3 How we should understand heaven

1. Introduction

a. The biblical foundations for the house of prayer are like an iceberg, where there is a much greater proportion of the iceberg under the water than the visible part above the waterline. The hidden and foundational parts will help us make more sense of the parts we can see – why we do things the way we do in the house of prayer.

b. As we pray for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done "on earth as in heaven" it follows that we should seek to understand more of what we are asking for. How is God's will and God's kingdom manifested and how does it operate in heaven? How is it expressed? Who is involved? Will it look the same when applied on earth? What impact will it have? What is the relationship between heaven and earth?

c. We are looking at heaven in the context of three questions:

   i **WHY?** Why is heaven important and why must it be the starting point for considering unceasing ministry to the Lord?

   ii **HOW?** How should we view or understand heaven from what the bible tells us?

   iii **WHAT?** What does the Bible have to say on the subject of heaven and what conclusions can we draw from that revelation?

d. The centrality of God in heaven means that he is the main focus of everything that happens there. Everything points towards him, all worship is directed to him. As the occupants of heaven behold his glory their response is worship. Similarly, as we behold the Lord our hearts are tenderised towards him and we begin to respond in the same way. And once our focus is on God, we are more likely to approach him on his terms and address him rather than our problems.

Colossians 3:1-2 *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. [2] Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.*

2 Corinthians 3:18 *And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

e. We must gain a solid, biblical understanding of heaven so that we can apply its principles to our earthly activities. Otherwise our ideas concerning heaven may remain vague, and earth-bound and ultimately, inconsequential or meaningless. How should we understand and interpret what the bible has to say about heaven?

2. How we should view heaven

a. The first step is to familiarise ourselves with those passages of scripture that address the subject of heaven. Unfamiliarity will prevent us from connecting with heaven. Revelation 4 and 5 illustrate some of the functional aspects of heaven. But what we see there is far removed from anything we have encountered here on earth, and many people find it difficult to connect in any meaningful way with these realities, they are so alien to us.

i There are also many passages that give us a revelation of the nature of heaven. For instance, Jesus prefixed much of his teaching through parables with "…the Kingdom of heaven is like…" He was giving us a revelation of how heaven operates, giving us some illustrations that are intended to de-mystify what heaven is like.

Luke 8:10 *Jesus said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of Heaven, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'"*

b. But when we have become familiar with what the bible says about heaven, how should we view this information? How should we interpret it so that we can live in the good of it? We need to know there is something that is hindering us from embracing the realities of heaven.

c. Being raised in the culture of the Western world in the post-war period, we are conditioned to view the world through an interpretive lens that we are almost certainly not aware of when we read passages of scripture about heaven. It can powerfully affect the way we understand and interpret those scriptures.

d. It is rooted in Greek philosophy, and for us it is a subtle cocktail of this Greek philosophical influence combined with secular humanism and the post-modern cultural trends that have largely shaped our 21st century way of thinking, our worldview and the way society functions as a whole.

e. It began with Socrates in the 4th century BC, and later developed and refined by Plato in Athens. Though much more complex, the cornerstone of Plato's teaching in our context is a strong distinction between two levels of reality:

   i First, everything that could be experienced by the human senses – so things that could be seen, heard, touched, tasted or smelt he called the **perceptual realm**.

   ii Anything beyond the scope of human senses he called the **intelligible realm**. It referred to anything that was unseen but that has an impact upon us.

   iii According to Plato anything outside of the perceptual realm that can be experienced by human senses dwells in a realm that is ethereal (extremely light and airy), immaterial (having no body or form), and insubstantial (lacking real substance).

   iv So because heaven couldn't be experienced by human senses it lacked solidity and was therefore removed from the realm of physical reality. Thus heaven could only be understood in terms of its spiritual nature – it was unknowable, unreachable and therefore irrelevant.

f. This division of reality into two realms was then adopted by Aristotle. One of his students was a young man called Alexander who quickly embraced this teaching. Later as he led the advance of the Greek Empire he founded cities that acted as bastions of this Greek culture, thus paving the way for the spread of these Greek philosophical concepts to most of the known world.

g. One of those cities was Alexandria, which became a great cultural centre for the exchange of ideas. At the turn of the 3rd century AD in this melting-pot was a man called Origen. He took the fundamental concepts of Plato's teaching and re-interpreted biblical understanding using those concepts. He would secure his enormous influence on history through a theologically

disastrous fusing of Platonist philosophy and Christianity, shaping the way most people think about heaven.

h. Origen took Greek philosophical ideas and makes a switch, defining heaven by those ideas, thus changing the biblical concept of heaven to that of Plato. This switch became the norm in church teaching and continues to affect the way the Western church views heaven today.

