

SPIRITUAL DEVIATIONS

Heaven-bound Delusions

The debunking of cherished beliefs is never a comfortable task. One of the most cherished beliefs, the notion of dying and going to heaven (a place where all our problems will instantaneously be resolved and where we will live an endlessly blissful existence) is deeply entrenched in traditional Christian thinking. Because the notion of heaven is so comforting to the natural man, so prevalent in church history, and so entrenched in our culture, it is rare to find a Bible teacher who does not perpetuate this erroneous thought. However, when honestly examined in the light of Scripture, the notion of heaven as the destiny of God's people is found to be without merit. Instead, such teachings, though soothing to the world-weary soul, produce an assortment of spiritual deviations.

Heaven is Not the Believer's Goal

In *Knockin' at Heaven's Door*, believers are told that "God Wants to Give Us Heaven" as "our eternal destiny" (22), and even though "God wants everyone to be in heaven," sin "causes heaven to be closed for some" (23). Such seemingly innocuous statements are commonplace in today's theology. They have, over time, gained such acceptance that they are all but exempt from serious scrutiny. A gospel tract published by Sword of the Lord Publishers, for example, bears the title, "How to Know You Are Going to Heaven." It presents in truncated form, the contents of the "Four Spiritual Laws," complete with verses supporting man's need of Christ's redemption on the cross. While presenting heaven as the destiny of God's elect, however, nowhere in the tract is there a verse to support this assertion. This is the one point that is assumed to not require biblical substantiation. As such, the notion of going to heaven is granted *a priori* status.

The Bible makes it unambiguously clear that the New Jerusalem on the new earth is our unique and ultimate goal (Rev. 21:2). The final two chapters of the Bible give us a symbolic revelation of the New Jerusalem replete with details—a divine, scriptural view which should govern our present-day walk on earth and which we should take as our unique and ultimate goal. In contrast, biblical details of heaven are so scarce that if heaven were indeed our "eternal destiny," we would be forced to resort to speculation and "imaginative, interpretive, creative thoughts" for

most of its particulars (Swindoll 32). Not surprisingly, though, the Bible does not emphasize that God wants to give us heaven; He wants to give us Christ (1 Cor. 1:2, 9). Further, the Scriptures emphasize that sin actually shuts off our access to Christ, who is signified by the tree of life. We have washed our "robes" from sin to enjoy Christ as the tree of life and to be built up as the dwelling place of God in spirit (Eph. 2:22). Our goal, our destiny, is to be filled with the divine life in order to be built together as the mutual abode of the Triune God with His redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified believers (Rev. 22:1-2, 14, 17; 1 Pet. 2:5). This destiny is consummated for eternity as the New Jerusalem on the new earth. The details of the New Jerusalem serve to show us that in the present age we should be regenerated, renewed, sanctified, transformed, conformed, built up, and glorified. As such "precious stones" (1 Cor. 3:12) we should seek to be corporately built up with others until this building of God and man, this mutual abode, is consummated.

To take heaven as the ultimate goal of Christ's redemptive work causes us to miss the present experience of Christ, which is in line with the Bible's focus of bringing us back to Christ as our life and into the mystical building of God and man. Conversely, taking the New Jerusalem as our ultimate goal brings us into the present-day enjoyment of the divine life and nature.

Heaven Is Not the Believer's Inheritance

Another commonly held notion which hinders many believers' genuine spiritual progress is that heaven is our inheritance from God. *Knockin' at Heaven's Door* says that "Heaven Is the Believer's Inheritance," that "God is not a miser," but rather that He "desires to share His riches with all of us" (22). What does the Bible, however, declare to be our inheritance? And what significance does our future inheritance have for our present, daily experience of Christ?

The New Testament reveals that our inheritance is related to the divine life, to the Triune God Himself. First Peter 1:4, which speaks of our inheritance "kept in the heavens," is actually a continuation of Peter's thought in verse 3, which says that God "has regenerated us unto

a living hope.” When we were regenerated, we received the divine life (1 John 5:12) and became partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). This regeneration engendered in us a living hope, a hope of life for this present age, for the coming kingdom age, and for eternity. The blessings of our inheritance include such things as the transformation of the soul (2 Cor. 3:17-18), the renewing of the mind (Rom. 12:2), and the glorification of our body (Phil. 3:21). These are all aspects of our inheritance that we can enjoy today and will possess in full in eternity. Most important, they are all related to the divine life, to God Himself. Each of the blessings of our inheritance kept for us in the heavens is a result of our joyful present participation in the Triune God. Our inheritance is not a place, but a person—the most wonderful person in the universe. All the blessings of our inheritance are the present and future benefits of our life relationship with Him.

