

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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HEAVEN

Matthew 6:9b

We will continue today to study what is called the ‘Lord’s Prayer’, the Lord’s teaching concerning prayer. The Lord’s Prayer begins with these words: *Our Father in heaven*. The last time, we saw what it means that God is called our Father. We need now to turn to the second part of that phrase, *in heaven*. Our Father who is in heaven.

What is heaven? Where is heaven? How are we to think about heaven? What is the meaning of heaven in the NT? These are important questions that any Christian should ask himself.

Looking for heaven

When you look at the rabbinical teaching on this matter, you find some interesting material. Listen to this description of heaven that a rabbi gives: ‘From the earth to the firmament above is a journey of 500 years. The thickness of the firmament, 500 year-journey. And there are seven heavens on top of that, each of 500 year-journey.’ Interesting description of heaven, isn’t it? How this rabbi figured it out, I have no idea.

I am not going to comment on this rabbinical description of heaven except to say that the assumption behind such an understanding of heaven is that heaven is a place, limited by time and space. A 500 year-journey from the earth to the firmament. A firmament of 500 year-journey, on top of which there are seven heavens, each of 500 year-journey. So that if you want to reach the seventh heaven, it will take you, if my calculation is right, 4500 years. Whatever that means from the spiritual point of view, I don’t know.

But I have a question. Is heaven some sort of a semi-material place, a place that you can pin point on a map? According to some theologians, the answer is ‘yes’. Let me quote to you from a book that was published just a few years ago (1994). It is entitled *Systematic Theology*. And in that book, the author makes this statement about heaven, and I quote: ‘These texts lead us to conclude that heaven is even now a place – though one whose location is now unknown to us and whose existence is now unable to be perceived by our natural senses.’ So what he says is that heaven is a place, it is a location, but we don’t know where it is because we cannot perceive it with our natural senses.

What do you think of that? This is a quotation from a recent book. We are not talking about some old rabbinical teaching.

In support of his opinion, he quotes several passages. For example Acts 7:55 where it says that Stephen looked up into heaven and he saw the heaven open, and Jesus standing at the right hand of the

Father. Personally, I don't see how we can use this passage to prove that heaven is a location. It seems to me that this verse points more to the fact that Stephen was granted by God a spiritual vision into heaven, into a spiritual dimension of being. This has nothing to do with a physical location.

Or take Luke 24:51 where we are told that Jesus was *carried up into heaven*. This ascension upward would seem to locate heaven somewhere up, somewhere above the earth. So on the basis of that verse, this evangelical author draws the conclusion, 'It is hard to imagine how the fact of Jesus' ascension to a place could be taught more clearly.'

Heaven is not a place

Well, I don't agree with that and let me explain to you why. Since we are in the context of prayer, of the Lord's Prayer, you will notice that in the Scriptures, Jesus is sometimes said to pray to God the Father, 'lifting up His eyes towards heaven.' Now, does that mean that somehow heaven is physically above the earth? When Jesus says that He is from above, does that mean that Jesus comes from a place that is physically above the earth?

No, no, no. We have to realize that the 'above' that the Bible speaks about is spiritually above, not physically above. Heaven is above not because it is physically on top of the earth, but because life in heaven is superior to the life found on earth. The contrast between above and below is used in the Bible to show the contrast between heaven where our Holy God dwells and the earth where sinful men live. And hence, Jesus says in John 8:23, *You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world* (this fallen world); *I am not of this world* (because Jesus is from above, from heaven). Do you get it?

So understand that when Jesus says that He is from above, He is not speaking in terms of a physical aboveness, but of a spiritual aboveness. He is saying that He is from that spiritual way of life which is far above from the physical way of life. That is why He says in John 3:31, *He who comes from above is above all* ... Then He says in the same verse, *He who comes from heaven is above all*. Notice this. The 'above' here is equated to heaven. The whole point of speaking of heaven, of being above is meant to teach us the fact of the spiritual superiority of heaven over earth. Because 'above' always indicates superiority.

Earth and heaven

All this is brought out very clearly by Paul in 1Corinthians 15. In this passage, Paul is speaking about the life to come, about what he would call 'heaven'. And he draws a contrast between what is from earth, and what is from heaven. Let's turn to this passage in 1Corinthians 15:42-49. As I read this passage, I would like you to do this very thing. Picture in your mind two columns. One headed *earth*, and the other headed *heaven*. And as I read the text, try to see what Paul puts under the category *earth*, and what he puts under the category *heaven*. 1Corinthians 15:42-49.

