

Three Degrees of Glory Are Biblical: A Latter-day Saint Defense

LDS Apologetics Research

ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

Critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints argue that the doctrine of three degrees of glory — celestial, terrestrial, and telestial kingdoms — has no biblical basis and contradicts the traditional heaven/hell binary. This criticism assumes that the Bible teaches a simple two-destination afterlife and that the Latter-day Saint model is an extra-biblical invention. A careful examination of the biblical text, however, reveals that the heaven/hell binary is itself an oversimplification of the scriptural witness. The Bible contains substantial evidence for degrees of reward, multiple dwelling places, and a differentiated afterlife — evidence that the three-degrees-of-glory framework accommodates more faithfully than the traditional binary model.

2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The strongest version of this argument holds: The Bible teaches two and only two eternal destinations — heaven for the righteous and hell for the wicked. "These shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal" (Matthew 25:46). "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36). The binary is consistent, clear, and repeated throughout scripture. The Latter-day Saint system of three kingdoms — with the vast majority of humanity receiving some degree of glory — effectively eliminates the seriousness of hell, undermines the urgency of the gospel, and reads a nineteenth-century revelation back into the biblical text. The terms "celestial" and "terrestrial" in 1 Corinthians 15 refer to types of resurrection bodies, not to separate kingdoms or heavens. The Latter-day Saint doctrine is an invention of Joseph Smith (D&C 76), not a recovery of biblical teaching.

This is a substantive objection. It must be engaged at the textual level.

3. Biblical Response

1 Corinthians 15:40-42 — Degrees of Glory

The most direct biblical evidence for differentiated degrees of glory is Paul's discussion of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:

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"There are also celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars: for one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead." (1 Corinthians 15:40-42)

Key observations:

1. **Paul explicitly connects different glories to the resurrection.** "So also is the resurrection of the dead" (v. 42) directly links the sun/moon/stars analogy to resurrected persons. This is not a passing metaphor about body types — it is a statement about the *differentiated nature of the resurrection*.
2. **Three distinct levels of glory are named.** The sun, moon, and stars represent three distinct degrees of glory, and Paul says the resurrection follows the same pattern. The Latter-day Saint identification of these with celestial, terrestrial, and telestial kingdoms maps directly onto Paul's own language.
3. **The word "celestial" is Paul's word.** Critics who claim the LDS terminology is invented must reckon with the fact that Paul himself uses "celestial" (*epouranios*) and "terrestrial" (*epigeios*) to describe different categories of resurrected glory.
4. **"One star differeth from another star in glory."** This phrase indicates gradation *within* each level — not merely two categories but a spectrum of glorified states. The heaven/hell binary cannot accommodate this language.

John 14:2 — Many Mansions

Jesus taught: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). The Greek *monai pollai* means "many dwelling places" or "many rooms." The plural "many" is significant — if heaven were a single undifferentiated state, "many mansions" would be an odd way to describe it. The imagery suggests a Father's house with multiple, distinct dwelling places, consistent with a differentiated afterlife.

2 Corinthians 12:2 — The Third Heaven

Paul writes: "I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago...such an one caught up to the third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2). The reference to a "third heaven" necessarily implies a first and second heaven. Paul does not explain the lower heavens because his audience presumably understood the concept. The existence of multiple heavens — numbered in ascending order — is precisely what the three-degrees-of-glory doctrine teaches.

Jewish tradition contemporary with Paul recognized multiple heavens. The *Testament of Levi* (2nd century BC) describes seven heavens. 2 Enoch describes ten heavens. The Talmud references seven heavens. Paul's "third heaven" participates in this established tradition of a differentiated, multi-tiered afterlife — a tradition the heaven/hell binary ignores.

Degrees of Reward and Punishment

The Bible repeatedly teaches that final judgment involves degrees, not a simple binary:

1. **Matthew 11:22, 24** — "It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you...more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee." If there are only two destinations (heaven and hell), the concept of "more tolerable" judgment is meaningless. Degrees of punishment require a more nuanced framework than the binary.
2. **Luke 12:47-48** — "That servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes." Many stripes vs. few stripes — proportional judgment, not binary.
3. **Matthew 16:27** — "The Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works." Reward "according to works" implies differentiation, not uniformity.
4. **Revelation 20:12-13** — "The dead were judged...according to their works." Judgment according to works demands a more nuanced outcome than simply "in" or "out."
5. **1 Corinthians 3:12-15** — Paul describes believers who build on the foundation of Christ with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or stubble. The fire will test each work. Some will be rewarded; some will "suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire." Here are believers who are saved but with dramatically different outcomes — consistent with different degrees of glory, inconsistent with a uniform heaven.
6. **Daniel 12:3** — "They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever." Different levels of luminous glory in the resurrection — echoing Paul's sun/moon/stars language.