Ezekiel 40:1-4 *In the twenty-fifth year of our exile, at the beginning of the year, on the tenth day of the month, in the fourteenth year after the city was struck down, on that very day, the hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me to the city. [2] In visions of God he brought me to the land of Israel, and set me down on a very high mountain, on which was a structure like a city to the south. [3] When he brought me there, behold, there was a man whose appearance was like bronze, with a linen cord and a measuring reed in his hand. And he was standing in the gateway. [4] And the man said to me, "Son of man, look with your eyes, and hear with your ears, and set your heart upon all that I shall show you, for you were brought here in order that I might show it to you. Declare all that you see to the house of Israel."*

i. Now here is how Origen interpreted this and similar scriptures:

   i *"And as in a dream we fancy that we hear, and that the organs of hearing are actually impressed, and that we see with our eyes—although neither the bodily organs of sight nor hearing are affected, but it is the mind alone which has these sensations—so there is no absurdity in believing that similar things occurred to the prophets, when it is recorded that they witnessed occurrences of a rather wonderful kind, as when they either heard the words of the Lord or beheld the heavens opened. For I do not suppose that the visible heaven was actually opened, and its physical structure divided, in order that Ezekiel might be able to record such an occurrence. Should not, therefore, the same be believed of the Saviour by every intelligent hearer of the Gospels?".*

j. Although there is absolutely no justification for it exegetically, Origen arrives at the conclusion that both the prophets of old and Jesus Himself were not actually encountering anything real in their experiences of heavenly things. Instead they merely received communication similar to a waking dream for their benefit and for those who would hear them. And so heaven, and all things connected with heavenly activity, only occur as an impression in the mind and bear no relationship to anything physical or substantial. In other words, it's all in the mind.

k. The conclusion this leads to is that "heaven" is merely a spiritual reality, having no form or substance, detached from relevance to our existence on earth that we have no means of accessing because it only exists in the spirit realm. Therefore, heaven to most people becomes downgraded to an unattainable conceptual unreality.

3. The "Great Switch" and its consequences

a. All this was happening at the time when the influence of Jewish leadership in the church was in decline and the Greco-Roman influence was in the ascendency. There were just not enough Jewish leaders in the church raising their hands and saying "That's not what heaven means according to the scriptures!" By now the world had transitioned into the Roman world which was predominantly Greek in its foundation.

   i Thus the glorious heaven of the Bible, the true abode of the living God, was exchanged in Christian tradition for a modified version of the intelligible realm of Platonic philosophy.

ii This throws into sharp contrast the difference between a Greek mindset and a Hebrew mindset. There are many differences between Geek and Hebraic mindsets, which is why Paul says this:

Romans 12:2 *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

b. We are in a battle for the mind and for the way we think – we have to learn to think the way God thinks. The bible is written from a Hebraic way of thinking.

i **Greek** thinking: based on logic and intellect; linear, step-by-step logic leads to conclusion

ii **Hebraic** thinking: centres on senses and experience of reality; circular and block logic – allows parallel arguments so conclusion not mandatory; powered by wonder and amazement

c. For many Christians today heaven is perceived as a vague "realm" that remains distant, ethereal, and uninvolved relationally with our world. Heaven itself, its inhabitants and their activity are disconnected from our everyday thinking and experience. Here's the danger: If heaven is seen in terms of being vague, disconnected and irrelevant, so is the God who inhabits the heavens. If the heavens lose their immediacy so does everything connected to them because heaven is intrinsically connected inseparably to the great God of heaven, it is where his power and authority is most fully displayed.

i So anything that causes us to see heaven in any way that is diminished from its glorious reality, and thus detracts from the power and authority of the one on the throne must be rejected and resisted with every fibre of our being. And we need to be aware of the subtle way that these unbiblical thoughts can begin to shape the way we live as Christians and how this all feeds into how we function in the house of prayer.

