



Sermon, September 18, 2016
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The Prayer that Changes Us: “Who Art in Heaven”

Matthew 6:9-13 (*Amplified Bible*)

9 Pray, therefore, like this: Our Father Who is in heaven, hallowed (kept holy) be Your name.

10 Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

11 Give us this day our daily bread.

12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven (left, remitted, and let go of the debts, and have given up resentment against) our debtors.

13 And lead (bring) us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. *For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*

What is Heaven?

Heaven is often the source of a lot of good jokes, usually in regard to getting into it. Take the following:

Three buddies die in a car crash, and they go to heaven to an orientation.

They are all asked, "When you are in your casket and friends and family are mourning upon you, what would you like to hear them say about you? The first guy says, "I would like to hear them say that I was a great doctor of my time, and a great family man."

The second guy says, "I would like to hear that I was a wonderful husband and school teacher which made a huge difference in our children of tomorrow."

The last guy replies, "I would like to hear them say, "Look! He's moving!"

Recently a teacher, a garbage collector, and a lawyer wound up together at the Pearly Gates. Feeling a little selective that day, St. Peter informed them that in order to get into Heaven, they would each have to answer one question.

St. Peter addressed the teacher and asked, "What was the name of the ship that crashed into the iceberg? They just made a movie about it."

The teacher answered quickly, "That would be the Titanic." St. Peter let her through the gate.

St. Peter turned to the garbage man and, figuring Heaven didn't *really* need all the odors that this guy would bring with him, decided to make the question a little harder: "How many people died on the ship?"

Fortunately for him, the trash man had just seen the movie. "1,228," he answered.

"That's right! You may enter."

St. Peter turned to the lawyer. "Name them."

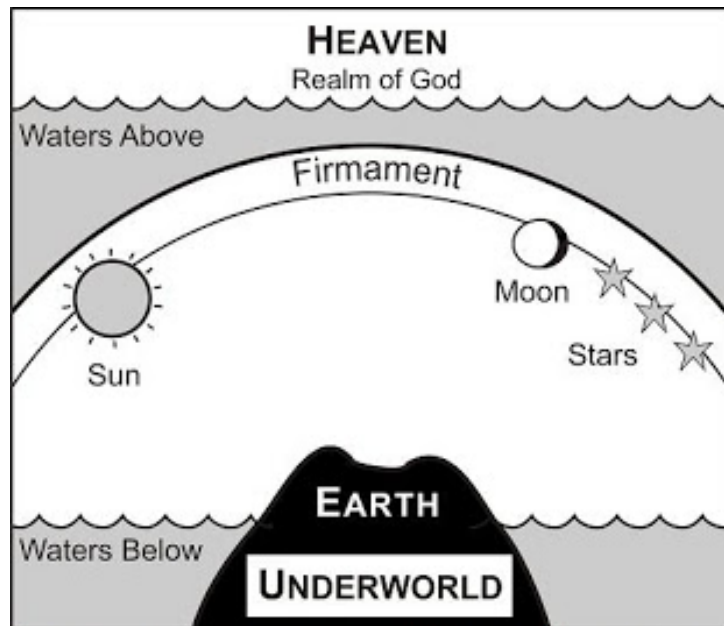
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Heaven. We "wish to high heaven," we say "for heaven's sake," and we all hope to go there after death. So, today, let's explore what Jesus might mean when he refers to heaven in his own teachings found in the Bible. And what he says might surprise you. But first, let's look at how the ancient world thought about heaven.