The Parable of the Talents

Matthew 25:14-30 describes servants given different numbers of talents who produce different returns. The reward is proportional: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things" (v. 21, 23). The one with five talents and the one with two talents receive different measures of responsibility. The language of proportional reward in the afterlife fits a multi-tiered kingdom far better than a uniform heaven.

Hebrews 11:35 — A "Better Resurrection"

"Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection." The comparative "better" implies that not all resurrections are equal — some result in a higher state than others. This is precisely the three-degrees-of-glory doctrine.

4. Early Christian Evidence

Multiple Heavens in Early Christianity

The concept of multiple heavens and differentiated afterlife states was widespread in early Judaism and early Christianity:

Irenaeus (c. 180 AD) taught a three-tiered afterlife: "The presbyters, the disciples of the apostles, affirm that this is the gradation and arrangement of those who are saved, and that they advance through steps of this nature; also that they ascend through the Spirit to the Son, and through the Son to the Father, and that in due time the Son will yield up His work to the Father...For there are many mansions with the Father, as the Lord declared" (*Against Heresies*, 5.36.1-2). Irenaeus explicitly connected John 14:2 ("many mansions") to a graduated system of salvation, with some dwelling in heaven, some in paradise, and some in the city — three distinct locations.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 200 AD) described different "abodes" (*monai*) for the saved, corresponding to different levels of spiritual attainment: "For there are different abodes proportionate to the worth of those who have believed" (*Stromata*, 6.14).

Origen (c. 230 AD) taught a multi-tiered afterlife with progressive advancement through different spheres, and explicitly connected Paul's sun/moon/stars passage to different degrees of resurrection glory (*De Principiis*, 2.10.2).

The Apocalypse of Paul (late 2nd-3rd century), a widely circulated early Christian text, describes multiple heavens with different levels of reward for the righteous — a tradition that shows the differentiated afterlife was common in early Christian thought.

The Heaven/Hell Binary Is a Later Simplification

The rigid heaven/hell binary that critics assume is "traditional" is actually a medieval simplification. Early Christian thought was far more nuanced, including concepts of progressive sanctification after death, different levels of reward, and an intermediate state (often called "paradise" and distinguished from the highest heaven). The medieval systematization — particularly through Augustine and later Aquinas — collapsed this nuance into a simpler framework. The Latter-day Saint three-degrees model is, in many respects, closer to the early Christian understanding than the binary model that replaced it.

5. LDS Doctrinal Position

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches:

- 1. Three degrees of glory correspond to sun, moon, and stars.** "The glory of the celestial is one, even as the glory of the sun is one. And the glory of the terrestrial is one, even as the glory of the moon is one. And the glory of the telestial is one, even as the glory of the stars is one" (D&C 76:96-98). This directly applies Paul's language from 1 Corinthians 15.
- 2. The celestial kingdom is for those who receive the testimony of Jesus, are baptized, keep the commandments, and are sealed by the Holy Spirit of Promise** (D&C 76:51-53).

3. **The terrestrial kingdom is for honorable people who were "blinded by the craftiness of men" and who received not the testimony of Jesus in the flesh but received it afterward** (D&C 76:71-79).
4. **The telestial kingdom is for those who received not the gospel, nor the testimony of Jesus, nor the prophets** — yet even they receive a degree of glory after suffering (D&C 76:81-89, 109-112). The telestial glory "surpasses all understanding" (D&C 76:89).
5. **Outer darkness is reserved for sons of perdition** — those who have a perfect knowledge of God's truth and then deny and defy it with full knowledge (D&C 76:31-38). This is a far more limited "hell" than the traditional version, which consigns the majority of humanity to eternal torment.
6. **The plan of salvation reflects God's love and justice.** A God who assigns the uninstructed, the ignorant, the deceived, and the morally imperfect to the same punishment as serial murderers and those who sin against the Holy Ghost is not just. The three-degrees model reflects the biblical principle that God rewards "every man according to his works" (Matthew 16:27).

