

JESUS AND HEAVEN

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In the human condition, the idea of the afterlife goes from A to Z. At one extreme: "When I'm dead, I'm dead. It's curtains. It's all over." And then there is our belief: Heaven awaits me in the company of God my Father, Jesus my Savior, and all the Saints. Although not recent, a Gallup Poll in 1988 found that 77% believed in this latter position.

Human understanding gives us very little help regarding eternity. In Theology, it is called a "Strict Mystery": beyond the realm of human understanding. With that as a backdrop, we now enter the realm of Religion. When Jesus appeared on the scene 2,007 years ago as a member of the Jewish community, that community was divided into two major factions, which might be called liberals and conservatives. The Pharisees believed in the afterlife and in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees denied any belief in the afterlife. Jesus appeared in public at the age of 30 years, and threw his weight entirely with the Pharisees – making the afterlife the center of His entire teaching.

Jesus was an itinerant preacher, as was quite common in antiquity...including Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Seneca, etc. These preachers gathered men around them and taught them to promulgate their ideas. And Jesus had his Twelve Apostles. Scripture scholars tell us that every parable and every explicit teaching of Jesus has the afterlife as its basis. We quote here only a few: "I am the resurrection and the life...."; "In my Father's house...."; "The good and the bad enter into the Kingdom prepared....": the three references to Heaven and Kingdom in Jesus own prayer, the Our Father. When the Jews tired of Jesus and wanted to do away with Him, they succeeded with the word "Kingdom". And Pilate added the term "King of the Jews" to Jesus' identification on the cross. While hanging on the cross in terrible pain, Jesus rewarded the criminal's faith with a promise to be with him "in Paradise".

So, from the teachings of Jesus we ask: what is this Heaven as He presented it? It is the destination; the reward; the relief from trials and tribulations; the reunion with those whom we love; the lasting home, the permanent address; the everlasting Father; the perpetual Christmas; the eternal Holy City.

Here St. Paul helps us out. "Eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, the glories that await us" as we approach Heaven on our earthly pilgrimage. In the Nicene Creed we express our belief in "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." And in the hymn "Amazing Grace", we know that after "10,000 years...we've just begun." Yes, Jesus, Heaven awaits us.