The New Testament repeatedly asserts that we believers are heirs not only of *things related* to God but that we are heirs of the Triune God Himself. The Scriptures tell us clearly what our inheritance is: We are “heirs of God” (Rom. 8:17) and heirs of the blessing of Abraham, which is the Spirit (Gal. 3:14, 29). As heirs of the Triune God, we live and enjoy Him in this age and will also inherit all the riches of what God is both in the coming kingdom age and in eternity. The Bible never tells us that *heaven* is our inheritance; rather, it is the *heavenly One* Himself, with all the surpassing wealth of His divine attributes and human virtues who will be our enjoyment and treasure both now and unto the age of the ages.

Ephesians 1:13-14 says that “the Holy Spirit of the promise...is the pledge of our inheritance unto the redemption of the acquired possession.” The Greek word *arrabon*, translated “pledge,” means a foretaste, a guarantee, a down payment, a partial payment in advance in guarantee of the coming full payment. Our wonderful portion today is the enjoyment of the Spirit as a foretaste of what we will enjoy in full for eternity. In other words, our eternal inheritance is also our present portion. We have a marvelous down payment, a foretaste of what we will inherit forever, the Spirit Himself. However, if we are deluded into viewing heaven as our inheritance, we will be defrauded of a present foretaste of our inheritance; we will be lulled into passively waiting for death in order to become heirs. God intends that our present lives be filled with our tasting and appropriating of what our full inheritance will be in eternity—the Spirit.

Ephesians 1:14 continues with the phrase, “unto the redemption of the acquired possession, to the praise of His glory.” Paul is speaking of the redemption of our body (Rom. 8:23), at which point it will be transfigured from a body of humiliation into a glorious body (Phil. 3:21). It is by our present, day-by-day enjoyment and experience

of the Spirit as our foretaste that we are filled with God’s divine element and matured in the divine life, resulting in the eventual redemption of our bodies at His coming.

In contrast to this view *A Divine Revelation of Heaven* weaves a fanciful description of heaven. The author claims to have been repeatedly transported there when visited by Jesus between 2:00 and 5:00 in the morning. The first heavenly visitation is described as follows:

At two o’clock in the morning, a mighty angel stood beside my bed. Jesus Christ was standing behind the angel....The mighty messenger of God said, “God has given me a special mission. I am sent here to take you to heaven and to show you parts of it.”

After a moment, he spoke again, “Come and see the glory of God!”

At once I was supernaturally transported from my home and found myself standing outside one of the gates of heaven with the heavenly angel. (16-17)

The book then describes a sumptuous scene of material wonders such as splendid pearls, exquisite diamonds, hair “like spun gold” (18), a golden book, beautiful music, an incomparable landscape, lush greenery and vegetation, horses that bow their knees and praise the Lord, and innumerable mansions (18-24). It declares that to live there should be “the focus of our hopes and desires” and that “heaven is the land of dreams come true!” (29-30). Such a view of heaven only incites the desires of the flesh and of the mind.

The apostle Paul had a very different focus and desire. He testified, “But what things were gains to me, these I have counted as loss on account of Christ...that I may *gain Christ*” (Phil. 3:7-8, emphasis added). With purposeful consistency, the Bible assures us that our inheritance is the Triune God and that He alone should be our daily focus and desire. Our inheritance is not a physical reward of heavenly splendor, but God Himself. Since God is our ultimate destiny, He should likewise be the object of our pursuit in the present. If we pattern our living and seeking after Paul, who pursued Christ single-mindedly (v. 12), we will be safeguarded from spiritual deviation.