1Corinthians 15:42. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body;

43 it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power;

*44 it is sown a **natural** body, it is raised a **spiritual** body. If there is a **natural** body, there is also a **spiritual** body.*

45 So also it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living soul.' The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

*46 However, the **spiritual** is not first, but the **natural**; then the **spiritual**.*

*47 The first man is from the **earth**, earthy; the second man is from **heaven**.*

*48 As is the **earthy**, so also are those who are **earthy**; and as is the **heavenly**, so also are those who are **heavenly**.*

*49 And just as we have borne the image of the **earthy**, we shall also bear the image of the **heavenly**.*

So did you notice how Paul is contrasting *earth* and *heaven*? You have the contrast of imperishable and perishable, of weakness and power. If you did the exercise that I told you, you would put under *earth* things like, physical, weakness, dishonor, corruption. Under *heaven*, you would have spiritual, power, glory, incorruption. When you do that, you have on one side the full definition of earth, and on the other side the full definition of heaven. When you compare the two together, it becomes very clear that what comes from heaven is far superior to what comes from earth, that heaven is above the earth.

Let that be clear in our mind. Heaven is not a place. It is not a material position that you can locate on a map of the universe. Heaven is spiritual. It cannot be measured in terms of distance. It cannot be pointed out in terms of direction.

Two different worlds

This understanding of heaven is made even clearer for us by Jesus in John 4 in His discussion with the Samaritan woman. You remember that the Samaritan woman was saying, ‘We, Samaritans, worship God in this mountain and you, the Jews, worship God in another place.’ And Jesus says, ‘You are not going to worship God in any one place. You are going to worship God in spirit and in truth for God is Spirit.’ Jesus was teaching the Samaritan woman that you cannot think of God in semi-physical terms. You cannot locate God in a place, just as you cannot locate heaven in any particular place.

When you confuse the material with the spiritual, it becomes superstition. Because you see, one characteristic of superstition is that you begin to localize spiritual power into a material object, and alleging that this material object can have a special effect on you. For example, you are told that you can wear this special charm around you which will protect you and give you, hopefully, good luck.

In the same way, when we start to claim that a place is more holy than another place, we become superstitious. Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, ‘Mount Gerizim where the Samaritans worship God is no more holy than the temple in Jerusalem where the Jews worship God. Worship is not a question of location. Worship is to enter into fellowship with God in spirit and in truth.’ And a place is holy only because I have met with the Holy God in this place.

I want to insist on this point because the notion that heaven is somehow ‘up there’ physically gives you the impression that heaven is very far, that God is far away. And that’s the conclusion of a commentator. Let me quote his words: “‘Our Father’ emphasizes the nearness of God but ‘in heaven’ speaks at the same time of the distance there is.”

Heaven, a spiritual world

Heaven, in the biblical teaching, is a different type of existence, a spiritual type of existence which is under the lordship of God. In Matthew 5:34, Jesus says, ... *do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is the throne of God*. Heaven is the throne of God. The throne is a symbol of the sovereignty of God. And life in heaven is characterized by the submission of all that is in it to the rule of God. Therefore we can define heaven as the sphere of God’s immediate presence and rule.

When we realize that heaven is spiritual, that it is a spiritual state of existence, we realize that heaven is not far away. Because being spiritual can be coextensive with the material world. For example, think of the human being. We have a spirit and we have a body. And the two of them can coexist together because the spirit is coextensive with the body. The spirit is coextensive with the body because it is not material. Material cannot be coextensive with each other in the same way.

So when we realize this, that heaven, being spiritual, can be coextensive with the physical universe, then we realize that God is always near. We don't have to travel for 4500 years. God is right here all the time, and heaven is just the other side of this physical existence. When it says that God is in heaven, it means that God is very close to those who live under His sovereignty, just as the spirit is to the body. When I whisper, He hears me right away. He is closer than our own breath. That's what Paul is saying in Acts 17:27-28: ... *God is not far from each one of us; for in Him, we live and move and have our being...*

To be with God

Now, let me ask this question. How much is heaven attractive to you? When you study the Bible, you find another strange thing. You find that there is never a description of heaven in physical terms. In the Koran for example, heaven is often pictured in terms of an earthly paradise with palm trees, beaches and the like. But the Bible never describes heaven as a material place. Why? Well, first of all, as we have already seen, heaven is spiritual. And since it is spiritual, you cannot describe it in terms of physical things.

