

# H Y M N S

## Concerning the Religious Concept of Going to Heaven

- 1 Sing the wondrous love of Jesus,  
Sing His mercy and His grace.  
In the mansions bright and blessèd  
He'll prepare for us a place.  
    When we all get to heaven,  
    What a day of rejoicing that will be!  
    When we all see Jesus,  
    We'll sing and shout the victory!
- 2 While we walk the pilgrim pathway,  
Clouds will overspread the sky;  
But when traveling days are over,  
Not a shadow, not a sigh.
- 3 Let us then be true and faithful,  
Trusting, serving every day;  
Just one glimpse of Him in glory  
Will the toils of life repay.
- 4 Onward to the prize before us!  
Soon His beauty we'll behold;  
Soon the pearly gates will open;  
We shall tread the streets of gold.

The believers' suffering existence on this earth and their future destiny as God's chosen and redeemed people have been recurrent themes in Christian hymns throughout the centuries. Unfortunately, this thematic content frequently takes the form of vaguely conceived and ambiguously fabricated expressions of heavenly mansions and of a physical city with streets paved with gold. Although this imagery is contained in Scriptures, a literal interpretation of these images does not match the clear words of the Bible concerning God's desire and intention for humanity according to His divine economy. Hymns based on an anticipated existence of a highly tactile nature stand entirely outside the divine revelation contained in the holy Scriptures. While appealing to natural understandings such expressions of hope actually vitiate the reality of the things that God has promised to His chosen people.

"When We All Get to Heaven" is an old favorite among many believers. Written in the late 1800s by Eliza Edmunds Stites Hewitt and published by the Hall-Mack Company in 1898, it expresses typical concepts that are promulgated among believers who have adopted the naïve concept that our eternal destiny is some kind of ethereal existence in a realm of physical bliss with luxurious material surroundings.

Like many hymns of this nature, it is a mixture of truth with shallow misinterpretations and often detrimental pronouncements of imagined rewards that await the faithful believers as their eternal destiny. While there are glimpses of the joy and the glory we confidently anticipate when we shall look into the face of our coming Lord and Savior, these momentary vistas of genuine glory are overshadowed by superficial hopes of corporeal gratification.

The first two lines of this hymn are a commendable call to all true worshippers to sing of the love and grace of the Lord Jesus: "Sing the wondrous love of Jesus, / Sing His mercy and His grace." The surpassing love of Jesus and His abounding mercy and grace are rich themes in the holy Scriptures worthy of our songs of worship and praise. We should sing of the great love of God toward the world in sending His only begotten Son for the purpose of redemption (John 3:16). We should also sing of the One who loved us and gave Himself up for us (Gal. 2:20), of the constraining love of Christ within us (2 Cor. 5:14-15), and of the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge (Eph. 3:19). Concerning grace, there is a profusion of verses to enjoy and proclaim: Grace came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17); we have been justified freely by God's grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:24); we have received super-abounding grace through which we are enabled to reign in life (5:17, 20-21); and God's abundant grace is sufficient to overcome every kind of suffering (2 Cor. 12:9).

These are only a few of the New Testament verses that refer to the love and grace of Christ. But it is lamentable that this hymn, instead of continuing to exult in the rich supply of love and grace revealed in the Scriptures, diverts our attention away from the revelation of all that our God has given to us in His Son. Rather, we are suddenly presented with visions of heavenly mansions based on the misinterpretation of John 14:2: "In the mansions bright and blessèd / He'll prepare for us a place." To turn hearts to such a goal, away from the pursuit of Christ Himself, does terrible damage to seeking Christians. This is not even to supply milk to believers who are still childish (cf. 1 Cor. 3:1-3); it is an unhealthy teaching.

First and 2 Timothy and Titus urge the believers to partake

of healthy teaching (1 Tim. 1:10; 2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1), healthy words (1 Tim. 6:3; 2 Tim. 1:13), and healthy speech (Titus 2:8) because there are many teachings which turn people away from the goal of God's New Testament economy (cf. 1 Tim. 1:3-4). Teachings which distract people from the center and goal of God's eternal purpose are very unwholesome. Moreover, teachings that are not only distracting but also false have tragic consequences in regard to the goal of God's ultimate expression in Christ. The promoting of heavenly mansions that are prepared for God's chosen ones falls into the latter category.