Ancient Worldview of two bowls -

1. *Heaven as a particular place*

In the early Semitic worldview, which was also shared by many other ancient cultures, all reality consisted of a split universe, much like two bowls placed on top of each other, with the top bowl separating the waters of the heavens from the earth below, which was flat, and the lower bowl containing the underworld, a shadowy realm called Sheol. The sky that we normally look at was like the inside of the bowl, and contained the stars, the sun and the moon. Rain was the water that was



"The 3-Tier Universe" - The regional geography led ancient Near Eastern people to the reasonable conclusion that the earth was encircled by a sea. Journeys in any direction eventually led to a body of water: the Mediterranean Sea is west, Black and Caspian Seas north, Persian Gulf east, and Arabian and Red Seas south.

let through the firmament of the sky. Above this firmament was the dwelling place of the sky deities. The deities of death, most notably Mot, dwelt in Sheol. When persons died, a shadowy remnant descended to this lower realm of the dead. (It must not be confused with Hell. Hell is a much later development.)

When Moses began to teach the Israelites about God, he was referring to the God who was one of the sky gods, and he taught them that the LORD (YHWH) was in fact the ONLY God. But in the conceptual universe of the time, God was thought to reside on this top bowl of the heavenly

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firmament, called *shemayim* in Hebrew. (*Shemayim* is plural, actually, which is where we get the translation "heavens," from, as in Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.") This developed into the idea that "heaven" was a particular place, that could be located, although it was out of reach of humans.

2. *Heaven as a realm of influence*

Around 4 - 500 years before the time of Christ, some people began to conceive of heaven not so much as a particular locatable place but as a realm of influence or a realm that provided a model for this world. It is often phrased as a formula: "As it is above, so it is below." In the prayer of Jesus it is echoed as "On earth as it is in heaven."

Jesus' parables and teaching

3. *At hand or within?*

When we turn to the Gospels to find out what Jesus says about heaven, we find something surprising. All of the references Jesus makes are either to his "Father in heaven" or to the "kingdom of heaven." For instance, when he begins his ministry, following his 40 day sojourn fasting in the wilderness, he travels around saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of **heaven** has come near (or is at hand)." "Come near. Is at hand." Usually, the Greek word translated as "come near," ἤγγικεν, refers to physical proximity. But in the Gospels, this word is used more existentially than spatially and reflects the approaching fulfillment of God's reign.

But elsewhere, in Luke 17:20-21, we find this: "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is *within* you."

Is it within us or is it at hand? This tension between "at-handness" and "withinness" gives rise to the need for parables. We find Jesus saying things like:

- The kingdom of **heaven** may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field;

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- The kingdom of **heaven** is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field;
- The kingdom of **heaven** is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.
- The kingdom of **heaven** is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.
- Again, the kingdom of **heaven** is like a merchant in search of fine pearls.
- The kingdom of **heaven** is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind;
- Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of **heaven** is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.

Question: *What do these parables suggest about the nature of "heaven?"*

A few observations: Seeds are planted within, but can also grow large providing shelter for many birds (suggesting a broad sphere of influence); yeast leavening the whole loaf (either within or near - referring to influencing the world around one); pearls denoting an inner attitude of discerning what is of great worth, a net with different fish again denoting a process of sorting and discernment; a householder bringing out the old and the new denoting again a process of discernment and choosing.

So what is it? Is heaven within us, or is it at hand? In trying to figure out puzzles such as this, I usually favor a "both/and" approach, rather than an either/or approach. Heaven is both at hand (or coming near) and within us. Think of it this way: **heaven is that realm or state of being in which God is active.** All of these parables can be read as indicating how God acts within the world: both within us, within our hearts and minds, and out in the world - often acting through us. Both/and. In other words, wherever God is present and active, *that* is heaven.

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Heaven as a realm where God is active

(Visual image: string threaded throughout the congregation)

I am going to pass this ball of string throughout the congregation. I invite you to unroll it as it comes to you and grab hold of a section of it. This string represents the active presence of God in the world. Jesus comes to us and says, "The kingdom of God is at hand! Grab hold of God! Dwell in God! Let God dwell in you! The kingdom of God is within!"

And with heaven within us, our task is to get heaven out into the world. Heaven is not someplace far away, requiring a warp drive engine to get to it, nor is it a long distance call away. But if heaven is within us, then the One who dwells in heaven is there also. We don't do this alone. Where God is, there is Heaven.