

Degrees of Glory: Biblical Basis and LDS Doctrine

Introduction

The Question: Your friend claims that the LDS use of 2 Corinthians 12 (Paul caught up to third heaven) and 1 Corinthians 15 (different glories in resurrection) to support the doctrine of degrees of glory is wrong and not scholarly consensus. Is this accurate?

Additional Question: Some LDS members say degrees of glory refer to the **resurrected body's state** (celestial, terrestrial, telestial bodies) rather than separate **locations/kingdoms**. What does LDS doctrine actually teach?

This document examines: 1. What the biblical passages (2 Corinthians 12, 1 Corinthians 15) actually say 2. How LDS theology uses these scriptures 3. Whether this use is legitimate or eisegesis 4. The LDS understanding: states of being vs. locations 5. D&C 76 and modern LDS clarification

Part I: The Biblical Passages

2 Corinthians 12:2-4 — Paul Caught Up to the Third Heaven

The Text (NRSV):

“I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was **caught up to the third heaven**—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was **caught up into Paradise** and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.”

Key Details: - Paul (or someone he knows) was “caught up to the **third heaven**” - This third heaven is equated with “**Paradise**” - The experience involved hearing inexpressible revelations

1 Corinthians 15:39-42 — Different Glories in the Resurrection

The Text (NRSV):

“Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both **heavenly bodies and earthly bodies**, but the **glory of the heavenly is one thing, and**

that of the earthly is another. There is one **glory of the sun**, and another **glory of the moon**, and another **glory of the stars**; indeed, **star differs from star in glory**. So it is with the resurrection of the dead.”

Key Details: - Paul uses astronomical imagery: sun, moon, stars - **Different types of glory exist - Star differs from star in glory** (variation even within categories) - This is applied to **the resurrection of the dead**

Part II: Scholarly Interpretation of These Passages

2 Corinthians 12:2-4 — “Third Heaven”

Jewish Background: Three Heavens

Scholarly consensus:

The “**third heaven**” reflects **Jewish cosmology** that was common in Second Temple Judaism (200 BCE - 70 CE):

1. **First Heaven:** The atmosphere (where birds fly, clouds are)
2. **Second Heaven:** Outer space (where sun, moon, stars are)
3. **Third Heaven:** The dwelling place of God (Paradise, the highest heaven)

Biblical evidence for this cosmology:

- **Deuteronomy 10:14** — “The heavens, **even the highest heavens**, belong to the LORD your God” (Hebrew: *shamayim shamei hashamayim* = “heaven of heavens”)
- **Nehemiah 9:6** — “You made the heavens, **even the highest heavens**, and all their starry host”
- **Psalms 148:4** — “Praise him, you **highest heavens**”

Jewish apocalyptic literature (contemporary with Paul):

- **2 Enoch** (1st century) describes seven heavens, with the third heaven as Paradise
- **Testament of Levi** (2nd century BCE) describes three heavens
- **Apocalypse of Moses** describes Paradise in the third heaven

Scholarly interpretation:

- Paul is using **common Jewish cosmological language**
- The “third heaven” = God’s immediate presence
- “Paradise” = the place of the righteous dead or God’s throne room
- This is **descriptive**, not necessarily prescriptive theology about multiple heavenly kingdoms

What scholars DON’T conclude: - That there are literally three distinct eternal kingdoms with different glories - That resurrection bodies differ based on these three heavens

Modern Scholarly Views

Conservative scholars (e.g., Gordon Fee, N.T. Wright): - The “third heaven” is a **visionary experience** of God’s presence - Not a systematic theology of afterlife geography - Paul is describing a **mystical vision**, not cosmic structure

Critical scholars: - This reflects **apocalyptic Jewish cosmology** - A literary device, not literal cartography - Paul’s point: He had an extraordinary revelation from God

1 Corinthians 15:39-42 — Different Glories

The Context: Resurrection Bodies

Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 15:

- **Verses 35-38:** How are the dead raised? With what kind of body?
- **Verses 39-41:** Analogy of different kinds of flesh and different glories
- **Verse 42:** “So it is with the resurrection of the dead”