The chorus continues with the theme of going to heaven, which has no solid basis in the Bible. The Bible frequently speaks of heaven as the dwelling place of God and of His angels; Satan and his fallen angels also have access. We can find in the Bible many references to the Son who comes out of heaven in His incarnation, and who returns to heaven after His death and resurrection. He is seated on the throne of His Father in heaven, and He will come again riding on the clouds of the heavens. All of these references may be wrongly understood to indicate that we will go to be with the Lord in heaven. However, we are given a definitive description of our eternal dwelling place which comes down out of heaven from God. The New Jerusalem will be part of the new earth as the tabernacle of God with men (Rev. 21:1-3).

A careful reading of the portrayal of the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation reveals that it is a composition of the redeeming God with His redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified people of all generations. Nowhere in the New Testament do we read of the believers going to heaven except for a brief time when the man-child will be caught up to God and to His throne (Rev. 12:5) and when the firstfruits will stand on the heavenly Mount Zion before the throne of God (14:1-5). Both of these instances are references to the overcoming believers who, after uniting with their Lord in heaven, will come down with Him out of heaven to destroy the forces of Antichrist at Armageddon and then reign with Him on the earth for a thousand years (3:12, 21; 20:4, 6). Following the millennial kingdom, the New Jerusalem is described as coming down out of heaven (21:2). Thus, to speak of going to heaven as our eternal goal and reward is both inaccurate and misleading.

**T**he second stanza—"While we walk the pilgrim path-way, / Clouds will overspread the sky; / But when traveling days are over, / Not a shadow, not a sigh"—is a general statement of enduring sufferings in this present age with the hope that in the coming age we will enjoy complete bliss. While the description is not wrong, it is bereft of any hint of vision concerning God's purpose

which distinguishes the sufferings of Christians from the hopeless sufferings of unbelievers. The Bible describes the sufferings of the faithful as a fellowship with our Lord in His sufferings that we may fully know Him and be prepared to rule together with Him (Phil. 3:10; Rom. 8:17-18).

**O**ur sufferings contribute to the consuming of our outer man (the fallen created humanity with its sin and death) and the renewing of our inner man (our regenerated human spirit with our transformed soul), thus working out in us "an eternal weight of glory" that far surpasses the momentary lightness of affliction (2 Cor. 4:16-18). We do not simply endure hardship so that we will appreciate an existence in which there is no hardship. Such an imaginative realm, experienced for eternity, might prove to be uneventful to the point of boredom.

Stanza 3 is the best of this hymn: "Let us then be true and faithful, / Trusting, serving every day; / Just one glimpse of Him in glory / Will the toils of life repay." Here, we are encouraged to serve the Lord in a true and faithful way with the confident expectation that a glimpse of our wonderful Lord will be more than sufficient to repay our labor here. In the heart of every seeking believer there should be the joyful anticipation of seeing the Lord and hearing Him say, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful over a few things; I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21, 23). We can sing this stanza with gladness of heart and thankful praise.

The final stanza encourages us to persevere toward the prize: "Onward to the prize before us! / Soon His beauty we'll behold." This clearly refers to the apostle's testimony in Philippians 3:14: "I pursue toward the goal for the prize to which God in Christ Jesus has called me upward," which has often inspired believers to press on. But the final two lines of the hymn are disappointing in their depiction of our "prize" in terms of a material city to be entered through pearly gates with the hope of walking on golden streets: "Soon the pearly gates will open; / We shall tread the streets of gold."

When we seriously and thoughtfully contemplate the eternal intent and purpose of God, it is implausible to believe that His creation, so full of attention to the minutest details and yet so infinite in its expansiveness, so full of His personal investment to the point of dying on behalf of everything in order to lead His many sons into glory (Heb. 2:3, 9-10), could consummate in a literal city having twelve gates, each gate consisting of one pearl, or that our destiny is to walk on a street of gold (Rev. 21:16-21). Such a literal interpretation of the New Jerusalem as a physical city is not fitting to our great God and His so great a salvation.

