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Is Heaven *Your* Destiny?

What happens when Christians die? Is 'Heaven' their reward?

by James McBride

For Christians, it's a comforting thought to contemplate a deceased much-loved family member as safely with Jesus in Heaven. Life's struggles are ended and gone is the pain, the daily stresses. Peace at last, and endless opportunity to praise the Saviour. Your pastor or priest assures you the deceased now has his reward for being a fine person, a good Christian.

I used to believe that. Then some questions began to bother me. Can Dad up there in Heaven be truly at peace and happy when he sees the path his wayward son has pursued? Isn't his tranquillity disturbed by Mum's tearful sorrow over his death?

Then I wonder about that old rogue, Uncle Tom—is he also 'up there'? (The Pastor did preach him into heaven.)

What about all our world's distress—the disease, the famine, the violence between individuals and between nations? Is he isolated from all of that, blind? Is that the reward for the Christian? Isn't much of Christian belief based on the idea that our loved ones 'in heaven' are looking out for us? (Some believers pray to them). *It doesn't make sense.*

Texts of Hope

The truth about life after death—as presented in the Scriptures—is liberating. Open the Christian Bible and a different scenario presents. Consider the following texts:

- *'We know that we will die, but the dead don't know a thing. Nothing good will happen to them--they are gone and forgotten'* (Ecclesiastes 9:5 CEV)
- *'[Man's] breath goes forth, he returns to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish'* (Psalm 146:4)
- *'The dead are silent and cannot praise the LORD'* (Psalm 115:17)
- *'If I die, I cannot praise you or even remember you'* (Psalm 6:5)

- *'Work hard at whatever you do. You will soon go to the world of the dead, where no one works or thinks or reasons or knows anything'* (Ecclesiastes 9:10)

Asleep - for a while

So, according to Scripture, when we die we are 'dead as a door-nail'. Our thoughts perish and we can't work or think or know anything. And—surprisingly for someone supposedly resident in Heaven—we can't praise God or even remember Him.

Sounds more like the apostle Paul's description of death—a sleep, eg I Thessalonians 4:13,15: *'...For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent [ie, precede] them which are asleep'*. The term sleep is applied to death throughout the Scriptures and is an apt description of the state of our dead.

The implication, of course, is that as in sleep we will wake up! The patriarch Job had something to say on this: *'... we [humans] fall into the sleep of death, never to rise again, until the sky disappears'* That's how it looked on first thoughts. But he adds: *'...If a man die, will he live again? all the days of my appointed time [ie, in the grave] will I wait, till my change come. You will call, and I will answer you: you will have a desire to the work of your hands'* (ch 14:14-15).

Paul echoes the same thought: *'...I will explain a mystery to you. Not every one of us will die, but we will all be changed. It will happen suddenly, quicker than the blink of an eye. At the sound of the last trumpet the dead will be raised. We will all be changed, so that we will never die again'* (I Corinthians 15:51-52).

Nor can we neglect what Jesus said: *'...Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in which all that are in the tombs shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life, and they whose*

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actions have been evil to the resurrection of judgement' (John 5:28-29). So—a *future* resurrection from their graves. And *for everyone*. Unnecessary, mind you, if you are already in Heaven!

In sum: true believers living and dead will receive their reward at the same time—at the 'last trumpet sound'. Or as wrote Paul: '*...When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with him in glory*' (Colossians 3:4). He appears on Earth at that trumpet blast! Given this clear teaching of Scripture it is strange that virtually all of Christendom embraces the false notion surrounding death, that upon our demise we go straight to either Heaven or to Hell (or, for some, into Purgatory).

The Source

Strange—but perhaps not surprising. For the whole world, according to Jesus, is deceived (Revelation 12:9). Paul adds: '*... the god of this world has blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them*' (II Corinthians 4:4). And most of Christendom has embraced Satan's foundational teaching!

Way back in Eden, Satan—the 'father of lies' (John 8:44)—deceived Mother Eve, telling her '*...you shall not surely die*' (Genesis 3: 4), God had informed the pair otherwise (*ch* 2:17). And like Eve most people today—of any faith—believe the lie. 'Die—but live forever, either in heaven or in hell'.

Jesus, you will recall (John 3:16), contrasted those who perish (the unbeliever) with those whose life will continue endlessly (the believer) Death or life. Extinction or life unending. Opposites.

But isn't that man 'King David '*... a man after mine own heart*' (Acts 13:22), in Heaven? Well, hear how the apostle Peter addressed his Jewish audience six weeks *after* the resurrection of Jesus: '*...[David] is not ascended into the heavens*' (Acts 2:34). Note also the comment of Jesus to Nicodemus: '*... No one has gone up to heaven except the Son of Man, who came down from there*' (John 3:13). Not Enoch, not Elijah, not even Noah or Abraham—or King David: '*... These all died in faith, not having received the promises*' (Hebrews 11:13).

Not the End

No—when we die we are well and truly 'dead as a doornail'. We do indeed 'rest in peace'. Those we leave behind need have no fears as to the fate of a loved one, secure in the knowledge that in God's time the righteous will be raised from the grave to everlasting life (Colossians 3: 4).

In His carefully-designed plan the people of God will be raised to reign with His Son *on Earth* (Revelation 5:10) for a thousand years, free from the malign influence of that father of lies, Satan (Revelation 20:3).

It is that time when the Messiah, the risen Jesus, will rule the nations in a godly manner. And after the thousand years? Eternity in the service of our Father God.

The Rest of the Dead

That's for Christians—those in whom, in this life, is the Spirit of God. But what of wayward Uncle Tom? Or of the billions who never even heard the Gospel? Or babes in arms? Or all those on whom the message fell on spiritually deaf ears? Well—that's also in God's Master Plan.

The Creator is well aware of human weakness. He understands that having from the beginning rejected His way of life that we have submitted rather to the rule of '*the god of this world*'. They are not 'the forgotten dead' but will be raised to physical life with opportunity to become a part of the Family of God. The Spirit of God will be available, then, to *all* who are willing to change.

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