



**WIN Program: Witnessing in Neighborhoods  
Advanced Class on Mormonism  
Week Eight:  
Are Three Levels of Heaven?**

**The Bottom-Line Guide to Mormonism Part 8: The Latter-day  
Saint View of Salvation**

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# Three Levels of Heaven?

by James White

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that there are three levels of heaven: the celestial (the highest), the terrestrial (the middle), and the telestial (the lowest). The clearest teaching concerning this is found in section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Mormons refer to 1 Corinthians 15:40-41 as Biblical support for this teaching. But did Paul believe in three levels of heaven? Lets examine that.

The King James Version translates this passage as follows:

*“There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. 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 Mormon church has latched on to the terms “celestial” and “terrestrial” in its teaching of various levels of heaven. The third word, “telestial” is not even an English word, but was created by the imagination of Joseph Smith by combining the first two letters of “terrestrial” with the last seven letters of “celestial.” A much clearer translation of the above passage is provided by the New American Standard Bible:

*“There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the glory of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.”*

No Bible text can be understood outside of the context in which it is found. Such is also the case here. 1 Corinthians 15 is known as the “resurrection chapter.” Paul is here discussing the topic of the resurrection of believers. Notice the two questions he has addressed in this chapter so far; verse 12 addresses those who did not believe in resurrection, and verse 35 asks the question, “with what kind of body do they come?” Paul is still answering this question in verses 40 and 41. What, then, is Paul’s point?

Paul is here discussing the connection between our physical body, and the spiritual body we will have at the resurrection. He maintains that there is definitely a connection between the two, but the future, glorified body will far transcend our current physical body in so many ways. To make his point, he brings in a number of illustrations. One is the seed and the plant (vs. 36-38), another that of the flesh of the animal kingdom (v.39). When we come to the verses under discussion here, we see that he is continuing with the same train of thought -here comparing the glory of heavenly bodies with the glory of earthly bodies. This verse simply continues his comparison - there is no reason to believe that all of a sudden he decides to talk about different levels of heaven! The very next verse substantiates this quite well:

*“So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.”*

Notice the continued parallelism - perishable, imperishable; dishonor, glory. Since it is therefore obvious that Paul is describing the nature of the resurrection body, and not different levels of heaven, what about the passage at 2 Corinthians 12:2?

This passage reads, in the New American Standard Bible, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago - whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows - such a man was caught up to the third heaven.” Then, in verse 4 Paul identifies this “third heaven” as “Paradise.” What is the third heaven?

The Bible does describe three heavens. The first heaven is that of the sky above us - the atmosphere of the earth. The second heaven is the abode of the stars and earth - “space” as we know it. The third heaven, however, was always the abode of God Himself, “heaven” as we would use the phrase. This was a common conception in Paul’s time, and was a convenient way of describing things. Hence, Paul was caught up into the presence of God, into the “third heaven.”

The teaching that there is a special place reserved only for people who have completed certain ceremonies and endowments in a temple on earth, who themselves will progress to becoming gods themselves, is completely without support in the Bible, and in fact is flatly and utterly contradicted by the teachings of God’s Word, the Bible.

<http://vintage.aomin.org/threelevels.html>

# **The Bottom-Line Guide to Mormonism Part 8: The Latter-day Saint View of Salvation**

By Robert M. Bowman Jr.

The LDS Church teaches that we all lived in heaven as spirit sons and daughters of our divine parents, Heavenly Father and Mother (see Part 3 of this series). God's plan was that those spirit children would become humans on earth as a probationary stage of life on their way to becoming gods like their heavenly parents. To gain exaltation to godhood, Mormons believe, we needed to become mortals who could be tested spiritually, freely choose to follow God, die, and be resurrected with immortality. This is why, Mormons say, we had to come live in this world.

In order to be mortal and die, we needed to be fallen creatures, born to mortal parents. This meant that Adam and Eve needed to transgress God's command not to eat of the forbidden fruit in order to give birth to mortal children and set things in motion for their earthly offspring to be resurrected to immortality. Had they not done so, according to Mormonism, Adam and Eve could not have had children. In short, Adam did a noble thing by choosing to transgress God's command. Thus, the LDS scripture Pearl of Great Price quotes Eve as saying, "Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient" (Moses 5:11; see also 2 Ne. 2:22-25, Book of Mormon).

