

Where is Heaven?

by Lynn Andrew

When speaking of a person who has passed from this world to the next, a common thing to say is that so-and-so is now "in heaven." Or more likely we would say that this person is "with the Lord." The expressions are almost interchangeable. Except when speaking to a child when ten-to-one the former will be used because it is an easier concept: "with the Lord" is ambiguous if taken at face value.

Why do we prefer the ambiguity? Obviously because we have never experienced "being in heaven," but we do have experiential knowledge that gives meaning to "with the Lord." What is the experience of being with the indwelling Spirit if not an experience of being with the Lord? Or is it only "God with us?" and not "us with God"? In other words, are we almost completely blind to the reality of who is with us?

Suppose that in our "walk" with Jesus in this life here on earth we had the blinders taken off so we could see with perfect spiritual perception. What would be the difference between that and being in heaven? Of course the difference has to do with the flesh: the carnal nature that undergoes corruption, fails, and dies. So we might answer the question "where is heaven" by saying, "It's not *where* but *when*: when the flesh is no longer our abode." Or to use Jesus' colorful rabbinical expression, "where the vultures are"—when the flesh has been abandoned.

This mixing of where and when is significant. Physicists know about that: space is four-dimensional, and time is one of the dimensions. Without time as we know time there is no place as we know place, and without matter there is neither. So when we abandon the material body and retreat to our spiritual one, we are released from this universe. Heaven is "up there" only in a figurative sense unless you imagine it existing on planets within this physical universe as some pagans do—and then you are back in a fleshly body.

The very practical implication is that in our experienced relationship

with Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and through him the Father and the fullness of God, we are while still on earth in heaven as well. Since heaven is not a separate place within this universe, and since time in heaven is not bound by the time of this universe, there is no necessity that living on earth must separate us from heaven. Although heaven is not here and now, for us who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the here-and-now is infused with heaven. The treasure we lay up for ourselves in heaven can even be experienced here and now because it is something that time and space cannot corrupt.

C. S. Lewis had this or something similar in mind when he wrote the story that came to have the unfortunate title *The Great Divorce*. Near the end of the book he puts into George MacDonald's mouth these famous words:

"... The good man's past begins to change so that his forgiven sins and remembered sorrows take on the quality of Heaven: the bad man's past already conforms to his badness and is filled only with dreariness. And that is why... the Blessed will say 'We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven,' and the Lost, 'We were always in Hell.' And both will speak truly."

Yet the Bible is filled with references to heaven as a place separate from the world. The word means simply sky or what is above the earth, but it is understood as a metaphor for a place loftier than the sky: "high and lifted up." For those who prefer to think literally, the apostle Paul distinguishes it as the third heaven, beyond the two we can see. As the sky is above, in the upward direction, so is heaven. Witnesses saw Jesus ascending, rising upward and into the clouds. Naturally when he returns to usher his own to heaven in the Rapture, the event has him coming in the clouds. That these are not to be taken too literally is obvious.

What is literally true is the independence of heaven. We say it existed before the physical universe came into being, which is true as a metaphor, but to get it literally right we have to remember that time as we know it is a created thing too. So heaven, the abode of God, does not depend on the physical universe—or at least it need not have depended

on it. But the incarnation of God appears to have linked heaven and earth such that we can say with some meaning, "so it was from the beginning." However we must not become too possessive in our thinking: even though the written word of God exists by which we have been told many things, we must not presume that it is possible for us to know much about that third heaven. Anyone who has been there as Paul was would have very little that he could tell about it.

What logic and all the information in Scripture points to is that the world, the physical universe in which we seem to primarily live, is relatively insubstantial. We might liken it to a masterful painting which is a simple, flat, lifeless thing relative to the painter and his studio. Taking that analogy a step further, the painting that sits on an easel within the artist's studio is located right in heaven. It may be that the devil thinks he has a claim on it, but he has not been allowed to take it off the easel and away from the studio. The Artist likes this particular painting very much and has in every sense put himself into it.

So where is heaven? It is "up there" and "out there," yet we are in the middle of it. The painting-on-the easel analogy is too simplistic to take us any further, and there are better analogies for longer essays, but it suffices to show that the separation between earth and heaven is not one of physical distance. There is nothing to prevent us from a real experience of heaven in the "here and now."

But here and now we have pain and conflict and longings and decay and death, to pick a few from a very long list. These are the things we live with. It is hard to argue with someone who sees more damnable influences than heavenly ones. In fact all has not been well in heaven either; some of the angels are in rebellion, and the battlefield extends across that link to earth. There is a war going on, and we are caught up in it. So the discomforts and the casualties of war with which we are surrounded cannot be taken as proof that heaven is not with us.

If the Bible says anything at all, it says that the war will end and the Kingdom of Heaven will come to earth. Those of Jesus' followers who received him when he presented himself as King are quoted by Luke as

saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (Luke 19:38) They knew that peace on earth depended on the war in heaven coming to an end.

The war will pause, at least, when Satan is bound during the Millennial reign of Christ. Then "I will pour out my Spirit," says the Lord (Isaiah 44:3, Joel 2:28, Zechariah 12:10), and earth will be much more like what we think heaven should be like. Thus it turns out that the answer to the question "where is heaven?" that we have answered by reasoning that it is not distant from or incompatible with earth, is what makes possible the Kingdom of heaven on earth.

But earth is still not heaven as heaven is heaven even while the government is on the shoulders of Jesus Christ enthroned in Jerusalem because this universe was not designed to go on forever. Though man with healthy genes and environment may live a thousand years on earth, we still need another form of existence if there is to be no finality. And there is no guarantee even of longer lifespans than what is currently normal. But we know of another kind of material body that is also heavenly, which Jesus demonstrated between his resurrection and ascension. No doubt that was a preview of things to come when he will rule on earth for something like a thousand years, and those of us who have been called out of the world to be sanctified and resurrected or Raptured to join him will be the army of administrators he needs to govern the earth. It will be heaven for us to be serving the Lord in incorruptible bodies and souls.

Now back to today and our struggles with unhappy attitudes and outlooks when we yearn for heaven because we think we do not yet have it. It is one thing to have our sight set on the victory; it is another thing to fail to appreciate our assignments and duties in the present battle. The two do not necessarily go hand in hand. We must realize that the Lord is with us here and now, and by faith take whatever we find before us as a good thing as seen from the vantage point of heaven.

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