

# Heaven: Is there more than one heaven?

Copyright©2011Mormon Outreach Ministries, Sydney

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, known as the Mormon Church, teaches that heaven is divided into three degrees of glory and it appeals to I Corinthians 15:41 and 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 to support this teaching. Many ancient people thought about multiple heavens. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for "heaven" is always plural and in the New Testaments and Septuagint (a pre-Christian Greek version of the Jewish Scriptures), the plural "heavens" is often used, reflecting the Hebrew plural usage for heaven in the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> In Hebrews 4:14, Jesus is said to have passed through heavens. Is there more than one heaven? Did Paul really teach three levels of heaven in 1 Cor.15 and 2 Cor.12? Is paradise different from heaven, as the Mormon Church teaches? To resolve these questions we should carefully compare Mormon teachings about heaven with those of the Bible.

## I Are there more than two eternal destinies? Is there more than one heaven?

**The Mormon Church teaches four levels of final destiny: from the lowest to the highest they are: outer darkness (the kingdom of devil), and then three levels of heaven: the telestial kingdom, terrestrial kingdom and the celestial kingdom (also called the "Kingdom of God")<sup>2</sup>** (*Gospel Principles*, p.271-273- LDS official teaching manual, D&C Section 76 --D&C is one of the *Standard Works*, canonised Mormon scripture). It teaches that most people, including all the wicked except the sons of perdition will go to the telestial kingdom, "not valiant" Mormons<sup>3</sup> and honourable non-Mormons will go to the terrestrial kingdom and worthy Mormons will inherit the celestial kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

**The Mormon Church teaches that only those in the celestial kingdom will live eternally in the presence of both the Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ** (D&C 76:62). **It also teaches that within the celestial glory there are three heavens or degrees, the highest level being "exaltation" (also called "eternal life") : living eternally as a god and having the ability to procreate children through eternity** (*Gospel Principles*, Chapter 46,47, D&C 131:1-4, 132:19-25,30,55).

**By contrast, the Bible teaches only two final destinies: eternal heaven or eternal hell** (Daniel 12:2, Matthew 25:31-46, 2 Thessalonians 1:5-9). This is based on whether or not each person has accepted the free gift of eternal life during his/her time on earth (John 3:16-17, Ephesians 2:8-10, Acts 16:31).

**The Bible teaches that in heaven, Christians, all those who have inherited eternal life through faith alone, will dwell in the presence of God forever, seeing the Lord himself** (Ephesians 2:8-10, Matthew 25:31-46, Revelation 21:3-4, 22:3-4). **In the Bible we are not promised that we may become gods.** The Bible does not teach that there are three heavens where people live eternally, whereas it does speak about three heavens (2 Cor.12:2-4).

## II Did Paul teach three heavens in 1 Corinthians 15:41 and 2 Corinthians 12:2-4?

### 1 Corinthians 15:40-41

<sup>40</sup>There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. <sup>41</sup>There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory.

The King James Version

**The Mormon Church claims that 1 Corinthians 15:41 teaches three heavens or degrees of glory, as the passage says, "There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differeth from another star in glory."** It also teaches that the sun, moon and stars are symbolic of the celestial, terrestrial, and telestial heavens where resurrected people spend eternity (D & C 76:70-71, 81, 96- 98).

But, **no way can we read Mormon teaching of three kingdoms into a passage dealing with two kinds of bodies: the earthly body and the heavenly body.** Firstly, the passage does not mention "telestial". Only the words, "terrestrial" and "celestial" appear in this passage: "celestial" means *heavenly* and "terrestrial" means *earthly*. Secondly, the context of 1 Cor. 15:40-41 is not about heaven, but about the difference between our earthly body and our future body given at the resurrection, The context of the passage is set in verse 35 where Paul asks 2 questions: *How are the dead raised up? With what body do they come?* The earthly body is perishable (v42), weak, (v53), natural (v44) and mortal (v53), but the heavenly body will be imperishable (v42), powerful (v43), supernatural (v44), and immortal (v53).<sup>5</sup>

### 2 Corinthians 12:2-4

<sup>2</sup>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 a one caught up to the third heaven. <sup>3</sup>And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;)<sup>4</sup> How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which is not lawful for a man to utter.

**The Mormon Church claims that 2 Cor.12:2-4 teach three heavens or degrees of glory, as Paul spoke of "one caught up to the third heaven."**

**The Bible does speak about "three heavens" (2 Cor.12:2-4), but does not imply a multiplicity of heavens, as the first heaven is the atmosphere of birds and clouds (Genesis 1:20, Psalm 147:8, Deuteronomy 11:11), the second is the sky where we see the sun, moon and stars (Genesis 1:14) and the third would be the highest heaven - God's dwelling place where**

**believers go upon death** (Isaiah 63:15, 1 Kings 8:30). In 2 Cor 12:2 it was this last heaven, God's dwelling place, Paul was talking about and in verse 4 **Paul equates the third heaven with paradise**. In **Hebrews 4:14**, Jesus is said to have "ascended higher than all the heavens". It means Jesus passed through the atmospheric heaven and starry heaven and dwells in the highest heaven (the third heaven).

In 2 Corinthians 12:4 the third heaven is synonymous with paradise, but in Mormonism "paradise" is different from any of three degrees of glory in heaven. What is paradise according to Mormonism? What does the Bible say about paradise?

