



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Living Under Vacant Skies
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 9-17)

Suggested Article:

📖 Nothing But the Truth
(*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 79-83)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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Living Under Vacant Skies

When, in the biblical cosmology, God creates heaven and earth, “heaven” names that part of creation in which God alone exercises dominion, and which we do not know intimately until we are at last fully reconciled to God. As our culture loses this sense of heaven “over us,” it will be more than a change in how we picture the world in our minds. It will reshape the way we live.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 17:16-34

Responsive Reading†

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

Why should the nations say, “Where is our God?” Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases.

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; they make no sound in their throats.

Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them.

We, who fear the LORD, will trust in the LORD! He is our help and shield.

May you be blessed by the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

The heavens are the LORD’s heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings.

We will bless the LORD from this time on and forevermore.

Praise the LORD!

Reflection

Language is funny, isn’t it? A physicist says, “Quarks, the imperceptible fundamental particles of matter, exist in six ‘flavors’: up, down, strange, charm, bottom, and top,” and this makes perfect sense to a person trained in quantum physics. But to other people it sure sounds like gobbledygook!

The biblical language about heaven can sound strange to us today. The prophet John sees “the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God” (Revelation 21:10, cf. 3:12). Peter reports seeing “something like a large sheet coming down from heaven,” filled with all sorts of animals (Acts 11:5-10). “I am the bread that came down from heaven,” Jesus says, referring to himself as the embodiment of God’s life-giving, heavenly manna (John 6:32-51). Doesn’t this sound like gobbledygook to many folks today? Yet, as Christians, we need such language, just as quantum physicists require quark-flavor talk, to think clearly.

What does it mean to say that heaven is “over us”? Heaven is not over us in any astrophysical sense. We could just as well say heaven is “inside,” or “outside,” if spatial relations were the only important point to convey. Yet we want to say that heaven is



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something different from the world (else, “inside” would be preferable). And heaven is more than a temporal continuation of this life, for heaven supersedes and is exalted above every temporal thing; indeed it creates a hierarchy of value in the world (otherwise “outside” would do as well). Heaven is a reality “over us” because it is the greater reality, the ultimate value, the final purpose, and the consummation of all things.

In the Christian teachings on creation and reconciliation, we can see why this type of transcendent vision, a certain longing for heaven, is essential to the life of the church:

- ▶ *Creation is a good gift.* “Heaven is the part of creation that we can only receive, as opposed to that which we partially control, employ, and manipulate,” writes A. J. Conyers. “It is the realm of grace, for it comes entirely as God’s gift and represents the fullness of all gifts.” Human action is always a response to creation and does not constitute reality. Thus, even as we affect a small part of the earth, “our actions are fraught with all kinds of ambiguity. Our intentional efforts to do a good thing, for instance, always invite the possibility of unintended evil.” Furthermore, the world does not find its purpose in itself. As Paul reminds the Athenians, all things find their purpose in relationship with God (Acts 17:28).
- ▶ *Salvation comes by grace.* When we are open to the mystery of heaven, we are predisposed to expect help. Our ethical struggles are taken up in benevolent grace, so we can tackle large, systemic problems with confidence. Our work in the world can be about more than “making a living,” as we remember that “the object of making a living is life and that life is never earned; it is only given.”

Study Questions

1. How would you explain the biblical language about “coming down from heaven”? If people need a translation of what we mean by heaven being “over us,” we need to supply not only more words, but actions that reveal what we believe. How could our lives reflect our deep belief in heaven “over us”?
2. In addition to the “over us” language, what ways of speaking about heaven are difficult for people to comprehend?
3. Conyers suggests that though children experience the world as a gift, adults tend to lose sight of this truth (*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 15-16)? Do you agree? How can your congregation’s worship remind people that they live “under heaven”?
4. How do you respond to Matthew Arnold’s description, in the poem *Dover Beach*, of a world without a transcendent heaven (*Heaven and Hell*, p. 16)?
5. Living as though the world is dependent upon nothing outside itself is called “idolatry” in the Bible, because we will wrongly place ultimate value on some mere part of the world. What idols do people worship in our culture?

Departing Hymn: “My Life Flows On In Endless Song”

† Adapted from Psalm 115:1-9, 15-16, 18.

