

Where Jesus Went When He Died

“Today you will be with Me in Paradise.”

Luke 23

J O Y R I G H T N O W I N T H E N E W J E R U S A L E M

“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, TO THE SPIRITS OF RIGHTEOUS MEN MADE PERFECT, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant. . .” (Hebrews 12:22-24)

The Bible says much about our hope of heaven. We look forward to that day when we shall be with each other and with our Lord in glory.

But what about right now? We need the added comfort of having some knowledge about the location and activities of our departed loved ones right now. In theological terms this present time period between death and the future resurrection and eternal age is called the *intermediate state*.

The Bible does not tell us a great deal about the present state of those who have died. It gives us only a few brief glimpses. Since it is describing a world far different from ours it uses symbols and pictures and analogies that can give us only a portion of the truth. Because of this there is confusion and disagreement among students of the Bible. I hope the brief remarks here will give you comfort for I believe I can show you that *there is joy right now for your departed loved one in the heavenly Jerusalem*.

For any kind of an answer about the dead we must turn to the Word of God. Man’s knowledge ends at the graveyard. The sum total of his wisdom about the dead is “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” But the God who wrote the Bible; the God who became a human being; the God who tasted death and came back and forth between the beyond and here; the God-man Jesus can tell us about it. He is God over “there,” wherever “there” is, just as He is God over here. The same One who created what we know over here, created

whatever there is over there. And so we turn to His Word and ask, “Where are our beloved dead right now?”

I. THEY ARE IN HEAVEN (Heb. 12:22-24)

God’s first response is, “They are in heaven.” They are in the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22-24) which both Jesus (Lk. 23:43) and the Book of Revelation (Rev. 2:7; 22:2) called Paradise. They are in the garden spot of the universe.

We are afraid to believe this because some Bible students stick Paradise off in some compartment of the land of the dead (what the Old Testament calls Sheol). But when you compare scripture with scripture, you see that departed Christians are with their Lord, with their fellow believers, with God and with the angels in heaven. They experience and express the joys of the new Jerusalem. This is the express teaching of our text (Heb. 12:22-24). Now let’s examine this point by point.

1. Their Heaven Is Pictured As the Heavenly Jerusalem.

In Revelation 21 we have a picture of the future state, after the return of Christ, in the era of the “new heaven and the new earth” (Rev. 21:1). And down to this earth descends “the holy city, the new Jerusalem” (21:2).

Like the ancient Jews we have a city. It is a city that we will one day possess with all the people of God when this age of sin and sorrow are past (Rev. 21:4; 22:14-15). But the Book of Hebrews teaches we have that city *right now*. Every time we look to God in worship and prayer, we are like Daniel who prayed with his face turned toward Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10). This is why the Book of Hebrews says, “You HAVE COME to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God” (12:22).

And when we die we go to that city. There we find, “the spirits of righteous men made perfect” (Heb. 12:23). You ask me where it is! I do not know. I don’t know if it is “out there,” or “up there” or “down there,” but I do know it is somewhere. You won’t find it on any map of the universe. You won’t go there in any space craft built by NASA. But it is as real a city as New York, London or Anderson, South Carolina. And it is the home address of our beloved Christian dead. Our Lord said, “I go and prepare a PLACE for

you” (Jn. 14:2). Our loved ones are “with the great Someone in the great somewhere”, they are in the city of the living God.

2. *Their Heaven Is Pictured As Paradise*

(Lk. 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:2-4; Rev. 2:7; 22:2).

God’s word for the heavenly Jerusalem is “Paradise.” When the thief on the cross put his faith in Christ, Jesus said to him, “*This day* you will be with Me in Paradise” (Lk. 23:43). When Jesus died He went through the gates of glory (Ps. 24:7-10). His spirit went to the Father (Lk. 23:46). His word for this destination was Paradise.

When the Apostle Paul had what could well have been an after-death experience, in one of those episodes when he was thought dead (Acts 14:19), he said: “Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know. . .this man (himself) was caught up to Paradise” (2 Cor. 12:2-3).

Earlier he had described this as being caught up into “the third heaven” (2 Cor. 12:2). For the Jews there were three heavens. The first was atmospheric where the birds fly. The second was the stellar heaven where the stars dwell. The third heaven was the highest heaven, the heaven beyond our physical universe where God lives. And Paul’s name for this heaven is Paradise.

In the Book of Revelation God tells the church at Ephesus that they may “eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7). Later He tells us (Rev. 22:2) that the tree of life is on each side of the river that flows from the throne of God in the heavenly Jerusalem. This then is Paradise.

Our loved ones are in heaven, the garden spot of God’s universe. Certainly they are not reaping the full blessings that are yet to come. For one thing, heaven is incomplete because you and I and others are still on the way. For another thing, they have more reward to receive. The influence of their lives is still going on. The Bible says, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. . .their deeds will follow them” (Rev. 14:13). They will have more joy as they see us come to be with them. They will receive, if they have been faithful, more rewards at the Judgment Day. As full as they are, they have more blessings to come. We admit this. But we should also not

hesitate to confess, “Our departed dead are in heaven, in the city of the living God, living with the Lord and singing praises with the angels.”

