "The righteous is repaid **on earth**" (*Prov. 11:31*) and "The heaven, *even the heavens*, are the LORD's; But **the earth** he has given to the children of men" (*Ps. 115:16*).

So for all eternity mankind is to inhabit the earth. Individual humans have no separate soul or spirit that departs for heaven at death; neither is there a separate class of Christians who will be recreated as spirit persons in heaven. The following texts also make it very plain that the earth is to be the home of **everyone faithful to God**: (Proverbs 2:21, 22; Psalm 37:9-11; Matthew 5:5; 6:9, 10; and Romans 4:13).

## Christ Never Promised Heaven for His Disciples

As shown in STUDY 2 the promised reward for Christians is entry into God's Kingdom which is to be on earth. This is the same promise that was made to the patriarchs i.e. the Jewish ancestors, as Paul said:

- ❖ "Now I say that **Jesus Christ** has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, **to confirm the promises made to the fathers...**" (*Rom. 15:8*).

So Jesus' service to the Jews—"the circumcision"—was to lead them to become Christians. In fact, these promises, confirmed by Jesus, that were "**made to the fathers**," exactly constituted the good news that Christians preached to others according to Paul's statement in Acts 13:32. Yet, did any of these promises ever include a promise of going to heaven?

### WHAT WERE THE PROMISES VERIFIED TO CHRISTIANS?

When we refer to **God's promises** in Genesis (12:2, 3; 13:14-17; 17:7, 8; 26:2-4; 28:13-14), as given to the forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we find that these promises are about inheriting the **land**, producing **progeny** and being a  **blessing to all nations**. There is no mention of heaven just as the Psalmist says that:

- ❖ "*The covenant* which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac, and confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, To Israel *as an everlasting covenant*, Saying, "To you I will give *the land of Canaan as the allotment of your inheritance...*" (*Ps. 105:8-11 NASB*).
- ❖ "Dwell in this land, and I will be with you [*Jacob*] and bless you; for to you and your descendants I give *all these lands*, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed *all the nations* of the earth shall **be blessed...**" (*Gen. 26:3-4*).

- ❖ “For the promise that he [*Abraham*] would be the heir of the world...” (*Rom. 4:13*).

So these are exactly the same promises that Jesus confirmed and Paul and others preached as the good news. But you may say didn't Abraham and his offspring already received those promises given in Genesis when Abraham dwelt in Canaan and later when Israel entered “the land of milk and honey.” Evidently not!

#### ABRAHAM AND OTHERS HAVE YET TO RECEIVE THE PROMISES

At the time the faithful disciple Stephen was about to be stoned for his proclamation of the truth, he recounted much of biblical history. In doing so he made this interesting statement about Abraham:

- ❖ “[*God*] moved him [*Abraham*] to this land in which you now dwell. And *God* gave him no inheritance in it, *not even enough to set his foot on*. But even when *Abraham* had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him” (*Acts 7:4b-5*).

Later, after giving a definition of faith, the writer to the Hebrews gave a synopsis in chapter 11 of those of the past who demonstrated such faith in God's promises, but interestingly he shows that the fulfilment of those promises for them was still future when he said:

- ❖ “These all died in faith [*including Abraham – verses 8, 9*], **not having** received the **promises**, but having seen them afar off were assured of them” (*Heb. 11:13*).
- ❖ “And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, **did not** receive **the promise**, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us” (*Heb. 11:39-40*).

And yet these are the very same promises confirmed by Jesus and preached by the first Christians (*Rom. 15:8*; *Acts 13:2*) and so must be still future for Christians and must concern the inheriting of the land, producing progeny, and being a blessing to all nations.

Although not named, Daniel is mentioned in Hebrews 11 as one “who stopped the mouths of lions.” So he, too, “*did not receive the promise*” but will receive it at the same time as other Christians receive it just as the angel told him:

- ❖ “But as for you, go your way to the end; then you will *enter into rest* and rise again in your *allotted portion at the end of the age*” (*Dan 12:13 NASB*).

The “*allotted portion*” for Daniel is: “of land assigned by lot...a share in the Messianic consummation” according to the Hebrew English Lexicon by Brown, Driver and Briggs, p.174. So these ancient patriarchs get the fulfilment of **the same promises** at the same time as Christians who also are “**really Abraham's seed**.” Furthermore, this blessing of Abraham will also be conferred upon Gentiles:

- ❖ “that *the blessing of Abraham* might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith ... Now to Abraham and his Seed were **the promises** made ... **29** And if you *are* Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise” (*Gal. 3:14, 16, 29*).

