

The Spirit World

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Where do the judged go after the partial judgment to wait until the resurrection, second coming, and final judgment? True Christian theology describes the afterlife as more of a continuum rather than a finality, which makes far more sense given the place of the final judgment long after death. For this reason there is a need to dispel any notion that after one dies they can go to heaven. Where they go may seem like heaven compared to their earthly existence, but it is still not the heaven in a traditional sense. The consequences stemming from the partial judgment lead to entrance into a spiritual existence somewhere between death and the resurrection.

A Place of Waiting and Progression as Spirits

The theology of the afterlife, before the traditional view of heaven, is known as the spirit world. The spirit world is a place where our spirits will exist after death and before the resurrection. Many in the spirit world will wait, learn, work, and rest from their labors on the earth, while others will suffer in their waiting. In the spirit world, we prepare for our resurrection when our spirits will unite with our mortal bodies to be judged and given a place in the eternities among the three levels of heaven or outer darkness (all of which are explained in other Sword Series™ essays available from the Foundation for Christian Studies).

Our spirits are able to progress in the spirit world in the same shape and form as humans (only in a spirit form), including the same attitudes, thought patterns, desires, and appetites as we had on earth. If we die with a certain attitude towards righteousness or wickedness, we will have that same attitude in the spirit world—nothing magical changes as a result of physical death.

A common question asked is what form will spirits have in the spirit world? The answer is given by the prophet Joseph F. Smith, who taught that all spirits are in adult form, having been in adult form before their mortal existence, and being in an adult form after their death—regardless of how old they are at death (Gospel Doctrine, 455). It's important that Christian doctrine define the physical nature of spirits. This description concurs with those of many people who have seen visions of ancestors and loved ones who passed on to the spirit world.

There are Two Main Divisions in the Spirit World

The spirit world is divided into two main parts, with one of those parts being subdivided into two parts—a total of three parts, or divisions. The prophet Alma defined Paradise as one part, and the spirit prison as another, which agrees with similar definitions offered by Luke and Peter from the Bible. After partial judgment, spirits who die with a degree of purity, having been obedient to the commandments of the Lord and the will of God on earth, will go to Paradise (Luke 23:43). Those who die with a lesser degree of purity and obedience will go to the spirit prison (1 Pet. 3:19). There is a separation between the righteous and wicked in Paradise and the Spirit Prison (Luke 16:26); however, as spirits progress and learn gospel principles they may move from one state to another.

Paradise

Paradise is described as being a place where righteous spirits are able to find rest from their earthly trials (Rev. 14:13). This rest includes the opportunity to be engaged in service to the Lord. This vision of service was seen by way of revelation through the prophet Joseph F. Smith. He records having seen Jesus Christ, after his death, appointing individuals in Paradise to “carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness, even to all the spirits of men” (D&C 138:30).

Spirit Prison, including Temporary Hell

“Spirit prison” is a term used by the Apostle Peter in his first epistle. He wrote of Jesus after his burial: “By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:19). These spirits in prison have not received the gospel for one reason or another and therefore remain subject to temptation. All those in the spirit prison retain their moral agency (free will) to choose good and evil. They are taught and guided by those in Paradise. If they accept the gospel and the ordinances performed for them in the holy temples on earth, they can depart from the spirit prison to enter Paradise.

The spirit prison is divided between those who have not yet received the gospel and those who rejected the gospel while living on the earth. Those who rejected the gospel are in a state of suffering “in a condition known as hell” (Gospel Principles, 292), which is really a temporary hell before the resurrection. These individuals in hell are unable to experience the mercy of Jesus Christ, having separated themselves according to their own moral agency. Their time in hell will be temporary, as outlined in Acts 2:27: “Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell.” Following this period of suffering, these individuals will take part in the second resurrection and be allowed entrance into the telestial kingdom, the least of the kingdoms of God following the final judgment. The telestial kingdom is sometimes referred to as the lowest level of heaven.

The Church Operates in the Spirit World

From the time that Jesus descended into the spirit prison until the present day, the Church of Christ operates in the spirit world. The teachings of the prophet Wilford Woodruff testify to this fact: “The same Priesthood exists on the other side of the veil. ... Every Apostle, every Seventy, every Elder, etc., who has died in the faith as soon as he passes to the other side of the veil, enters into the work of the ministry” (Journal of Discourses, 22:333–34).

Families Exist in the Spirit World

Likewise families are organized in the spirit world. Jedediah M. Grant, a counselor in the First Presidency under Brigham Young, was said to have seen a vision of the spirit world. He described this to Heber C. Kimball, who wrote: “He said that the people he there saw were

organized in family capacities. ...” (Heber C. Kimball, Journal of Discourses, 4:135–36).

The Location of the Spirit World

The location of the Spirit World is physically the same realm as that in which we live in today. Referring to the spirits of righteous people who have died and entered into the spirit world, the prophet Joseph Smith said they “are not far from us, and know and understand our thoughts, feelings, and motions, and are often pained therewith” (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 326). On this matter the prophet Ezra Taft Benson said, “Sometimes the veil between this life and the life beyond becomes very thin. Our loved ones who have passed on are not far from us” (Ezra Taft Benson, “Life Is Eternal,” Ensign, Jun 1971, 32), while President Brigham Young left little ambiguity when he commented, “Where is the spirit world? It is right here” (Discourses of Brigham Young, 376).

The Christian doctrine of the spirit world occupying an earthly realm is exceptionally illuminating and fits with the physical nature of spirits. Furthermore, this assertion is completely consistent with scripture and the numerous sightings of spirits over the centuries. If God should decide that someone should see a particular spirit for one reason or another (an ancestor, for example), he, the creator of all, certainly has the power to enable a living person to see the spirit form of one who has died. This soundly explains the visions of many over the centuries, who have seen spirits of the dead.

Conclusion

The organization of the spirit world explains a great deal about the gospel of Jesus Christ and encourages us to be righteous and worthy on earth so that we are prepared for our work in the afterlife. This teaching about the spirit world is a powerful motivator in this world.

The doctrine of the spirit world more fully concurs with what Christ did after his death and before his resurrection according to scripture. There is work to do in spirit prison and many souls are needed to carry it out.

These fantastic and enlightening doctrines are a wonderful example the restored gospel in its fullness on earth. It provides wealth of scripturally sound and divinely inspired doctrine on the spirit world. This doctrine not only gives valuable insights about the afterlife—it provides spiritual motivation for living a Christ-centered life on earth, driven by the love of God and our neighbor. It offers much more than the fear of hell to move us toward eternal life in the eternities.

An important note: Christian doctrine teaches that unbaptized children under the age of eight go directly to the celestial kingdom when they die (see the essay on baptism). This is contrary to the false doctrine that unbaptized souls go to a state in which they rely on our prayers and God’s mercy and judgment for admittance into heaven. The Christian doctrine of going directly to the celestial kingdom demonstrates more mercy and justice for children who are unfortunate enough to meet this fate in mortality.

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