

Levels of Bliss in Heaven

June 28, 2020

In its 1989 report on the End Times, our LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations addressed this question as well as others. Regarding heaven and "degrees of glory" the commission said the following:

"Eternal life is pictured in the Scriptures as a state of never-ending 'blessedness.' This means, on the one hand, that Christians will live forever in perfect freedom from sin, death, and every evil (Is. 25:8; 49:10; 1 Cor. 15:26, 55–57; Rev. 2:7, 11; 20:14; 21:4). At the same time, they will experience the unending joy of being with God in the new heavens and new earth (e.g., Revelation 21–22; Ps. 16:11). Forever eliminated is the possibility of falling away from God. This blessedness will bring with it the joy of being in eternal communion with fellow believers, whom we have reason to believe we shall recognize (cf. Matt. 17:3). And, there will be no limitations or degrees attached to the enjoyment of the happiness to be experienced, though there will be degrees of glory corresponding to differences of work and fidelity here on earth, producing praise to God but no envy (see 2 Cor. 9:6; Matt. 20:23)."

This well-crafted statement contains a complimentary message about the nature of heaven to what we gleaned from God's Word regarding hell. It is also [1] a place made by God, but not yet made by God, as a fit and proper place for His resurrected children to dwell. [2] The saints in heaven graciously are identified as not only at peace with God, but properly belonging in His household as His redeemed children who can no longer possibly sin and displease Him. [3] Heaven also will be a place of equal bliss and peace, but also one in which the earthly works of the saints are established with them in honor forever in heaven among the communion of the blessed.

I. A place made by God as fit and proper for His resurrected children to dwell

God created all the host of earth and heaven in the six days of creation (Gen. 2.1). The foremost heavenly creatures were the angels. The foremost visible creatures were mankind. While Scripture depicts the soul or spirit of the dying going directly to heaven or hell (cf. Ecclesiastes 3.21; Hebrews 9.27-28; Luke 16.19ff, etc.) while their bodies rest in the earth until the resurrection, as well as angels meandering in and out of heaven (Job 1, Luke 2 and many others), Scriptures tell us that heaven and earth will pass away (while God's Word is eternal; cf. Mt. 24.35; 2 Peter 3.12), and that God would create a new heaven and earth so that those who dwelt in heaven and the saints who had dwelt on earth will be one community. Scholars argue if they will be unmade and a whole new heaven and earth will be created or if the old will merely be "recycled." I personally hold to the former; that when God withdraws His Word that preserves creation, it will all dissipate into the original "nothingness" and that He will speak a new heaven and earth into existence. The strength of the recycle view should also be maintained, though, that the new heaven and new earth will be like the old and heaven and the old earth, only more so. Also speaking for the latter view is the fact that the bodies of the Saints will, indeed, be the same bodies born on earth, but swallowed up in immortality. This also is clearly stated in Scripture and cannot be denied. In that sense of the saints, we are certainly 'recycled' but all things are made new.

Read the Revelation, 21.1- 22.5.

II. Where the Saints dwell in bliss as the Household of God

Isaiah 25.8: He will swallow up death forever, And the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces; The rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; For the Lord has spoken.

Is eternal life offered even in the OT? What is the 'rebuke of His people'? Who renders that rebuke and why? How is this made sure, even in the OT?

Isaiah 49.10: They shall neither hunger nor thirst, Neither heat nor sun shall strike them; For He who has mercy on them will lead them, Even by the springs of water He will guide them.

What is the condition of those who are promised this of God?

1 Corinthians 15.24-28, 50-58: Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. ²⁵For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. ²⁶The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. ²⁷For "He has put all things under His feet." But when He says "all things are put under Him," it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. ²⁸Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all. . . .

⁵⁰Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. ⁵¹Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed— ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. ⁵³For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. ⁵⁴So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."

⁵⁵"O Death, where is your sting?
O Hades, where is your victory?"

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

What are the differences between the saints' condition at burial and his resurrected state? How does this correspond to the difference between Christ's state in death and in resurrection?

Rev. 2.7: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. 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. 2.11: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." '

Rev. 21.4: And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

III. Where the Saints' glory reflects God's Work through them on earth

2 Corinthians 9.6: But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

Matthew 20.23: So He said to them, "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father."

Let's consider this parable of our Lord....

Matthew 25.14ff "For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. ¹⁵And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. ¹⁶Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. ¹⁷And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. ¹⁸But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. ¹⁹After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

²⁰"So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' ²¹His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' ²²He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' ²³His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

²⁴"Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.'

²⁶"But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. ²⁷So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents.

²⁹"For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

What is the talent? What does it mean to be given more talents than others? Why will those given more talents be rewarded with more and those who refused to deal them have them taken away? What's the role of Jesus in God's reaping where He did not sow? Faith? How does one talent become two? What's the eternal dimension of that?

IV. Some passages alluding to levels of glory in heaven

Daniel 12.2f: And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, Some to shame and everlasting contempt. ³Those who are wise shall shine Like the brightness of the firmament, And those who turn many to righteousness Like the stars forever and ever.

Matthew 20.21 f: She said to Him, “Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.” ²²But Jesus answered and said, “You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They said to Him, “We are able.” ²³So He said to them, “You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father.” ²⁴And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers. ²⁵But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. ²⁶Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. ²⁷And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Mt. 5.11-12: Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹²Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

2 Cor. 9.6f But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.

1 Peter 2.18f: Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. ¹⁹For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. ²⁰For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God.

1 Cor. 3.12f: Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. ¹⁴If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Rev. 6.9f: When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. ¹⁰And they cried with a loud voice, saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” ¹¹Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.