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## Concerning God's Central Thought and Man's Destiny

- 1 Lo, the central thought of God  
Is that He be one with man;  
He to man is everything  
That He might fulfill His plan.
- 2 Earthen vessel man was made—  
Body, soul, and spirit too,  
God as life that he may take  
And with Him have oneness true.
- 3 By the flow of life divine,  
Man becomes a precious stone  
Fit for building God's abode,  
That His glory might be known.
- 4 'Tis the city God hath built,  
'Tis the dwelling God requires,  
'Tis the new Jerusalem  
Which fulfills His heart's desires.
- 5 'Tis the building of the saints,  
'Tis the blend of God and man,  
Purposed by the Father's will  
Long before the world began.
- 6 In its center, as its pow'r,  
Is the throne of Christ and God,  
Whence doth flow the stream of life  
As the Spirit's living flood.
- 7 Christ, the tree of life, is there  
In the flowing of the stream,  
Yielding fruit of life divine  
As the food of life supreme.
- 8 God in Christ, the glorious light,  
Thru the city brightly shines,  
Scattering all the deathly night  
With its light of life divine.
- 9 God in man and man in God  
Mutual dwelling thus possess;  
God the content is to man,  
And the man doth God express. (*Hymns, #972*)

**F**aith governs our living. We live according to what we believe. If we believe that our destiny is to enter into a place full of creature comforts in imagined sublime surroundings, we will live in a manner that seeks such comforts today. If, however, we believe that we will enter into an organic union of complete oneness with the Triune God to become the same as He is in life and in nature and that we will rule and reign with Him as His corporate expression for eternity, we will live in a manner that seeks to be one with Him today, ruling and

reigning with Him in life for His expression in His corporate Body now.

**S**ome hymns, holding forth the promise of material rewards—heavenly mansions, streets of gold, and pearly gates—constitute a kind of pabulum for small-souled believers. In stark contrast, the hymn here begins with the central thought of God revealed in His divine revelation—the point at which all of our contemplation concerning our eternal future should begin.

“The central thought of God,” the hymn declares, “is that He be one with man.” Most of the religions of the world speak of some transfer into heavenly environments in which man remains as man and God as God. The only connection between God and man is the action of an eternally magnanimous Sovereign who bestows on an infinitely inferior creature an eternal existence in a materially luxurious environment. But the author of this hymn, Witness Lee, taking his cue from the holy Word, unfolds God's intention to be one with man and portrays the way in which He carries out His divine purpose. The ultimate consummation of this oneness is the New Jerusalem which is the issue of the blending of the Triune God with His chosen, redeemed, regenerated, transformed and glorified people in a corporate Body.

One may wonder whether it is necessary to sing of the deeper truths revealed in the Word of God. Why not rather simply sing of Jesus who loves us and of the wonderful redemption we enjoy in Him? Although we should enjoy these aspects of God's full salvation, we should not be limited to the beginning points of the truth (Heb. 5:11-14). The Christian life is a mystery. The way we live depends absolutely on our faith, and faith must be solidly based on the Word of God.

Paul speaks of “all the riches of the full assurance of understanding,” which are “unto the full knowledge of the mystery of God, Christ” (Col. 2:2). Then he links the “order” in our Christian living directly to “the solid basis” of our faith in Christ (v. 5). Thirdly he urges that we “walk in Him, having been rooted and being built up in Him, and being established in the faith even as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (vv. 6-7). Hence, we need to study the Word, feed on the Word, sing the Word, and let the Word dwell in us richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another, singing with grace in our hearts to God (3:16). Such singing in faith will change our living.

Another may ask, “Where does the Bible say that God's central thought is that He would be one with man?” This intention is clearly depicted in the Bible. Genesis 1:26-27

shows us the significance of God's creation of man: "And God said, Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." God has a specific purpose for man and a special relationship with man. Exploring this unique relationship, the psalmist in Psalm 8:4-8 asks the question, "What is mortal man, that You remember him?" Later, the book of Hebrews reiterates this question and then supplies the answer: "We see Jesus" (2:9). What we see in Jesus is a man who not only tasted death on behalf of everything (v. 9), but was also crowned with glory and honor. He is the Author of our salvation who is also leading many sons (the men whom He created, redeemed, and regenerated) into glory (v. 10). Through incarnation, He became the same as we are, partaking of blood and flesh (v. 14).

