

The Big Topics - Part Four: Heaven

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[0 : 0 0] As you may well be aware, we're going through a series here on Sundays looking at some of the, what we might call the big topics of the Christian faith. Things like sin and the cross, hell, heaven and mission. They're the big five. Now last week, if you were here or you've caught up online, we looked at hell. And if you were here, you'll appreciate or you've heard it that perhaps there were some ideas which has been shared by me, which at the very least, I guess, would have given us some food for thought as we try and work everything out in terms of justice and forgiveness, redemption, God's judgment, salvation, all those big words, big concepts, how they might tie together underneath this banner of God's love. And I've spoken with a number of folks this week about it.

And I know some of the house groups have been going through stuff as well. So thank you very much, really, for your willingness to engage with these meaty topics that we've been doing and engage in such an open way. And just to repeat really what I said at the end of last week, my hope is that we can continue to work things out together, you know, as a dialogue and a to and fro with grace.

And if you want to come and chat to me on anything I've said or suggested, then the door is always open. And please do. I do love a good discussion. So do come and pick my brains. It won't take you long, I tell you, but we'll go through things together. All of which means, though, that we're on week four now of this five-week series. And we're going to conclude things next week by looking at mission, and in particular, how all that we've looked at in the previous weeks might shape the how and the why of our faith, why we share it, perhaps, and live it out, and how. But for this morning, we had hell last week. It's a whole lot more positive this week because we're on heaven this week, which may well be a relief to you. And so to get the heavenly ball rolling today, I thought we'd just kick back for a couple of minutes to watch some, let's say, divine dancing from perhaps the original Strictly Come Dancing duo.

Fred and Ginger there.

from the 1935 film Top Hat. You see, nothing if not contemporary. Here at St. John's as they dance along. It's Irving Berlin, who wrote the song Cheek to Cheek. And if you picked up the words there, you know it. Some were singing along. Heaven, I'm in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak, and I seem to find the happiness I seek when we're out together dancing cheek to cheek.

[3 : 1 2] Bit of old school romance there in time for Valentine's Day, maybe. When it's this couple's connection is seen as being heavenly. You know, heaven, I'm in heaven. The way of describing perhaps the sense of bliss that these two legendary dancers being cheeky together might have brought them. And I guess that the concepts and the qualities of heaven, they've gone on to inspire, you know, popular songwriters ever since Irving Berlin. So we've got, you know, there's Eddie Cochran's Three Steps to Heaven. There's Led Zepp's Stairway to Heaven.

Bob Dylan with his Knocking on Heaven's Door. Bruno Mars, a bit of Locked Out of Heaven more recently. Or any number of other harmonious heavenly hits which we're no doubt humming in our heads when we think about heaven. Indeed, throughout popular culture, not just songs. Perhaps you'll have picked up the Netflix series, The Good Place, which is all about the afterlife. Best-selling novels, like the five people you meet in heaven. You know, heaven is seen as this catch-all term for a place, I guess we could say, a place you might go to when we die. And so this morning, it'd be good to unpack this idea a bit. Because I hope, as we'll see, yes, heaven is a place we can go to when we die. But there's also so much more to it than simply that. Now, interestingly, in the Bible, we tend to see the word heaven or the word heavens being used in one of two main ways. Now, one is as a description of the sky above the atmosphere. So, for example, Genesis 7, 11, when the

rains came down for Noah's flood, we're told that the floodgates of the heavens were opened. The floodgates of heaven, it's an expression perhaps that we use to this day, you know, when torrential rain comes. We sometimes say, you know, the heavens opened. Now, we know that's not how rain works. We know the heavens don't literally open to give us our downpours. But it's an expression perhaps which harks back to an ancient common belief at the time that the sky was literally like a dome over the earth.

Think about the sort of Eden project in Cornwall. It's that kind of idea, a massive sort of dome that went over the earth. Genesis translates the word as, calls it an expanse. And then behind or above this dome, so the belief was, that there was a big layer of water. So ancient people thought the sky was blue because there was water being held up behind this dome, being held back until those times when the dome, the sky, when the heavens were opened. So heaven can mean the sky above us.

