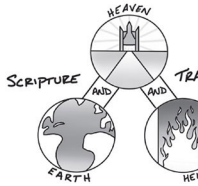
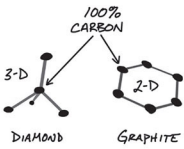
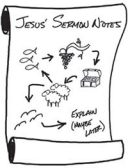


A VISUAL GUIDE TO EXPERIENCING GOD'S KINGDOM AMONG US

WHAT WE ASSUME JESUS SAID...

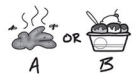


JESUS' SERMON NOTES
PRO: RELEVANT QUESTION
POINT 1: PURPOSE
POINT 2: POWER
POINT 3: PRACTICAL
CONCLUSIONS: APPLICATION

- ✓ = AFFIRMED EARLY CH
- X = REJECTED HERESY
- = OPEN FOR INTERPRETATION

3 WONDERS OF HEAVEN

WHAT IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS



ABOUT HEAVEN?

FAMILY PLANNING

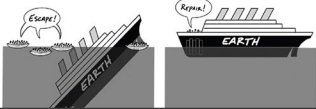


SKYE JETHANI

HEAVEN Soul →

Joy... WHO HAS MORE?

EARTH



DEATH Body →

A VISUAL
GUIDE TO
EXPERIENCING
GOD'S KINGDOM
AMONG US

WHAT IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS

ABOUT HEAVEN?

SKYE JETHANI



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For Jay Patel
“There is a friend who
sticks closer than a brother.”

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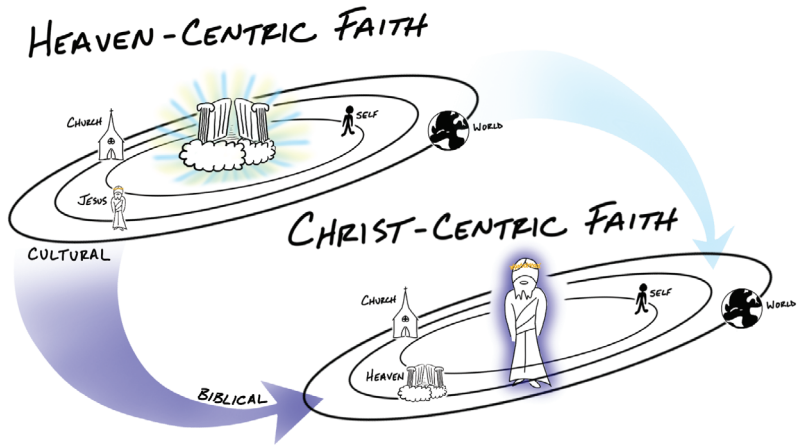
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INTRODUCTION

REDRAWING OUR MAP OF HEAVEN

MAPS FASCINATE ME. Growing up, we had a giant *National Geographic* atlas the size of a coffee table. I used to flip the massive pages and wonder about the strange places on the other side of the planet. On the light-up globe in the den, I would try to measure with my hand how far where I lived in Chicago was from India, where my cousins lived. Even now, we have a map in our dining room marking all the places we've traveled as a family.

INTRODUCTION

You may not be as enamored with maps as I am, but each of us carries them. I don't mean the app on your smartphone, but the maps you carry in your mind. Our mental maps provide a sense of geography to help us navigate between home, work, school, or the grocery store, but they do much more than that. They orient and guide us, offer perspective, and provide a framework for understanding our place in a complicated world. Our mental maps are imaginary models of the cosmos where we define what is real, what is important, and where things reside in relation to each other.

For example, our culture has shaped our minds to imagine the earth revolving around the sun. That is our mental map of the solar system, but people in most premodern cultures carried a vastly different mental map in which the sun revolved around the earth. In the sixteenth century, when Nicolaus Copernicus first presented evidence that the geocentric view of the cosmos was incorrect, many resisted changing their mental map. It was a long-held belief that humans were the climax and centerpiece of God's creation. Therefore, it made sense for the sun, moon, planets, and stars to rotate around us on a stationary earth. The desire to defend this established mental map was so intense that scientists were denounced as heretics for challenging it.