Heaven Is Not the All-inclusive Solution

It is axiomatic among modern Christians that heaven will be the ultimate, comprehensive solution for all of our problems. *The Applause of Heaven* describes heaven as a world free of problems and asks its readers, “Tell me, doesn’t that make you want to go home?” (191). Baxter concurs and reports that in heaven there will be no more “off-key” singing (80) and that voices “without quality of

tone or pitch on earth will sing in beautiful harmony in heaven. We will all be happy over there” (81). With unquestioning certainty, heaven is anticipated to be a solution to all earthly troubles and shortcomings.

When heaven becomes the believer’s goal, inheritance, and panacea, passivity ensues. Having received the assurance that they have escaped God’s eternal wrath, many believers deviate to an errant Christian living, focusing either on Christian ethics or on the pursuit of material blessing at best or returning to their former manner of living at worst. After being regenerated, heaven becomes the apogee of Christian experience, something to patiently await, something to look forward to after death. Thus, the notion of heaven has a beguiling, drugging effect, causing the believer to waste away his years on earth, crucial years which God has measured out to us for the accomplishment of His purpose (Eph. 3:11). Swindoll warns in *Eternity*, “Don’t spend most of your adult Christian life looking up as if you had nothing else to do” (90).

The notion of heaven as God’s solution to our problems has contributed greatly to the delay of the coming of His kingdom on earth (Matt. 5:10). Waiting for heaven actually postpones and frustrates God’s economy, His plan for fulfilling His eternal purpose. Waiting for heaven postpones the renewing of the mind (Rom. 12:2), the sanctification of our tripartite being (1 Thes. 5:23), the transformation of our soul (2 Cor. 3:18), our conformation to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29), and the coming glorification of our body (Phil. 3:21). On the corporate side, waiting for heaven impedes the building up of the believers as God’s house (Eph. 2:22), the recovery of the visible and spiritual oneness of believers (John 17:21; Eph. 4:3), the preparation of the corporate bride of Christ (Rev. 19:7), the producing of the church as God’s masterpiece (Eph. 2:10), and the consummation of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2).

As the believers’ personal walk and corporate experience of Christ are diluted through passivity, the Lord’s coming is delayed rather than hastened (2 Pet. 3:12). The teaching that we are all going to heaven when we die is a strategic delusion of God’s enemy, causing us to seek escape from the very place that is the locus of God’s attention and activity. While God longs for His kingdom to come to earth, His believers, all agog for heaven, are wistfully wasting the precious time allotted to them on earth.

Heaven Is Not the Fulfillment of God’s Economy

One of the most significant prayers of the apostle Paul was that God would “enlighten all that they may see what the *economy* of the mystery is” (Eph. 3:9, emphasis added). Paul prayed this because he realized that it was necessary for us to see God’s plan in order to be able to cooperate with Him for its execution. This great plan is accomplished both in the present church age as well as in the coming age of the millennial kingdom. God’s plan is accomplished on earth in this age by bringing the situation on earth under His heavenly rule so that His kingdom may exist “also on earth” (Matt. 6:10). The commonly held notion that believers will go to heaven and that God will fill heaven with saved sinners is contrary to the purpose of God as revealed in the New Testament. In fact, this misunderstanding becomes a veil frustrating the Lord’s response to Paul’s prayer for our enlightenment.

The idea of heaven being a material place where dreams come true and where God’s redeemed walk amidst jewels, precious ores, and innumerable mansions is puerile when compared to God’s purpose and plan, which is profound, divine, mystical, and spiritual, being focused on Christ and the church as His reproduction, His life increase, and His bride.

The idea of heaven being a material place where dreams come true and where God’s redeemed walk amidst jewels, precious ores, and innumerable mansions is puerile when compared to God’s New Testament economy. God’s purpose and plan are profound, divine, mystical, and spiritual, being focused on Christ and on the church as His reproduction, His life increase, and His bride. God’s economy involves the dispensing of the Triune God into the tripartite man, resulting and consummating in a universal couple, a mutual abode expressing God in an enlarged and expanded way. The customary thought of going to heaven diminishes God’s wisdom from the profundity found in the New Testament to a sim-

plistic, materialistic, and often worldly idea derived from religious tradition. The New Testament reveals the unfathomable riches of Christ in His economy, whereas the traditional and shallow concept of heaven as the culmination and pinnacle of Christian experience stands in frivolous contradiction.

