

# Is Heaven The Reward Of The Saved?

by Staff

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shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.  
And thus we shall always be with the Lord."  
—I Thessalonians 4:17*

Some time ago, I joined five other members of God's church in one of the most solemn activities that a person can ever experience: bearing the casket of a friend. In this case, we bore long-time church member Amanda Surette from a funeral chapel to a hearse and from the hearse to the grave. Sweet, little Mrs. Surette, who just a couple of weeks previously had softly murmured the Canadian national anthem in French to my family and me, had died.

On the seemingly interminable walk from the hearse to the grave site, memories of old beliefs came flooding to my mind—and questions and answers from God's Word:

"Has Mrs. Surette's soul gone to heaven?"

"No! It is her human spirit that has returned to God!"

"But how do we know that *our* doctrine is true?"

"We understand from God's Word that Mrs. Surette and others will come up in the first resurrection."

The encouraging words of I Thessalonians 4:17, often read at church funerals, speaks of this time, the first resurrection, and gives us an exciting description: "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord."

However, some churches attempt to prove from this verse that heaven is the reward of the saved—that Christians will go to heaven and be there with Christ forever. This article will provide a clear explanation of this verse—from the Bible.

## **Origin of False Beliefs**

First, where did the idea that heaven is the reward of the saved originate? Does the Old Testament teach it? Did Jesus and His apostles teach it?

A perusal of various encyclopedia articles on "heaven" will show that this doctrine originated with the pagan, polytheistic Greeks and Romans. Their deified heroes and other favorites of their multiple gods were supposedly given admission to their "heaven," which they called "Elysium."

Various peoples evolved their own versions of Elysium. The Germans and Scandinavians had their Valhalla. The American Indians had their Happy Hunting Grounds. The eastern Buddhists have Nirvana, which offers the dubious promise of "the extinction of all desire and personality." Interestingly, the Western, professing Christian heaven is more similar to the original Greek concept.

Growing up in the Church of England, I never questioned the idea that one day we would go to heaven, although it was never proved from the Scriptures. What a shock I received when I first started listening to *The World Tomorrow* radio broadcast on Radio Caroline in 1966! I learned for the first time, after fifteen years of church attendance, that Christ will come *from* heaven to be with us, rather than the other way around.

## **The Kingdom of God**

First, we need to review what God's Kingdom really is and what the reward of the saved really is.

Daniel 2:36-43 describes four major kingdoms, empires, or governmental systems that have ruled over the greater part of the civilized world:

1. The Chaldean-Babylonian Empire (625 to 538 BC)
2. The Medo-Persian Empire (538 to 330 BC)
3. The Greco-Macedonian Empire (333 to 31 BC)
4. The Roman Empire (Established 31 BC. The imagery suggests that it will exist in some form until the end of the age.)

Clearly, these physical empires existed on earth. Now notice verses 44-45:

And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever. Inasmuch as you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it broke in pieces the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold—the great God has made known to the king what will come to pass after this. The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure.

These verses say that God's Kingdom will encompass all of these previous kingdoms—on earth! Daniel 7:17-18 says much the same.

Daniel 7:27 adds a vital piece of information to our understanding of where God's Kingdom is:

Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him.

God's everlasting Kingdom shall not be in heaven but "*under* the whole heaven"!

Why then should we be surprised that God's Kingdom will be on earth? God tells us through Moses that ancient Israel was a type of God's Kingdom and, in fact, could have been His Kingdom had they obeyed Him:

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:5-6)

The very churches that misuse I Thessalonians 4:17 could better understand its meaning by studying the words of the so-called "Lord's Prayer," which many repeat every day: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10; see Micah 4:8). Jesus instructs His people to pray for God's Kingdom to *come*, not to be taken away to it!

Obadiah 17, 21 tell us specifically where God's Kingdom will be set up:

But on Mount Zion there shall be deliverance, and there shall be holiness; and the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions. . . . Then saviors shall come to Mount Zion to judge the mountains of Esau, and the kingdom shall be the Lord's.

