

# essentials : how big is your gospel?

James Paul considers the truth about heaven



And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! For then would I have flown away, and be at rest.  
 7 Lo, they would I wonder for it, and remain in the wilderness. Yet I would have my refuge from the windy storm and tempest.  
 8 Destroy, O Lord, and discomfit those who hate me, for I have been upon the walls thereof: mischief and sorrow are in the midst of it.  
 9 Wickedness is in the right of the chariot horses, and galleys have been in her streets.  
 10 For I was out to reason, and reproached me: then I went home in bitterness: neither was it for me that I did magnify myself above the Lord.  
 11 But it was thus, a mine of gold, my guile, and mine own craft.  
 12 We will speak vainly, and will be as the wind in a compass.  
 13 For he hath afflicted me out of his desire, and hath hated me.

### PSALM 55

To the chief Musician on Neginoth, Maschil.  
 1 A Psalm of David, when the Philistines were at Gath. Doth not travaill himself with us?

HEAR me, O God, by my name, and judge me by thy strength.  
 2 Hear my prayer, O God: give ear to the words of my mouth.  
 3 For strangers are risen up against me, and oppressors have sought my soul: they have not set God before them. Selah.  
 4 Behold, God, is mine helper: the Lord is with them that uphold my soul.  
 5 He shall reward evil unto mine enemies: cut their off in thy wrath.  
 6 I will praise thee, O Lord, as long as I live: I will praise thy name, O Lord, for ever.  
 7 For he hath delivered me out of all tribulation, and hath preserved my life from the hand of death.

### PSALM 56

To the chief Musician on Neginoth, Maschil.

BECAUSE OF THE VOICES OF the enemy, because of the oppression of the wicked for us: I am inwardly oppressed, and in wrath they have risen.  
 4 My heart is sore pained within me, and the terrors of death are fallen upon me.  
 5 Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and there hath overwhelmed me.

PSALMS 55-58  
 22 Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved.  
 23 But thou, O God, shalt bring them down into the pit of destruction: bloody and deceitful men shall not live out half their days; but I will trust in thee.

### PSALM 56

To the chief Musician on Neginoth, Maschil.

BE merciful unto me, O God, for a man would swallow me up daily, oppressing me: mine enemies will show me up: for they will fight against me, O Lord.  
 3 What time I am in trouble, I will trust in thee.  
 4 In God I will praise him: I have put my fear what flesh earne.  
 5 Every day they will say, O Lord, all their thoughts are against me: they will say, O Lord, he hath delivered me out of all tribulation.

### PSALM 57

To the chief Musician, Al-taschith, Michtam of David, when he fled from Saul in the cave.

BE merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee: yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast.  
 2 I will cry unto God most high, unto God that performeth all things.

om heaven, a  
 approach of h  
 me up. Se'l  
 his mercy a  
 lions: and I  
 hat are set  
 of men, wh  
 nd arrows, a  
 sword.  
 O God, ab  
 glory be ab

red a net for  
 ved down: f  
 ore me, int  
 are fallen th

ed, O God,  
 I sing and g

glory: awa  
 I myself v

O Lord, amo  
 sing unto th

s great unto  
 ruth unto t

, O God, abo  
 glory be abo

### 58

1, Al-taschith,  
 David  
 righteousness  
 o ye judge up  
 nen?  
 work wicke



James Paul is director of English L'Abri and a former palliative care doctor

The apostles chose the word *euangelion*, Greek for 'good news', to describe the message of Jesus. The word 'gospel' that we use today comes from the Anglo-Saxon for this same word. But what exactly is the good news of the gospel? It is a common thing amongst evangelical Christians to summarise the gospel as, 'Jesus died on the cross for our sins so we can go to heaven'. But is this really the good news that the apostles spoke of?

When we look at the Bible we see that the gospel is much bigger than saving souls for heaven. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul says that God's will is 'to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ' (Ephesians 1:10). The problem with the gospel statement, 'Jesus died for our sins so we can go to heaven', isn't so much that it is wrong, but rather that it is too small. It is a reduction of the cosmic truth of what God is doing in and through Jesus Christ. And the big problem with this smaller gospel is that it can reinforce a division between heaven and earth that leads to an unhelpful dualism<sup>1</sup> in the lives of many Christians.

The more we think that God is wanting to take us out of this material creation and into a spiritualised heaven, the more likely we are to think that to be truly spiritual we must disengage from the everyday things of earthly life and focus on the inner life of the soul. This split in reality between heaven and earth, soul and body, the spiritual and the secular, has been a persistent thorn in the flesh of the church from the earliest times. It is present in the idea that we must treat our physical bodies harshly as a necessary spiritual discipline for the soul,<sup>2</sup> and in negative attitudes to sex as something best avoided if we want to live a pure spiritual life.