Today we refer to the shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric map of the solar system as the Copernican Revolution, and it reminds us that our mental maps don't always reflect reality and

may need significant revision. When we encounter evidence that challenges our mental maps, we gain an opportunity to pause, evaluate, and revise our ideas. As Copernicus discovered, for some this process is uncomfortable or even terrifying because they foolishly equate their mental map of the world with the world itself. Therefore, any invitation to revise their map is viewed as an attack on reality itself that triggers fear, anger, and resistance. Revolutions, after all, never go unchallenged.

This is no less true for our *religious* mental maps. Consider what comes to mind when you hear the word *heaven*. Most modern Christians carry a culturally created mental map that imagines heaven as a distant celestial realm full of glorious dwellings occupied by the souls of God’s redeemed people who are surrounded by angels in a paradise far removed from this earth. Our map also says the only path to heaven passes through death; it is utterly inaccessible to the living who still occupy the earth. For those shaped by popular forms of Christianity, our map also says that Jesus died on the cross so we might gain access to this heavenly paradise after we die.

Nearly everything about our faith—Jesus, the gospel, the cross, the church, our mission, even how we raise our children and interact with our non-Christian neighbors—revolves around the view of heaven I’ve just described. I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say many of us have a heaven-centric mental map of Christianity. But what if our mental map is wrong? Just as the earth

is not the center of the solar system, what if heaven is not the center of our faith?

As I noted earlier, we use maps to guide and orient ourselves. But if our maps are wrong, they are certain to *mis*guide and *mis*-orient us. The same is true for our mental map of heaven. If it is incorrect, it will send other aspects of our faith and life off course as well. Significant parts of the Bible won't make sense to us, and we are likely to misinterpret even the most basic parts of Jesus's message and mission. I believe that is exactly what has happened in much of popular Christianity, and until we correct our mental map of heaven, we will find it extremely difficult to fix the other misaligned aspects of our faith.

Unfortunately, merely reading the Bible—while always a good practice—may not be enough to repair our warped view of heaven. This is because when we encounter the word *heaven* in the Scriptures, we insert our culturally created mental map. We rarely slow down long enough to ask whether our map of heaven and the Bible's are the same.

Because many people find great comfort in their culturally inherited map of heaven, any challenge to it is met with resistance or even accusations of heresy—not unlike what Copernicus faced when he asserted the earth revolved around the sun. Yet if we are going to be faithful to God, we must ask if our mental map of heaven is grounded in the revelation of Scripture or if it's mostly the product of cultural clichés and sentimental tradition. We must

be willing to surrender the flawed map we *like* for the more accurate map we *need*.

What Jesus Said about Heaven

After the work of scientists like Copernicus and Galileo, people slowly began to accept the heliocentric map of the solar system because their existing geocentric maps simply did not function as well. With the earth at the center, the observable movements of the planets made no sense and were unpredictable. But once they put the sun at the center, everything fell into place. The movement of the stars, moon, and planets in the sky became orderly and predictable. The heliocentric model found acceptance because *it worked*. The Copernican Revolution succeeded because it gave people a better, more reliable mental map of the universe.

My hope is that you have a similar experience reading this book. As we redefine heaven according to what the biblical authors wrote, and as we shift our mental map of Christianity from a heaven-centric to a Christ-centric vision, I trust that many other things will suddenly fall into place for you—from Jesus’s sermons and healings to his death and second coming. When we come to embrace Jesus’s map of heaven, we will discover that it works so much better than the one we’ve inherited from popular Christian culture.

INTRODUCTION

In the pages that follow, we will explore what the Bible says about the kingdom of heaven with a focus on what Jesus and his apostles taught—and did not teach—about it. First, we will revise our mental map of heaven and God’s kingdom (part 1). We will then use this new map to rethink the meaning of Jesus’s parables (part 2) and miracles (part 3). After that, we will discover how the kingdom of heaven changes our view of the cross (part 4). Finally, we will explore what Jesus said about the ultimate fate of heaven and earth (part 5).

The process of redrawing your mental map of heaven will require you to rethink long-held assumptions, question previously unquestioned beliefs, and learn to read familiar passages from the Bible with new eyes. I’ll warn you now, this is going to be disorienting and challenging, but revolutions always are. Let’s begin.