But there is another reason. Because heaven is nothing without God. The whole attraction about heaven is God. He is the whole wonder, the center of heaven. In fact, in the Bible, heaven is sometimes used as another name of God. Take for example the parable of the prodigal son. What does the prodigal son say in Luke 15? He said, *Father, I have sinned against heaven.* And by this, he means that he has sinned against God.

God is whole center and meaning of heaven. He is the whole attraction of heaven. And the more attractive is God to you, the more attractive heaven becomes to you.

Let me make this other observation. Have you ever noticed that nowhere in the NT or in the OT will you once see the statement that when you die, you will go to heaven. Do you know why? Because the attraction is not the place. It is the person who is in that place that makes it attractive. That is why Paul says in Philippians 1:23, *for me, to depart and be with Christ is far better.* He didn't say, 'To go to heaven is far better.' He said, 'To be with Christ is far better.' Again, he says the same thing in 2Corinthians 5:8 where he talks about being *absent from the body* and being *present with the Lord.* The attraction is first and foremost the person, not the place. Remarkable isn't it?

Citizens of heaven

Now, in Philippians 3, Paul says that from the spiritual point of view, our citizenship is in heaven. My parents moved from Taiwan to Canada when I was a young boy. All of us who are immigrants know what is the process that you have to go through before you can get your Canadian citizenship. But how do we become a citizen of heaven? There is one condition that you have to meet. Only one, but a major one. The difficulty is this. The Bible warns us that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven. What is from below cannot enter what is from above. Man, in his earthly condition, cannot inherit heaven. He has to go through the process of spiritual regeneration. That's the condition. The only way we can get citizenship in heaven is by being born again.

That's what the Lord Jesus says in John 3:6. *Whatsoever is born of the flesh is flesh.* We are born of the flesh and so we are flesh. But He goes on to say, *Whatsoever is born of the Spirit is spirit.* It is when we have faith in God that we can be born of the Spirit. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to make us to be born anew. This spiritual transformation gives life to our spirit and at the same time, it gives us citizenship in heaven.

Applying for a heavenly citizenship

If you are not a Christian, you might ask, ‘Why should I make the choice for heaven, for that spiritual life?’ Let me give you one reason. Because if you are wise, you realize that this life is passing away. You realize that this life is temporal. All that is from below, all that is physical will one day perish. And if you have any wisdom at all, you know that there is no future in that earthly life. Often, it is when we are sick that we realize how transient life is. You are suddenly reminded, with a surprising force, that this physical life is passing away very quickly. In my work as a physician, I deal with very sick people who are often one breath away from death. For them, one more breath is the difference between life and death.

So if you are wise, you will apply today for your citizenship in heaven. You will chose God rather than this world. And the decision must be made now, not when you are dying. Remember Philippians 3:20. Paul refers to believers as those whose *citizenship is in heaven*. Notice the present tense. Not that our citizenship ‘shall be’ in heaven. But that *our citizenship is in heaven*. Heaven is a present reality for the Christian. And therefore, the choice for heaven has to be made right now.

Experiencing heaven today

One final point before I close. We are told in the Lord’s Prayer, *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. That tells us something about heaven. It tells us that God’s will is done perfectly in heaven. And the prayer is that God’s will be done on earth *as it is now in heaven*. In heaven, there is perfect bliss, perfect happiness, perfect joy. For what reason? Because God’s will is done perfectly in heaven.

Do you see the implication that this verse has in our lives? If God’s will is perfectly done in our lives, we are going to experience heaven here and now. I can begin to experience what heaven is like when I live in total obedience to God. Does that lift up your heart? Of course, we will not be able to achieve that completely in this world, not until Jesus comes back. But in the meantime, I can resolve, by the grace of God, that God’s will is going to be done in my life as in heaven. He is going to have His way totally and absolutely. And then, we will enter into the joy of heaven.

Heaven is something that we begin to experience now, not just when we die physically. When our whole life is governed by the will of God, we experience heaven right now. That’s why Paul says that when we are in Christ, *our citizenship is in heaven*.

So when we say, *Our Father in heaven*, heaven should no longer be something strange, or distant, or foreign. But something that we know in our own experience. A place of perfect fellowship with God because our will is in harmony with His will. And with this harmony of wills, our will and God’s will, heaven comes into our soul.