Even today this dualistic way of seeing reality provides an implicit background for many Christians, so that they see their lives divided into a primary spiritual realm of church activity, Bible reading, prayer and evangelism, and a secondary

less important 'secular' realm filled by work, leisure, relationships and education. Cultural engagement, social action, creativity, academia and caring for nature, all become unimportant backdrops to the 'real' spiritual drama of saving souls for heaven. Yet as we have seen, God's plan is to bring everything in heaven and earth together under the loving lordship of Jesus Christ. What then is a better way to understand the relationship of heaven and earth?

So rather than a location, I think it is better to see heaven as a dimension of reality – the dimension where God's heavenly will is done

### the throne room of God

The Bible writers focus less on the idea of heaven as a place 'out there in the universe where God lives' and more as the throne room of God.<sup>3</sup> This emphasises heaven as the place from where God rules and where his will is done. So rather than a location, I think it is better to see heaven as a dimension of reality – the dimension where God's will is done. The Bible story starts in Genesis with a meeting of dimensions, a perfect earthly garden where God's heavenly will is done. The mission God gives humanity is to extend his good and loving will so that the whole earth is brought under the dimension of heaven.<sup>4</sup> When the first humans rejected God and closed their hearts to his will, the way between heaven and earth was shut.<sup>5</sup> Yet God's response was not to sit in a distant heaven and wait for the faithful to find ways to reach him. His response was to open doors from heaven through which he could come down to earth and begin the work of redeeming a hurting and broken world.

### doors

There are many examples in the Bible of these doors from heaven to earth - Jacob's ladder,<sup>6</sup>

the burning bush,<sup>7</sup> the giving of the law on Mount Sinai,<sup>8</sup> God coming to dwell on earth in the tabernacle<sup>9</sup> and the temple.<sup>10</sup> But in the gospel God opens a door in his very self by taking on human flesh; Jesus Christ is 'the heavenly man',<sup>11</sup> fully God and fully human, fully of heaven and fully of the earth. His mission, by dying and rising again, is to pay the price for the sins of humanity so that the holiness of heaven and the sin-infected earth can be reunited once again. Jesus didn't die just so that the souls of the righteous might escape to heaven. Jesus died so that everything in heaven and on earth might be brought together in one joyful and glorious new creation. That is what the apostle John saw in his final vision of a new heaven and a new earth.<sup>12</sup>

## The mission God has given is nothing less than being part of bringing all things, in heaven and on earth, under Christ

The extraordinary wonder of the gospel is that when you become a Christian you become a meeting place of heaven on earth. The Spirit of God comes from heaven to live within you so that you are empowered to carry out God's will on earth. You become a mini-tabernacle, a mini-temple, a mini-dwelling place of God on earth, from which the loving power of heaven can flow out to redeem the broken world around you. Telling people the good news of the gospel is vitally important because they need to know how they can become a part of heaven on earth. But the mission that God has given his Spirit-filled people is far larger than just winning souls for heaven: it is nothing less than being a part of bringing all things, in heaven and on earth, under Christ.

### Christ is Lord over all

This is why there is no secular-spiritual split in the Christian life. As the Dutch theologian and Prime Minister Abraham Kuyper put it, 'There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ does not cry, Mine!'<sup>13</sup>

## FURTHER READING



This article is based on James's new book *What on Earth is Heaven?* (IVP) which is available at [IVPbooks.com](http://IVPbooks.com) and on [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk). In it he explores what the Bible has to say about questions such as 'what is heaven?', 'where is heaven?', 'why can't science find heaven?', 'what happens to us after we die?' and 'what does heaven have to do with our lives now on earth?'

Everyone has their unique part to play in bringing the kingdom of heaven to their square inch of the earth, no matter how small or insignificant we may feel that part to be. Christ is Lord not just of religious things or of souls, he is Lord of bodies and minds, of ideas and emotions, of science and the natural world, of medicine and ecology, of business and economics, of the whole of human history and the whole of human civilisation. ■

## REFERENCES

1. 'Dualism' is the philosophical term for the division of reality into two opposite and often opposing realms.
2. See Colossians 2:20-23
3. 2 Chronicles 18:18, Matthew 5:34
4. Genesis 1:28
5. Genesis 3:23-24
6. Genesis 28:10-15
7. Exodus 3:2-4
8. Exodus 19:20
9. Exodus 40:34
10. 1 Kings 8:11
11. 1 Corinthians 15:48
12. Revelation 21:1
13. From Kuyper's inaugural address at the dedication of the Free University, Amsterdam; Bratt JD (ed), *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 1998:488