The apostle John declares that Jesus is God and that He existed with God from the beginning (John 1:1). In John 14:10-11 the Lord Jesus says, "I am in the Father and the Father is in Me." In verse 20, the Lord continues, "In that day [the day of His resurrection] you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you." Here we see not only the oneness of the Father and the Son, but also that the believers have been incorporated into that divine oneness. Clearly God is one with man; He is one with man in the person of Christ, and He is one with man in the Body of Christ. Thus, God's central thought manifestly is to join Himself to man and man to Him. In this oneness, God wants to be everything to man in order to fulfill His plan.

Stanza 2 testifies that this oneness is intrinsically based on the impartation of His own life into man. God created man in a particular way—body, soul, and spirit—with the intention that man would be able to receive Him as life and thus "with Him have oneness true." This is the marvelous thought of God—not simply the oneness of a Creator with His creatures, nor merely the oneness of a Redeemer with His redeemed. It is a oneness based on God imparting Himself into His chosen and redeemed to be their life and life supply that they may live in and by His very life and nature. What true oneness is this!

**T**he third stanza introduces the thought that in the flow of this oneness of life essence, a transformation is accomplished—"Man becomes a precious stone / Fit for building God's abode." The imagery of human beings becoming living stones for the building of God implies transformation (1 Pet. 2:5). God's purpose is to transform man into the image of His Son (2 Cor. 3:18). Thus, man is constituted with the very element of the divine life to be built into the habitation of God (Eph. 2:21-22). God's dwelling place can never be a physical temple or even a physical city. His habitation must be constituted with living stones, His redeemed, regenerated, and transformed people. The transformation of sinners into living

stones is accomplished by the flow of the divine life into His redeemed people day by day (4:15-16; Col. 2:19).

The building work proclaimed in the third stanza issues in the New Jerusalem, the city God has built, the dwelling God requires to fulfill His heart's desires (stanza 4). The New Jerusalem is the city of the living God, the city that Abraham looked for (Heb. 11:10). God has prepared this city for His people (v. 16). It is the tabernacle of God, in which God will dwell with men for eternity (Rev. 21:3). This city is the thought of God—His purpose and His goal for Himself and for His people.

**S**tanza 5 reveals that the constituents of this city are God and His chosen ones: it is "the building of the saints" and "the blend of God and man." It is crucial for us to realize that the New Jerusalem is not a physical city. It is a sign of the union and mingling of the Triune God with His chosen, redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified people to be the bride (Rev. 21:2, 9-10), the counterpart of Christ for His satisfaction, and the tabernacle, the dwelling place, of God for His rest (v. 3; John 14:23).

This city is the result of the processed Triune God perfecting His elect into oneness in Himself (John 17:21-23). Hence, at the center of the city is the throne of Christ and God (stanza 6). Out from this administrative center, the Spirit of God is flowing as the river of water of life. This indicates that for eternity God will be flowing Himself into man in an ever-continuing dispensing of the divine life. Here Christ, as the tree of life, is ever supplying His saints (stanza 7), and God the Father is ever shining as the glorious light of the city, "scattering all the deathly night," with the light of the divine life (stanza 8). The imagery clearly speaks of an eternally dynamic interaction with the Divine Trinity, in contrast with a static existence of walking on golden streets with no apparent aim or objective. We have significant meaning for our eternal living, substantial reason for singing and praising our wonderful Lord.

"God in man and man in God / Mutual dwelling thus possess; / God the content is to man, / And the man doth God express." The entire universe will be impacted by the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and the new earth. No wonder that the entire creation is eagerly awaiting the "revelation of the sons of God" when even "creation itself will also be freed from the slavery of corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:19-21). We can only bow and worship our God with reverence and awe that He has such an eternal purpose for us.

*by Gary Kaiser*