

The Levels of Heaven

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

26 April 2026

Children's Talk: Getting Closer to the Lord

The Children of Israel did not have a church building like we have. Instead they had a special tent, called the Tabernacle. In the middle of the Tabernacle was the Ark of the Covenant. This was a box that had the Ten Commandments inside of it. It was incredibly important. It was so special that only the most important priest could go into that middle room, and he could only do that once a year. The next room was also special: it had a lamp, a table, and an altar of incense. Only the priests were allowed into this room. All around the Tabernacle there was a courtyard. This was where they made sacrifices to the Lord. The priests, their helpers, and the Children of Israel were allowed in this area. Anyone who was unclean had to stay outside.

This doesn't seem fair: only some people were allowed to get close to the Lord! That isn't true anymore: everyone is able to get close to the Lord, and in fact the Lord wants everyone to be as close to Him as possible. But there are different ways of getting closer to the Lord, and some of them get us closer than others.

1. The simplest way to get close to the Lord is just doing what the Lord says.

Even when we don't feel like it, we can just make ourselves do the right thing even if we aren't happy about it and are grumpy. But remember that this is still a way of being close to the Lord! It is good, even if we don't feel good about it.

2. We get even closer to the Lord when we actually think about what He says, try to figure out how it will help someone else, and because it helps someone else and we care about other people we are willing to do it.
3. We get the closest to the Lord when we love doing what He says and do it without even having to think too much about it. We can actually love doing the good things the Lord tells us and it can feel very joyful.

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An important question for anyone of faith is whether you are going to get to heaven. In some sense this is *the* question of faith. Everything we do in this world is either leading us towards an eternity in heaven or away from it. But it's important that we not fall into the trap of thinking of this as a pure binary: Yes it matters whether or not you'll make it; but there is nuance beyond just whether you will make the cut. Heaven is a varied and diverse place, with different types of angels with different approaches to the Lord and life. Each of these variations reflects variations within our own minds and hearts. Because of this reality, to talk about what heaven might be like for us is to talk about who we are in the here and now. It's not just a question of "am I a good person?" it's a question of, "what kind of good person am I?" So today we are going to look at the three most general divisions of heaven, and reflect on what they can tell us about who we are as people.

The topic of the children's talk is a useful starting point. The Tabernacle is actually a model or a map of how heaven is arranged; Moses was even shown the pattern for the tabernacle by being allowed to see into heaven, rather than just being told what to do (Exodus 25:8-9, 40; 26:30; *Secrets of Heaven* §9457). The layout had three basic sections:

1. The holy of holies, the central room in which was the Ark of the Covenant, containing the Ten Commandments;
2. the holy place, the outer room, essentially a foyer, in which were the lamp and table of bread, and an incense altar, where the priests ministered;
3. and an open-air courtyard all around the tent itself, where the people could come and the main sacrifices were made.

This threefold division is actually mirrored in the layout of the church: there are three levels leading up to the altar where the Word is kept.

Each one of these sections, according to the Teachings of the New Church, represents a level of heaven: the innermost shrine, where the Ark was kept, represents the highest heaven, called the heavenly or celestial heaven, where the best angels live, and the Lord is most fully present. The outer room represents the middle heaven, called the spiritual heaven, where the angels are more distant from the Lord. And the outer court represents the lowest heaven, the natural heaven, where the most superficial and distant-from-the-Lord angels live. This information could just seem like a bit of spiritual trivia. But remember, the Kingdom of God, that is, Heaven, is not just a place that awaits us after death: it is something that exists within us:

Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, "See here!" or "See there!" For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20-21)

Since the kingdom of God is within us, we will only enter heaven after death if heaven already exists in our hearts and minds; and in fact, we will enter the level of heaven that matches the level of our minds. As a result, any time we learn about the nature of heaven, we are able to learn about our hearts and minds. In this case, just as there are three levels of heaven there are three levels to our minds.

Before we get into the specifics of what each one of those levels stands for I want to reflect on the fact that there are different sections, each one more interior than the last. Spiritual life is a process. In the process we can be further away from or closer to the Lord (We can also of course turn our backs on the Lord and so be in hell, spiritually speaking). But assuming we are on that path towards heaven, that

does not mean our work is done. The Lord's goal for us is that we get continually closer to Him:

The Lord, from the Divine love or mercy, wills to have all near to Himself; so that they do not stand at the doors, that is, in the first heaven; but He wills that they should be in the third; and, if it were possible, not only with Himself, but in Himself. Such is the Divine love, or the Lord's love. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1799)

Even the best of the best can still improve and so grow closer to the Lord. No one ever arrives at perfection. There are two useful takeaways from this that come to mind for me. On the one hand, it can be freeing: even though I am far from perfect, I can still be in a heavenly state, a heavenly mind frame. The lowest angels, the most limited and imperfect, are still in heaven, and the Lord loves that they are in heaven with Him. On the other hand, I must also not become slack, as if barely squeaking across the threshold of heaven should be my goal. There is always room for growth and improvement! Being heavenly does not require perfection; nor does being heavenly mean perfection has been attained.

