

THE THIRD HEAVEN

In 2 Corinthians 12:2 Paul refers to a man "caught up to the third heaven." In approaching a study of this phrase from Paul's writing, it would be well to carefully note the use and context of various words employed. At the same time, it would be well to discard understandings which might have been influenced by inherited tradition.

Many commentaries in error refer to the three heavens as: 1) the sky above where birds fly, 2) outer space where the planets and stars are, and 3) the eternal seat of God. But by allowing related Bible terms to harmonize themselves we should arrive at a correct understanding.

The word "heaven" can refer to that which we see above the earth and which extends into space as far as our eyes can behold. *"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth ... And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day."* (Genesis 1:1, 6-8)

This usage refers to that which is material and related to the place of our earthly existence. *"And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands."* (Heb. 1:10) *"For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water."* (2 Pet. 3:5) *"But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men."* (v. 7) *"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up."* (v. 10) *"Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?"* (v. 12)

But the word is also used to denote the eternal seat of God. *"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven."* (Matt. 7:21) This usage is not restricted to time, distance, or direction but speaks of a dimension related favorably to God. It denotes the eternal abode of God and is hid presently from our sight and presence. *"Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven."* (Matt. 6:10) *"But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal."* (Matt. 6:20) *"For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."* (2 Cor. 5:1) *"He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things."* (Eph. 4:10) Note here that Paul refers to a heaven above "all heavens."

Paul speaks of "the third heaven" in 2 Cor. 12:1-4. *"It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such as one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter."* Paul's usage of the words heaven and paradise in this passage clearly refer to that which is beyond our present sight, experience, and knowledge.

Note also that these words heaven and paradise are used interchangeably. Since the word heaven in this passage refers to a dimension removed from the present, then this interchangeable use allows understanding of the word paradise to also refer to a situation removed from the present. Thus, heaven and paradise as used in this passage refers to the same time and place - the presence of God. It appears that the one referred to by Paul was actually "caught up" into the eternal heaven or paradise of God.

But the word paradise also has a dual meaning. It refers to where Jesus went for three days and three nights. Jesus stated to the thief in Luke 23:43, *"Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."* He was referring to a

pleasant state of being removed from the material and related to the spiritual.

Yet this state was not the final eternal abode, for after the resurrection and before the ascension Jesus Himself stated, *"Touch me not; for I am NOT YET ascended to my Father"* (John 20:17). But Jesus HAD BEEN in paradise, for He had so declared this destination to the thief. Both Jesus and the thief went somewhere between the present and the eternal - that place was paradise. The word paradise, therefore, can refer to that state of being which exists between the material (our heavens) and the eternal (the abode of God). Paradise is the SECOND of the three heavens.

But in addition to the eternal abode of God, paradise also refers to the place of departed saints. As seen earlier, this is where both Jesus and the thief went. But other passages expand our understanding to include: Samuel and Saul, "to morrow shalt thou and thy sons be with me" (1 Sam. 28:19); Lazarus (Luke 16:22,25); those whom God will "bring with him" (1 Thess. 4:14); and souls under the altar, "souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held" (Rev. 6:9-11).

It is indeed comforting to understand, as Paul meant it to be, that redeemed souls are not forgotten but will return with God when "the Lord himself shall descend from heaven" (1 Thess. 4:16). Two verses earlier Paul wrote, "Even so THEM also WHICH SLEEP in Jesus will God BRING WITH HIM" (v. 14).

But where will they have been so that they may descend with the Lord? They will have been in paradise, the intermediate state where righteous souls await. In Luke 16:22-23,26 Jesus taught that this state has two parts, one pleasant and one unpleasant. In Acts 2:27 Peter states that Jesus went here for the three days and three nights. The unpleasant section of hades is referred to in Luke 16:23 by Jesus as "torments" and says that this is where the rich man went.

Paradise is the destiny of the righteous. The redeemed, departed souls who reside in paradise will descend with the Lord, the righteous then living on earth "shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so shall we

ever be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17) This state of being, which serves temporarily between the present and the eternal, will no longer exist when time ends. It will have served its purpose. Then we who have enjoyed its comfort (Luke 16:25) will henceforth enjoy the comforts of Christ and the heavenly Father in the eternal paradise.

Therefore the three heavens are: 1) that which we can see surrounding us in the universe, 2) where the righteous departed spirits go, and 3) the eternal presence of God.

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GOSPEL MEETINGS

<u>DATES</u>	<u>PLACE & TIME</u>	<u>SPEAKER</u>
June 29 - July 2	Cloud 9 Church Sierra Vista, AZ	Wilbur Bass (Auburn, AL)
July 3 - 6	Tucson, AZ (520-325-9621 for info)	Wilbur Bass (Auburn, AL)
July 7 - 11	Blanchester Church Blanchester, OH	James McDonald (Woodbury, TN)
July 11 - 13	West Gadsden Church Gadsden, AL	Sam Dick (Cave City, KY)
July 14 - 18	Becton Church Becton, KY	James McDonald (Woodbury, TN)
July 17 - 18	Pennyrile St. Park Pennyrile, KY	Various Speakers
July 18 - 20	Fayetteville Road Church Atlanta, GA (7PM EST)	Sam Dick (Cave City, KY)
July 21 - 26	Oak Grove Church Woodland, AL	Wilbur Bass (Auburn, AL)

July 27-
- Aug. 1

Napoleon Church
Woodland, AL

James McDonald
(Woodbury, TN)

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

1. About what city is it prophesied that it will be rebuilt from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate?
2. From what did Jesus feed the multitudes, after John the Baptist's death?
3. What happens to a house divided against itself?
4. According to Psalm 115, what will happen to those who make and trust in idols?
5. What did Rahab the harlot hide the spies among?

ANSWERS NEXT MONTH . . .

and remember last month's questions?

1. Who took three spears and struck down Absalom while he hung from a tree by his head? JOAB (2 Sam. 18:14)
2. How long did the Feast of the Unleavened Bread last? SEVEN DAYS (Exo. 34:18)
3. Which disciple was the one that "Jesus loved"? JOHN (John 21:24)
4. When Paul went to the apostles to present the gospel he was preaching to the Gentiles, who accompanied him? BARNABAS (Gal. 2:1,2)
5. According to Isaiah 25, what will God do to the tears from all the faces? WIPE THEM AWAY (Isa. 25:8)