II. THEY ARE WITH GOD (Heb. 12:23).

Our text tells us that to be in the heavenly Jerusalem is to be with God (12:23). This statement seems almost absurd because God is *everywhere*. This is true. But it is also true that God, who cannot be seen (Jn. 1:18), has chosen to manifest His glory before the eyes of men. It was His Shekinah glory that appeared to Israel as a burning pillar of fire (Ex. 13:21-22). When Stephen died and Jesus stood up in the heavenly Jerusalem, the scripture says, “But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the GLORY OF GOD and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55). This glory is the light of heaven (Rev. 22:5) and our loved ones live in the glow of the light of the glory of God right now.

III. THEY ARE WITH JESUS (Lk. 23:43).

Unable to see the invisible God, and able only to live close to His glory, they are able to see, to touch, to talk with and thus to fellowship with Jesus. He is God made manifest in human form (Jn. 1:14). In Him they behold the glory in human terms (Jn. 1:14). He is the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). He is the outshining of the glory of God (Heb. 1:3).

It should be a source of unspeakable joy to know that our loved ones are with the Lord. Jesus told the dying thief, “Today, you will be WITH ME in Paradise” (Lk. 23:43). Paul said he wanted “to be absent from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8).

My favorite verse in this connection is John 14:3, where our Lord says, “. . .if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will receive you unto myself, that where I am, there you may be also.” I do not believe that this verse deals with the Second Coming but with the hour of death when Jesus comes to claim His own. When a Christian closes his eyes in death, the first sight he sees on the other side is the the face of Jesus Christ. Our first glimpse of glory is the glorious face of our Redeemer. I believe the humblest believer at his death shall have the same vision that Stephen and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56). For this reason we can sing,

When I come to the river at closing of day,
When the last winds of sorrow have blown
There'll be Somebody waiting to show me the way,
I won't have to cross Jordan alone.

I won't have to cross Jordan alone
Jesus died for my sins to atone
Through the darkness I see, He'll be waiting for me,
I won't have to cross Jordan alone.

IV. THEY ARE WITH FELLOW CHRISTIANS (Heb. 12:22-24).

The “*spirits* of just men made perfect” live in a city. This speaks of joyful community and fellowship. Heaven is not a crowd. It is a family. God calls us all by name. We know each other by name. On the Mount of Transfiguration Peter and John recognized Moses and Elijah and called them by name.

Think of all the good and godly people you have known who have died. What a noble band! What a group to be with! And that is where your loved one is right now.

It is not death to die
To leave this weary road
And, midst the brotherhood on high
To be at home with God.¹

And best of all, dear friend, they have not completely left you. You hold them in your heart and they hold you in theirs. Sweet memories pass both ways between heaven and earth and keep love alive. And they are waiting for you. Say this:

I cannot think of them as dead
Who walk with me no more
Along the path of life I tread
They have but gone before.

The father's House is mansioned fair
Beyond my vision dim

All souls are His, and here or there
Are living unto Him.

And still their silent ministry
Within heart hath place
As when on earth they walked with me
And met me face to face.²

V. THEY ARE CONSCIOUS (Rev. 6:9-10).

Because the Bible often speaks of death as “sleep” (Deut 31:16), many Protestants believe our departed dead right now are asleep. This is the doctrine known as “soul sleep.”

Examining scripture with scripture it seems that the term sleep applies primarily to the body, or to the peaceful manner in which one dies (Acts 7:60), but that the soul after death is awake and conscious and active. In Revelation 6:9-10 the Christian dead ask questions. In Revelation 7:15 they are said to be serving God day and night.

A beautiful passage in Revelation says they “rest from their labors” (Rev. 14:13. See also 6:11). The Greek word can mean “refreshed” or “rested.” In the Greek it was used of the sailor who had come through the trouble seas to find rest in port. This tells me our loved ones in heaven are not tired and weary and worn. Spurgeon said that when he got to heaven he wanted to sleep for a thousand years. I believe that when he got there, he felt like he had. Our loved ones are alive and refreshed and full of new strength and are ready to serve a million years without a trace of weariness.

VI. ARE THEY BODILESS (2 Cor. 5:1-6).

An unanswerable question is whether or not our departed dead have a recognizable form or body at this time. Protestant theology has leaned toward the fact that they do not. In fact, many works of theology call this “intermediate state” the “disembodied state.”

Certainly they do not have their final resurrection body with which they will inhabit eternity when this age is over. That body will be fashioned out of the particles that are now resting in the earth. Paul said, “The body that is sown

is perishable, it is raised imperishable; 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” (1 Cor. 15:42-44). All of this takes place at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ “at the last trumpet” (1 Cor. 15:52).