But equally, elsewhere in the Bible, heaven describes this, describes the place, it's hard to represent in any picture, the place where God dwells, you know, where God resides in all his glory. So in the Psalms, we read this, Psalm 11, 4, the Lord is on his heavenly throne, or Psalm 14, 2, the Lord, it says, looks down from heaven. Heaven is where God's dwelling place is.

[6 : 35] What's fascinating though, is that in the Hebrew language in which the Old Testament was originally written, there's only one word which is used for both the sky and the place where God dwells.

And it's this word here, Shemayim. Did you fancy some Hebrew this morning? Let me hear you say Shemayim. Ooh, you Hebrew talking heroes, you. Nice one. Now, bear in mind, it's the same word that sometimes are either translated as sky or as God's dwelling place. One word for two separate meanings. What might that tell us? Well, I think for a start, if you're a translator, it must be a nightmare trying to work out how to put it into English, trying to work out which meaning to use. Is it sky? Is it heaven? And to make it more complicated, this word Shemayim in Hebrew, it's a plural word, which I guess explains why sometimes the translators say heaven, and sometimes they say heavens, you know, as they try and work out what the original writers were trying to say. But aside from problems of translation, but the main thing, this double meaning between sky and God's dwelling place gives us and suggests perhaps is just how closely connected heaven and earth are, you know, separated if you like by this relatively thin dome, which if the rains were anything to go by, breaks open pretty frequently. In fact, there's the scholar, there's a biblical scholar, Paula Gooder, she describes the biblical understanding of the relationship between earth, where we are, and heaven, where God is, as being like this. She says, heaven, according to sort of biblical understanding, lies directly above earth with the floor of heaven functioning as the roof of the earth. It's quite a nice picture, quite an intriguing one, perhaps, but one which does maybe tie in with the vision that Jacob had in Genesis of that ladder or that stairway to heaven with angels going up and down on it and Jimmy Page doing a solo halfway through as well.

The idea of heaven being the next floor up, maybe two hours. I don't know how you'd feel about having God as your upstairs neighbour. It'd be quite hard to pop and tell him to turn his music down, I know.

Now, of course, we know that heaven is not literally the other side of our sky. I mean, when the astronauts went up in the 60s and 70s, one of the things that disappointed some people with all that space exploration when the astronauts came back was they were asked, did you see God up there? And it's like, no, we saw space.

[9 : 27] And people were expecting the astronauts almost to bump into heaven when they exited our atmosphere and there was disappointment that they didn't. And yet, whilst, you know, despite this, the idea of heaven as being somewhere up there, you know, it continues to this day. What does seem key, though, with this idea is how connected the Bible sees heaven and earth as being? You know, we could say, thinking back to that song, we could almost say heaven and earth are kind of dancing cheek to cheek almost. It's that kind of idea of intimacy, you know, separate, yeah, but intrinsically connected. Transcendent, but also close as well.

And the idea of this connected closeness, we might call it, it's backed up, I think, when we realise how often the Bible lumps heaven and earth together. So if you think about the very first verse in the Bible, Genesis 1-1, it says this, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, all in one package, it seems. They come together, you know, two sides of the same coin, almost. Again, to quote Paula Gooder, she says this, it's easy to assume that heaven is far away because it feels

far away, but the Bible suggests that heaven is created alongside earth, and though veiled from it, earth, it's actually very close to it. Now, if it is indeed true that heaven, as the phrase says, is closer than we think, we might expect, I guess, to experience or be aware of that closeness with heaven in our everyday lives from time to time. And it seems to me that is often the case. We are aware of heaven. Perhaps we might not always realise it, but I'd say we are. I mean, let's start with where we're at today. Let's start with church and our experience here and sort of work out from there. So, for example, in the book of

Revelation, there are various passages which describe the worship songs of those gathered around the throne of God, the songs they're singing in heaven, songs praising God for his holiness and how he's worthy and giving him honour and glory and all that kind of stuff. It's singing in heaven.

And so, when we sing, as we've been doing and as we will do today in our gathered times together, there's often a very real sense, I think, in which we're joining in with the songs of the angels in heaven. Indeed, we often use identical words which they're recorded as singing in Revelation, perhaps most famously these ones which are in various hymns and songs. You know, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty. Words like that which are being sung in heaven, it would seem, at this very moment.

