

Hot topic: Heaven

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Introduction

Is heaven real? It certainly is. The Bible mentions heaven 459 in the OT, and 273 in the NT.

So why is it a hot topic? There's actually a mismatch between how our culture thinks about heaven and how the word is used in Scripture. That creates serious problems: instead of understanding what Scripture is telling us, we impose our existing understanding on Scripture.

When we hear the word *heaven*, we tend to think of "where we go when we die." Scripture hardly ever uses the word that way. Of the 732 times the word appears in Scripture, it never means the place of the dead. If you don't understand this, you will be very confused.

Let's take an example. The Bible says that King David did NOT go to heaven when he died.

Acts 2³⁴ For **David did not ascend to heaven**, and yet he said, "The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand³⁵ until I make your enemies your footstool.'" "

So, if David didn't go to heaven, he must have gone to hell? No: wrong conclusion. This way of thinking is quite recent in church history: only the last 600 years or so. Before that, Christians understood what Peter was saying: that King David died and was buried. They understood he was in the ground, awaiting resurrection. That's exactly the point that Peter made just 4 verses earlier:

Acts 2²⁹ "Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day.

What Peter is saying is that only Jesus has been resurrected. For the rest of humanity, the resurrection is still a future hope. As Paul says in 1 Cor 15, it's a crucial hope, but **we don't have our resurrection bodies yet**: only Jesus does. Jesus died, and was buried. On the third day he rose from the dead. Forty days later, he ascended into heaven (Acts 1:11). Jesus alone lives in God's space, ruling the earth, bringing all opposition to him into submission. No other human is in heaven.

In Biblical cosmology, heaven = God's space, where God rules the cosmos. It is not a place where humans go. Therefore, to "ascend to heaven" would mean to try to rule as God rules. That's a really evil idea, like a control freak who wants to take over God's position and rule the world in his place.

Isaiah condemned the King of Babylon for exactly that thought:

Isaiah 14¹³ You said in your heart, '**I will ascend to heaven**; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north;¹⁴ I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.'¹⁵ But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit.

So, we need to look in more detail at how Scripture does use the word 'heaven.'

Heaven in Scripture

There are three main meanings in Scripture for the word heaven:

- a) **Sky**: God created the heavens (Gen 1:1). Scripture therefore speaks of the birds of the heavens (Gen 1:30) and the stars of the heaven (Gen 15:5).
- b) **God's space**: where God rules the cosmos. Heaven and earth are interrelated: earth is our space (where we live); heaven is God's space (where he rules).
- c) **Metonymy for God**: The word *heaven* can stand for God himself. For example, if someone says, "You'll have to ask Canberra" they are not thinking of the city but of the government it

represents. In the same way, Heaven often refers to God's rule—that Heaven (God) was meant to rule over earth (us).

Those core meanings cover what Scripture means by heaven. In many cases, heaven and earth go together. In fact, that's true of more than a quarter of the 732 verses that mention heaven mention earth as well. This is true of both the meanings above:

- a) "The heavens and the earth" = the entire created world, sky and land, all creation.
- b) Heaven (as God's space) is meant to be in harmony with earth (our space), for earth should be under Heaven's rule.

The problem is that earth has rebelled against Heaven's rule. How Heaven solves the problem and is reconciled with earth—that's what the narrative of Scripture is all about.

The story starts with Genesis where earth rebels against heaven's rule, and it winds all the way to Revelation where the God and humans are finally married and enjoy life together in the new heaven and the new earth. It's not that humans have finally floated off to heaven, but that earth has come back under God's administration again.

When earth rebelled against heaven, the way into God's presence was lost (Gen 3:22-24). The Tower of Babel was an attempt to take over heaven's administration of earth from God (Gen 11:4; compare Dan 4:11). So, God chose Abraham's family to restore the blessing of his presence to the earth. As Jacob fleeing for his life, God showed him a dream of a ladder between heaven and earth. He needed to know that the Promised Land was the place where God would reconnect heaven and earth.

At Sinai, God spoke his law to Israel, making them the nation that lives under heaven's rule (Dt 4:36, 39). God asked them to build a dedicated tent (tabernacle) where God would live among them—a space on earth filled with glory of God (Ex 40:34).

In the Promised Land, Solomon built a magnificent temple where God would be present. Of course, nothing on earth can contain God, as Solomon acknowledged in his prayer of dedication:

1 Kings 8 ²⁷ But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!

Nevertheless, the temple was the place where heaven and earth touched, where even foreigners could know God (1 Kings 8:43), where God's glory would be known on earth (Psa 57:5,11; 108:5; Hab 2:14).

The prophets promised God would create new heavens and new earth (Isa 65:17) where evil and decay are gone. Instead of rebellion, earth will accept heaven's rule:

Isaiah 66 ¹ Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool ..."

All this starts to come together in the person of Jesus. In the beginning he was with God, in God's space (Jn 1:2). In him, the glorious presence of heaven was known on earth (Jn 1:14, 32). As in Jacob's dream where the Promised Land was like a ladder between heaven and earth, Jesus is the one who joins opens heaven and re-joins it with earth (Jn 1:51; 3:13). If the temple was the place where the presence of heaven was known on earth, Jesus' body was literally that temple—where the presence of heaven is known on earth, where earth and heaven would be re-joined through his death and resurrection (Jn 2:19-22). He is the bread of heaven who restores life to the earth (Jn 6:33-58).

At the cross, Jesus dealt with human rebellion. God raised him from the dead, exalting him as Lord of heaven and earth (Col 1:15-23). We are citizens of his reign (Col 1:13). That doesn't mean we're going to heaven: it means that the hope for earth is heaven's reign (Col 1:5).

And that's the point: Jesus dealt with our rebellion against God. He removed the gulf between heaven and earth, reconciling us with God. He made atonement—made heaven and earth "at one." This is the good news! Once again, as in the beginning, Heaven and Earth are reconciled: earth can enjoy heaven's rule.

And that's precisely what we are to portray! It's not that we are waiting to go to heaven, but that we are ruled by heaven, and looking forward to the return of our heavenly ruler:

Philippians 3 ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

How did we get this wrong?

I suspect we created our misunderstanding about heaven by thinking like this:

- a) God is in heaven.
- b) The Christian dead are with God.
- c) Therefore, the Christian dead are in heaven.

Evaluation:

(a) is true. That's how the word "heaven" is used in Scripture: heaven is primarily used to mean God's space (in contradistinction to earth which is our space).

(b) is a misunderstanding: the Biblical picture is more involved, and less dualistic. The dead are certainly in the care of God, but we are not told of their current state.

Consequently, (c) is false.

So, is there life after death? Will we see God? Resoundingly YES!

There are other words the Bible uses for our hope (just not "heaven"). Graham will provide more on this, but first we need to understand how the word heaven is used in Scripture. This is really important: otherwise we impose our misunderstanding on Scripture.

Conclusion

In Scripture, heaven sometimes means the sky, and sometimes means God's space. Heaven was meant to rule earth. When the rebellion is over, heaven and earth are completely restored in harmony.

That's how heaven is used in Scripture.