

Does the Bible Teach That a Saved Person Immediately Goes to Heaven When He or She Dies?

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The question in our title manifestly applies only to persons who are Scriptural “candidates” for Heaven. We could enlarge it thus: Will those who die, having been saved through their faith in Jesus the Christ, their obedience to His conditions of pardon, and their faithful service to Him thereafter, go directly to Heaven?

To ask this question implies that some hold and teach that the Bible sets forth this view of the abode of the righteous dead (and likely more than a few don’t even believe that one must be righteous to ascend immediately to Heaven!). Evidence abounds that this view is rampant among members of the denominations and those influenced by denominational doctrines. It is not unusual for the obituary page of newspapers and the Online obituary reports by funeral homes to carry such announcements as the following: “Our dear, departed father has joined the angels in Heaven, where he waits to welcome us.”

Those who consciously and purposefully believe this doctrine allege that when the Christ ascended to Heaven following His resurrection the righteous dead of all previous ages were transported to Heaven with Him. This doctrine further alleges that all the righteous dead since then go immediately to Heaven—implying the non-existence of Hades from that time forward (we could appropriately call it “The Anti-Hades” Doctrine).

A few brethren have subscribed to this view through the years. It’s first adherent of whom I am aware was the nineteenth-century preacher, F.G. Allen. However, his contemporaries, including such men as Alexander Campbell, J.W. McGarvey, and Moses E. Lard forcefully rejected and opposed Allen’s contentions, and for good reasons, as I hope to demonstrate. The only brother of prominence I know of in more recent years to embrace what we might also call “The Instant Heaven” doctrine (and surprisingly so) was the late and lamented Gus Nichols, although I’m not aware if he ever tried to “convert” others to it.

Some are just now discovering this view of the abode of the righteous dead. Only a few months ago a preaching brother wrote to me that he had just learned an approach to some passages that runs contrary to all that he had formerly believed and taught concerning the abode of the righteous dead. He said it had caused him to rethink the meaning of said passages (which indeed, one must do to embrace it!). He was firmly convinced of this “new” position. He

sent me a copy of the sermon he was planning soon to deliver to the brethren where he lived. I responded to his contentions, demonstrating some their fallacies, but to no avail. When I saw my efforts were futile, I closed our discussion by cautioning him against making his new discovery a hobby, fearing that I may have been too late with my warning.

While some thus consciously hold this view to be true, I've discovered over the years that some brethren "unconsciously" or unintentionally evince this view, indicated by remarks they make in reference to loved ones who have died. Further, many brethren who deny believing in this doctrine nonetheless promote it in some of the songs they sing in their worship assemblies. Consider the following examples, only a few of those which could be cited (emph. DM):

- The fourth verse of Virgil P. Brock's hymn, "Beyond the Sunset," reads, "Beyond the sunset O glad reunion, **with our dear loved ones who've gone before**; in that fair homeland we'll know no parting; beyond the sunset forevermore."
- Perhaps the best-known songwriter among us, the late Tillet S. Tedlie, in his song, "In Heaven They're Singing," devoted an entire song to the idea that the righteous dead are now in Heaven. The song's title sounds this theme, and its first verse reads, "In heaven **they're singing a wonderful song**, a theme that shall never grow old; and **glorified millions are singing it now, in that beautiful city of gold.**"
- The second verse of "Sing to Me of Heaven" reads: "Sing to me of heaven, as I walk alone, dreaming of **the comrades that so long have gone; in a fairer region 'mong the angel throng, they're happy as they sing that old sweet song.**"
- The Refrain of "An Empty Mansion" says, at the "**...end of life's troublesome way, many friends and dear loved ones will welcome me there....**"
- The third verse of "Where We'll Never Grow Old" declares that when our lives here are finished "All our sorrow will end, and our voices will blend, with **the saved ones who've gone before.**"
- "When the Sun Goes Down" is saturated with the concept that upon dying the righteous immediately enter their heavenly "mansion" where tears are wiped away and "**We shall join the blood-washed throng...**" already there.

