

Dear Darryl,

Thank you for writing us at Christian Questions Radio. You asked us to harmonize 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 with Revelation 21:2. You wanted to know how it would be possible for the saints to come down from heaven (Revelation 21:2) when 1 Thessalonians 4:17 says that they would only be gathered as far as the earth's atmosphere.

"For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever." (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17)

Verse 16 denotes what happened at our Lord's return in 1874 to the saints who had been sleeping in death for centuries. They were awakened to receive new immortal spiritual bodies like that of our Lord's glorious body. Verse 17 goes on to say that future saints now living "will be caught up [changed at the moment of death] together with them [to be also like the saints who were already raised] in the clouds [often symbolic of trouble and persecution] to meet the Lord in the air [earth's atmosphere, not the heaven of heavens]." We believe that these scriptures refer to the harvest of the Gospel Age, a time preceding our Lord's setting up of His kingdom on earth. Even though persecution has not been the experience of all the saints either before our Lord's second presence or after, there are scriptures pertaining to the closing days that indicate that the very last members of the Church may suffer persecution and violence before they die. For example, their experience would be comparable to that of Elijah who was caught up in a fiery chariot and accompanying whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). Since we believe the Church class is still being completed (as is the great multitude, also a heavenly class), the marriage of the Lamb cannot have occurred. (See Revelation 19.) Therefore, we conclude that the risen saints are not yet with our Heavenly Father in the highest realm of heaven, where Jesus was seated after He ascended to heaven. We believe that the risen saints are with our Lord Jesus in the lower areas of heaven tearing down this present evil system so that Christ's earthly kingdom can be set up.

However, in Revelation 21:2, the time frame has moved forward to the actual setting up of the earthly Kingdom. The Church is now complete, the marriage has taken place in the highest realm of heaven where God abides, and all people on earth are aware of a change in government from man's control to Jesus and His Church's control.

"I saw the Holy City [the government of God], the New Jerusalem [the completed Church in glory and Kingdom power, now united in marriage to the Lamb], coming down out of heaven from God [coming down from the highest place in heaven as they get their directive to rule], prepared as a bride [all the saints are counted as one collectively] beautifully dressed [resplendent for her husband Jesus]." (Revelation 21:2)

This verse pertains to the inauguration of the reign of Christ. “Coming down from heaven” signifies that the New Jerusalem is of divine origin.

Are the risen saints in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 being gathered only as far as the earth’s atmosphere? Perhaps they may be in this realm or some other heavenly realm. We are not dogmatic on this issue. However, these same saints in Revelation 21:2 (the New Jerusalem) now descend from the highest echelon of heaven since that is where their marriage to the Lamb took place.

We hope we have answered your question. Be sure to sign up for CQ Rewind at www.christianquestions.net. The service is free without obligation and will provide you with scriptural perspective on many questions and topics.

Sincerely,

Christian Questions Radio