PART 1

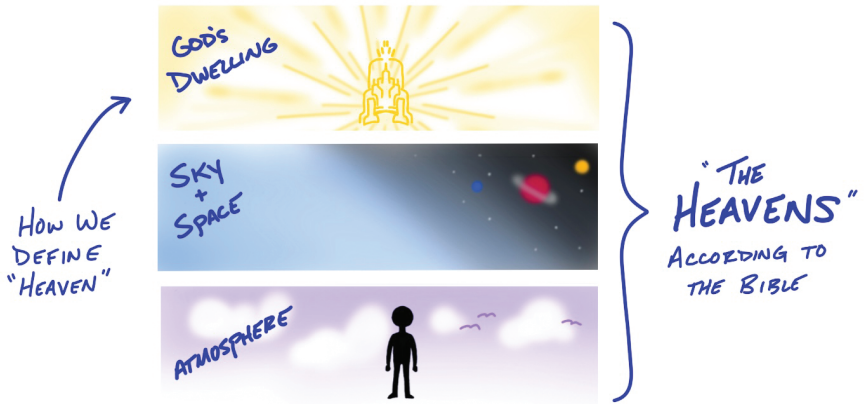
THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN HAS COME NEAR

MATTHEW 4:13–17

Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali—to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

“Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people living in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned.”

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”



1

IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS . . . THEN OUR VIEW OF HEAVEN MUST MATCH HIS

THE FIRST CLUE THAT JESUS'S MAP of heaven is different from ours is found in the word itself. The Hebrew word for "heaven" in the Old Testament is *shamayim*, and the Greek word in the New Testament is *ouranos*. Both words are plural and are usually accompanied by a definite article. Therefore, they should more accurately be translated into English as "the heavens." This means,

according to the Bible, heaven is not a single place or a proper name, and we should not speak about heaven as a singular location the way we speak about London, Wrigley Field, or even something as vast as the Pacific Ocean.

The ancient cultures that shaped the Bible, and to which Jesus belonged, understood “the heavens” to be a vast realm surrounding the earth. First, they spoke of the heavens when referring to the sky or atmosphere. When Jesus said “the birds of the air,” the actual language he used was “the birds of the heavens” (Matt. 6:26). The heavens are also where the celestial bodies abide—the sun, moon, and stars. Modern people distinguish between the atmosphere and outer space, but ancient cultures did not. Therefore, the heavens were simply everything in the air and above the earth.

“The heavens” also carried another important meaning in the ancient world. It referred to the dwelling place of God. The heavens are the invisible, intangible realm occupied by the Lord and his hosts. When this meaning is intended, our English Bibles will often ignore the plural Hebrew or Greek word and use the singular instead. For example, Isaiah 66:1 is translated as “This is what the LORD says: ‘Heaven is my throne.’” When modern people read this verse with our mental map, it conjures images of God occupying a celestial city far away from the earth. But in Hebrew the verse says, “*The heavens* are my throne.” The Lord is saying that he occupies the air/sky/atmosphere immediately surrounding us. Unfortunately, most of our translations of the Bible do not

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN HAS COME NEAR

help us grasp this more immediate and accessible vision of God’s heavenly presence.

The reason is simple. Our modern scientific knowledge has influenced how we translate these ancient texts. We want to differentiate the natural realm of the atmosphere from the supernatural realm of the spirits. Therefore, our English Bibles will say birds, clouds, thunder, or rain occupy “the air” but that God and his angels occupy “heaven,” when all of these verses actually use the same plural word—“the heavens.” By imposing our mental map of heaven onto the Bible, we obscure or erase the mental map of the biblical writers and of Jesus himself. Instead, we come to believe that heaven is a distant place accessible only after death and that God could not possibly be as near as the air filling our lungs.

The implications of this, as Dallas Willard notes, are a warped understanding of God, his kingdom, and the message of Jesus. “The damage done to our practical faith in Christ and in his government-at-hand by confusing heaven with a place in distant outer space, or even beyond space, is incalculable. Of course, God is there too. But instead of heaven and God also being always present with us, as Jesus shows them to be, we invariably take them to be located far away and, most likely, at a much later time—not here and not now.”¹



READ MORE: Acts 2:42–47; Ephesians 2:11–22