

MILESTONES

A Survey of the Concept of Heaven

The following survey of the concept of heaven in Christian literature reveals a wide range of thought throughout church history. The various views are intertwined with notions of reward and rest and often contrasted with themes of judgment. Heaven is presented both as a physical location with physical mansions and as a spiritual realm. Within these excerpted portions, the characterizations of heaven that so permeate today's Christianity can be seen both in their initial stage of development as well as their full expression. Only occasionally is there a voice that calls into question the scriptural accuracy of these characterizations. What is most evident, however, is the almost complete departure of these views from the central line of the economy of God, the apostles' teaching that God desires to dispense Himself into man for the producing of an organic expression of Himself. This departure, which began during the time of the apostle Paul (2 Tim. 1:15), has resulted in views of heaven that universally ignore God's economy when attempting to explicate the details of the New Jerusalem.

Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 200)

In *Against Heresies* Irenaeus speaks of a "gradation and arrangement (among) those who are saved" (Roberts 1: 567). Each will receive a different habitation, based upon what he has produced, whether a hundredfold, sixtyfold, or thirtyfold. "Those who are deemed worthy of an abode in heaven shall go there, others shall enjoy the delights of paradise, and others shall possess the splendour of the city" (567).

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215)

In *The Stromata* Clement speaks of a relationship between faith, works, and the glories of heaven. Belief leads to salvation and salvation to good works. This was the way the apostles attained their "sacred abode" (Roberts 2: 504). Anyone who follows in their footsteps can become worthy "of reaching his own mansion" (505). Also, in heaven, there are different degrees of glory. "The believer, through great discipline, divesting himself of the passions, passes to the mansion which is better than the former one" (505).

Tertullian (c. 160-c. 225)

Tertullian distinguishes Hades from Paradise for today

and Gehenna from the heaven of heavens after the general resurrection and judgment (3: 59). Hades is the place where both the souls of the rich man and Lazarus are kept after death (Luke 16:23). The rich man is in a sub-region of torment, and Lazarus is in a different place of refreshment. Between each continent is a separating gulf. In *A Treatise on the Soul* Tertullian says, "Every soul is detained in safe keeping in Hades until the day of the Lord"; he further remarks, "Christ in His death spent three days in the heart of the earth,...in the secret inner recess which is hidden in the earth and enclosed by the earth" (234). At present, "All souls...are shut up within Hades" (234). Abraham's bosom is identified as a sub-section of Hades where Lazarus is at rest. The fact that Abraham is still there clearly shows "that Hades is not in any case opened for (the escape of) any soul" to leave (234).

In *Against Marcion* Tertullian indicates that Abraham's bosom "is meant [to be] some temporary receptacle of faithful souls" who are "Abraham's children, even from among the Gentiles...[who are] of the same faith....Although it is not in heaven, it is yet higher than hell" (406).

Hippolytus (c. 170-c. 236)

In *Fragments from Commentaries* Hippolytus maintains that Paradise "did not belong to heaven, but was in reality planted in the created system" (5: 163). In *Against Plato, on the Cause of the Universe*, he describes the nature of Hades, its function as far as the righteous and unrighteous are concerned, heaven itself, and the coming judgment on the wicked. Hades is the place "in which the souls both of the righteous and the unrighteous are detained. Hades is a place in the created system, rude, a locality beneath the earth, in which the light of the world does not shine" (221). He further emphasizes the inclusiveness of all the dead waiting in different sections: "The souls of all are detained until the time which God has determined" (222). In the part of Hades where the righteous are kept, "there is neither fierce heat, nor cold, nor thorn; but the face of the fathers and the righteous is seen to be always smiling, as they wait for the rest and eternal revival in heaven which succeed this location" (222).

The unrighteous are in a place where they already feel the

power of punishment. From where they are, they can “see the terrible and excessively glowing spectacle of the fire” of their future judgment (222). Although no one has been cast there yet, in this locality there is a place by itself containing a “lake of unquenchable fire” for those sentenced to endless punishment (221). Instead of receiving a glorious body as the righteous, “their bodies [will remain] unchanged,...unransomed,...and still with all the ills in which they died” (222).