#### THE MEANS TO FULFIL THE PROMISES

To fulfil those promises of land, progeny, and blessing of the nations God promised a **Messianic prophet** (*Deut. 18: 15-19*) ruling as **king** over a **concrete kingdom** (*2 Sam. 7: 12-19, 2 Chron. 17:13-14*) to bless the nations and to turn the earth into paradise. All of this describes fully what was being offered to Christians and is what Christ verified. At no time did Jesus offer any other destiny such as heaven. Bible Scholar William Strawson notes in *Jesus and the Future life* p. 38: “The gospel records do not speak of ‘going to heaven’...there is no suggestion that Jesus is offering to his disciples the certainty of ‘heaven’ after this life.” And theologian J.A.T. Robinson states in his book *In the End God*, p. 104 that: “Heaven in the Bible is nowhere the destination of the dying.”

## The Apostle Paul Did Not Expect to Go to Heaven

As mentioned earlier, the apostle Paul expected and promoted the hope of receiving the promises that were made to the Hebrew forefathers. So he stated that:

- ❖ “...we declare to you glad tidings—that **promise** which was **made to the fathers**” (*Acts 13:32*).
- ❖ *Then to King Agrippa Paul said:* “And now I stand and am judged for the hope of **the promise** made by God **to our fathers**. To this promise **our twelve tribes**, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For **this hope's** sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews” (*Acts 26:6-7*).

- ❖ *Then to the Jewish religious leaders in Rome he said that it was: "...because for **the hope of Israel** I am bound with this chain" (Acts 28:20).*

This is "**the one hope**" (Eph 4:4) which Christians have, and as previously noted God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David were about inheriting the land, producing progeny and being a blessing to all nations by means of the Messianic king ruling this kingdom on earth—this was *the hope of Israel* for which Paul was imprisoned—not because of any concept of going to heaven. Indeed no later forefather changed the meaning of that promise. As with Jesus, at no time does Paul hint at any other destiny such as heaven even though his desire to be with Christ is often misconstrued as a desire to be in heaven. Rather Paul seeks for the promised inheritance:

- ❖ "...knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of **the inheritance**" (Col. 3:24).
- ❖ "...but imitate those who through faith and patience **inherit the promises**" (Heb. 6:12).

So just as Abraham and all the faithful people of ancient times have not yet inherited these promises, so, too, Christians, as "Abraham's seed" have, up to now not yet inherited such promises of land i.e. the world (Rom 4:13). It all concerns the "inhabited earth to come":

- ❖ "For He has not put **the world** (Lit: *inhabited earth*) **to come**, of which we speak, in subjection to angels" (Heb. 2:5).

If heaven were the destination for inheriting the promises for the readers of Hebrews one wonders why the subject here is "*the inhabited earth to come*" rather than going to heaven.

## Only Christ Jesus Went to Heaven

If heaven is not ever to be the place for humans, then we must ask why Christ went to heaven. Of course, he could not have gone to heaven as a mortal human! However, Romans 1:4 and 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 53 show that Jesus, now as an immortal human, had a body which was incorruptible and "in power" and so could withstand being transported to heaven and being in God's presence. Nevertheless, this was for certain purposes and was not to be a permanent situation.

### A TEMPORARY RESIDENCE

- ❖ *The apostle Peter stated: "...that he [God] may send the Christ appointed for you, **Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring** all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago" (Acts 3:20, 21).*

So Jesus is to be in heaven only "*until the time for restoring all the things.*" Furthermore, the purpose of Jesus' temporary residence in heaven is so that he may act as our advocate and high priest while awaiting the time when his Father makes his enemies "a footstool for his feet" (Ps.110:1).

