

ASCENSION OF OUR LORD | MAY 16, 2021

ACTS 1:1-11 | PSALM 47 | EPHESIANS 1:15-23 | LUKE 24:44-53

If you go on Amazon and look up the most popular books about Christian theology, you find quite an eclectic mix. A book on forgiveness. A book by C.S. Lewis. Something called *Mama Bear Apologetics*.¹ But mostly what you find are a whole bunch of books on heaven.

People have all sorts of ideas about heaven. Our pop culture is flooded with images of it, most of which look an awful lot alike. Whether you're looking at paintings in a museum or watching the season five finale of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, heaven means St. Peter, clouds, and gates.

And underneath all those relatively pedestrian images is a more serious set of assumptions. Our language about heaven is almost always about two things. The first is that heaven is about me. And if not me, then people I like. The second is that heaven is about something that happens in the future. So a typical question would be something like, *Where do I go after I die?* It's about me. And it's about something in the future.

This is sort of interesting because when you read about heaven in the Bible you notice two things.² One is that it doesn't come up very often. Based on that Amazon bestseller list, you would think that there'd be stuff about heaven all over the place. But there's not as much as you'd think. Out of over eight hundred thousand words in our Bible, "heaven" gets seven hundred some mentions. Which sounds like a lot until you realize "bread" gets about four hundred, and nobody would mistake the Bible for a cookbook.

But the second thing you notice is a little more substantive. That when the authors of scripture talk about heaven, they're talking about something different from what we usually mean. They rarely talk about it as something about us. And they rarely talk about it as something that happens in the future. So how do they talk about heaven?

Well, if you start at the very beginning of the Bible, you make it all of one verse before you get your first reference to heaven. In the first creation story from Genesis, we're told that God created "the heavens and the earth." The earth is the place where people and plants and animals live. And heaven is the place where God lives. The people who wrote this text believed that the world was surrounded by a great big dome that kept our water. So when it rained, it was as if the doors of the dome were opened and the water came down. Humans lived under the dome, and God lived on top of it.

This works pretty well if you're living three millennia ago. It works less well for us now. After all, if you fire a rocket in the sky, it doesn't hit a dome and ricochet back down. It just keeps on going. And we know rain isn't from trapdoors opening in the sky. It comes from clouds.

It's easy to get hung up on all the places where those texts are obviously wrong. But the important idea in those texts isn't about where rain comes from, it's about what heaven is. And in those texts, heaven is not a place you go later. It is the place where God dwells right now.

And that's really the key if you want to understand this story from Luke. After rising from the dead and appearing to his disciples, Luke tells us that Jesus ascended into heaven. If you look at paintings of the ascension, they often show Jesus's feet dangling down from parted clouds. Where is Jesus going? If you read Luke's accounts, the answer is that he's going away. Why else would the disciples stand and stare at the sky.

¹ I'm guessing this is like Berenstain Bears for people who are mad about cancel culture.

² Paula Gooder, *Heaven* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011). St. Paul's Cathedral in London's YouTube channel also has some talks by her on this subject which are worthwhile.

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But remember how the Hebrew Bible talks about heaven. For Luke, heaven isn't "away." It's not something separate from earth. And it isn't something off in the future. Heaven is the place where God dwells. So when Jesus ascends into heaven, he's going to God.

Jesus takes us to the place where God is. And he doesn't simply go as a spirit or a soul or an essence. But he goes as a body. A body with a history. A body with scars. A body with a story. When Jesus ascends to heaven, he isn't going away from us. He's bringing us to the place where God is. As one second century writer put it, because Jesus has ascended to heaven, "we ascend through the Spirit to the Son, and through the Son to the Father."³ Jesus takes us with him. There's a reason why in some Orthodox traditions, the ascension is understood as an echo of Christmas. Christmas is the Son coming among us and taking on human life, and the ascension is Son bringing that human life back to the presence of God. So that even as we go about our daily lives, filled with trivialities and mundane happenings, we are always present to God through Christ.

Another way to think about this is by asking where God happens. If you believe the Amazon bestseller list, and I'd be careful believing some of that, the answer is God happens after you die. Once you die, then you can be present with God. But there are lots of other answers, too. Sometimes we say that God happens in particular places. Maybe you've had that experience when you go into the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and you get that overwhelming sense of God's presence. And then you go into a Duane Reade and it's a little less awe inspiring. Or sometimes we think that God happens in the past. In our memories. It's easy to imagine someone approaching the disciples and asking where Jesus is. And the answer would be, "Oh, man. You just missed him."

What all of those have in common is they suggest God is somewhere else. In this place. At this time. After this and that. But the ascension means that God is always happening. That we are always present to God through Christ. You don't have to go to some special place. You don't have to die. You don't have to live in some particular time. God always happens. And we are always present.

At first glance, the ascension appears to be a story about Jesus being absent. *Why do you stand looking up to heaven?* But it's actually a story about Jesus always being present with us. Because Jesus there with God interceding for us, there is no space, no time, no experience where Christ isn't present. As our reading from Ephesians puts it, Jesus has filled "all in all." You are as close to God in 2021 as you would have been during Jesus's life. You are as close to God in suburban New Jersey as you are in Jerusalem. You are as close to God in St. John the Divine as you are in Duane Reade. It might not feel that way, but it's true.

And that's exactly what we ask for whenever we pray that God's will be done "on earth as it is in heaven." Not that we would get to go someplace nice later. Not that we would escape from our world or our histories or our bodies or our lives. But that our world might be more like the dwelling place of God. That instead of looking away to search for God, God's power would fill all in all.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

³ I think this is in Irenaeus's *Against the Heresies*.