Paul’s point:

1. **There is continuity:** Like a seed becomes a plant, our bodies are raised transformed
2. **There is discontinuity:** The resurrection body is different from the mortal body
3. **Glory/splendor varies:** Just as sun, moon, stars have different splendor, so will resurrected bodies

Scholarly interpretation:

What Paul IS saying: - The **resurrection body will be glorious** (contrasted with the perishable, dishonorable mortal body) - There is **diversity** in creation (flesh, heavenly bodies) that illustrates **transformation** in resurrection - The resurrection body is a **spiritual body** (v. 44), imperishable, glorious, powerful

What Paul is NOT clearly saying (scholarly debate): - Whether **different believers** receive different degrees of glory - Whether there are **separate kingdoms** based on worthiness - Whether the sun/moon/stars represent **three distinct levels** of glory

Two Interpretive Views

View 1: Individual Variation in Glory (Minority)

Some scholars (e.g., **Anthony Thiselton, Gordon Fee**) suggest Paul may imply: - Individual believers will have **varying degrees of reward/glorious** based on faithfulness - “Star differs from star” = individual differences in resurrected glory - This would align with Jesus’s parables about different rewards (Matthew 25, Luke 19)

Biblical support for this view: - **Daniel 12:3** — “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” - **Matthew 13:43** — “Then the righteous will shine like the

sun in the kingdom of their Father” - **2 Corinthians 5:10** — “All of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil”

View 2: Contrast Between Mortal and Resurrected Bodies (Majority)

Most scholars (e.g., **N.T. Wright, Richard Hays**) argue Paul’s primary point is: - The **contrast** between the **mortal body** (weak, dishonorable, perishable) and the **resurrection body** (powerful, glorious, imperishable) - The sun/moon/stars imagery illustrates the **vast difference** between earthly and heavenly existence - NOT primarily about **gradations among believers**

This view emphasizes: - Verse 42-44: “So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable... It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.” - The point is the **transformation**, not the ranking

Part III: Can LDS Legitimately Use These Scriptures?

The LDS Claim

LDS theology uses these passages to support:

1. **Three degrees of glory:** Celestial, Terrestrial, Telestial (D&C 76)
2. **Different resurrection bodies** corresponding to these kingdoms
3. **2 Corinthians 12:2** as evidence for multiple heavens
4. **1 Corinthians 15:40-41** as evidence for three distinct glories (sun = celestial, moon = terrestrial, stars = telestial)

Is This Eisegesis or Legitimate Interpretation?

Arguments That LDS Use Is Eisegesis (Reading Into the Text)

Your friend’s likely position:

1. **2 Corinthians 12:2** is about **Jewish cosmology** (sky, space, God’s presence), not about eternal kingdoms of glory
 - Paul isn’t teaching systematic theology about the afterlife
 - The “third heaven” ≠ three kingdoms of glory
 - This is a **vision**, not a doctrinal statement
2. **1 Corinthians 15:40-41** is about the **contrast** between mortal and resurrected bodies, not three levels
 - Paul’s point: Resurrection bodies are **glorious** (unlike mortal bodies)
 - Sun/moon/stars are **analogies** for diversity, not a systematic three-tier system
 - No mention of “celestial,” “terrestrial,” “telestial” kingdoms
 - Paul elsewhere speaks of **one resurrection** to eternal life vs. judgment (Romans 6:5, Philippians 3:11, 1 Thessalonians 4:16)

3. **Nowhere in the Bible** is there a clear teaching of three eternal kingdoms with different glory levels
- The NT speaks of **heaven and hell, eternal life and eternal destruction**
 - Jesus speaks of **sheep and goats, wheat and tares, wise and foolish virgins** (binary, not three-tier)

This is the standard Evangelical/Protestant objection.