Living Under Vacant Skies

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 5	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To appreciate the importance of the transcendent nature of heaven.
2. To reflect on the meaning of biblical language about heaven “over us.”
3. To reflect on how the transcendence of heaven relates to the doctrines of creation and reconciliation.
4. To begin to recognize how a belief in heaven “over us” shapes our character and actions.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Heaven and Hell (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and the suggested article before the group meeting. The hymn text “My Life Flows On In Endless Song” is reprinted in *Heaven and Hell*, pp. 68-69. Locate the tune for “My Life Flows On In Endless Song” in your hymnbook, or print copies of this public domain tune from the Web site www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

Share the story that A. J. Conyers tells of preparing the wedding ceremony for Ben and Cheryl (on p. 11 of *Heaven and Hell*). The story highlights one way in which we live “under vacant skies” and the pressure that this puts on us to find ultimate happiness through our own actions.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members in the following week will face temptations, endure struggles, and evaluate opportunities in a manner that shows awareness of heaven “over” them.

Scripture Reading

Arrange for a group member to read aloud Acts 17:16-34 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins, and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Members may be familiar with this story of Paul’s visit to Athens. What features of the story did they only just notice when they heard it read again? Perhaps they will mention that it begins with Paul’s distress that “the city was full of idols,” that his preaching at first sounds like gobbledygook to the Athenians (and some of them mistake “Jesus and the resurrection” for the names of two new gods), that Paul’s response to idolatry is to emphasize the transcendence of God (as the creator and Lord of heaven and earth, the one who appointed the times and places of flourishing for all nations, and the final judge

of creation), and that Paul explains God's transcendence (in verse 28) by quoting twice from their poets and philosophers.

Explain that Psalm 115 (quoted in the responsive reading) guides Paul's reaction to the Athenians' idolatry: they are living as though the world is dependent upon nothing outside itself and have wrongly placed ultimate value on some mere part of the world. Even the Athenians' many 'gods' are, in Paul's view, mere personifications of some values or natural forces within the world. They represent a blind "groping" after the true God.

The reflection focuses on what the Bible means when it says heaven is "over us," that the New Jerusalem comes "down" from heaven, and so on. This is not spatial or astrophysical language. Rather it conveys the difference and greater reality of heaven in relation to earth, and that heaven, as the portion of creation in which God's will is fully done, is a source of grace that provides the final purpose and consummation of all things. Recall Jesus' model prayer to God: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

- ▶ *Creation is a good gift.* Discuss the key differences between Greek stories of creation and the Biblical story reviewed by Conyers on pp. 13-14 of *Heaven and Hell*.
- ▶ *Salvation comes by grace.* Discuss Conyers' suggestion about how children and adults differ in their stance toward reality (*Heaven and Hell*, pp. 15-16).

Study Questions

1. Members might focus on Revelation 21:10, Acts 11:5-10, or John 6:32-51. They might mention that Revelation 21:10 suggests that our happiness is not a product of our own efforts, but will be a gift prepared by God. Interestingly, heaven is not described as a place we go when we die, but the source from whence our happy life with God comes. In Acts 11 the message comes to Peter from God. Likewise, in John's gospel, Jesus comes to dwell with us from the Father "in heaven," which is to say, from the Creator God.
2. Members might mention the language of "going to (or coming from) heaven," of "heavenly beings," and of heaven being like a "city" or like a "garden (Paradise)."
3. While we can think of exceptions to the rule, Conyers' observation seems to be true in many people's lives. Members might mention worship activities such as prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of confession, singing hymns about heaven or judgment, bodily motions such as bowing in prayer or lifting hands in praise, or specific sermons. Conyers describes the special language invoked in services of burial and marriage.
4. Arnold describes an army that does not know when to fight and when to retreat, perhaps because it hears conflicting signals to do both coming from different leaders. In this setting, the struggle loses its meaning as well as its direction. Do we sometimes feel morally enraged, but unsure about what should be the object of our struggle? Are we easily misled into being morally "against" the wrong things? Are we tempted to "give up" because we see little progress being accomplished?
5. Review the responsive reading adapted from Psalm 115. Members might suggest idols such as honor and prestige, wealth, mere power over other people, caring for one's family to the neglect of the legitimate needs of other people, advancing a particular political agenda, 'worshiping' nature, and so on. Idols are rarely bad things; rather they are values that we wrongly place ahead of our response to God's call.

Departing Hymn

Distribute copies of the tune "My Life Flows On In Endless Song." If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.