But what about right now? Must we try and visualize our loved ones as invisible spirits with no form or shape? The scripture gives us several hints that we do not. Our departed dead seem to have some visible form, some intermediate kind of spiritual body.

In 2 Corinthians 5:1-6 Paul is talking about death and describes it as leaving this “earthly tent.” Then he says of the heavenly body, “. . .we *have* a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked” (2 Cor. 5:1-3).

Now Paul could be talking about the final resurrection body. But two things stand out here to me. First, he says we “have” a body in heaven and he uses the present tense. We have it now. It is waiting for us. Second, he draws back and seems repelled by the idea of being “naked” or not having a body to clothe his spirit.

In the Book of Revelation we are told of the souls of the martyrs under the altar of God in heaven. The Bible says, “Then each of them was given a white robe” (Rev. 6:11). This white robe could be symbolic of salvation (7:14) but could also point to their heavenly clothing which covers their heavenly bodies in this interim period. When Moses and Elijah appeared to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, they had identifiable, tangible, real bodies.

My advice to you is to not get all tangled up in this theological debate. Visualize your loved one in glory as he or she appeared to you on earth. Subtract sorrow and sin and weariness and worry and burden and see them joyful, and thankful and useful and beautiful as they praise God (Rev. 7:9-10), and serve God (Rev. 7:15) and wait for you and me (Rev. 6:11). Though their bodies lie in the grave and wait for the resurrection morning, I believe with all my heart that when your spirit leaves your body in death and you pass to the other side, you will be able to see and embrace and talk with your loved ones and they with you. The “how” of this I simply leave with God.

VII. ARE THEY AWARE OF EARTH? (Heb. 12:1).

Another difficult question is whether or not our loved ones are aware of what is happening to us on earth right now. In Revelation 6:10 they seem to remember the earthly struggles and have pity for us as they cry out, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of earth and avenge our blood?”

The classic passage is Hebrews 12:1. In chapter 11 God tells us about the heroes of the Old Testament. In chapter 12 he challenges us to follow in their footsteps and “run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (12:1). In between, in Hebrews 12:1, he says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses” let us run the race well.

The picture is taken from the athletic games of Greece. And some take the meaning literally. In the heavenly grandstand, the Christians in heaven are watching us and praying for us and cheering us on. The great Presbyterian preacher, Clarence Macartney, said, “I have little doubt that they observe our life here in this world.”

Others feel that “witness” does not mean they are “spectators” who witness or watch what we do. They bore their witness in the earth and in heaven they are our examples.

I tend to believe the last view. God definitely forbids our trying to communicate with the dead (Deut. 18). I cannot see them sitting in heaven with the omniscience of God knowing and seeing every little thing we do. I do see them, however, remembering us and concerned for us (Rev. 6:10). And I see Jesus, with them, telling them whatever they need to know about us.

I love to play in our church golf tournaments. Playing through eighteen holes of golf is, for me, a hard, frustrating but happy experience. But at last you play the last hole and then sit on the hill in the shade with others who have finished before you. You get a cold drink and a good seat and you watch your fellow golfers, still coming as they hit the ball to the eighteenth hole. You cheer them on and kid them and see them smile and welcome them as they take their seat beside you.

Now all back through that course are your friends still playing golf, even though you can't see them. You know what they are going through. They are having some good moments. They are making long straight drives, sinking long difficult putts, getting closer friendships with their playing partners and stopping for some good, cold drinks of water.

But there are some bad things happening too. There are crooked drives and missed putts. There are blisters and bee stings and aggravations with others on the course.

But these bad memories and realizations of what they are going through don't rob you of your peace about them. For you see, you have made the course. You with your blisters and bad shots and broken clubs have made it and enjoyed it and you know your brothers will too. You can't wait to see them come around the bend and tee off on old "eighteen." You can't wait to welcome them to the "hill" so you can talk about the eighteen holes, good and bad.

Yonder on the hillsides of glory are our brothers and sisters who have played life's eighteen. They know what we who are still playing are going through. But they know, no matter how bad things get, God will see us through. They know the day will come, when we will round the bend and play our last hole. And with joy they will receive us and welcome us as we take our seat with them on the hillside of glory. I don't know about you, but I can hear them singing as they think about our life and watch us pass from earth to heaven:

Ten thousand times ten thousand
In sparkling raiment bright
The armies of the ransomed saints
Throng up the steeps of light
'Tis finished, all is finished
Their fight with death and sin
Fling open wide the golden gates
And let the victors in.

There is joy right now in the New Jerusalem. And there will be a special and a very personal joy for those we love who are there, on that day when we go to be with them. Until then, let us "run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

NOTES

1. George Washington Bethune. Quoted in *The Funeral Encyclopedia: A Sourcebook*, p. 220.
2. Frederick L. Hosmer, "Friends Beyond." Harper & Row, Publishers, Incorporated, New York City. Used by permission.