And when we sing those words, I think that's why it's powerful because we're joining, it would seem, in sync with what's going on in heaven, blurring those boundaries, you know, unifying earth and heaven in worship at the same time.

[12:38] And what do you think of that? You know, when we sing, do you get a sense that we're in company with heaven? Is that something that you think about? Or are you thinking more about Jesus and what he's done for us?

Are you thinking about your own life and what you need God to do in it? Does heaven register with our singing? I wonder sometimes, perhaps, if we could ask God, as we sing, to open our minds a bit and open our eyes to be more aware of the way in which our voice is joining the gazillions of angels up in singing in heaven.

You know, that sense that we're, this boundary is getting blurred when we sing. Because I wonder if we were aware of the choir that we're a part of, I wonder if that would just lift and inspire our worship even more.

That's one thing with worship. What else? Well, I don't know if you found this, perhaps, when you've been to them, but very often, I'm sorry to bring it down a bit, but at funerals, you know, I take a fair number of funerals in my role.

And I find the gap between heaven and earth becomes sort of tangibly thin during those services. It's one of the privileges of my role that I get to get to pray what's called the prayer of commendation at funerals that I take.

[14:00] Often, if you've been to ones here or other funerals in here, in this building, the coffin normally goes there and I sort of move forward and pray over the coffin for the life of the deceased, that they would be commended to God.

Now, when I'm stood over the coffin and sort of all the eyes of the mourners are looking this way, there's a, there is a very real sense of the weight of that moment.

There's the sort of significance of what's happening and what I'm praying in that. And yet, at the very moment of praying this prayer of commendation as it's called, for me, God's presence actually becomes even more real.

And the love that I sense God has for the person who's died, it can feel quite overwhelming really. And often, I have to sort of clench my fist almost or bite my cheeks when I'm doing a funeral because it does overwhelm me trying to keep it together at that point because at that moment heaven suddenly feels very, very close.

God's dwelling place suddenly sort of comes into view almost. And I guess sort of incidentally really, my funeral experience, I think other ministers would back this up perhaps, my funeral experience has fed into my views on hell which I was sharing last week because when I'm commending to God someone who's died, my spirit is predominantly aware, can overwhelm sometimes by the extent of God's mercy and his redeeming love for the person I'm praying for rather than any sense of the prospect that they're possibly about to face his eternal conscious punishment.

[15:48] No, that doesn't enter my sense at all. My sense when I'm praying for someone is just God's love and God's redeeming mercy for them. But again, what do you reckon?

When you've been to funerals in the past, I know places, I know there's a mix of emotions that go on with it all and grief and all that understandable stuff but what's your sense of heaven like? Do you think about it when you go to a funeral? Is that something that we're aware of? So I wonder next time we're in a position where we're grieving or we're going to a funeral for a loved one. I wonder sometimes if it might be worth us just asking God to use that funeral time to speak to us of eternal things, to open our minds to the reality of heaven being seemingly present in that moment of grief but also commendation shall we say.

What else though in terms of the closeness between heaven and earth? Well I guess connected to funerals in some way is the fact that I've heard over recent years dozens and dozens of stories from those who have lost loved ones but who have nevertheless sensed the presence of their loved ones with them even though they've gone from this life.

[17:17] And on the one hand those kind of stories they mess with my head a bit you know they're very confusing and baffling almost they're not logical and neat and I'm quite a logical person really I don't quite like things messing up but I've heard too many of these stories to simply write them off and discount them.

For example just this week I was with a family we got a funeral coming up for a guy on Friday so I met with a family again this week but they were also sharing the story of a brother of theirs who had tragically taken his own life.

Now this brother this guy he lived on a coast down in the southwest but they told me that at the exact moment of his death when he took his life over 100 miles away from here their home in Burntwood was suddenly filled with an overwhelming fragrance of the seaside you know of seaweed and salty air and so on.

At the moment that their brother on the coast took his life. Now I've got no reason to doubt that was real that happened and it can't be explained rationally you don't get sea air in Burntwood as nice as it might be.

But it is an indication perhaps that the boundary between heaven and earth between this life and the next between I would say between God's embrace of those who are so crushed that they take their own life and our awareness of God's presence with us as he does that.

[18:58] It would all seem to be incredibly blurred and complicated but ultimately connected I would say. And you may well have heard or have your own stories about those unexplainable ways in which those who have gone before us in some way feel connected to us still.

