

HEAVEN, HEAVENLIES, PARADISE

Paul's understanding of [heaven](#) and related themes must be placed within the wider context of his total [eschatology](#) (see esp. Lincoln 1981). As with other NT writers, Paul reveals a debt to, as well as a development of, both the OT and apocryphal and pseudepigraphical Jewish works, some [knowledge](#) of which is essential for an understanding of Paul's thinking.

- [1.](#) Background
- [2.](#) Heaven
- [3.](#) Things Above
- [4.](#) Third Heaven, Paradise
- [5.](#) Heavenlies

1. Background.

Basic to OT understanding is the duality of [heaven](#) and earth which together make up the material [creation](#), an idea retained throughout Scripture, culminating in the promise of a new [heaven](#) and a new earth (see [Creation and New Creation](#)). This physical demarcation pointed toward a spiritual distinction: earth as the dwelling place of humankind, the heavens as the place where [God](#) dwells (see [World, Cosmology](#)). The idea of a third "realm," [Sheol](#), was introduced as the place of the departed, a shadowy realm where [knowledge](#) of and fellowship with God was not possible. As the thought of vindication for the righteous beyond the grave arose, culminating in the hope of personal [resurrection](#), so also [Sheol](#) was divided, the righteous waiting for final [salvation](#) in a form of paradise.

The word *paradise* (Gk *paradeisos*) was almost certainly a Persian word taken into both Hebrew and Greek, originally referring to a park or garden. It is used only three times in the OT ([Song 4:13](#); [Neh 2:8](#) and [Eccles 2:5](#)), but is found forty-seven times in the LXX, notably as a term for the garden of Eden. This paradisaic bliss became a [model](#) for a hidden paradise, the immediate resting place of the righteous dead (*1 Enoch* 60:8; 61:12), but also of an ultimate resting place (*2 Enoch* 8–9; *2 Bar.* 51:3).

Alongside the present/future [dichotomy](#) was an earth/[heaven](#) duality in which paradise was sometimes located on earth (*1 Enoch* 32:3–6; 77:3) and sometimes in [heaven](#) (*1 Enoch* 60:8; 61:12; 70:3). These ideas are brought together in *2 Enoch* 8. Alongside these developments went another in which the number of "heavens" proliferated; sometimes there were three, or five, or seven or even ten; *2 Enoch* 8:1 and *Apocalypse of Moses* 37:5 locate paradise in the third [heaven](#).

This brief and much simplified account of a complex and often confusing and inconsistent development of ideas puts Paul's thinking into context.

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2. Heaven.

Paul uses the word *ouranos* twenty-one times, twelve of these in the singular and nine in the plural. It is frequently assumed that the plural uses reflect the Hebrew *šāmayim*, but it is possible that, as in the LXX, where the frequency of the plural increases in the later writings, this is due to the influence of the notion of several heavens (see, e.g., Turner). However, there appears to be no discernible pattern in Paul's usage of singular and plural. He uses the word as:

(1) Part of a description of the universe as the heavens and the earth ([1 Cor 8:5](#); [Eph 1:10](#); [3:15](#); [Col 1:16](#))

(2) The abode of [angels](#) ([Gal 1:8](#))

(3) The dwelling place of [Christ](#) from which he came down ([Eph 4:9](#); [Rom 10:6](#)), to which he returned ([Eph 4:10](#)), where he now is ([Eph 6:9](#); [Col 4:1](#); cf. [Rom 8:34](#)) and from whence he will return ([Phil 3:20](#); [1 Thess 1:10](#); [4:16](#); [2 Thess 1:7](#))

(4) The eternal home of the believer ([2 Cor 5:1, 2](#); [Phil 3:20](#); cf. [Gal 4:26](#)), where the hoped-for [salvation](#) is being kept ([Col 1:5](#))

3. Things Above.

This brief survey demonstrates that [heaven](#) was not for Paul a merely future reality; it denotes a spiritual sphere coexisting with the material world of space and time; it is where the exalted Christ now is, seated at God's right hand (see [Exaltation and Enthronement](#)). Not only that; the believer is united with Christ, is "in Christ," and as such belongs already to the company of [heaven](#) ([Phil 3:20](#)) and can be thought of as being seated with Christ in the heavenly realms ([Eph 2:6](#)). Even now the believer's life is "hidden with Christ in God," and "the things above" should be the focus of the believer's attention and should provide the orientation and goal of the Christian's life here and now. Believers live now in this world as [citizens](#) of [heaven](#), seeking increasingly to become what they are in Christ; and as their gaze is fixed on Christ above the life of [heaven](#) becomes an increasing reality as they are "being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing [glory](#)" ([2 Cor 3:18](#)). It is similar thinking which lies behind the expression "the [Jerusalem](#) which is above" in [Galatians 4:26](#). Ever since Christ was exalted, he has become the focal point of [salvation](#), in whom is found all the [fullness](#) of [salvation](#) once centered upon the earthly Jerusalem. The heavenly realm of Christ's rule is the new city of God of which the believer is a citizen.