But it's also not just a matter of continuous gradual growth. Each heaven, and so each level of the mind, has unique traits or qualities that build on the ones that go before. Here is how one passage of the Teachings of the New Church puts it:

These three degrees of life in a person are opened successively:

1. the first degree by a life in accordance with what is fair and just;
2. the second degree by a life in accordance with the truths of faith from the Word, and in accordance with the consequent goods of charity toward the neighbour
3. and the third degree by a life in accordance with the good of mutual love and the good of love to the Lord.

These are the means whereby are successively opened these three degrees of life in a person, thus the three heavens in him. (*Secrets of Heaven* §9594)

We'll now look at each one of these stages and reflect both on how it can be good enough but also leave room for improvement.

The lowest heaven is called the natural heaven. It describes a state of life in which the focus is on fairness and justice. It is a mindset embodied in the golden rule:

Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 7:12)

This is the baseline of heavenly life: whatever else you think or feel about another person, treat them the way you want to be treated. Be fair and kind in your dealings. Think of your reaction when a friend asks for a ride to the airport on the weekend. You really don't want to go; you are annoyed that they asked; but they do favours for you sometimes, and you know they would give you a ride to the airport if you asked them. And the Lord says you are supposed to do for other people what you want them to do to you. So you grudgingly agree and somewhat resentfully do the lift. Now something really important to note here: you are on some level being heavenly! Grudgingly and resentfully perhaps, but it is a mindset that will get you into heaven. You are loving the Lord and your neighbour on that most basic level.

A level up though in your approach would take you to something more heavenly, into the middle heaven. The middle heaven is called the spiritual heaven. It describes a state of life in which the focus is on truth from the Word and charity towards the neighbour. It is a state of life exemplified by genuine care for other people, guided by truth from the Lord's Word. This is the attitude we see in the Lord's commandment about others:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34).

When you care about other people, and because of that care for them you look to the Lord and His teachings to better understand how to serve the neighbour, you have entered this middle heaven. Going back to our airport run example: a spiritual

person may not agree right away; but their immediate reaction would be to try to figure out if it is right, or another way to help even if they cannot do the lift. They think about how the Lord says to freely give, and so decides yes, it is the right thing to do. So they happily agree to help, even though it is inconvenient. Just like the first example, they are loving the Lord and the neighbour, but this time more deeply.

The highest level is the heavenly one. This one embodies the heart of what it means to be heavenly, and is called the heavenly heaven. It is characterized by pure love: love to the Lord above all else, and shared love for everyone else. The nature of this love is that it does not question what is right; it sees immediately what is good and gets to work. We see an illustration of this in the parable of the reaper and the harvest:

And He said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground, and should sleep by night and rise by day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he himself does not know how. For the earth yields crops by itself: first the blade, then the head, after that the full grain in the head. But when the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26-28)

The farmer does not need to know how the plants have grown up; he simply knows that when the time for harvest arrives he immediately needs to start reaping. In the case of a heavenly person it is his genuine, deeply felt love that enables him to see what is true. In the case of the airport run, the heavenly person would not spend time thinking about what is right or weighing up the options. He would immediately feel love for his friend, and from that love genuinely want to do him a favour, and carry it out happily. The opportunity to serve would be a joy. Heavenly people can seem naïve or blind to the rest of us, and it's important to note that a truly heavenly person is neither of those things: they really will care about what is right or wrong; they really will be able to tell if something is true or false. But a lot of that sight comes from an inner feeling that is opaque to an outside observer.

Everyone who loves the Lord and their neighbour is already connected to one of these three levels of heaven; and in any given circumstance you might find yourself leaning towards one or the other of these attitudes. All of them count as being in heaven. But with that as the baseline, perhaps we can strive to grow. If we notice that we are stuck in the natural level, blindly doing what's right just because we know we should, with a certain degree of resentment, perhaps we should try to push ourselves to the spiritual level: try to understand the Lord truths and teachings, reflect on or get in touch with how these are for the sake of the people we care about, and strive to put them into practice with more intention and less resistance. If we are in the spiritual level, with a good understanding of what is right and applying it as best we can, perhaps we can reach for the heavenly degree: adding love to our understanding and closing the gap between thinking about what is right and doing what is right, such that our impulse to do good is strengthened. And should we realize that we do sense a love for the Lord and from the Lord that just pushes us into action without any need for thought or hesitation, we simply must remember not to become complacent and think that we are perfect, and instead keep looking for those ways to grow. Every step in our spiritual growth is a step closer to the heaven and to the Lord.

The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, "See here!" or "See there!" For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you. (Luke 17:20-21)