

Where is God? (2) Heaven or Earth

Based on the book Heaven by Paula Gooder.

Up until Jesus time the idea that people who died went to heaven didn't really exist. There were a few good souls, Abraham, Methuselah, Elijah, who were very righteous and went to live with God, but the rest went down to Sheol. In fact for a long time there wasn't even that, people just disappeared when they died. Then the idea that maybe people do carry on living, so there must a place, but it was a bit like sleep. So much later the idea of resurrection came along, but it was thought it would be at the end of times, when God comes back to judge the world, the dead will rise and be with God then.

With Jesus our ideas change so that we go to be where Jesus is. Christianity is about being united with Jesus, in baptism and we participate in his death and resurrection when we take the bread and wine. So what happens to Jesus happens to us, and Jesus ascends to heaven, so we ascend with him where he is. So the idea is that heaven is where the dead in Christ go. And because heaven is outside our normal understanding of time, they are there already, they don't have to wait for the end of time.

But this isn't fixed or settled. You will see in Thessalonians and Revelation different understandings of those timing and what happens to people when they die. Especially because the early church thought Jesus was going to come back any day, so it didn't really matter if the dead were "asleep" for a week or a year. Now we're up to 2000 years and we're thinking, are they still just asleep - how is that working? In Revelation there's the amazing picture of the people under the altar saying "how much longer lord, before we can rise up again?"

So this idea of heaven for most of the bible, is not a place where the dead go. In Genesis - we are told that God made the heaven and the earth by dividing the world into stuff below and stuff above. Earth was for us humans, but God couldn't dwell there, by whatever law of spiritual physics, and so God made heaven as a place for him to dwell, to be as close as possible to us. So he can be very close.

This idea is expanded in the idea of the temple in Jerusalem - a place where heaven and earth touch. The temple is his footstool, or where he sits on the cherubim and seraphim above the ark of the covenant. In the exile people are taken away from Jerusalem, so they've lost contact with God. But Ezekiel's vision of the throne on wheels - a rolling chariot - a way that God can come to his people, and be with him. In Isaiah it says raise up the valleys, make a highway, so that this chariot can come to where people are. A highway of holiness.

And then all that is superseded in Jesus. He becomes the temple, he become the link between heaven and earth. That's how we get to heaven.

So heaven is this idea that its where God dwells, and is close to us as he can be, its not really for us.

Then, with Jesus, if we are united with him, we e go to where he is, and he is in heaven.

Although... I have a feeling.. and it is just my feeling..

That heaven is a place where God dwells, and the angelic beings with him, and there is worship going on. Btu that this earth will be renewed, wont' be swept away. When we become Christians we're not destroyed but a new creation starts and we're renewed from within. So could that happen to the earth?

Actually I'd quite like to spend my next life gardening, working, making this earth beautiful. We're made to work, we get a great deal of satisfaction from it. So why wouldn't we want to use those skills, and live in a redeemed earth? The afterlife might not be about sitting round on clouds, its about beekeeping or bookkeeping or filmmaking or accountancy or cooking or all these things. But doing them without any kind of sin or fault, or anything that gets in the way.

God is there, god is here, and its a mystery what happens we die. But with Jesus there is a hope of a life after this one. And there is a hope that all will be redeemed one day.