Origen (c. 185-c. 254)

In *de Principiis* Origen suggests that the understanding the saints now lack on earth will be fully granted after death. He says, “All the saints who depart from this life will remain in some place situated on the earth, which holy Scripture calls paradise” (4: 299). There they will receive instruction as in a “school of souls,” and what is presently seen as in “a glass darkly” will be seen “clearly and distinctly” (299). Some will make more rapid progress than others. They will follow Jesus who passed already into the heavens and “ascend to a place in the air, and reach the kingdom of heaven, through those mansions, so to speak, in the various places which the Greeks have termed spheres...but which holy Scripture has called heavens” (299). The mansions are like stations along the way in the journey to the Father’s house.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

In Augustine’s *Enchiridion*, he speaks of being careful with what we build upon the foundation which is Christ. We can build with temporal and earthly things (wood, grass, stubble), or we can build with Christ (gold, silver, precious stones). Fire will come and test both kinds of materials (1 Cor. 3:13, 15). “The fire...shall prove, not the work of one of them only, but of both. Now the trial of adversity is a kind of [proving] fire” (Schaff, *Nicene* 3: 259). When the final, universal judgment comes, those of Christ’s kingdom will “live truly and happily in eternal life,” while those in the devil’s kingdom will “drag a miserable existence in eternal death without the power of dying” (273). With those in both kingdoms there will be degrees of happiness or degrees of misery.

Augustine defines or illustrates heaven in the phrase, “Your will be done as in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). “The Church of God is heaven, His enemies are earth....Our spirit is heaven, and the flesh earth....Our mind whereby we see truth, and delight in this truth, is heaven” (Schaff, *Nicene* 6: 281). In *On the Psalms*, he says that the heavens are the righteous souls, including “all the holy Apostles, all the holy Virtues, Powers, Thrones, Lordships, that heavenly Jerusalem...and there God dwelleth” (8: 596).

In another collection of his writings on the Psalms,

Augustine says that there “is in heaven an eternal Jerusalem where the angels, our co-citizens, are. From these co-citizens we on earth are estranged” (Clark 232). In our exile on earth, “We shall sometimes meet companions who have seen the holy city and who urge us to hasten” to the house of the Lord (232). If you seek the heavenly Jerusalem, you will have it (Psa. 122:1). She is our mother whom the apostle said was eternal in the heavens (Gal. 4:26) which, at present, is being built (234).

St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274)

According to Aquinas, heaven is a place of “ultimate good”; it is “perpetual and full joy” (339). This “final good will endure forever” in a state of “perfect tranquility of peace” (341). It is a kingdom “in which God reigns in the saints and the saints reign with God” (337). It is not the material heaven, the loftier regions of the visible world, but is supercelestial, the spiritual firmament. “This ultimate good, which consists in God, is also called eternal life” (338). To see God and have a vision of God beatifies the soul. By a direct vision of God, one can comprehend (enclose, apprehend) God and “hold Him present within ourselves” (339).

Dante Aleghieri (1265-1321)

In the *Divine Comedy* Dante presents a view of heaven that was common in his day. First, heaven includes the nine material heavens (the Moon, Venus, Mercury, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the fixed stars, and the firmament above); second, there are the Celestial Hierarchies, the Holy of Holies; third, there is the Heaven of Heavens where the fully perfected saints can be found in mystic union with the Redeemer. Here are the blessed of the blessed, the saints of saints (Milman 94-97).

Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531)

According to Zwingli the “last day” of John 6:40 refers to “our departure from this present world” (Bromiley 202), at which time the Lord will give eternal life to those who believe on Him. “When we are freed from the body [we] shall go up [to heaven] without any delay, postponement or renewed affliction if only we have maintained our faith inviolable” (254). In commenting on the passover, Zwingli notes that “Christ himself is the true passover by which the sanctified are perfected unto eternity, that is, by which believers are freed from the slavery of sin and enter into heaven” (Pipkin 210). “Heaven is reached through no other price or tribute than the [redemption] of the Son of God” (285).

John Calvin (1509-1564)

In discussing heaven Calvin says, “If heaven is our

homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile? If departure from the world is entry into life, what else is the world but a sepulchre?" (Gamble 134). And since "Christ is in heaven, Christians must seek their life in heaven and in the future, not on earth and in the present" (139). In discussing John 14, Calvin speaks of heaven in terms that are familiar to many modern Christians: "Christ [does not teach] that there were different degrees of honour in the heavenly kingdom. He says that the mansions are many, not that they are different or unlike....Christ has prepared a place both for them [the fathers] and us, into which He will receive all at the last day" (Parker 74-75).