## Biblical Usage of the Words 'Heaven' and 'Heavenly

### 'IN or FROM HEAVEN' OFTEN MEANS 'WITH or FROM GOD'

Apart from the normal usage of the word heaven to refer to God's location or the earth's atmosphere the word *heaven* is used as an indirect reference to God himself. This is because *heaven* itself is called God's throne. So the term *heaven* is often used as a substitute for God himself as in Daniel and Matthew. Especially by the 1<sup>st</sup> century was this substitute linked with the Jewish practices of not using the divine name and being rather cautious regarding the use of the word *God*. Examples are:

- ❖ "The baptism of John—where was it from? From heaven [*i.e. from God*] or from men?" (Matt. 21:25).
- ❖ The prodigal son says: "Father I have sinned against **heaven** [*God*] and against you" (Luke 15:21).
- ❖ "...provide (*present tense*) yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a **treasure in the heavens...**" (Luke 12:33) *i.e. with God.*

### USAGE OF THE WORD "HEAVENLY"

The Greek word *epouranios* translated "heavenly" means: "of heavenly origin or nature" according to Thayer's Gk/Eng. Lexicon. This means that it is used as an adjective to describe the *transcendent nature of things that originate with God*. The word is also used of God himself as "*the heavenly Father*" to describe His transcendent nature. Only in the phrase "*heavenly places*" is a location referred to and then *heavenly* simply describes those locations. However, Paul simply seeks to be in God's kingdom when he states that:

1. "...the Lord will preserve *me* for His *heavenly kingdom*" (2 Tim. 4:18).

This is, of course "the kingdom of God" which originates with God i.e. comes from God and will be superior to all other kingdoms. Similarly Paul speaks of Christians as:

2. "...you who share in a *heavenly calling*" (Heb. 3:1). Please note that some paraphrased versions mislead here.

This is a calling that comes from heaven—it is God's calling of individuals to become Christians. It is not a calling of Christians to go to heaven but is a gift which can be partially experienced now when one receives the spirit. Yet some turn away from their calling:

3. "For *it is* impossible for those who were *once enlightened*, and *have tasted the heavenly gift*..." (Heb. 6:4).

Commentators variously state that the superior free gift that originates from heaven [God] is any of the following: Christ the living bread, the whole plan of salvation in Christ, the new life in Christ, the remission of sins because of Christ's sacrifice or eternal life. Yet none of these has the thought of going to heaven as being the free gift.

#### "HEAVENLY JERUSALEM"

❖ "But you *have come to* Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of **angels**, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn *who are* registered in heaven, **to God** the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, **to Jesus** the Mediator of the new covenant..." (Heb. 12:22-24).

This is a *present* condition of Christians just as in Ephesians 1:3 and 2:6 where *Christians on earth* are seen as *being in heaven representatively* through their union with or incorporation into Christ. The adjective *heavenly* is **qualitative** and has reference to things which originate with God. Hence the "*heavenly Jerusalem*," to be situated on a literal Mount Zion on earth, is the glorious city of the **future** which Christians have figuratively approached *now*:

❖ "But now they desire a better, that is, a **heavenly (country)**. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has **prepared a city** for them" (Heb. 11:16).

This "**heavenly (country)**" was called "*the land of the promise*" in Hebrews 11:9 and so speaks of Canaan restored. So the city prepared for them in God's mind is a Jerusalem yet future:

❖ "For here we have no continuing **city**, but we seek the one **to come**" (Heb. 13:14).

❖ "The *Jerusalem above* is free, and she is **our mother**" (Gal. 4:26). Quoted from the LXX Psalm 86:5:

"A man shall say, **Sion is my mother**; and such a man was born in her."

"And of Zion it shall be said: 'This one and that one were born in her.'" (Hebrew Psalm 87:5).

Men are not born in heaven. But this is a Messianic text and focuses on the future capital city of the Kingdom. It is "above" because it is vastly superior to other cities because it originates with God.

#### THIS SAME CITY COMES DOWN FROM GOD

❖ "I, John, saw *the holy city*, New Jerusalem, **coming down** out of heaven **from** God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2).

In fact, there is no scriptural reason to understand this city as referring to anything other than the "heavenly Jerusalem" which originates from "above." Professor Richard Longenecker explains that:

The idea of a "heavenly Jerusalem" ("the Jerusalem that is above") has a rich Jewish background. The concept has to do with the culmination of God's redemptive purposes in human history, the realization of God's reign in its totality. As such, it is an eschatological concept that **describes Jerusalem as it will be** at the end of time, often in contrast to what the city is at present. References to a "heavenly Jerusalem" are to be found in embryonic form in the Jewish scriptures (e.g. Ps. 87:3; Isa. 54 the opening verse of which Paul quotes in 4:27; Ezek. 40-48). *Word Biblical Commentary* on Galatians.

So in these passages from Galatians, Hebrews, and Revelation there is really no thought of going beyond the clouds from the time of one's death as some kind of spirit being. Certainly, from the facts that Jesus never

promised such a thing, Paul never expected such a thing, and the promises for Christians concern the land. But how are we to understand the term “*the Kingdom of heaven*”?

### “Kingdom of Heaven” = “Kingdom of God”

Christians sometimes use the term “kingdom *of* heaven” as if it meant a kingdom *in* heaven. However, of the gospel writers, the term “kingdom of heaven” is used only by Matthew who wrote for a Jewish audience. The other gospel writers used the term “kingdom of God.” In fact, one can see that the two phrases mean exactly the same thing, i.e. they are synonymous, if the parallel accounts of Matthew 19:14 and Mark 10:14 are compared:

- ❖ “But Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me and do not try to stop them, for **the kingdom of heaven** belongs to such as these” (*Matt. 19:14 NET*).
- ❖ “But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me and do not try to stop them, for **the kingdom of God** belongs to such as these” (*Mark 10:14 NET*).

These parallel accounts show that *the kingdom of the heavens* means *the kingdom of God*. However, for some unknown reason, Matthew did use the two terms of “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” together in *Matthew 19:23, 24* and by a further comparison of the parallel accounts it is evident that the two terms are exact equivalents i.e. they refer to the one kingdom as Jesus showed when he said:

- ❖ “Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to *enter* **the kingdom of heaven**. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to *enter* **the kingdom of God**” (*Matt. 19:23-24*).

Furthermore, a comparison of the account of Matthew 8:11 with Luke 13:28-29 shows the same equivalency of meaning for the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. But why does Matthew use of the word *heaven* instead of *God* in his phrase “kingdom of heaven”? Evidently there was a common Jewish practice of using the word *heaven* as an indirect reference to God himself, rather than saying the word ‘God. This is called a ‘periphrastic.’ In contrast the other gospel writers wrote for predominantly Gentile readers and so were not restricted to such a periphrastic.

#### “KINGDOM OF HEAVEN” MEANS THAT IT ORIGINATES WITH GOD

In the phrases “the kingdom of heaven/the kingdom of God” the preposition ‘of’ is the possessive and means that it belonging to God because He is its originator and it is superior to all other kingdoms. It does not say the *kingdom in the heavens*; so it does not refer to a location in heaven as can be further seen from all of its descriptions in the Bible as being on earth.

### The Kingdom of Heaven is Associated with Earth, Paradise and Israel

#### ON EARTH

Contrary to the misguided allegorical interpretations which lose all real meaning, the following statements by Jesus are completely literal when he showed *the physical conditions that will exist “in the kingdom of the heavens”/“in the kingdom of God” and so being on earth when he said:*

- ❖ “I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline *at the table* with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the **kingdom of heaven ...**” (*Matt. 8:11 NASB*).
- ❖ “...when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the **kingdom of God** but you yourselves cast out. And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and **recline at table in the kingdom of God**” (*Luke 13:28-29 ESV*).

East, west, north and south are earthly geographical directions. Such *eating* with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the prophets is a completely physical and therefore earthly scene “*in the kingdom of the heavens.*” Furthermore, Jesus said that he would “*never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God*” (Mark 14:25). No doubt, Jesus had in mind the “*banquet of well oiled dishes*” that Jehovah “*will certainly make for all the peoples*” (Isa. 25:6-8).

However, there is no biblical statement implying that there are two separate realms of the kingdom—one in heaven additional to the one on earth. The biblical descriptions are of a kingdom that will be entirely on earth:

- ❖ “Your **kingdom** come. Your will be done, **on earth** as it is in heaven” (*Matt. 6:10*).
- ❖ “A stone [*kingdom* - verse 44] ... struck the image on **its feet** [*therefore on earth*] ... *the stone* became a large mountain and filled the whole **earth**” (*Dan. 2:34-35*). *If the stone [the kingdom] fills the whole earth, then it must be on earth.*

#### IN PARADISE

The evildoer hung up next to Jesus *requested of him to:*

1. “...remember me when you come in your **kingdom**” to which “[*Jesus*] said to him: ‘I assure you today, (*the comma here is in keeping with the context*) you will be with me in **paradise**” (*Luke 23:42-43 KGV*).

So Jesus equated the kingdom with paradise and the evildoer was to be resurrected on the earth. Then by connecting Luke 23:42-43 with Jesus’ prayer of: “your **kingdom** come. Your will be done, **on earth** as it is in heaven” we can appreciate that the verified promise to the forefathers and therefore to Christians is the kingdom paradise to be on earth. The two other occurrences of the term *paradise* in the Christian Scriptures are:

2. “To him who overcomes I will give to eat from *the tree of life*, which is in the midst of the **Paradise** of God” (*Rev. 2:7*).