### III Where will people go upon death? What is paradise?

The Mormon Church teaches that after death our spirits will go to the spirit world, which is divided into two; "paradise" and "spirit prison." It teaches that heaven is distinguished from "paradise", as "paradise" in Mormonism is the section of the spirit world where the spirits of righteous people will go after death and is a temporary place before the Final Judgement (Gospel Principles, 2009, pp.242-244). (See our article "Hell: the temporary abode of suffering or a place of eternal punishment")

**But the Bible teaches that those who die in the Christ of the New Testament go immediately into the presence of the Heavenly Father and enjoy fellowship with him there** (Luke 24:43, Philippians 1:23, 2 Corinthians 5:8).<sup>6</sup> **The souls of those who die without the Christ of the New Testament immediately go to a state of eternal punishment, their bodies will not be raised until the day of final judgement** (John 5:28-29, Acts 24:15).

**The Greek word for paradise is used for various meanings outside the New Testament, but in the New Testament the Greek word for paradise is used three times, showing the third heaven** (2 Cor. 12:4), **the place of blessedness promised to the thief** (Luke 23:43), and **the location of the promised tree of life** (Revelation 2:7).<sup>7</sup> Jesus used the term "paradise" once in Luke 23:43. When the thief was about to die, he turned to Christ asking him to "remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom" (Luke 23:42), and Jesus accepted him. Jesus promised the thief the bliss of heaven on that very day, "Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." (ΚJB) The criminal who asked for mercy will be in paradise with Jesus.

Our good deeds do not save us. The thief was not good enough. No one is. The only one who is good is God (Mark 10:18). But even the best men do not measure up to God's perfect standard. Isaiah says, "But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away" (Isaiah 64:6). *There is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins* (Ecclesiastics 7:20) (See Psalm 14:3; Romans 3:10-18). God cannot lower the entrance requirement for eternal life. Out of mercy God provided the way for you and me to be declared righteous in God's sight. Only our faith in Christ's work on the cross saves us. Eternal life is a gift. **Titus 3:5** says, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us" (See Ephesians 2:8-9; 2 Timothy 1:9).

**The Bible teaches that we all stand before the judgement seat of God** (Matthew 12:36, 2 Cor. 5:9-10, Romans 14:10 Revelation 11:8) **and that people who died without having a saving faith in the Jesus of the New Testament will be punished** (Revelation 21:8), **while the judgement of people in Christ of the NT will be a judgement to evaluate and bestow various degrees of reward** (John 5:24, Romans 8:1, Revelation 11:18). Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life." (John 5:24) In Revelation 21:8, the "unbelieving" are among those who will be cast out to the lake of fire. "The unbelieving" includes moral and honourable people who died without having a saving faith in the Jesus of the New Testament. Their lives demonstrated opposition to the God of the Bible.

**Conclusion:** Nowhere does the Bible teach that there are three degrees of glory where people live eternally. The Bible does teach about three heavens: the atmospheric heaven, the starry heaven and the heaven where God dwells. It is this last heaven or the third heaven Paul was talking about in 2 Cor.12:2-4. Paul was confident that when the time comes for us to be 'away from the body', we will be 'at home with the Lord.' (Philippians 1:22-23) "Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." God's Word tells us that those who truly repent even at the very last minute can be with God in paradise. This is also a promise to all those who have accepted the free gift of eternal life during his/her time on earth (John 3:16-17, Acts 16:31).

1 F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Eerdmann, 1990) p.115

2 John Farkas, "AFTERLIFE" in *MORMON TERMINOLOGY* (New York, Berean Christian Ministries)

3 Mormons "who received the gospel and a testimony of Jesus but then were not valiant" will go to the Terrestrial Kingdom (*Gospel Principles*, p.272)

4 For "How can we inherit celestial glory?" See *Gospel Principles*, p.272, D&C 76:50-53. For "Who else will inherit celestial glory?" All who die without a knowledge of the gospel but "would have received it with all their hearts" and all children who "die before the age of accountability" "will inherit the celestial kingdom of God." (D&C 137:7-10)

5 Some Latter-day Saints may point to the words, "sun", "moon" and "stars" in v 41 to say that these words explain the different levels of glory. But the context refers to "bodies", not heavens!

6 Some Christians think that although the souls of those who are in Christ since Christ's resurrection have directly gone to God's presence in heaven, the souls of believers who died before Christ's resurrection did not enjoy the blessings of heaven, but went to the underworld, a time of waiting away from God's presence in heaven. But, the Old Testament saints expressed joy in the face of their death (Numbers 23:10, Psalm 16:11, 17:15, 73:24, Proverb 14:32) [Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, London, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1959, p.685]. A Bible teacher, Wayne Grudem says "it seems likely that OT believers also entered immediately into heaven and enjoyed a time of fellowship with God upon their death." [Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester, IVP, 1994) p.821-822] Elijah was taken by a whirlwind into heaven, not into the underworld (2 Kings 2:11). In Matthew 23:32, Jesus reminded the Sadducees, God said that "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" and then said, "He is not God of the dead, but of the living." This implies that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were living and having unbroken fellowship with God.

7 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester, IVP, 1994) p.593