The samples above are from a brief survey of fewer than 200 of the 946 songs in the book used by the congregation of which I'm a member; doubtless many of the other 700+ songs contain similar phrases indicating that the redeemed are already in Heaven. It's quite possible that at least some of these song writers did not realize the implications of some of their words (perhaps they were simply "carried away" with the godly intent of glorifying our final heavenly estate?). I confess that I have sung some of these songs over the years without noting these

implications, but I no longer do so. It's inconsistent, at best, to sing words that are contrary to our convictions of inspired Truth, whether on this subject or any other.

This concept, however, has never gained a significant following, and for several good reasons, as I propose to demonstrate. The fallacy of this view of the abode of the righteous dead is clear from at least the following considerations:

1. The "general rule" (with an admitted few exceptions) is that "it is appointed unto men once to die..." (Heb. 9:27), excepting those who are alive at the Lord's return.
2. The New Testament defines *death* for humankind as the separation of one's immortal, God-infused spirit from his physical body. James stated it plainly: "...the body apart from the spirit is dead..." (2:26). The physical body of all who die will decompose, but one's spirit lives on in a realm God prepared for departed spirits. Solomon summarized this truth; in reference to a lifeless body, he stated, "...the dust returneth to the earth as it was, and the spirit returneth unto God who gave it" (Ecc. 12:7).
3. The New Testament identifies the depository of all departed spirits, both righteous and unrighteous, as "Hades." It is generally accepted that *Hades* is the transliterated/anglicized compound Greek word, *eido*, meaning "to see," which, combined with the negative particle *a* at its beginning, means "not to see" or "unseen" (*Vine's* advances the view that *Hades* derives from the Greek word, *ado*, meaning "all-receiving," that is, Hades is the destination of the spirits of good and evil men alike).
4. Jesus pulled back the curtain of this invisible realm in his account of the rich man and Lazarus, a beggar (Luke 16:19–31). Both men died. The spirit of Lazarus was born by angels to "Abraham's bosom," a Hebraism connoting comfort and rest (vv. 22–23). The spirit of the nameless rich man did not fare as well, "being in torments" that involved fiery anguish (vv. 23–24). Jesus said that the rich man was in Hades (v. 23), from which we must deduce that (a) Lazarus and Abraham were also in Hades, and that (b) two vastly different areas of the Hadean realm exist, one of which is inhabited by the spirits of the righteous and the other (*tartarus* in the Greek New Testament, 2 Pet. 2:4), by the spirits of the unrighteous. Moreover, an impassible chasm exists between them (v. 26). We may also fairly deduce that the spirits of all who have died await the Great Resurrection occupy either "Abraham's bosom" or "tartarus."
5. In his Pentecost sermon, Peter referenced the destiny of both the Lord's spirit and His lifeless body by quoting and applying David's remarkable Messianic prophecy: "Because thou wilt not leave my soul unto Hades, Neither wilt thou give thy Holy One to see corruption" (Acts 2:27, 31; Ps. 16:10). Note the following: (a) the soul/spirit of the Lord entered Hades upon His death, otherwise He could not leave it upon His resurrection, and (b) His body did not remain in its sacred tomb sufficiently long to putrefy before God raised Him from it "on the third day" after His entombment (Luke 24:7).
6. Jesus referred to the Hadean realm of comfort and rest into which His spirit was about to enter when he promised the penitent thief on the cross next to His, "...Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43), which connotes a place of pleasure and blessing. Since the

Bible provides no hint that more than one sphere exists in Hades either for righteous spirits or for unrighteous spirits, we therefore deduce that *Abraham's bosom* and *Paradise* describe the same Hadean sphere. (Paul's calling "the third heaven" [i.e., Heaven itself] "Paradise" [2 Cor. 12:2-4] has led those of the *instant Heaven* persuasion to infer that since Paul thus uses *Paradise* in reference to Heaven, the saved inhabitants of Hades had all been transported to Heaven upon Jesus' ascension – and that all the righteous dead since then have made their way there instantly. Such an inference fails to allow that *paradise* may be used to describe any "place" of great blessing, pleasure, and peace, depending upon contextual considerations. While *paradise* fittingly describes Biblical pictures of Heaven, it doesn't follow that every "place" called "paradise" is Heaven. "Abraham's bosom" also well fits the meaning of *paradise*, the Hadean realm into which Lazarus and the Lord entered)