It would certainly be inconsistent to interpret this paradise as being in heaven. The mention of the tree of life, reflects back to the Garden of Eden – an entirely earthly scene. So, too, for Paul’s vision of paradise when he says:

3. “I know someone who...was caught up to *the third heaven* ... this man was caught up into **paradise**” (*2 Cor. 12:2, 4*).

*This third heaven is either:*

1. Literally the third “heavens and earth” described in 2 Peter 3:13 i.e. the future “new heavens and new earth.” or:
2. Figuratively as granting insight into truths contained in heaven and expressed with the highest degree of inspiration i.e. third as being superlative.

However, this was a vision (a *revelation*. verse 7) and does not mean that the subject of the vision i.e. *paradise* got relocated to heaven. Because the Greek term *paradeisos* is used many times in the Septuagint (LXX) translation of the Hebrew Scriptures and always refers to *an earthly garden* this is what would have been in the mind of a first century Jewish Christian for each of the 3 occurrences of the term in the Christian Scriptures. It is inconsistent to say that in two of these instances *paradise* means heaven, but that in one instance it means earth when, in fact, the term was never used to refer to heaven. So view #1 seems the more likely.

#### IN ISRAEL

For centuries Israel came under the control of foreign empires; so naturally Jesus’ disciples wished to know when Israel would be liberated. They framed their question to Jesus as:

- ❖ “Will you, at this time, restore the **kingdom to Israel?**” (*Acts 1:6*).

It was not wrong for them to ask this question, and so Jesus did not correct them regarding their view that the location of the Kingdom was to be on earth—connected with Israel. However, he was not able to answer this question regarding time because it was beyond his own knowledge. So indeed there would be a restoring of “*the kingdom to Israel*” but **when** that would be was known only to God.

NOTE: Biblically “*kingdom of God*” refers to God’s throne on earth (2 Sam. 7:12-19; 1 Chron. 17:12-14): “Then Solomon sat on the throne of the LORD as king...” (*1 Chron. 29:23*).

## Because Christ Returns to Earth Why Would Christians Leave the Earth?

Numerous Scriptures show that Jesus ascended to the right hand of God in heaven. As stated in Psalm 110:1 this was to be only “*until I make your enemies your footstool.*” This *temporary situation* was to last only “*until the times of restoration*” when he would then leave heaven, so that:

- ❖ “...He [*God*] may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began” (*Acts 3:20, 21*).

So Christians are: "...to wait for his Son **from** heaven" (1 Thess. 1:10). This shows that Christ is to return to earth – coming in glory which must be visible as he said:

- ❖ "For the Son of Man will **come in the glory** of His Father with His angels" (*Matt. 16:27*). *Then he will take his place as earth's ruler: "...in the new world (Gk palingenesia), when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne..." (Matt. 19:28 ESV).*

The Greek word *Palingenesia* is variously rendered: "Regeneration" NASB, NKJV; "renewal of all things" NRSV, NIV; "new age" NAB; "when everything is made new again" NJB. Clearly this "renewal of all things" at "**the times of restoration**" occurs on earth because Jesus has come "**from the heavens**." No holy prophets of old time ever spoke of renewal or **restoration** of the heavens where God dwells.

## What about "Great Is Your Reward in Heaven" in Matthew 5:12?

Some have interpreted Jesus' words concerning the Christian's reward "in heaven" as meaning that "heaven" is the reward and they must go there to enjoy it. However, Jesus said that the reward is **in** heaven and not that the reward 'is heaven' In fact, the reward is reserved in heaven as both the apostles Peter and Paul inform us concerning the Christian's hope of :

- ❖ "...an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, **reserved in** heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be *revealed in the last time*" (*1 Pet. 1:4, 5*).  
... "...because of the hope **reserved** for you in heaven" (*Col. 1:5 NAB*).

