

How far is Heaven when we look up into the sky?
Q's from the Pews 2018

During the 1960's, the Soviet Union ran an anti-religion campaign based on their cosmonauts' experience in space. As the story goes, the cosmonauts looked around in outer space but were not able to see God. Therefore they concluded 'there is no God' (<https://www.businessinsider.com/strange-connection-between-russian-astronauts-and-god-2014-7>).

They went all the way into outer space and could not find God. Maybe they should have gone even higher?

Even if they had gone higher, they wouldn't have found God, because God's presence in Heaven is not a geographical location that we can measure. Heaven is on an entirely different plane of existence. And technically speaking, the Bible describes Heaven in at least three different ways.

1. In one sense, 'heaven' describes everything that is located 'above' the earth. Ecclesiastes 3 for example says: "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity *under* heaven" (Ecc 3:1 NIV). And psalm 19 equates 'heaven' with 'sky': "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1 NIV).

2. Given the 'heavenly' nature of 'the heavens above,' early believers understood God to inhabit those heavenly realms. And so 'heaven' in the Bible also means the place where God dwells. For example, Psalm 14 and 103: "The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men" (Psa 14:2 NIV); "The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all" (Psalm 103:19 NIV).

This 'heavenly presence of God' though is not the same as the 'heavens above the earth' and we know that because the book of Hebrews describes everything that exists as we know it as but a copy and shadow of heaven where God is (See Hebrews 8:5; 9, 10). This means that 'heaven where God is' is right now outside of our realm of experience and existence. The 'distance' between heaven and earth is more like the distance between a chair and its shadow than a farm house and its barn.

3. The Bible also describes Heaven as the eternal dwelling place for God and His people – although, technically, the Bible describes that more as 'the new heavens and the new earth.' Our eternal experience of Heaven is not 'pearly gates' and 'puffy clouds' but a renewed heaven and earth where we will experience the world as God intended it before the Fall in the Garden of Eden (see 2 Peter 3:13, Revelation 21).

To answer the question then, when you look up, you will not be able to see 'Heaven' where God exists, no matter how powerful your telescope is. The heavenly realm where God lives is entirely outside of the realm where we live. But the time is coming when Jesus will return and establish the new heavens and the new earth on the footprint of the old one and we will experience life with God forever. A rocket ship won't get you there – but faith in Jesus will.

- Graham Gladstone