Arguments That LDS Use Is Legitimate

LDS response:

1. **The passages are compatible** with a doctrine of degrees of glory, even if not explicitly teaching it
 - 2 Corinthians 12:2 shows Paul knew of **multiple heavens**
 - 1 Corinthians 15:40-41 explicitly mentions **different glories** in the resurrection
 - “Star differs from star in glory” = **individual variation**, not just mortal vs. immortal
2. **Additional biblical evidence** suggests more than a binary heaven/hell:
 - **John 14:2** — “In my Father’s house are **many mansions** [or ‘many rooms’]”
 - **2 Corinthians 12:2** — Multiple heavens exist
 - **Luke 12:47-48** — Different degrees of punishment (“beaten with many stripes” vs. “few stripes”)
 - If there are **degrees of punishment**, why not **degrees of reward**?
3. **The Bible is incomplete** without modern revelation
 - Joseph Smith’s vision (D&C 76) **clarifies** what Paul only hinted at
 - Ancient scriptures were tampered with (LDS belief in lost plain and precious truths, 1 Nephi 13:26-29)
 - God continues to reveal truth through prophets
4. **Early Christian diversity** on the afterlife
 - Not all early Christians believed in simple heaven/hell
 - **Origen** (3rd century) taught **apokatastasis** (universal restoration) with gradations
 - **Irenaeus** spoke of different “mansions” for different levels of righteousness
 - The modern binary heaven/hell is a **later development**, not original Christianity

The Scholarly Consensus

Most biblical scholars (non-LDS) would say:

- 2 Corinthians 12:2 is **not** about three kingdoms of glory (it’s about Jewish cosmology and a mystical vision)
- 1 Corinthians 15:40-41 **may** suggest varying degrees of reward, but is **primarily** about the contrast between mortal and resurrected bodies
- The LDS use of these texts to support a **three-tier system** (celestial, terrestrial, telestial) is **not the natural reading** of the text
- However, the idea of **varying rewards** in the resurrection is **not unbiblical** (see Daniel 12:3, Matthew 25, Luke 19)

So: - Your friend is partially correct: The LDS reading is not the scholarly consensus or the natural reading - **But:** The concept of degrees of glory is not entirely **foreign** to biblical thought (just not in the specific LDS three-kingdom form)

Part IV: LDS Doctrine — States of Being vs. Locations

The Question

An LDS member said: “Degrees of glory refer to the **resurrected body’s state** (celestial, terrestrial, telestial bodies), not separate **locations**.”

Is this accurate LDS theology?

D&C 76: The Vision of the Three Degrees of Glory

Context: In February 1832, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon received a vision of the afterlife while translating the Gospel of John.

D&C 76 describes:

1. **Celestial Glory** (vv. 50-70, 92-96)
2. **Terrestrial Glory** (vv. 71-80, 87, 91, 97)
3. **Telestial Glory** (vv. 81-90, 98-112)
4. **Sons of Perdition** (vv. 25-49) — outer darkness

Are These “Kingdoms” or “States”?

The language of D&C 76:

“Kingdoms” language:

- **Verse 50:** “They who dwell in his presence are the **church of the Firstborn**; and they see as they are seen, and know as they are known... they are **gods**, even the sons of God”
- **Verse 71:** “These are they who received not the gospel of Christ... These are they who are **honorable men** of the earth... **These are they who receive of his glory, but not of his fulness**”
- **Verse 81:** “These are they who received not the gospel... **These are they who are thrust down to hell**”
- **Verse 92:** “And thus we saw the **glory of the celestial**, which excels in all things”
- **Verse 96:** “These are they who **shall come forth in the resurrection of the just**”
- **Verse 106:** “These are they who are **cast down to hell** and suffer the wrath of Almighty God, until the fulness of times”

Key observations:

1. Spatial language is used:

- Celestial: “dwell in his presence” (v. 62)
- Telesstial: “thrust down to hell” (v. 84), “These are they who shall not be redeemed from the devil until the last resurrection” (v. 85)
- Different groups “inherit” different kingdoms

2. Different glories/bodies:

- **Verse 70:** “These are they whose bodies are **celestial**, whose glory is that of the sun”
- **Verse 78:** “These are they whose bodies are **terrestrial**, whose glory is that of the moon”
- **Verse 81, 89:** Those in the telesstial are “as innumerable as the stars”; their glory is “that of the stars”