Likewise, one of our most beloved passages shows that Jesus Christ will dwell on earth in Jerusalem, accessible to physical people and nations:

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it. Many nations shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. (Micah 4:1-2)

Returning to the New Testament, Matthew 24:3 shows that the disciples knew, and therefore were taught by Jesus Himself, that He would come back to this earth, when they asked Him, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"

In His reply, Jesus continually repeats that He will *come back* to this earth:

For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west; so also will *the coming of the Son of man* be. . . . Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see *the Son of Man coming* on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. . . . But as the days of Noah were, so also will *the coming of the Son of Man* be. (verses 27, 30, 37; see also verses 39, 42, 44, 46, 48, 50)

Some might argue that, because Jesus went to be with God the Father in heaven after His death and resurrection, we must go to heaven to be with Him. However, in John 14:3, Jesus tells His disciples that He will *come* again to earth and will here receive them to Himself to be with Him: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will *come* again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." If He wants us in heaven, why would He have to come here to get us? The Parable of the Minas or Pounds (see Luke 19:11-15) also makes this clear.

After all of Jesus' teaching, the disciples, although still limited in their knowledge and understanding, knew for sure that Jesus was to restore His Kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). In Acts 1:9-11, their understanding is greatly enhanced:

Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so *come* in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven."

He will come down from heaven, through the clouds, and will set down on the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:4). He will be clearly visible to human eyes.

Christ reveals to the apostle John in Revelation 19:11-21 that He will not return meekly or unnoticed to this earth. His return will be witnessed by the whole world whose kings and armies (verse 19) will gather to battle against Him. No secret, quiet "rapture," whisking Christians off to heaven, but the most terrible battle in man's history.

### **Kingdom of Heaven?**

Some scriptures speak of the Kingdom of Heaven. However, they mean just what they say: the Kingdom *of* heaven, not the Kingdom *in* heaven. The word "of" denotes possession, not location: It is Heaven's Kingdom.

In explaining this point, Herbert Armstrong often compared the grammar of the "Kingdom of Heaven" with that of the "Bank of Morgan." We could use the Bank of New York as a more modern example. If I say, "I'm going to conduct business at the Bank of New York," you would assume that I will be going to a local branch, not to the head office in New York City! It is the Bank *of* New York, not *in* New York, although its head office is in New York.

Similarly, it is the Kingdom *of* Heaven, not the Kingdom *in* Heaven, although its headquarters is in heaven. Our place in God's Kingdom is, in fact, being reserved by Him in heaven right now, until Jesus Christ brings it with Him:

» [We are begotten again] to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you. (I Peter 1:4)

» And, behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according as his work. (Revelation 22:12)

### **Meeting Him in the Air**

There are so many scriptures that prove Christ is coming to earth to stay with us that when one puts them all together, it is astounding that any professing Christian who claims to use the Bible as his guide can believe the pagan idea that he is going to heaven. All one needs to do is to use a concordance to look up scriptures containing the words "kingdom" and "reward."

Let us return to our original difficult scripture in I Thessalonians 4, and notice the previous verse: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and

with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first" (verse 16). This clearly proves that the timeframe is that of the second coming of Jesus Christ; not the death of each Christian.

Notice also that Christ is descending from heaven. We will not meet Him in heaven but in the atmosphere of the earth as He is on His way down.

Now comes the central question of this matter. We have just met Christ in the air! Where do we go from here? Up to heaven or back down to earth? I Thessalonians 4:17 says that we are to be with the Lord forever, but where will the Lord be? Again, many scriptures give the clear answer, but Zechariah 14:4 gives a concise one:

And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two, from east to west, making a very large valley; half of the mountain shall move toward the north and half of it toward the south.

Could this be some "heavenly" Mount of Olives? No, it is the one "which faces Jerusalem on the east"! Could it be some "spiritual" Jerusalem? No, Jesus is going to split it in half!

He will have arrived on earth. Who will be with Him? The second half of verse 5 tells us: "Thus the Lord my God will come, and all the saints with You." All the resurrected saints or holy ones will be with Him.

Will He stay on earth? Notice verse 9: "And the Lord shall be King over all the earth. In that day it shall be—'The Lord is one,' and His name one." Yes, He will stay. The Kingdom of God and the reward of the saved are on this earth! As Jesus Himself tells us in Matthew 5:5, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

Jesus will come again to earth, this time with His saints and with His army of angels too. He will take His rightful place on His glorious, earthly throne and share power with His saints over the physical nations of the earth (Revelation 2:26-27). God tells us in Revelation 5:10: "And have made us [the saints; verse 9] kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign *on the earth*."

Can the truth be any clearer?

Mrs. Surette and many others of our beloved brethren will take a well-deserved rest for a little while longer. The sadness of their deaths will soon be turned to incomparable joy when they are resurrected as Jesus Christ returns as King of kings to the earth. We will join them in a joyous meeting with the Eternal God that is beyond human imagination. Then we will accompany Him in His glorious descent, flanked by a vast army of angels, to take up our new, exciting responsibilities in ruling with Him—on earth!