The hoped for 'inheritance' is what was promised to the forefathers just as Christ verified and Paul expected (Rom 15:8; Gal 3:16; Acts 13:32 and 26:6-7). So in *Jesus' Resurrection and Christian Origins* Theologian N.T. Wright explains:

What then do the New Testament writers mean when they speak of an inheritance waiting for us in heaven? This has been much misunderstood...The point of such passages, as in 1 Peter 1.4, 2 Corinthians 5.1, Philippians 3.20, and so forth, is not that one must 'go to heaven', as in much-popular imagination, in order to enjoy the inheritance. There it is rather that 'heaven' is the place where God stores up his plans and purposes for the future. If I tell a friend that there is beer in the fridge, that doesn't mean that he has to get into the fridge in order to enjoy the beer. When the early Christians speak of a new body in heaven, or an inheritance in heaven, they mean what St John the Divine means in Revelation 21: the new identity which at present is kept safe in heaven will be brought from heaven *to* earth at the great moment of renewal. Yes: the great majority of Christian expressions of hope through the middle ages, the reformation, and the counter-reformation periods have been misleading. 'Heaven' is not the Christians ultimate destination.

Published in *Gregorianum* 2002, 83/84, 615-635

So clearly, if the reward of inheriting the kingdom is "reserved for you in heaven" it is not necessary to live in heaven to receive it. This is because Jesus as God's representative is "**coming quickly, and my reward is with me**" (Rev. 22:12) i.e. coming to earth.

### CHRISTIANS GET THEIR REWARD WHEN JESUS RETURNS TO EARTH

All relevant Bible texts show that Christians will only be rewarded when Jesus appears at his return to earth:

- ❖ "When Christ *who is* our life **appears, then** you also will appear with Him in glory" (*Col. 3:4*).
- ❖ "...rest *your* hope fully upon the grace that is to be **brought to you** at the revelation of Jesus Christ"  
(*1 Pet. 1:13*).
- ❖ "...and when the Chief Shepherd **appears**, you will receive *the crown of glory* that does not fade away"  
(*1 Pet. 5:4*).
- ❖ "For the Son of Man **will come** in the glory of His Father with His angels, and **then He will reward** each according to his works" (*Matt. 16:27*).

So the reward, crown of glory, and recompense will be brought by Jesus from heaven when He returns to earth in his future glory.

### PROMISED REWARDS FOR THE FAITHFUL WILL BE ON EARTH

The Abrahamic Covenant promises **the land** as an inheritance for believers (Gen. 12:2, 3; 13:14-17; 17:7-8; 26:2-4; 28:13-14). Christians, as "the seed of Abraham" are party to the Abrahamic covenant and so benefit from

what was promised to Abraham. However, because “the righteous will be recompensed **on the earth...**” (*Prov. 11:31*) they must “...imitate those who through faith and patience **inherit the promises**” (*Heb. 6:12*)

- ❖ And “the promise to Abraham and his offspring [is] that he would be **heir of the world...**” (*Rom. 4:13*), and as Jesus said: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall **inherit the earth**” (*Matt. 5:5* quoted from *Ps. 37:1*).

In fact, Psalm 37 is entirely about the inheritors living on the earth and so too for Matthew 5:5. It will, indeed, be on earth that God’s will shall be done through the kingdom as Jesus said: “Your kingdom come. Your will be done **on earth** as it is in heaven” (*Matt. 6:10*). So it is God’s decision, not ours, concerning what the Christian destiny is. As He says:

- ❖ “I have made **the earth**, the man and the beast that *are* on the ground, by my great power and by my outstretched arm, and have given (*proleptic – ‘I will give’ NASB*) it to whom it seemed proper to Me” (*Jer. 27:5*).

So God chooses to give **the earth** to Abraham and his seed, which is primarily Christ Jesus. There is never any mention in the Scriptures of a giving of heaven to Christians. By inheriting the Kingdom, those of the faith of Abraham will be granted the land of Israel and then the whole world. There is no scriptural reason for them ever to go to heaven, although entering the kingdom does involve struggle, just as Paul said that: “Through many tribulations we must enter *the kingdom of God*” (*Acts 14:22*).

## The Kingdom and the Holy Ones Ruling in It Will Not Be in Heaven

Jesus was not resurrected to heaven, but rather he was resurrected on earth, and only after the 40 days did he ascend to heaven. Even then it was only to be there for a certain length of time. In the book *Jesus’ Resurrection and Christian Origins* theologian N.T. Wright explains:

I have often heard it said, sometimes by people who should know better, that Jesus died and was ‘resurrected to heaven’, but that is precisely not what the early Christians said. Raised from the dead, yes; exalted to heaven, yes; but resurrection never did mean ‘going to heaven when you die’.

