

THE UPWARD CALL

Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God IN CHRIST JESUS.
(Philippians 3:13-14 NASB)

#05-1110

Snatched Away to the Third Heaven & into Paradise

January 10, 2011

(1) Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. (2) 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 [snatched away to] the third heaven. (3) And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—(4) was caught up into [snatched away into] Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. (2 Corinthians 12:1-4 NASB [CV])

This set of scripture is used by some as proof that believers go to the third heaven and paradise upon death. But this cannot be the proper understanding of these verses.

Paul was snatched away, which is the better rendering, but he did not know how this occurred, whether in the body or out of the body. Paul related this experience to defend his apostleship, not to offer some grand teaching on going to heaven. He simply was snatched away and heard things that man is not allowed to speak.

Note that he was snatched away *to* the third heaven and snatched away *into* paradise. Some translations place a bias into these verses by stating that Paul was caught *up*, not *to* or *into*. This has led to the teaching that Paul was caught up from this earth, which for some people refers to either the experience at death or the rapture. However, this cannot be determined from Paul's description of his experience. He did not know if he was in the body or in the spirit. He simply had a powerful experience.

Paul was obviously snatched away to something not of this earth and time. It is most probable that he was snatched away *to* the third heaven, and it was there that he saw paradise. In other words, he was snatched away *to* the third heaven and then snatched away *into* paradise.

Let us look at the third heaven first.

Paul was the only one of all the inspired writers to refer to the third heaven. Most commentators view the third heaven as a third level in the heavens that currently exists and to which believers are taken when they die. It is seen as the place where the throne of God is.

There is some basis for believing that there are three heavens described in scripture. The first heaven refers to the part of the earth's atmosphere from which comes rain and in which the birds fly (Genesis 8:2; Deuteronomy 11:11; 28:24; Isaiah 55:10); the second heaven refers to all the host of heaven or where the sun, moon and stars reside (Deuteronomy 4:19; 17:3; 2 Kings 23:5; Isaiah 13:10; Jeremiah 8:2; Revelation 12:1); and the third heaven refers to where God and His throne reside (Psalm 11:4; Isaiah 66:1).

Interestingly, scientists have identified five spheres or "heavens" above our earth: the troposphere (weather, clouds and birds), stratosphere (ozone layer), mesosphere, ionosphere (auroras), and the exosphere, which leads to outer space. Adding outer space where the host of heaven resides and the heaven of God's throne, one could argue that perhaps there are seven heavens, which is the number of perfection of what is in view.

I believe Peter offers us another way to explain the third heaven. In his second epistle, Peter refers to three different chronological heavens and earths, meaning that the heavens and earth pass through three historical phases. This does not mean that each is an entirely new entity, as if the previous one disappears. It means that the nature of each is different; that is, they are constituted differently. Consider the progression presented by Peter.

First heavens and earth: **(5) For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, (6) through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water** (2 Peter 3:5-6 NASB).

Second heavens and earth: **But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men** (2 Peter 3:7 NASB).

Judgment of the second heavens and earth: **(10) But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. (11) Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, (12) looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!** (2 Peter 3:10-12 NASB).

Third heavens and earth: **But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells** (2 Peter 3:13 NASB).

The third heavens and earth are what John and Paul saw as well: **Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first [former] heaven and the first [former] earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea** (Revelation 21:1 NASB). The word *first* can be translated *former*, meaning *previous*.

We have not been given a record of Peter being snatched away as Paul was or called up in spirit as John was, but all three are in agreement, as it should be.

However, Paul and John stand out among the apostles for the revelations that they received. As recorded in Revelation 21-22, John was caught away in spirit to perceive the Lord's day, so was Paul snatched away to see and hear the Lord's day. In other words, Paul saw beyond the coming millennial kingdom to the eon of the eons in which there is a new heaven and new earth, with New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, having the glory of God (Revelation 21:10-11). Just like Paul, John saw the third heaven and paradise that Peter said we should hasten.

Since Paul was snatched away to the third heaven, the paradise that he was snatched away into, most likely, is also in relation to the time of the third heaven, for this coincides with John's vision on the isle of Patmos. When he was caught away to the third chronological heaven, he saw paradise.

Now, what is paradise?

Paradise refers to a park, which is what the garden of Eden was before Adam disobeyed God's one command. In the book of consummation, the Revelation, we discover a garden as well, but it is described as a city-garden (note the trees of life and the river of life), and it is called **New Jerusalem**. As the new heaven and earth came into view, John saw this city coming down out of heaven, having the glory of God. Undoubtedly, Paul saw this same view, but there is a difference in their experiences. John was called "to come up here" to perceive it, but Paul was snatched away to and into it to hear it, but could not write what he saw. I believe Paul, like John, **transcended time** to see well into the future.

He did not directly offer any details of his experience; nevertheless, I believe Paul did indirectly write about what he saw when he wrote of the **New Creation in Christ** (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). Paul was snatched away to see the New Creation, when **all things are new** (Revelation 21:5), which I believe is paradise on the new earth. But the New Creation is about people, specifically the sons of God. Thus, Paul saw the destiny of all the saints in Christ. But there was even more, for the New Creation is ultimately about all mankind becoming sons. I believe that when he saw it, it took his breath away. It was inexpressible. It must have been a shock for a Pharisaic Jew to learn that all mankind will one day, but not all on the same day, be part of the New Creation. Glory to God!