Again I've got other stories of people talking about butterflies appearing in random places. There's birds. There's one guy I know he constantly feels there's a presence of a feather appearing out of nowhere which reminds him for his own reasons of a loved one who's gone.

Perhaps it's a smell of perfume which suddenly comes into a room of someone who we've loved. I don't know. It's all quite random I'm sure. And we can try and explain these things away as our minds playing tricks on us when we're grieving and so on.

But I think I'd caution against that as we may well be dismissing something of the mystery of times and places where heaven and earth would seem to be meeting in some way in order to bring us peace and reassurance that God's connecting it all together.

I don't know. What do you think? What do you think? Does that make sense? Does that resonate or do you think I'm balking at that a little bit. That all just sounds a bit weird. I don't know. I guess my suggestion might be that the next time someone shares something like that with you, a little story, maybe it's a good time to just quietly pray to God and ask him for discernment to know what in that experience they're sharing is of him.

[20:37] Because if in that experience, as we're saying, the boundary between earth and heaven becomes particularly thin maybe, I'd suggest there's an opportunity in that moment to share something of the good news of the God who inhabits that boundary and who's behind all of this complexity and mystery and love.

Now, as we said earlier, heaven is this phrase that's often used as a catch-all expression to describe where people go when they die. and the concept of heaven understandably, rightly, brings huge comfort and hope to people.

And yet, and yet, the Bible suggests that heaven is not our final, eternal destination.

Say that again. The Bible suggests that heaven is not our final or eternal destination.

I mean, let's go back to that opening verse from the Bible, Genesis 1.1, when we're told that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now, familiar verse may be, and there's a lot in

it, but I haven't really clocked until recently that there's this thing in there.

[21 : 58] What are we to make of the fact that the heavens, you know, this Hebrew word, shamayim, the heavens are said to have been created? You know, it implies that heaven has not always existed, that there's a beginning to it.

And if the idea of God creating heaven is a strange one to get our heads around, because we assume heaven, you know, as God's dwelling place, must be eternal, because God's eternal, therefore where he dwells must be eternal, the Bible indicates otherwise, because, you know, even Jesus himself says heaven and earth will pass away.

But my words will never pass away. Indeed, if heaven, as God's dwelling place, would seem to be temporary, with a beginning, with a creation, but also with an end, that it seems, according to Jesus, to pass away, what does that mean for our belief and the popular belief that heaven is the place we go to when we die?

Well, according to a guy called Tom Wright, mentioned to me the other week, one of the leading biblical scholars in the world today, and many other scholars alongside him, they would say, actually, we're right to think of heaven, you know, the state of paradise and bliss with angels and white light and the glory of God and floaty harps on clouds and all that kind of stuff.

Perhaps we're right to describe that place, that state, that age, as what we do often, as life after death. So when Jesus, for example, tells the thief on the cross, today, you'll be with me in paradise, it's probably that heavenly white light kind of place that Jesus would seem to be talking about.

[23 : 47] But as good as this created heavenly place is, it's only a temporary home, it's only a temporary resting place. So in John's gospel, again, a passage we use in funerals all the time, where Jesus talks about heaven as being like a big house, it seems.

He says this, in my father's house are many rooms and I'm going there to prepare a place for you. Now the word that's translated in English as rooms is the Greek word mone.

Okay, mone or mone, mone. Show me the mone, perhaps. Now mone in Greek, which we translate as rooms, usually means, not just any old room, but it means specifically a temporary dwelling place.

A temporary dwelling place, somewhere which we will eventually move on from. Now how temporary is impossible to say, I would suggest, as it would seem to be outside of our concept of time.

But it would certainly seem to be in the gap between death and the overall resurrection which the Bible describes as happening at the end of all time.

[25 : 03] See, in the book of Revelation, the writer John, he tells us his vision of what's to come eventually. He says this, he says, I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. 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. 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.

He who was seated on the throne said, I am making everything new. New heaven, new earth. It's a picture, I guess, of the ultimate fusion, the joining between heaven and earth, renewed creation where there is no need or there is no dome, no veil, no separation between heaven and earth because God brings heaven, where he is and all those who have gone before us, where they've been dwelling, brings heaven down to earth, a renewed new earth.