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)

The Westminster Confession states that after death men's bodies return to dust, but

the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies; and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. (Schaff, *Creeeds* 670-671)

Richard Baxter (1615-1691)

In *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, Richard Baxter presents "the greatest treatment on Heaven ever to appear" (Smith 14). The subtitle of Baxter's work is "A Treatise of the Blessed State of the Saints, in Their Enjoyment of God in Heaven." Baxter writes that once we are in heaven, we will be able to look back to earth and know the answer to the question, "Is this the purchase that cost so dear as the blood of Christ?" We will then exclaim, "O blessed price!" (25). "To have necessities, but no supply is the case of them in hell. To have necessities supplied by means of the creatures, is the case of us on earth. To have necessity supplied immediately from God, is the case of the saints in heaven" (49). As soon as the "faithful souls...leave their prisons of flesh" they will be convoyed by angels to where "heaven will be their residence, and God their happiness" (78). Baxter also equates the promise of the gospel with heaven: "As heaven is the perfection of all our mercies, so the promises of it in the gospel, are the very soul of the gospel" (214). "Must [the Lord] go before to prepare so glorious a mansion for such a wretch, and art thou loth to go and possess it?" (308).

Charles Hodge (1797-1878)

Charles Hodge, a Presbyterian theologian who taught at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1820 to 1848, defines death in *Princeton Sermons* as the separation of soul from the body. The soul continues to exist and remain conscious. "Its eternal destiny is immediately decided. The souls of the righteous are made perfect in holiness....[and] immediately pass into glory" which is to "enter heaven" (348-349). The land of Canaan to the children of Israel is a figure of heaven in which the promise is held out for an eternal rest, eternal life, which can be entered at death (350-352). At death, the believer is ushered into the Lord's presence which is in heaven (354).

A. A. Hodge (1823-1886)

A. A. Hodge, the son of Charles Hodge, was a professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Seminary from 1877 until his death. In *The Confession of Faith* he expounds on the Westminster Confession, supporting the view that "the souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness" and "immediately introduced into the presence of Christ...and the society of the holy angels" (381). Although the Westminster Confession unequivocally states that this is in the highest heavens, Hodge comments that "absolutely nothing is revealed [about the location of heaven], except that it is wherever the glorified humanity of Christ is" (382). He further says, "As to location of the place in which Christ and his glorified spouse will hold their central home throughout eternity, a strong probability is raised that it will be our present Earth, first burned with fire and then gloriously replenished" (383).

What is most evident in this survey is the almost complete departure of these views from the central line of the economy of God, the apostles' teaching that God desires to dispense Himself into man for the producing of an organic expression of Himself.

Henry Alford

According to Alford, the Father's house in John 14:2 is heaven, in which are many abiding-places and "may be also in degree of dignity." It is through His death that He prepared "a place not the *many mansions* that He is preparing:—*the place* as a whole, not *each man's place* in it" (583).

Ralph Earle

In commenting on John 14:2, Earle states:

The Greek word is *monē*, which comes from the verb *menō*, "remain" or "dwell." The noun occurs (in NT) only

here and in verse 23, where it is translated “abode” (KJV, NASB) or “home” (NIV).

The rendering “mansions” in verse 2 comes from the Latin Vulgate *mansiones*. The correct rendering of *monai* is “dwelling places” (NASB) or “rooms” (NIV). In today’s language a “house” cannot have many “mansions”; it has many rooms. The mistranslation here has led many people to get excited about having a mansion in heaven—for which there is no biblical basis.” (47-48)

F. Godet

According to Godet, “The image,” in John 14, “is derived from those vast oriental palaces, in which there is an abode not only for the sovereign and the heir to the throne, but also for all the sons of the king” (129). There is no difference between the abodes, as different degrees of heavenly glory, “but solely to their *number*; there are as many as there are believers” (129).

Robert Govett

In commenting on John 14, Govett states that the Savior “was going to the house of His Father, and there they should have an abode with Him” (141). This abode is eternal and in heaven, not temporary and on earth. Contrary to “the great houses of this world...our mansions will not decay. Nor shall we be caught away from them by death”; these abodes will be “in the city of God’s providing and building” (141).

Gerhard Kittel

Speaking of John 14:2, Gerhard Kittel states that the

heavenly dwellings which are the goal of salvation (the movement is from below upwards), and to which believers will go after their earthly separation from God, are called abiding places which are fully prepared for them in the Father’s house. (580)

In verse 23 of this chapter, he states that “the movement is from above downwards” which “depicts salvation after the departure of the Saviour as a permanent abiding of Christ and God in believers” and that the believers’ “salvation consists in union with God and Christ” by the believers having their home in Christ and in God (580).

H. A. W. Meyer

Meyer notes that the Father’s house “is not *heaven generally*, but the peculiar *dwelling-place* of the divine [glory] in heaven, the place of His glorious throne” and that through His death the believers were brought into “the

fellowship of the divine [glory]...to prepare the way for their future [glorification together] with God” (211).

by James Reetzke

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