

## **The Third Heaven (2 Cor. 12:2)**

In his second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul refers to the third heaven and states: “I know a man in union with Christ Jesus who, fourteen years ago – whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know; God knows - was caught away as such to *the third heaven.*” (2 Corinthians 12:2) Was Paul “taken” into the very heavens, as some Christians believe? Or might there be some other explanation as to what he experienced?

The Scriptures use the word “heaven” or “heavens,” in at least six different ways. Therefore, it is most important to examine each usage first, as this will shed light upon the topic of our discussion.

### The physical heaven(s):

Genesis 1:1 speaks of the physical heavens when it states: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Another example of the physical heavens is found at Psalm 19:1, which reads: “The heavens are declaring the glory of God. And the work of his hands the expanse is telling.”

The apostle Paul spoke of God’s creative work at Romans 1:19,20, and said: “because what may be known about God is manifest among them, for God made it manifest to them. For his invisible qualities are clearly seen from the world’s creation onward, because they are perceived by the things made, even his eternal power and Godship, so that they are inexcusable.”

### Heaven is also used to describe space in the proximity of our earth.

For example, we have Jesus’ reference to the “birds of **heaven**” at Matthew 6:26. Jesus is obviously speaking of the sky. Another example of this is found at 2 Kings 2:11, where “Elijah went ascending in the windstorm to the heavens.” Elisha would have seen Elijah go up into the sky, and disappear from sight. That it was only the sky he went into is made clear at John 3:13 where Jesus said: “Moreover, no man has ascended into heaven but he that descended from heaven, the Son of man.”

### Another use of the word heavens, is the invisible dimension, or ‘dwelling place’ of God.

Psalm 33:13,14 states: “From the heavens Jehovah has looked...from the established place where he dwells.” Psalm 2:4, states: “The very one sitting in the heavens will laugh; Jehovah himself will hold them in derision. And at Psalm 20:6, King David said: “Now I do know that Jehovah certainly saves his anointed one. He answers him from his holy heavens.”

### A fourth usage of the word heaven is in reference to a highly elevated, spiritual position.

An example of such usage is found at Ephesians 2:6 which states: “And he raised us up together, and seated us together in the heavenly places (Greek: literally, “heavenlies,”) in union with Christ Jesus.” Another example is found at Revelation 4:1, where John sees an open door in heaven, and hears a voice saying to him: “Come on up here, and I will show you the things that must take place.” All enlightenment comes out of heaven, from God. Persons who receive such enlightenment are, therefore, “raised up” or elevated, in a spiritual sense.

### Heaven is also used as a synonym for God.

In the parable of the prodigal son, the repentant man said: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.” (Luke 15:18) Another example is Jesus’ frequent reference to the kingdom, as the “kingdom of God,” even as he does in Luke 4:43. Nevertheless, at other times he refers to it

as “the kingdom of heaven,” as he does at Matthew 4:17. In other words, he uses those two terms interchangeably.

The last usage of heavens is in reference to government.

We have an example of this at Haggai 2:6,7 which states: “For this is what Jehovah of armies has said, ‘Yet once more – it is a little while - and I am rocking the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry ground.’ *(He explains)* And I will rock all the nations, and the desirable things will come in...” The prophet then shows what that means. He continues: (in verses 21, 22) “.....I am rocking the heavens and the earth. And I shall certainly overthrow the throne of kingdoms and annihilate the strength of the kingdoms of the nations...”

What we see here is that heavens mean ‘kingdoms of the nations.’ In Hebrews 12:26, 27 this prophecy is referred to, and further explained. The writer states: “At that time his voice shook the earth (*Mt. Sinai*), but now he has promised, saying: ‘Yet once more I will set in commotion not only the earth but also the heaven.’ *Verse 27 continues:* “Now the expression, ‘Yet once more’ signifies the removal of the things being shaken as things that have been made, in order that the things not being shaken may remain. *And what is that? He answers in verse 28:* “Wherefore, seeing that we have a kingdom that cannot be shaken...” Please note that what is shaken and removed is “earth” and “heaven.”