4. Remote, ethereal, irrelevant

a. The first misconception: heaven is remote. This is the inevitable outcome of an artificial division between material and spiritual (seen and unseen). Consequently, only what is perceptible to human senses becomes authoritative and absolute. But that is not how the bible presents the proximity of heaven to us. Far from being remote the bible says it is very near:

Matthew 3:2 *In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, [2] "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*

Matthew 4:17 *From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*

Isaiah 30:21 *And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left.*

Luke 17:21 *… for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.*

Hebrews 4:14,16 *Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. [16] Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

b. Scripture categorically presents heavenly things in the most tangible, vivid terms. What we know is clear: heaven is filled with real sights, real sounds, real creatures and real objects. Angels say things, hold objects in their hands, interact with people, fly from place to place, and reside in a place with real dimensions. In the practical sense heaven possesses physicality, the furthest thing from ethereality.

   i Although we are not able to see these things right now, they are all very much able to be seen because they have a distinct form and substance that has been described in scripture that doesn't change from one moment to the next as though they were some sort of heavenly hologram.

   ii In the Bible "invisible" does not mean "immaterial."

Isaiah 6:1-7 *In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. [2] Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. [3] And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" [4] And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. [5] And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" [6] Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. [7] And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."*

c. In v6 we see one of the Seraphim flying towards Isaiah carrying a live coal that he had taken with tongs from the fire on the altar. Why did he use tongs to take the coal from the fire? Because it was too hot to hold, he would be burned by it. So even a Seraphim, one of the highest order of heavenly beings was able to be affected by heavenly fire.

d. Physicality set as opposite to spirituality is a philosophical distinction, not a biblical one. When God created Adam he was formed of the dust of the ground. But he didn't become a living being until God breathed his spirit into him. That is how we are to understand the relationship between physical and spiritual – we are physical and spiritual beings as one entity. Spiritual, in the biblical sense, simply means something that is divinely authored or that is invisible to human sight – while it may not be able to be seen by us, it doesn't mean that it can't be seen at all.

e. If heaven is viewed as being remote and insubstantial it will be dismissed as being irrelevant. Even in the church, the dwelling place of God rarely receives any kind of prolonged attention. Instead of focusing our attention with awe and wonder on the wonders of the throne room we are content to lower our gaze and shift our focus to lesser things. And so our neglect and lack of zeal to pursue revelation and understanding of heavenly things betrays just how inconsequential we view that place to be.

5. Enlightenment and beyond

a. Following the Reformation, in the 17th/18th Century came the Age of Enlightenment. This was a time when much of the philosophical thinking of the ancient Greeks was embraced and developed and extended, and in many ways was a turning point where the influence of the church, and more specifically the authority of scripture was being questioned more and more

in the light of human progress. And out of all this have come further ideologies such as humanism and communism – they all have their roots in the Enlightenment.

b. This led in the 29th Century to the development of natural philosophy. Science and scientific knowledge increased exponentially, and the fabric of biblical relevance decreased further. A whole raft of scientific "explanations" have become universally accepted by both the scientific community and society as a whole, and thus forms the basis of the secular humanistic worldview that undergirds the way most people live today.

c. In trying to understand the nature of the universe and the earth and who we are as the human race, instead of receiving the wisdom of God as revealed in the scriptures, mankind has instead turned to trying to reason it out for ourselves using our own intellect. The way that science explains all of these things today does so without reference to God. This has an immense impact on our consideration of heaven – it just doesn't fit into the modern way of thinking, and so if it even enters into our thinking at all, because it can't be explained in any way scientifically, it is either rejected totally, or at best viewed in the same way as fairy-tales and fantasies.

6. Conclusion

a. The bible tells us that heaven is as real as the ground we stand on, but it's because of sin that it's no longer joined in any physical way to the earth. But as the writer of Hebrews reminds us, we have a Great High Priest who has opened up a new and living way, and we now have unlimited, unhindered access to heaven. We need a greater hunger to explore the realities of heaven in greater measure because many scriptures make no sense if they are not grounded in a biblical understanding of heaven.

b. Without a thorough biblical grasp of heaven and its reality for us as believers, we will live out our faith in a very earth-bound way. A biblical grasp of heaven will give us an eternal perspective that is both motivational and powerful, because it will keep us moving forward with a momentum that is unstoppable.

c. A biblical understanding and application of what the scriptures teach us about heaven will bring us back to gaining a greater insight into what we have been called to in the House of Prayer. Because the House of Prayer is not about a way of doing things, but it's about a partnership with the God of heaven in answer to the call to see his will being done and his kingdom coming to earth as it is in heaven.

Isaiah 66:1 *Thus says the LORD: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?*