In the traditional concept of going to heaven, all of God’s dealings with His believers in this age are viewed as a preparation for a heavenly destination. *A Divine Revelation of Heaven* says that “God wants to purify His saints on earth so they will enjoy heaven’s atmosphere” (54). In the book’s vision of heaven an angel reveals great storehouses, physical buildings that warehouse miracles such as healings. The angel indicates that these miracles were waiting to be released to the earth, if only someone would believe and ask for them (91). What in fact governs God in His dealings with

man is His eternal purpose to be one with man; that is, to redeem, regenerate, renew, sanctify, transform, conform, and glorify man with the divine life and nature of the Triune God. What governs God is His desire to be in redeemed humankind, and for redeemed humankind to be in Him. It is not the physical geography and architecture of a heaven filled with blessings that forms the basis of His transactions with mankind; rather, it is His profound intention within His economy.

Traditional notions of going to heaven are antithetical to the New Testament economy of God because they portray an irreconcilable disparity between our living today and our existence in eternity. The New Testament reveals the present Christian experience to be one of daily organic salvation, a life that is the living out of the indwelling Christ. As we grow in grace, the divine life and nature spread throughout our being as Christ makes His home in our hearts (Eph. 3:17). The believer's inward being becomes increasingly, day by day, the abode of God (John 14:23), and God becomes increasingly, day by day, the believer's abode. This daily, progressive, organic process eventually consummates as the New Jerusalem—an eternal union, mingling, and incorporation of God in man and man in God. Our eternal experience will be a plenary continuation of our present-day experience. We will not leap from a spiritual, mystical, and inward relationship with God to one that is largely outward and detached in heaven. When most believers think of heaven, they see themselves *with* Jesus, not *indwelt* by Him or abiding *in* Him.

Heaven Is Not the Depths of God

First Corinthians 2:9 is often described as God's promise of heaven: "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard and which have not come up in man's heart; things which God has prepared for those who love Him." While it is certainly true that our enjoyment of the Triune God is inexhaustible, Paul applies this experience to the present. In verse 10 he says, "But to us God has revealed them through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God." Also, in Romans 11:33, he declares, "O the depth of the riches...of God!" It is God Himself who is deep and profound in His nature and essence. His being is unfathomably rich in divine attributes and human virtues. Christ is our eternal portion in His many aspects, and the Spirit reveals and conveys these riches to us both now and into eternity.

In contrast, the traditional notion of going to heaven conjures up a variety of superficial images. Many imagine that they will sprout wings and play harps. Others envision golf courses. Still others see beautiful stones, golden streets, and the dream house/mansion they never had on earth. Others see heaven primarily as a family reunion hosted by a smiling Jesus. Ultimately, heaven is

nothing more than the fulfillment of earthly desires to an unlimited degree. All these views share a common adverse effect: causing believers to be content with a substandard experience of Christ on the earth while waiting for heaven and its splendor. However, when one begins to know the deep things of God, he realizes that glory is God expressed in His divine attributes and human virtues through His transformed believers. God's glory is seen when Christ is magnified in everyday affairs, making ordinary life extraordinary.

If one views the traditional idea of going to heaven as harmless, or even as helpful and comforting, it becomes easy to understand why so few Bible teachers bother to cut "straight the word" on this matter (2 Tim. 2:15). But as with all biblical truth, accuracy matters, not only for the sake of understanding but also for the sake of the believers' daily experience. The well-entrenched rubrics of heaven as the believers' eternal destiny cause many to deviate from God's central focus and desire by taking heaven, rather than God Himself, as their goal. It further affects the present living of believers by defrauding many of the awareness and foretaste of their inheritance. The various fallacious notions of heaven lull many into complacency, veiling them from the profound truth of God's New Testament economy. Rather than appropriating the riches of God's daily organic salvation, many believers wistfully long for heaven to bring about an all-inclusive solution to their problems. Furthermore, commonly held notions of heaven as our destiny lead to superficiality both in our understanding of God's plan and goal as well as in our Christian experience.

Our eternal destiny will be an intensified continuation of our present experience of the Triune God and of the corporate Body of Christ. It will indeed be marvelous, profound, and supremely rewarding. Contemporary notions of heaven as our destiny only demean the Bible's revelation of our eternal cohabitation with God. Our destiny—the mutual abode of the Triune God, the New Jerusalem—is infinitely grander, and such a view engenders a grander now.

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