The apostle Peter makes this very same point at 2 Peter 3:5-7 and writes: “...there were heavens from of old, and an earth, standing compactly out of water, and in the midst of water, by the word of God; and by those means, the **world** of that time suffered destruction when it was deluged with water.” (“The world of that time,” which was “deluged by water” and “destroyed,” was the governmental administration and earth’s inhabitants. Only Noah and his family survived).

Peter continues: “But by the same word the heavens and the earth that are now are stored up for fire, and are being reserved to the day of judgment of the ungodly men.” The point Peter is making is that just as God destroyed a ‘world,’ a system, consisting of people and their rulers, (earth and heaven) by bringing the flood, even so in our day, he has reserved this world to “the judgment and destruction of ungodly men.” In other words, just as the ‘heavens’ and “earth” came to an end in the flood, even so the “heavens” and “earth” (today) will also come to an end, albeit in a different way.

When Isaiah prophesied, saying: “For there are new heavens and a new earth and the former things will not be called to mind, neither will they come up into the heart” (65:17), he was foretelling the very thing Peter is talking about. And to further show that ‘heavens and earth’ are referred to as a system of “rulers” and “subjects,” Isaiah also said this: (1:2) “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth, for Jehovah himself has spoken: “Sons I have brought up and raised, but they themselves have revolted against me.”

Finally, when the Scriptures speak of, ‘**world**,’ as used in 2 Peter 3:5-7, that word is translated from the Greek word “**kosmos**.” *Strong’s Concordance* gives the meaning as: “an orderly arrangement,” (by implication, “the world in a wide or narrow sense.”) In other words, “**world**” and its equivalent “**kosmos**,” referred to by Peter, actually consist of a “heavens” (governmental administration), and an “earth,” (those under its rule). Before the flood, as Peter shows, that is what existed, and subsequently perished in the flood. It really meant the “destruction of ungodly men.” In this way, that world came to an end. After the flood, a new kosmos or world, began.

Now then, before proceeding to identify the 'third heaven' we need to consider the aspect of 'ages' as used in Scripture. In Matthew 12:32 Jesus said that whoever speaks against the holy spirit, it will not be forgiven him in this system (Greek: 'age'), nor in the one to come. Clearly, Jesus is speaking of two ages, i.e., this age, and the one to come. There are several scriptural examples of this.

In Matthew 13:39 Jesus said that the "harvest is a conclusion of the age." And in Luke 18:29,30, he said that those who follow him now, will get everlasting life in the "coming age."

Surely, that period before the flood was an age that came to an end. The present 'world,' or system of things, also consists of heavens and an earth (same representations), that Peter says "are stored up for fire and are being reserved to the day of judgment, and of destruction, of ungodly men." This is the present age. Now then, that leaves the "age to come" or "the coming age." Like the two ages before it, it also will consist of 'heavens' and 'an earth,' i.e., an administration, consisting of Christ Jesus, the King, and his Bride, (associate "Kings and priests"), to whom he gives authority to rule over the nations. Those nations (humankind in general), will form the new earth under the rule of Christ Jesus, with his "bride." (See: Revelation 2:26, 27; Luke 22:28-30) This kingdom "will not be shaken," even as shown in Hebrews chapter 12. It will prevail, and accomplish God's purpose for this earth.

In view of the foregoing, it seems rather obvious that the "third heaven" actually consists of Christ Jesus and his bride. Moreover, they are the administration for the new "earth." Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that this is what Paul had a glimpse of. In Ephesians 1:9,10 Paul refers to the "sacred secret" and then explains that there will be an administration "to gather all things together again in Christ." That administration is the kingdom of God that Jesus spoke about while on earth, and it is the good news of this kingdom that we, as Christians, must declare in this age. (Matthew 24:14)