Heaven is therefore, I don't think, meant to be seen as some distant, eternal resting place of clouds and harps and floaty things. No, it's much more grounded than that long term.

[26 : 36] A new heaven joining with a new earth is a physical, literal place of resurrection and life. Tom Wright, helpfully I think, calls this ultimate destination life after life after death.

So we might think of our concept of heaven as being life after death. The new heavens and a new earth is life after death. Now if you've read, this is all in a book by his called Surprised by Hope. If you've read it or you've heard this spoken about before, it's quite a common understanding perhaps now. It won't be a new concept to you and you might have thought this through for a while. But I appreciate for some of us this will be a new way to think about things.

So a couple of things really as we come into land, what might be worth pointing out. For a start, I would say it literally gives eternity, a whole new world of possibilities.

Indeed, John in Revelation, he draws heavily from the prophet Isaiah and Isaiah's description of what this new heaven and new earth will look like.

[27 : 46] Indeed, Isaiah describes it like this. He says, people will build houses and dwell in them. They will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. My chosen ones will long enjoy the work of their hands.

They will not labor in vain, nor will they bear children doomed to misfortune. For they will be a people blessed by the Lord. It's a picture of this new heaven and new earth about building and farming and eating and drinking in a place overflowing with joy and togetherness, both with each other, but with God who dwells with us.

But if you notice, it's not a place where you just sit around floating on clouds. It's a place of work, which might sound quite depressing, says Carolyn, but it's a place of work at its best, work which brings joy and satisfaction, work which works for us.

I know you're grumbling at the prospect of work, but think about the kinds of hobbies or activities, when we're so absorbed in them that we lose track of time.

It could be pottering around the shed, it could be gardening or sport, it could be art, it could be cooking, it could be travel. That's the kind of picture I get of work in the new heaven and earth.

[29 : 07] Activity which is so engrossing, so in tune and tandem with what we enjoy doing, that it feeds the souls of ourselves and others.

Activity which is almost a perfection perhaps of all that we do in this life, which is good and gives us pleasure. That's the kind of earthly slash heavenly future I could get excited about.

I love to potter. I could do an eternity of pottering and call that work, that would be great. Yes, they'll be singing, I'm sure, but thank goodness there's going to be so much more variety than that.

In fact, if you don't like singing, don't panic because that's only a small part I would suggest of what the new heaven and new earth is going to be about. And what's more, this new creation is clearly a physical place where our physically resurrected, renewed bodies will be fully alive.

Paul in 1 Corinthians describes these new resurrected bodies that we get with this word. He says they're going to be imperishable, which implies ongoing energy and vitality.

[30 : 16] No aches and pains, no bad backs, no chronic fatigue, arthritis, none of that in the new heaven and new earth. No, imperishable bodies, that sounds pretty good to me.

And yet I think what's especially inspiring about all this is that this life in the here and now is at its best, I would say, intended to give us a glimpse or a preview, a trailer, if you like, of what the final resurrected, eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth will be.

All that is good in this life, I would suggest, will somehow continue to echo and resonate into eternity. If it's good, God's going to keep it and use it.

And Tom Wright, one little quote from him, he says in that surprise by Hope book, he says this, what we do, what you do in the present by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbour as yourself, what we do in the present will last into God's future.

These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little more bearable to the day when we leave it behind altogether. No, they are part of what we may call building for God's kingdom.

[31 : 41] I think that's why Jesus commands us to pray to God in the Lord's Prayer. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. It's both a present need, we need this now Lord, yeah, but it's also an anticipation of that future fulfilment.

Indeed, bringing the ways of heaven to earth, I would say, is at the heart of the mission that God's given us for this life. That mission is what we'll be looking at finally next week.

And in many ways, you know, the application of these principles, we'll have to flesh it out next week and wait till then. In fact, I've probably gone on long enough. Let's press pause there like we've been doing in recent weeks because there is a flow to these.

But one final word. We started with music, a bit of cheek to cheek from Tata and all that. Let's finish with a bit of a musical thing as well. In fact, we're going to finish with some lyrics, a quote from the 1980s mystic St.

Belinda of Carlisle, who was onto something I think, when she said that ultimately heaven is a place on earth.

[32 : 53] With that in mind, let's pray and put all that together before God.