With but few exceptions (the Lord Jesus principal among them), the Bible teaches that the departed spirits of all the dead, beginning with Adam, both righteous and unrighteous, have remained and will remain in Hades until His return. We discern this fact from the following statements:

1. In an extended discourse, Jesus announced that He will return at a time which no one can predict (Mat. 24:36-25:30).
2. At His coming, "...the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God..." (John 5:25, 28; cf. 1 The. 4:16). *The dead* will include "...all that are in the tombs..." both "they that have done good...and they that have done evil..." (John 5:28-29; cf. 1 Cor. 15:22-23; 1 The. 4:16-17). (Note: There will be only one universal resurrection, never mind the contentions of the "rapture" advocates.)
3. Our mortal, fleshly bodies will then be resurrected, which in the same instant will be made "incorruptible" and – reunited with our immortal spirits – be fitted for the heavenly kingdom (1 Cor. 15:42-44). Those still living will instantly be changed and given bodies meet for eternity (vv. 52-53). Since those sentenced to "eternal punishment" (Mat. 25:46) must likewise be capable of immortality, the conclusion is irresistible: like the righteous dead, they will be raised with immortal bodies and those alive at His coming will immediately be changed and given immortal bodies (utterly refuting the egregious annihilationist heresy).
4. The declaration of eternal sentences for all mankind – both good and evil – will then follow the Resurrection (John 5:28-29; cf. Mat. 25:31-32, 46). None will be able to avoid appearing before the "judgment seat of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:10).
5. Following the Judgment, all the saints, whether resurrected or alive at His coming, will be "caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 The. 4:17).
6. Having abolished all competing claims of authority and power, the last of which is death, the "King of kings and Lord of lords" will deliver the immortal saints of His glorified kingdom to His Father (1 Cor. 15:24-26; 1 Tim. 6:13-16).

To aver that (1)“Abraham’s bosom”/paradise” was emptied at Jesus’ ascension and its residents ascended with Him to Heaven and/or (2) that all the righteous who have since died have immediately entered Heaven therefore implies the **denial** of at least the following doctrines, all of which Scripture explicitly or implicitly teaches, as I have summarized above (my summary of absurdities required by the *anti-hadean* dogma in parentheses):

1. **The existence of Hades** since the Lord’s resurrection and ascension (if it still exists, it has had no occupants since a few weeks after the Pentecost of Acts 2!).
2. **The universal resurrection** of all the dead at the Lord’s coming (there will be none to be resurrected!).
3. **The instant infusion of immortality** by the Lord to the bodies of those raised and to those alive at His return (those resurrected and in Heaven will already be so equipped, or they couldn’t have inhabited Heaven!).
4. **The universal final Judgment**, at which all must appear (the only ones not already “judged” will be those living when the Lord returns, or perhaps the Lord will empty Heaven of all its glorified humankind to attend the Judgment!).
5. **The ascension of the resurrected and immortalized saints**, all of whom will meet the Lord in the air (superfluous, relative to those already in Heaven; only those living when the Lord returns will be available to thus ascend!)

This doctrine meddles with some of the clearest revelations of the Holy Spirit relative to “final events” and our Heavenly hope. Let us take care not even to unconsciously subscribe to it or sympathize with it – or sing it.¹

Endnote

1. For a fuller discussion of this subject, I highly recommend the article by the late Guy N. Woods, “Do the Spirits of the Righteous go Immediately to Heaven at Death?” in *Questions and Answers*, Freed-Hardeman College: Henderson, TN, 1976, pp. 340-345.]

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