## **Historic Christian View of Salvation**

Adam's transgression was a deadly sin  
The wicked are resurrected to face hell

All who trust in Christ truly will be saved;  
many people will be lost  
People must be reconciled to God in this life

Two possible futures: eternal life or eternal  
punishment

## **LDS View of Salvation**

Adam's transgression was a noble act  
The wicked are resurrected to be granted a  
lower level of salvation

Almost everyone will be saved, but only  
Mormons can attain the highest salvation  
Billions of people, including many who knew  
about Jesus and rejected him in this life, can  
still accept the (LDS) gospel in the afterlife

Four possible futures: the celestial, terrestrial,  
and telestial kingdoms, and the outer darkness

The Bible, on the other hand, never says anything positive about what Adam and Eve did, plainly describing Adam's transgression as sin (Rom. 5:12, 14). The fact that God instructed them, before they sinned, to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28) shows that the Fall was not necessary for them to have children. Eve's pain in childbearing was increased because of the Fall (Gen. 3:16), which assumes she would have had children even if she had not fallen.

As a result of Adam's noble fall, Mormonism teaches, all people became subject to both physical death (separation of spirit from body) and spiritual death (separation from God). Evangelicals also affirm that physical and spiritual death resulted from the Fall, but Mormons put a different spin on this distinction, as we shall see. For people to live forever in heaven with their heavenly parents, both kinds of death needed to be

overcome. God's plan meets this need through Christ's atonement—his suffering in Gethsemane (where, they believe, the Atonement mainly took place) and dying on the cross. On the core historical facts that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave, Mormons are in agreement with the Bible. Unfortunately, their understanding of the *significance* of these events is radically different.

Mormonism separates salvation into two different kinds: salvation from physical death and salvation from spiritual death. In the LDS view, God will resurrect all people to immortality regardless of how they live or whether they believe. This salvation from physical death is thus *unconditional*—not dependent on either faith or works. On the other hand, salvation from spiritual death, they say, requires both faith and good works—including works only Mormons can do. One must accept the Atonement, repent of one's sins, be baptized (in the LDS Church), receive the Holy Ghost (which only Mormons can do), and obey God's commandments (which includes Mormon rituals, notably getting married “for eternity” in an LDS temple, and a long list of other obligations). Only people who do all these things can live in heaven with Heavenly Father and Mother and continue progressing toward the goal of becoming gods. In this sense, salvation is *conditional*—dependent on faith and the works required in the Mormon religion.

Mormonism widens the number of people who might obtain this spiritual salvation by teaching that those who never heard the LDS gospel in this life (most of humanity) may accept it in the spirit realm. This is why Mormons get baptized for the dead—they are getting baptized on behalf of their non-Mormon ancestors in the hope they will accept the gospel in the afterlife. The Bible shuts the door on the idea of people being saved after they die (e.g., Heb. 9:27).

What about the many people who will be saved to unending physical life but will not attain spiritual salvation necessary to return to live with their heavenly parents? According to the LDS Church, nearly all of them go to heavenly kingdoms inferior to the “celestial” kingdom (where Heavenly Father lives) but still more glorious than our present world. The “terrestrial” kingdom (visited by Jesus but not the Father) is for decent non-Mormons as well as less than faithful Mormons, while the “telestial” kingdom (visited by the “Holy Ghost” but not Jesus or the Father) is for wicked people. Practically every human who has ever lived will enjoy unending life in one of these heavenly kingdoms. Only a comparatively few wicked humans who reject the truth after receiving a clear revelation of it (for example, some ex-Mormons) will be banished to “outer darkness,” spending eternity there with the devil and his angels.

There are striking differences between the LDS and biblical views of salvation. Mormons believe that practically everyone will be saved, even people who rejected Christ. The Bible teaches that a lot of people will not be saved (Matt. 7:13-14) and that those who reject Christ are lost (John 8:24). Mormons teach that everyone, even the wicked, will be resurrected to immortal life in some heaven; the Bible teaches that the wicked will be raised only to face God's judgment as whole human beings and be cast into hell, body and soul (Matt. 10:28; John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15). Mormons believe that faith and works, including LDS rituals, are prerequisites to eternal life with God the Father. The Bible

teaches that God redeems us to enjoy eternal life through faith in Christ alone, with our good works as the fruit, not the prerequisite, of that salvation (Eph. 2:8-10). (Mormons frequently belittle evangelicals for affirming salvation through faith alone.) The Bible reveals just two ultimate eternal futures for all people: eternal punishment or eternal life, the lake of fire or the new heavens and new earth (Matt. 25:46; Rev. 20-22). The ultimate goal of salvation in Mormonism is to become gods; according to the Bible, there will always be only one God (Is. 43:10), and no amount of faith, repentance, good works, or religious rituals can change that fundamental reality.

<http://www.irr.org/mit/Bottom-Line%20Guide%20to%20Mormonism%20-%20Part%208,%20The%20LDS%20View%20of%20Salvation.pdf>