6. Key Scriptures

- **1 Corinthians 15:40-42** — Celestial and terrestrial glory; sun, moon, and stars; "so also is the resurrection"
- **2 Corinthians 12:2** — "Third heaven" — implies first and second
- **John 14:2** — "Many mansions" — multiple dwelling places
- **Matthew 11:22, 24** — "More tolerable" — degrees of judgment
- **Luke 12:47-48** — Many stripes vs. few stripes — proportional judgment
- **Matthew 16:27** — Reward "according to his works"
- **1 Corinthians 3:12-15** — Different building materials; saved "yet so as by fire"
- **Hebrews 11:35** — "A better resurrection" — implies varying degrees
- **Daniel 12:3** — Wise shine like the firmament; others like stars
- **Revelation 20:12-13** — Judged according to works
- **Matthew 25:14-30** — Parable of talents — proportional reward
- **D&C 76** — The Vision — full description of three degrees
- **D&C 76:89** — Telestial glory "surpasses all understanding"

7. Responses to Common Objections

"1 Corinthians 15 is about resurrection bodies, not kingdoms."

Paul's point is precisely that different resurrection bodies carry different glories — and that the resurrection involves differentiated outcomes ("so also is the resurrection of the dead," v. 42). The LDS doctrine does not separate "body types" from "kingdoms" — the type of glorified body one receives

corresponds to the kingdom one inherits. Paul's language supports, not undermines, the three-degrees framework.

"Matthew 25:46 is a binary — eternal life or eternal punishment."

Matthew 25:46 describes the judgment of the sheep and goats in one particular parable. Parables illustrate a single point; they are not exhaustive eschatological systems. Other parables (talents, laborers in the vineyard) introduce proportional reward. Other passages (Matthew 11:22, 24; Luke 12:47-48) explicitly teach degrees of judgment. Reading the full biblical witness — not one verse in isolation — yields a differentiated picture.

"'Third heaven' just means the highest heaven — not three separate heavens."

This interpretation concedes the point. If "third heaven" means "highest heaven," then there are at least three heavens. The question becomes what the first and second heavens contain. The Latter-day Saint answer — different degrees of glory — is the most natural reading and is consistent with the Jewish tradition Paul inherited.

"The three-degrees doctrine eliminates the urgency of the gospel."

On the contrary, the three-degrees doctrine heightens the urgency. The celestial kingdom — the fullness of God's presence, exaltation, and eternal family — is reserved for those who receive the gospel, enter into covenants, and endure to the end. The vast gap between celestial glory and lesser degrees makes the gospel invitation more urgent, not less. The difference is not between salvation and damnation but between fullness and limitation — between becoming what God intends and settling for less.

"D&C 76 is an extra-biblical invention."

D&C 76 is a revelation, and its acceptance depends on whether one accepts Joseph Smith as a prophet. But the biblical foundation for the doctrine is substantial: Paul's three glories, Paul's third heaven, Jesus' many mansions, proportional judgment, degrees of reward, and the early Christian tradition of a differentiated afterlife. D&C 76 develops and systematizes what the Bible already teaches in scattered form.

8. Conclusion

The heaven/hell binary that critics defend as "biblical" is actually a medieval simplification of a far more nuanced scriptural and early Christian tradition. The Bible consistently teaches proportional judgment (Matthew 11:22; Luke 12:47-48), differentiated reward (Matthew 16:27; 1 Corinthians 3:12-15), multiple dwelling places (John 14:2), multiple heavens (2 Corinthians 12:2), and a resurrection in which different persons receive different degrees of glory — "one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars" (1 Corinthians 15:41). Early Christian writers including

Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen taught a differentiated afterlife with multiple levels of reward.

The Latter-day Saint doctrine of three degrees of glory is not an invention but a restoration — a systematic articulation of what the Bible and early Christianity already taught. It reflects a God who is both just and merciful: just in rewarding "every man according to his works" and merciful in providing a degree of glory even for those who failed to receive the gospel in mortality. The three-degrees framework takes the full biblical witness more seriously than the binary model, and it presents a God whose plan is comprehensive enough to account for the infinite diversity of human moral experience.

Further Reading and Resources:

- FairLatterdaySaints: [Three Degrees of Glory](#)
- Church of Jesus Christ: [Kingdoms of Glory](#)
- BYU Studies: "Degrees of Glory: Patristic and Medieval Sources," by John Tvedtnes
- Blake Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: The Problems of Theism and the Love of God* (2006)
- N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (2008) — non-LDS scholar arguing against the simplistic heaven/hell binary