3. Different access to God:

- **Celestial:** Dwell in God’s presence (v. 62)
- **Terrestrial:** Receive the presence of the Son, but not the fulness of the Father (v. 77)
- **Telesstial:** Receive the Holy Spirit, but not the Son or the Father (vv. 86, 88)

LDS Leaders on Kingdoms vs. States

Joseph Smith:

In the **King Follett Discourse** (1844), Joseph said: > “God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man... You have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done before you.”

- This emphasizes **progression** and **exaltation** to godhood (celestial glory)
- Implies a **state of being** (becoming like God) but in a specific **place** (God’s presence)

Brigham Young:

“The Lord Almighty has organized **kingdoms** for his children... Those who do not embrace the Gospel in this life, and become prepared to enter into the celestial glory, will enter into a terrestrial or a telesstial glory.” (Journal of Discourses 11:126)

- Uses the term “**kingdoms**” explicitly
- Suggests these are **places** people “enter into”

Joseph Fielding Smith:

“The inhabitants of each kingdom will be judged according to their works and will be assigned to the glory which they merit... Each will have a body adapted to that kingdom.” (*Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:21-22)

- Bodies are “**adapted**” to the kingdom
- Suggests **both** a state (type of body) **and** a place (kingdom)

Bruce R. McConkie:

“Those who gain **exaltation** in the highest heaven within the celestial world... shall be gods... There are three heavens or degrees within the celestial kingdom. To obtain the highest, a man must enter into... the new and everlasting covenant of marriage.” (*Mormon Doctrine*, p. 117-118)

- “Three heavens or degrees **within** the celestial kingdom”
- So even within the celestial, there are **degrees**

Modern LDS Understanding

Most LDS members and leaders understand degrees of glory as BOTH:

1. **Different types of resurrected bodies** (celestial, terrestrial, telestial) with different capacities and glories
2. **Different kingdoms/realms** where those with those bodies will dwell

The relationship:

- Your **resurrected body type** determines **where you can dwell**
- Celestial bodies = celestial glory = dwell in God’s presence
- Terrestrial bodies = terrestrial glory = presence of the Son but not fulness of the Father
- Telestial bodies = telestial glory = presence of the Holy Spirit only

So the LDS member who said “it’s just the body’s state, not a location” is PARTIALLY correct: - Yes, it’s about different **resurrected body types** - But these bodies **correspond to different kingdoms/locations** - D&C 76 clearly uses spatial language (“dwell in his presence,” “thrust down to hell,” “inherit”)

Key LDS Scriptures on This

D&C 88:22-24:

“For he who is not able to abide the **law of a celestial kingdom** cannot abide a **celestial glory**. And he who cannot abide the law of a terrestrial kingdom cannot abide a terrestrial glory. And he who cannot abide the law of a telestial kingdom cannot abide a telestial glory; therefore he is not meet for a kingdom of glory.”

- “Cannot abide” = cannot exist in or tolerate
- The **glory** (light, presence) of a kingdom requires a compatible **body/nature**
- This suggests **both** a state of being (ability to “abide”) **and** a location (the “kingdom”)

D&C 130:18-19:

“Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, **he will have so much the advantage in the world to come.**”

- Suggests **progression** and **degrees** of attainment
- “Advantage in the world to come” = **state of being** (knowledge, capacity) in a **future world**

D&C 76:112:

“And the glory of the **telestial** is one, even as the glory of the stars is one; for as one star differs from another star in glory, even so differs one from another in glory in the telestial world.”