Published in *Gregorianum* 2002, 83/84, 615-635

So as with Jesus, all faithful Christians will be resurrected on the earth so that they can inherit it just as Jesus promised that: “...theirs is the Kingdom of heaven ... they shall inherit *the earth*” (*Matt. 5:3, 5*) and that “...they shall reign **on the earth**” (*Rev. 5:10*). Furthermore, in prophecy:

- ❖ “...the kingdom...and the greatness of the kingdoms **under** the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones” (*Dan. 7:27*) and:
- ❖ “...the [*enemy*] marched over the broad plain of **the earth** and surrounded the camp of *the holy ones and the beloved city*” (*Rev. 20:9*).

Biblically if something is “**under the whole heaven**” then it is on earth just as “*the holy ones and the beloved city*” are under attack from those who swarm “*over the broad plain of the earth.*”

## Uniting With Christ Occurs When He Returns

- ❖ “For our citizenship is (*currently*) in heaven, **from which** we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Phil. 3:20*).

N T. Wright reasons that:

The point of being a citizen of a mother city is not that when life gets tough, or when you retire, you can go back home to the mother city. The people to whom Paul was writing in Philippi were Roman citizens, but they had no intention of going back to Rome...If when the going got tough there, *the emperor would come from Rome* to deliver them from their enemies in Philippi...this is more integrated with a theology of a coming new heaven and new earth...

## The Rapture Does Not Mean Going to Heaven

- ❖ “...we who **are alive** and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord himself will **descend from** heaven...And **the dead** in Christ will rise first. *Then we who are alive*



and remain shall be **caught up** (*snatched up*—Gk. *harpagmon*) together with them in the clouds to *meet the Lord in the air*. And thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:15-17).

This Greek verb *harpagmon* was translated in the early Latin bibles as *rapere* from which we get the English noun ‘rapture.’ This *being caught up* is **in the air** (Gk. *aira*) that is: **the atmosphere immediately above earth’s surface** (Bauer’s Gk/Eng. Lexicon). These verses mainly concern the resurrection, yet Paul adds an extra aspect in speaking of the rapture. Yet there is no thought of going to heaven in this verse. Also the phrase, “*Thus we shall always be with the Lord*” is because Christians will accompany Jesus as he continues his descent to earth. So Jesus speaks of his own return when he says in John 14:3 “*I will come again.*”

#### THE SEQUENCE AT THE LAST DAY

- 1) The descent of Jesus.
- 2) The resurrection to immortality of dead Christians.
- 3) The change to immortality of living Christians - “*We shall be changed*” (1Cor. 15:52, 53).
- 4) The being “*snatched up*” into **earth’s atmosphere** of both the resurrected and the *changed* living Christians so as to meet the descending Lord.

### Christian Belief about Their Destiny --- 150 A.D.

Justin Martyr in his Dialog with Trypho said:

For if you have fallen in with some who are called Christians...who say there is no resurrection of the dead, and that *their souls when they die are taken to heaven*, do not imagine that they are Christians...But I and others who are right-minded Christians on all points are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead, and a **thousand years in Jerusalem**, which will then be built, adorned and enlarged, as the prophets Ezekiel, Isaiah and others declare ... And further, there was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the Apostles of Christ, who prophesied by a revelation that was made to him that *those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem*; and that thereafter the general and eternal resurrection of all men would take place.

Justin’s condemnation of those who promote heaven-going as the Christian destiny harmonizes with his interpretation of the apostle John’s Revelation concerning the millennium spent in literal, physical Jerusalem.

#### APPENDIX:

### The Belief that Christians Are Resurrected as Spirits

This false belief raises some serious problems because:

1. All resurrections recorded in the Bible are of the whole person i.e. a solid bodied person, just as Jesus was resurrected as an immortal human.
2. So when someone dies and has been buried, what part of them would be resurrected if they did not return as a solid bodied person? Actually nothing, because a person is a unity, and so not having separating parts: body, soul and spirit.
3. 1 Corinthians 15:37-38: “...you sow, not the body that will develop, but a bare grain, it may be, of wheat ... God gives it a body just as it pleased him, and to **each of the seeds its own body.**”

In the analogy of the seed there is a change of attributes from seed to plant, but the plant must be of the same genetic material as the seed. So too the glorified body is as a result of dramatic qualitative changes that occur in its seed. It is *not an exchange* of bodies but a change by glorification of the person. In fact, the transfiguration of Jesus was a glimpse of this glorification.

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