

Have Christians Been Misinterpreting This Scripture for Hundreds of Years?

I grew up singing the Ira Stamphill song “I’ve Got a Mansion Over the Hilltop.” Although it was originally written during the economic hardships of the Great Depression, it remained quite popular in rural Pentecostal congregations like the one I attended as a child.

The lyrics of the song proclaim that, in the midst of discomfort and duress, Jesus will one day come and take Christians off to heaven. Our earthly poverty will be supplanted with a heavenly abundance and joy. As believers dwell, eternally, in a mansion built by Jesus, there will no more lack or discouragement.

Many of the struggling families in my church took comfort in that song and truly longed for the day they could escape their earthly struggles. They didn’t feel like they had a great life in the dirt and mire of creation, so they longed to go to another place.

This beloved song was based on the King James rendering of John 14:2-3. The text reads as follows:

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. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

Over the years, many have read this passage with the

understanding that Christianity's goal is to evacuate "sinful creation" and dwell in the heavenly realms. That is certainly how Stamphill, along with families attending my church, read this passage.

Yet, is this what the Bible is truly declaring? Is Jesus really preparing "mansions" on the other side of glory for us to dwell in?

I could see where some would interpret John 14:2-3 this way, particularly when they're struggling with the difficulties of life (or attached to the King James Version of the Bible). Nevertheless, a more thorough engagement with the text provides a starkly different understanding. In the literal rendering of the New American Standard, the following is declared:

"In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:2-3).

Here we find no mention of "mansions" or "heaven." The text is concerned with something else. Jesus reveals that, through His imminent death and resurrection, He's instituting a "new tabernacle" or "place of dwelling" for His beloved followers.

In the broader context of John 14-16, Jesus declares what will soon transpire on Calvary. He wants His followers to understand that—through the Spirit—He has been in union with the Father ("dwelling" with Him). As He's leaving, it is important to clarify that they will also be able to make their "abode" with God. Jesus affirms,

"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him'" (John 14:23, NASB).

It's interesting, but the word for "abode" in verse 23 is the same word used for "mansion" (KJV) or "dwelling place" (NASB) in verse 2. They are actually talking about the same reality.

When Jesus declares that He is "going to prepare a place," He isn't talking about heaven or some kind of rapture scenario. Rather, He is talking about a "union" that sincere believers can experience with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He's talking about an active connection that will be available through the precious work of the cross and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Rather than going away to enjoy this intimacy, He is telling us that genuine believers can actively abide with the Father here on earth. Jesus has made that available through His sacrificial act and the subsequent gift of the Holy Spirit. His "going" to the cross unlocked amazing realities for those who are faithful.

Many of the individuals I grew up with could never understand this, but we're able to have a "dwelling place" with Jesus right now, in the midst of our imperfect lives. In spite of our strained relationships and limited resources, we can still know what it means to truly have an "abode" with the Lord.

Stamphill was mistaken: You don't have to go "over the hilltop" to have a dwelling place with the Father. The opportunity to abide isn't rooted in your location, but in whether you have a genuine love for God. Though well-meaning, popular religion doesn't seem to understand that Jesus has truly prepared a place for you, right here on earth. {eoa}

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