- Even **within** the telestial kingdom, there are **variations** in glory
- “In the telestial **world**” = spatial language

The Truth: Both/And

LDS doctrine teaches **BOTH**:

1. **Different resurrected bodies** (celestial, terrestrial, telestial) with different capacities, glories, and abilities
2. **Different kingdoms/realms/worlds** corresponding to these bodies

The body and the location are intimately connected: - Your body type determines which glory/presence/kingdom you can “abide” - A telestial body cannot dwell in celestial glory (it would be burned up by the glory, per D&C 88:24) - So they are **distinct places** with **distinct inhabitants** who have **distinct bodies**

However:

- LDS theology does NOT teach these are **spatially distant** like different planets
 - They may be **right here on the transfigured earth**, but with different capacities to perceive/access God’s presence
 - Think of it like different **dimensions** or **frequencies** rather than different **locations** in space
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Part V: Summary and Conclusion

Can LDS Use 2 Corinthians 12 and 1 Corinthians 15 for Degrees of Glory?

Your friend’s claim: “The LDS use of these scriptures to support degrees of glory is wrong and not the scholarly consensus.”

Answer:

Partially correct: - 2 Corinthians 12:2 (“third heaven”) is about **Jewish cosmology** and a mystical vision, not a doctrinal statement about three kingdoms of glory - 1 Corinthians 15:40-41 is **primarily** about the contrast between mortal and resurrected bodies, not explicitly about three-tier kingdoms - The LDS reading (sun = celestial, moon = terrestrial, stars = telestial) is **not** the natural or scholarly consensus reading

But: - 1 Corinthians 15:41 (“star differs from star in glory”) **does suggest** individual variation in resurrected glory - The concept of **varying degrees of reward** is biblical (Daniel 12:3, Matthew 25, Luke 19, 2 Corinthians 5:10) - The LDS position is that these verses are **compatible** with a fuller doctrine revealed through Joseph Smith (D&C 76), not that they **explicitly teach** it

So: - LDS members can **legitimately point to** these passages as **hints** or **compatible** with the doctrine - But they **cannot claim** these passages **explicitly teach** the three degrees of glory in the LDS sense - The doctrine comes primarily from **modern revelation** (D&C 76), with biblical passages offering **supporting hints**

Are Degrees of Glory “States” or “Locations”?

The LDS member’s claim: “Degrees of glory are just the resurrected body’s state, not locations.”

Answer:

Both/And: - LDS doctrine teaches **different resurrected bodies** (celestial, terrestrial, telestial) with different capacities - These bodies correspond to **different kingdoms/realms** where those individuals dwell - D&C 76 uses both language: “bodies are celestial/terrestrial” AND “kingdoms,” “inherit,” “dwell in his presence,” “thrust down to hell”

The relationship: - Your **body type** determines which **glory/kingdom** you can “abide” (D&C 88:22-24) - A telestial body cannot dwell in celestial glory - So they are **both** different states of being **and** different kingdoms/realms

Modern LDS understanding: - These may not be **spatially distant** locations (like different planets) - They may be **right here** on the transfigured earth but with different capacities to perceive/access God’s presence - Think of it as different **dimensions** or **levels of access** rather than different **places** in space

So the LDS member is partially correct: - It IS about different body types/states of being - But these states correspond to different kingdoms/realms (not just abstract states) - D&C 76 clearly uses spatial language

Final Thoughts

For LDS apologetics: - Be honest that 2 Corinthians 12 and 1 Corinthians 15 are **hints** and **compatible** with the doctrine, not explicit proof texts - The doctrine is revealed in **D&C 76**, with biblical passages offering supporting concepts - Emphasize that the Bible shows **varying rewards** (Daniel 12:3, Matthew 25), which is consistent with degrees of glory - The three-tier system (celestial, terrestrial, telestial) is **clarifying revelation**, not explicitly in the Bible

For conversations with Evangelicals: - Acknowledge that these passages are **not explicit** about three kingdoms - But challenge the **binary** heaven/hell model: Does the Bible really teach **only** two outcomes? - What about “many mansions” (John 14:2)? - What about varying rewards/punishments (Luke 12:47-48, Matthew 25)? - LDS doctrine provides a **more nuanced** understanding of the afterlife

On states vs. locations: - Both are true in LDS theology - Don't oversimplify to just "states" or just "locations" - The resurrected body and the kingdom/glory are intimately connected