It is this fact, of which the [Holy Spirit](#) is the pledge and guarantee ([2 Cor 5:5](#)), that enables Paul to face [weakness](#) and [suffering](#) in the present, and even to face the awesome reality of [death](#); for when the present "earthly tent" is taken down, the believer has "a building from God, an eternal house in [heaven](#)" ([2 Cor 5:1](#); see [Body](#)). Here Paul is thinking not so much of corporate citizenship as he is of personal transformation, as in [1 Corinthians 15:35–57](#) (but see, e.g., Ellis for a corporate interpretation), and also

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seems to raise the difficult and much discussed question of an [intermediate](#) state. The latter may be a bodiless experience after [death](#), sometimes understood as “sleep” but more likely as real [fellowship](#) with Christ, preceding the reception of the final [resurrection](#) body (cf. [Phil 1:23](#)). However, “naked” in [2 Corinthians 5:3](#) can be understood differently, for example, as referring to appearing before God outside of Christ. Paul’s concern might not be with bodiless existence after [death](#), but rather with a desire to be transformed at the Parousia rather than pass through the experience of [death](#), or even with a polemic against a [realized eschatology](#) that thought the [resurrection](#) state was a present experience and reality (see Martin, ad loc.; see [Eschatology](#)).

4. Third Heaven, Paradise.

Part of the difficulty is precisely that for Paul [heaven](#) is not only a future reality; there is a vertical as well as a horizontal dimension to his eschatological understanding. Fellowship with the exalted Christ, citizenship in [heaven](#) and eternal life are present realities to such an extent that the border between earthly and heavenly can be crossed even now. In [2 Corinthians 12:1–5](#), albeit with the greatest reluctance (the third-person narration emphasizes his desire to distance himself from what he describes), Paul recounts an experience in which he was caught up to the third [heaven](#), to paradise. How much of his contemporaries’ thinking Paul accepted is not clear, but here his language undoubtedly reflects some of their ideas about the various heavens as outlined above (e.g., *T. Levi* 2–5), and the two modes of heavenly journey in their writings—“in the spirit” or bodily (e.g., *1 Enoch* for the former, *T. Abr.* 8:3B for the latter). Clearly Paul enters the very throne room of God; he goes into the presence of Christ and receives a [revelation](#) so sacred or mysterious that it cannot be shared (see [Visions](#)).

5. Heavens.

What is significant in [2 Corinthians 12](#), both for Paul’s argument and our understanding of his thinking, is the thorn in the [flesh](#) which was given to him to keep him humble, and his description of it as a “messenger of [Satan](#).” Several interpreters refer to the experience of four rabbis, reported in the Babylonian [Talmud](#), who were taken up to [heaven](#), of whom only one, Rabbi Akiba, returned unscathed, the others all suffering in some way (*b. Hag.* 14b). If, as scholars such as W. Baird have suggested, Paul is speaking of a similar assault upon himself in the heavenly realms, this would suggest that Paul distinguishes between [heaven](#) in the ultimate sense of the dwelling place of God, and the heavenly realms which are part of the created order, and which will one day be renewed along with the earth. This would make sense of a unique expression used by Paul five times in Ephesians only—*en tois epouranois*, “in the heavenly realms.” The exalted Christ is seated at God’s right hand in the heavenly realms ([Eph 1:20](#)), and the Christian is seated with him ([Eph 2:6](#)) enjoying “every spiritual blessing” ([Eph 1:3](#)). But these heavenly realms are also inhabited by “the rulers and authorities” ([Eph 3:10](#)) who are further described in [Ephesians 6:12](#) as “the spiritual forces of evil”! The heavenly realms, therefore, refer to the spiritual sphere in which God, Christ, the powers of darkness and the believer exist together, and as well as sharing Christ’s reign and receiving the blessings of [salvation](#) the believer is involved in spiritual warfare (see [Principalities and Powers](#)).

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There is, therefore, a tension in Christian experience between the earthly and the heavenly, the present and the future; the believer lives in this world while belonging to another, in this age while anticipating the age to come. It is a tension that will be resolved only when Christ “hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, [authority](#) and power ... so that God may be all in all” ([1 Cor 15:24, 28](#)).

See also [CITIZENSHIP, ROMAN AND HEAVENLY](#); [CREATION AND NEW CREATION](#); [DYING AND RISING WITH CHRIST](#); [EPHESIANS, LETTER TO THE](#); [ESCHATOLOGY](#); [INTERMEDIATE STATE](#); [PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS](#); [RESURRECTION](#); [VISIONS, ECSTATIC EXPERIENCE](#); [WORLD, COSMOLOGY](#).

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