

Who Art in Heaven

This is the second of ten sermons on the Lord's Prayer

Matthew 6:9

Sunday, January 24, 2021, Aledo UMC

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Sermon Text, Matthew 6:9

⁹ (Jesus said unto them,) "After this manner therefore pray ye: 'Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.'"

Sermon, "Who Art in Heaven"

After we pray, "Our Father," we immediately add, "who art in heaven." With that, we turn our attention to glory, our final destination.

I think of one little boy who had heaven all figured out. He said, "I know what heaven is like, because I was there. God makes people when he thinks of them, and then they wait to be born."

A three-year-old girl named Morgan approached her Grandmother one day and asked, "Where's Grandpa?" Grandma replied, "He's in heaven." The little girl couldn't hide the surprise on her face and asked, "Still?"

Nine-year-old Heather was in Sunday school when her teacher explained that someday we would have glorified bodies. Heather asked, "Do you think we'll look like Barbie?"

Another little girl, four-year-old Jenny, asked her Dad, "Does heaven have a floor?" He replied, "Well, Jenny, what do you think heaven is like?" She looked up at the sky and clouds and replied, "Well, I can't see any floor, so I guess people are just up there on coat hangers!"¹

Three years ago, Dr. Billy Graham died at the age of 99. Several years before his passing, Dr. Graham said, "Someday you will read or hear that Billy Graham is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. I shall be more alive than I am now. I will just have changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God."²

When we pray, "Who art in heaven," we are confessing our belief in that otherworldly place. But what is heaven? And where is it? And what do we mean when we pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven"?

When we pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven," we're not just repeating a prayer from memory; we're making a confession of faith. But what are we confessing?

In short, we are confessing that heaven is real and that God lives there. The Bible speaks in very certain terms of the existence of heaven. However, there is no place in scripture where we are given a geographical location for heaven. In the cosmology of the First Century, heaven was up, someplace in the firmament. Four-year-old Jenny expressed that belief when she described heaven as a place with a lot of clothes hangers; let that encourage you the next time you do laundry!

Some people testify to having visited heaven; their stories of "near death experiences" have been made into movies or preserved in books. Colton Burpo was just three years old

¹http://www.skywriting.net/inspirational/humor/what_children_say_about_heaven.html

²<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/february-web-only/billy-graham-viral-quote-on-death-not-his-d-l-moody.html>

when he had a near-death experience and his brief journey to heaven which has been described in the book and movie, *Heaven Is for Real*.

Don Piper's *90 Minutes in Heaven* chronicles his own near-death experience in heaven in 1989.

Apparently, the Apostle Paul had his own near-death experience which he describes in 2 Corinthians 12.

So overwhelmed was he by the experience, that Paul writes about himself in the third person, saying:

² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man...⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.

I know that there are psychologists and skeptics who will tell you that there is no such place as heaven and that those who claim to have had a near-death experience which supposedly took them there were really experiencing some sort of end-of-life chemical reaction in their brains. But here's the thing: the Bible presents heaven as a place which can only be encountered by faith just as we only encounter God by faith. Just as God does not show God's face to us—except through Jesus Christ—God does not give us heaven's address so we could drive up to it and take pictures of it the way we might with Graceland.

Keep in mind: we are children of the Enlightenment. The legacy of the Enlightenment is privileging knowledge, reason, and science over mystery. Thanks to the legacy of the Enlightenment, we have come to believe that everything can be validated by science; that we can repeat an experiment in order to study it.

But the universe doesn't work that way; some things are a mystery and cannot be validated through human reason or scientific inquiry. Some things will forever remain a mystery. Heaven—like God—is a mystery and heaven—like God—will never be validated by scientific inquiry. But that doesn't mean that heaven—or God—do not exist. Heaven—like God—can only be grasped by faith, not by sight.

So what is heaven? In its simplest terms, it is the place where God lives. We confess that when we pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven." However, the Bible also makes it clear that heaven cannot contain God. In 1 Kings 8:27 we read, "The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain (God)."

Last week Diana Eggen read Psalm 139 which includes these pertinent words:

⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

So what is heaven? And where is it? By all indications, heaven is not of this world or even of this universe. Heaven belongs to another dimension entirely, one that is not of this world. And God exists in that eternal, otherworldly place. And it is a holy place, unscathed by the ravages of sin and evil. The theological word for that is *transcendence* which means that God is everything that we are not. God is "wholly other," perfectly holy and higher than humanity in every way. This view of God might cause us to approach God with great awe, reverence and even fear.

However, to say that God is lofty and transcendent doesn't capture all that God is for God is also near and knowable. The theological word for that is *immanent*. The tension between the transcendence of God and the immanence of God is one of the first theological matters addressed in Scripture. In Genesis 1, God creates the heavens and the earth and all that is therein by simply speaking the word. God stands apart from the Creation and speaks it into existence. But then just one chapter later—in Genesis 2—God gets down on his holy knees and makes a mud pie. Then God breathes into the mud pie and it comes to life. And God names the living mud pie *Adam*.

So which is it? Is God lofty and transcendent? Or is God intimate and immanent? The answer is: yes. Both. Genesis lays the transcendence of God next to the immanence of God because God is both.

Once again, the psalmist said—

¹³ For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.

¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

The Lord's Prayer asserts the immanence—the intimacy of God with the words, "Our Father." In other words, God is our blood relative thanks to the blood of Jesus Christ which brings us into the family of God. But as soon as we pray, "Our Father," we confess, "who art in heaven." Not only is God immanent; but God is also transcendent, rising above all things mortal and earthly and sinful: God is in heaven; God sits on his eternal, divine throne.

And when we pray, don't we want both the immanence and the transcendence of God? Don't we want to know that the God who "knit me together in my mother's womb"—the God who numbers the hairs on my head, the God who walks with me through the valley of the shadow of death—is also the God who can rise above the trials and the tribulations that trouble me.

And when we pray to "our Father who art in heaven," aren't we asking God to help us rise above our trials and tribulations? Aren't we saying, "God, I need you to help me see the big picture because that's what you see from your perspective in heaven"? What do my present circumstances look like—what do my troubles and needs look like—from where you're at? Because that's what I need right now. That's why I pray, "Our Father who art in heaven."

When you think about it, when you pray, "Our Father who art in heaven," you're really praying an eschatological prayer. In other words, you're praying a prayer that lines up with the end of the story. St. John Revelation 21—

¹ Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ 'He will

wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

In other words, when you pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven," you're not just *saying* that you believe in heaven; you're also *seeing* heaven by faith. And you're seeing your future, your inheritance, by faith. For I've read the end of the book and I know outcome: God who is seated on the throne makes all things new! Isn't that the assurance—the hope, the promise—we want when we pray? That God is still on the throne, despite whatever happens in this corrupt world? That is the hope we confess when we pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven."