

THEOLOGY IN COMMUNITY

HEAVEN

Edited by CHRISTOPHER W. MORGAN
and ROBERT A. PETERSON



Contributions by Gerald Bray, Ray Ortlund, Stephen Wellum, Jonathan Pennington, Ajith Fernando, Andreas Köstenberger, Jon Laansma, Stephen Noll, David Calhoun

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Vice President, Acts 29; Chaplain to the St. Louis Cardinals; author,
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HEAVEN

Christopher W. Morgan and
Robert A. Peterson, editors

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Heaven

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To our wives, Shelley Morgan and Mary Pat Peterson,
loving life-partners, best friends, dedicated wives
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BBR	*Bulletin for Biblical Research*
BDAG	*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*
BDB	*A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BJRL	*Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*
BTNT	Biblical Theology of the New Testament
EvQ	*Evangelical Quarterly*
ExpTim	*Expository Times*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JRE	*Journal of Religious Ethics*
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
L&N	*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
Neot	*Neotestamentica*
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum Supplements
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentaries
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
TDNT	*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries

TynBul	*Tyndale Bulletin*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*

SERIES PREFACE

As the series name, Theology in Community, indicates, theology in community aims to promote clear thinking on and godly responses to historic and contemporary theological issues. The series examines issues central to the Christian faith, including traditional topics such as sin, the atonement, the church, and heaven, but also some which are more focused or contemporary, such as suffering and the goodness of God, the glory of God, the deity of Christ, and the kingdom of God. The series strives not only to follow a sound theological method but also to display it.

Chapters addressing the Old and New Testaments on the book's subject form the heart of each volume. Subsequent chapters synthesize the biblical teaching and link it to historical, philosophical, systematic, and pastoral concerns. Far from being mere collections of essays, the volumes are carefully crafted so that the voices of the various experts combine to proclaim a unified message.

Again, as the name suggests, theology *in community* also seeks to demonstrate that theology should be done in teams. The teachings of the Bible were forged in real-life situations by leaders in God's covenant communities. The biblical teachings addressed concerns of real people who needed the truth to guide their lives. Theology was formulated by the church and for the church. This series seeks to recapture that biblical reality. The volumes are written by scholars, from a variety of denominational backgrounds and life experiences with academic credentials and significant expertise across the spectrum of theological disciplines, who collaborate with each other. They write from a high view of Scripture with robust evangelical conviction and in a gracious manner. They are not detached academics but are personally involved in ministry, serving as teachers, pastors, and missionaries. The contributors to these volumes stand in continuity with the historic church, care about the global church, share life together with other believers in local churches, and aim to write for the good of the church to strengthen its leaders, particularly pastors, teachers, missionaries, lay leaders, students, and professors.

For the glory of God and the good of the church,
Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson

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1

LEARNING ABOUT HEAVEN

ROBERT A. PETERSON



> But, as it is written,
>
> > “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
> > nor the heart of man imagined,
> > what God has prepared for those who love him”—
>
> these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.—1 Corinthians 2:9–10

Paul’s words are ironic. On one hand, he says that “what God has prepared for those who love him,” what Paul calls “our glory” (in 1 Cor. 2:7), is beyond human knowing (v. 9). It is inaccessible to human senses; we cannot find it out. Moreover, “the heart of man” cannot even imagine its greatness. On the other hand, in the very next verse, the apostle affirms, “these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit” (v. 10).

So which is it, Paul? Is heaven beyond human imagining? Or is it revealed through the apostles in Scripture? The answer is yes!—it is both. On our own, we have no access to the divine. But God has stooped to reveal himself supremely in the apostles’ preaching and writing of Scripture. Thus we can know what God has told us ahead of time about heaven.[1]

The problem is that we human beings show an incorrigible tendency not to be satisfied with Holy Scripture. As a result we seek knowledge of “the other side” in the wrong places. This has been true throughout church history, as well as in our own day. We will briefly explore:

- Tondal, an Irish knight who, about 1150, was given a guided tour of heaven in a dream;

- The Adamites of the 1400s, who sought to bring heaven down to earth by their efforts;
- Betty Eadie, whose out-of-the body experience in 1973 launched a best-selling book; and
- The Heaven's Gate cult of the 1990s, which tried to go to heaven in a flying saucer.

Tondal: A Visit to Heaven in a Dream in 1150

This is the story of Tondal, an Irish knight who visited hell and heaven in a dream in 1150. The tale, originating in an Irish Benedictine monastery, influenced medieval literature and art. Tondal's guardian angel sought to sanctify the knight by leading his soul through hell's punishments. He suffers the terrible, physical pains of hell, including gross torments.[2]

Tondal's soul also experiences sensual delights when he is taken to an earthly paradise with three exquisite walls made of silver, gold, and precious stones, respectively. Passing through the first wall of gleaming silver, he sees godly laypeople in shining white clothes singing praises to God as they long for Christ's return. The knight is overwhelmed by the delicious scents, sights, and sounds of heaven on earth. All pain and suffering are banished.[3]

Next, the angel leads our knight through a second wall—of glimmering gold—where resplendent people sing sweet praises. Dressed in silk, they sit in golden chairs and are adorned with gleaming crowns. A hint of the tale's purpose is revealed: these people had sexual experience but were later purified through martyrdom or asceticism.[4] The story extols monastic virginity.

Going deeper into the same beautiful land, Tondal sees people playing charming music amidst glorious surroundings. Who are they? They are the most obedient monks and nuns.

> Tondal cannot enter, because the Holy Trinity is present and also because once a person has gone inside, he can no longer be separated from the communion of saints. Tondal is not dead and so must return to life and die in sanctity before he can enjoy the beatific vision. But the angel gives him a second reason: he cannot enter because he is not a virgin. Here in the inner monastic precincts of the golden land only perpetual virgins are allowed. . . . He must stay outside, but even so he rejoices with all of his senses.[5]

Tondal comes to a huge tree with singing birds in its branches and sweet fruit dangling from its limbs. "Here are the cloistered virgins of both sexes who have never ceased praising and blessing the Lord. Each wears a golden crown and

bears a golden scepter."[6] The tree is the church; the virgins are its builders and defenders.

The angel leads the knight to the third and most glorious wall. This one is not made of silver or gold but is composed of gems, with gold for mortar! The precious stones are those of Revelation 21, including jasper, sapphire, emerald, onyx, beryl, and topaz (vv. 19–21). The tale's glorification of monastic virginity reaches its apex when Tondal climbs the wall and beholds the perpetual virgins among the nine orders of angels. The knight hears ineffable words before waking up from his dream. As a result of his journey, Tondal is full of wisdom and is converted.[7]

Jeffrey Burton Russell is accurate: "In this vision of ascetic hierarchy, virgin monastic superiors are at the summit."[8] This tale of a knight's journey to heaven on earth is propaganda for the monastic life in general and for monastic virginity in particular.

Sadly, our next specimen does not occur in a dream but in history. And its version of heaven on earth ends up being hellish, as we shall see.

The Adamites: Bringing Heaven Down to Earth in the 1420s and 1430s

Jan Hus (c. 1372–1415) was one of several Czech preachers who stirred up the people against the Bohemian higher clergy, which was largely German, very wealthy, and corrupt. Hus, a Roman Catholic priest and professor at the University of Prague, helped create a reform movement. He preached the Bible as the means to produce spiritual and moral change. He revised a Czech translation of the Scriptures to encourage the people to read the Word of God.[9]

Hus challenged the pope's power and threatened the status quo in Bohemia. When Hus was ordered by the archbishop of Prague to stop preaching, he refused and left the city in 1412. Although he was given a promise of safe conduct to the Council of Constance in 1414, when he arrived he was arrested, tried for heresy, and burned at the stake.

"Hus was more dangerous dead than alive. A widespread movement named after him developed"[10]—the Hussites. Though all were more extreme than Hus himself, they had a radical wing, the Taborites. The latter took their name from Mount Tabor, where Christ predicted his second coming, they taught. When the millennium did not come in February 1420, as they had predicted, they became revolutionary, viewing themselves as God's holy warriors. They gained many Bohemian adherents and fought their opponents with some success until

suffering a devastating defeat in 1434.[11]

But even the Taborites were not the most extreme Hussite group. That distinction belongs to the Adamites, also known as the Pikarts. This group taught many heresies.

> The Pikarts vaguely embraced a pantheistic concept of God. Denying original sin and the existence of Satan, they believed that they were fully redeemed and good. The Adamites lived as if all prophecies had been fulfilled and the millennium had already begun. In the belief that they were like Christ, and as innocent as Adam and Eve in Paradise, they wore no clothes, even in cold weather. They engaged in sexual promiscuity, prohibiting marriage and holding that all men possessed all women in common. Owning no property themselves, they believed that they had the right to seize other people's possessions. Thus they attacked neighboring villages, taking whatever they wanted and ruthlessly killing the inhabitants. The Adamites' savage and lewd behavior proved so shocking that a Hussite army exterminated them.[12]

If Tondal in a dream visited an earthly heaven especially for monastic virgins, and the Adamites believed they themselves had brought heaven down to earth, our next figure maintains she went to heaven and came back with astounding revelations from Jesus.

Betty J. Eadie: To Heaven and Back in 1973

"To The Light, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom I owe all that I have. He is the 'staff' that I lean on; without him I would fall."[13] So reads the dedication to Betty Eadie's *New York Times* number-one best seller, *Embraced by the Light*, her first-person account of an extraordinary near-death experience. She has shared her message with countless people through television appearances and hundreds of talks.

So what was Betty's remarkable experience? She had gone to the hospital on November 18, 1973, for a partial hysterectomy at her doctor's advice. She had successful surgery in the morning and, as she tells the story, that night died and left her body for over four hours before returning to it. Wonderful things happened to her in the spirit world. Although she was prohibited from remembering all that happened in her out-of-the-body experience, she remembers it was so great she did not want to return to her body or beloved

family.[14]

At death her spirit was pulled up and out of her body as if by a magnet. Her immediate feeling was one of great freedom, as her new body was weightless. She traveled great distances instantly and at will. She passed through a tunnel of dense blackness, aware that other people and animals were there. Though some lingered there, she went quickly until she saw a pinpoint of light in the distance. Racing toward the light, she saw the figure of a man standing in it, bathed in light more brilliant than any she had ever seen. She was literally embraced by the light, who was Jesus, "the Son of God, though he himself was also a God."[15] His presence overwhelmed her with unconditional love. Unlike what her childhood training by Roman Catholic nuns and Protestant Sunday school teachers had led her to believe, Jesus had no judgment for her but only great love, even as the purpose of his mission in coming into the world was to teach love.

While outside her body in heaven, Jesus taught her many things through direct impartation of knowledge. The result? She learned the equivalent of volumes instantly. She learned that all human beings had existed long before their births as spirit beings in heaven. She learned that all religions of the world are necessary so the preexistent souls who have been born into bodies might grow spiritually. She openly shares her conclusions:

> Having received this knowledge, I knew that we have no right to criticize any church or religion in any way. They are all precious and important in his [God's] sight. Very special people with important missions have been placed in all countries, in all religions, in every station of life, that they might touch others. There *is* a fullness of the gospel, but most people will not attain it here.[16]

She learned that all human beings have been endowed with free will by God, who would never override that freedom. She learned that God loves every human being with unconditional love and uses our experiences in life and after death to take away our fear. As a result, we will live with him forever as spirit beings with godlike qualities. All human beings are good and finally will be saved, though those who are too earthbound will have to linger in purgatory while they are healed by the light. "But eventually, they learn to move on to accept the greater warmth and security of God."[17]

Though much of her heavenly knowledge was lost when she returned to her

body, she distinctly remembered this:

> I traveled to many other worlds—earths like our own but more glorious, and always filled with loving, intelligent people. We are *all* God's children and he has filled the immensity of space for us. . . . I saw galaxies and traveled to them with ease and almost instantaneous speed, visiting their worlds and meeting more children of our God, all of them our spiritual brothers and sisters. And all this was a remembering, a reawakening. I knew that I had been to these places before.[18]

How was visiting these planets in other galaxies "a remembering, a reawakening"? And when had she "been to these places before"? The answer is, in her life as a preexistent soul, ages before she was born with a body. All of this, she claims, was directly communicated to her by Jesus in heaven. Who is Jesus, according to Betty Eadie's revelations? He is "the Son of God, though he himself was also a God."[19] Contrary to her Protestant upbringing, God the Father and Jesus were not "one being," but "Jesus was a separate being from God."[20] She learned Jesus was "a perfect man."[21]

The ultimate hope of Christians is based on Christ's death and resurrection and centers on the resurrection of the body and life with the Trinity and all other believers on a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1). Contrary to this, Betty sees no need for Christ to make atonement, regards "the earth . . . [as] only a temporary place for our schooling," and regards returning to her body as "abhorrent."[22] Her hope centers on being released from the prison house of the body at death and returning to the spiritual state she had as a preexistent spirit being in a spirit world.

At least eight times Mrs. Eadie appeals to the Word of God.[23] Sadly, she does not interpret the Bible in context even one time! Her view of heaven, purportedly gained directly from the less-than-divine Christ, contradicts Scripture in numerous places and squares much better with Mormonism. I do not feel a need to be able to explain exactly what happened to her in her near-death experience. But I am confident we should appeal to the Word of God and no one's experience, including Betty Eadie's, in matters pertaining to God and heaven.

We have learned of Tondal's dream visit to paradise on earth, the Adamites' failed attempt to bring heaven down to earth, and Betty Eadie's claim that Jesus taught her much in an out-of-the-body experience. Next we explore a modern cult that claims to have gone to heaven in a flying saucer.

The Heaven's Gate Cult: To Heaven in a UFO in 1997

The world was shocked in March 1997 when thirty-nine members of the Heaven's Gate cult committed mass suicide in Southern California by ingesting lethal drugs. But if people had known the history of the group's leaders—Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Nettles—they would not have been surprised at all.

Applewhite and Nettles went by various names: Bo and Peep, Pig and Sow, and Do and Ti. And the groups they founded over the years had various names too: the Human Individual Metamorphosis, the UFO People, and finally, Heaven's Gate. Convinced they were the two witnesses of Revelation 12, Applewhite and Nettles proclaimed a flying-saucer gospel for many years. Although the details of their message changed over the years, one theme remained constant: the two leaders had come to earth in a spaceship on a mission with an important message: "Only escape from our planet, doomed by pollution and decay, [can] save the human race."[24]

According to Bo and Peep, salvation involves moving outside the earth's atmosphere to the kingdom of God, which they conceived of as a physical place. Those who are saved will be "beamed up by a flying saucer and transformed into a higher level, that of resurrected people."[25] In the 1970s and 1980s the two leaders traveled in the western United States, seeking converts who would abandon families, friends, and employment to prepare for their ascent to space.

> By the 1990s the message of the UFO cult evidenced a more dramatic and apocalyptic tone. In 1985 Nettles had "left her human vehicle." By 1987 the practice of castration had been introduced. In the early 1990s the group believed that the lift-off might take place in the next two years. They even took out an advertisement in *USA Today* stating that "the Earth's present civilization is about to be recycled—spaded under." They were making their final bid for recruits. As they awaited the end, along came the Hale-Bopp comet. For most people it was a celestial wonder. But to the Heaven's Gate group it signaled the end. The tail of Hale-Bopp, they believed, concealed the UFO that would lift them up. But to be beamed up to the next level they had to leave their human containers. And this they did by swallowing a dose of lethal drugs.[26]

Conclusion

The knight Tondal explored an earthly monastic paradise in a dream; the

Adamites tried unsuccessfully to create heaven on earth; Betty Eadie claimed to have died, been "embraced by the Light," and returned back to tell about it; the Heaven's Gate cult tried to go to heaven in a UFO.

What do these four very different stories have in common? Actually, a number of things. They testify to the fact that human beings are inherently religious and made to worship God but sadly have a tendency to put things in God's place. Why do stories like these exist? What drives them is a deep inner longing for God. With Tondal the knight, humans long to dwell in bliss. The Adamites' misguided hope for heaven on earth is a dim reflection of a true biblical hope for that very thing, though it will not come by human effort but divine. In spite of Betty Eadie's very wrong theology, regarding Jesus as the focus of heaven is right. And although the Heaven's Gate's end was tragic folly, the desire to connect heaven and earth is God-given and will be realized in heaven's coming down to earth (Rev. 21:10).

Sadly, humans also have a tendency to put things in God's place. Curiously, though I did not see it at first, all four stories have a subtext of sexuality gone awry, whether Tondal's tale's putting monastic virginity above married life, the Adamites' lewd behavior, Betty Eadie's downplaying of the physical body, or Heaven's Gate's castration.

Most important for our purposes, however, is the fact that each of these stories involves the forsaking of the Word of God and clamoring for a substitute. The substitutes are church tradition (Tondal's story), human reason (the Adamites), mystical experience (Betty Eadie), and wild speculation (Heaven's Gate), respectively. Each story undervalues Scripture's authority and overvalues human ability to find God. And ironically, without their knowledge, each one demonstrates—in bright lights—the noetic effects of sin, to which we now turn.

The Noetic Effects of Sin

If we pay attention to the main prophetic text Paul quotes in 1 Corinthians 2:9, cited at the beginning of this essay, we discover these disconcerting words in the next two verses: "In our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment" (Isa. 64:5–6). Ever since Adam's fall, all human beings have come into the world guilty and corrupted by sin. And that sin affects the way we think; there are powerful noetic effects of sin. Paul is the most emphatic New Testament writer on this theme:

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Rom. 1:21–23)

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. (1 Cor. 1:20–21)

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (2:14)

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Cor. 4:3–4)

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. (Eph. 4:17–18)

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him. (Col. 1:21–22)

If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. (1 Tim. 6:3–5)

> And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Tim. 2:24–26)

> To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work. (Titus 1:15–16)

There is no mistaking Paul's evaluation of the unsaved mind—it is foolish, unable to accept spiritual truth, blinded by Satan, darkened, hostile, depraved, held in the Devil's snare, and defiled. Consequently, we are in the dark spiritually and in desperate need of the Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture if we are to know God and do his will. Indeed, we must heed Peter's advice concerning God's Word, "to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Pet. 1:19), that is, until Christ returns. Why? Peter answers: "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (v. 21). For this reason the essays in this book on final salvation (heaven) do not appeal ultimately to human reason, experience, or tradition but to the written Word of God. And this is also the reason why we must seek to ask questions the Word actually answers.

Now, it is possible for even well-intentioned believers to ask questions Scripture does not answer. What are some of these? Examples include the following:

- What age will we be in the age to come?
- Will we live as families or as one family of God?
- What will we be doing day in and day out?
- How will we interact with other Christians?[27]

It is also possible (and desirable!) to ask questions for which Scripture provides answers. Many of these questions will be answered in the pages of this book. And perhaps it is a good idea to give brief answers here to some of these questions.

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions concerning Heaven

- Will everyone go to heaven?
- What happens when believers die?
- What about purgatory?
- Will we recognize others in heaven?
- Will we be married and enjoy sex in heaven?
- Will there be sorrow in heaven over those in hell?
- What kind of bodies will we have in heaven?
- Will the current earth be completely destroyed and a brand-new earth created?[28]

Will Everyone Go to Heaven?[29]

Universalism holds that everyone will be saved. Its proponents use three biblical arguments. First, they appeal to passages that express God's desire to save all. Their favorite verse is, "This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3–4; see also 4:10; 2 Pet. 3:9).

Paul wants prayers to be offered "for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions," that Christians might enjoy "a peaceful and quiet life" (1 Tim. 2:1–2). Roman officials opposed believers, and wicked Emperor Nero was on the throne when Paul penned this verse. Paul, therefore, in verse 4 tells readers to pray even for ungodly rulers. He does not teach that all will be saved but that God intends for the gospel to reach all kinds of people.

Second, universalists also argue from passages that allegedly speak of the unlimited outcome of Christ's crucifixion. They most frequently cite this verse: "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men" (Rom. 5:18; see also John 12:32; Col. 1:20).

By "one act of righteousness" (in Rom. 5:18) Paul refers to Jesus' death. But this verse does not support universalism, as the next verse shows: "For as by the one man's disobedience the *many* were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the *many* will be made righteous" (v. 19). We cannot press the two occurrences of the word "all" in verse 18 ("condemnation for all . . . justification and life for all") any more than we can press the two occurrences of the word "many" in verse 19. Rather, "many" and "all" here are relative terms contrasted with the "one" trespass of Adam and the "one" act of righteousness of Jesus Christ. These contrasts emphasize the great effects of Adam and Christ on the human race. In fact, Paul restricts salvation to "those who receive the abundance

of grace and the free gift of righteousness" (v. 17).

Third, universalism's most popular argument is that Paul teaches the final salvation of all people. The favorite passage appealed to for this argument is, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. . . . Then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:22, 28). But this passage does not teach universalism. Verse 22 must be understood in light of verse 23, which explains "so also in Christ shall all be made alive": "But each in his own order: Christ, the firstfruits; then at his coming those who belong to Christ." Paul intends readers to understand "all" in verse 22 as equivalent to "those who belong to Christ" (v. 23). And only believers belong to Christ.

First Corinthians 15:28 speaks of God's being "all in all." This and similar passages (Eph. 1:10; Phil. 2:9–11), if taken by themselves, can be made to fit with universalism. But other verses in the books where these verses appear do not teach all will be saved. Universalists must shrink the biblical data to argue their case; they fail to take the whole Bible into account. As a result, universalism offers a false hope that inhibits Christian missions.

In addition to the fact that the universalist arguments are not convincing, Scripture in many passages teaches that not everyone goes to heaven. Here is a sample:

> And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Dan. 12:2)

> Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." . . . And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matt. 25:41, 46)

> And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched." (Mark 9:43–48)

> . . . when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. . . . (2 Thess. 1:7–9)
>
> He also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night. (Rev. 14:10–11)
>
> And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. . . . And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev. 20:10, 15)

What Happens When Believers Die?

Scripture teaches that at death believers' souls or spirits immediately go to be with Christ (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23). This is comforting, for we know that while death is often painful, God never leaves us nor forsakes us (Heb. 13:5). Our souls are made perfect in holiness (Heb. 12:23), and we enjoy being with Christ in perfect bliss. Believers who lose loved ones to death, therefore, grieve not "as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep" (1 Thess. 4:13–14).

However, if we view this interim existence in light of the Bible's story, we must label it temporary and abnormal. God created us as holistic beings with body and soul united. Christians' great hope therefore is not a disembodied existence in an intermediate state but a resurrected and holistic existence with the Trinity and all the saints on the new earth (John 5:28–29; 1 Cor. 15:20–23; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1).

What about Purgatory?

The Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory does not offer a chance for salvation after death. Rather, it is a place where the sins of believers not atoned for in this

life are purged. Purgatory is not a final destination, and all who go there will go to heaven. Though many hope to go to purgatory after death and eventually reach heaven, today many Catholics no longer believe in purgatory. Nevertheless, the documents of Vatican II affirm it.[30]

Three passages have been used to support the doctrine of purgatory: Matthew 12:32; 1 Corinthians 3:15; and 2 Maccabees 12:42–46 from the Apocrypha. But these are not a solid foundation for it. In Matthew 12:32 Jesus does not say some sins will be forgiven after death but, rather, those who commit the unpardonable sin will never be forgiven. In 1 Corinthians 3:15 "the Day" mentioned in verse 13 refers not to the time of death but to Christ's return and the last judgment. And there is nothing here about sins being purged after death or of people moving from purgatory to heaven.

We reject Rome's appeal to 2 Maccabees 12:42–46 from the Apocrypha as evidence for purgatory because we agree with the Jews, custodians of the Old Testament, who never accepted the Apocrypha as a part of Scripture. Actually, Roman Catholic scholars base their belief in purgatory on church tradition, but we do not put tradition on the same plane as the Bible. Instead, we subordinate all human teachings to Scripture and on that basis find purgatory lacking.

Furthermore, as the Reformers argued, purgatory is an insult to Christ's once-for-all and sufficient atonement for sins. "Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood" (Heb. 13:12; cf. 10:10). Our sins are purged by Jesus' suffering on the cross, not our suffering after death. There is no purgatory; when we enter Christ's presence, he will immediately and entirely purify us, as Paul teaches: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1 Thess. 5:23–24). Purgatory offers a false hope; according to Scripture, there is no "third place," but only two destinies for human beings: heaven and hell (Matt. 25:46; John 5:28–29; Rev. 21:7–8).[31]

Will We Recognize Others in Heaven?

While Christians will have ample time (!) to make many new friends in the new earth, Scripture leads us to anticipate recognizing those we have known in this life. This question often reveals confusion between what happens to believers at death and their eternal destiny. At death Christians' bodies rest in the grave, and their souls go immediately into Christ's presence. But this incorporeal, intermediate state is only temporary. When Christ returns, he will raise the dead

and unite our resurrected bodies and spirits, and we will enjoy him and one another forever. Resurrection means physical bodies, which in turn means we will recognize others.

The Word of God teaches that the risen Christ was recognizable (Matt. 28:9–10, 16–17; Luke 24:31–43; John 20:28). An objection is sometimes made that at times his followers did not recognize him after his resurrection. But these are exceptions, not the rule. God prevented the disciples on the road to Emmaus from recognizing him (Luke 24:16). One reason Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener was that she was not expecting him to rise. But when he called her name, she immediately recognized him (John 20:16). Oliphint and Ferguson are on the mark: "Like Christ, we too will be recognizable after the resurrection. Indeed, who and what we really are will be clearer than ever."[32]

Will We Be Married and Enjoy Sex in Heaven?

God created the family before the fall, and it was essential for the fulfillment of human beings' task to fill the earth and care for it. Paul regards marriage as a picture of the greater, more intimate reality of our union with Christ (Eph. 5:31–32). In this way the earthly family is a picture of Christ and the church (our heavenly family).

Jesus affirms this: "In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matt. 22:30). Jesus does not say we will become angels or be like them in every way—common misconceptions. The problem of humankind's aloneness is finally resolved by the heavenly family in the New Jerusalem. This implies that our relationship with our spouse will be enhanced in the new earth.

The New Testament teaches that the marriage covenant dissolves upon death (Rom. 7:1–2; 1 Cor. 7:39). This was the understanding of marriage in the Old Testament as well. In ancient Israel, if a husband died, his brother was supposed to marry the woman to keep the children and property in the family (see Deut. 25:5–6).

With the marriage covenant dissolved, what will our relationships be like in the new earth? We are all united to Christ; we are his spiritual siblings (Luke 8:19–21; Heb. 2:11–12) and coheirs with him in God's family. This does not mean our relationship with our spouse will be diminished. Rather, because of the absence of sin, we will know our spouse, friends, and loved ones better than we do now.

This question suggests another: Will there be sex in heaven? By now the

obvious answer is no. More explanation is in order. First, God created us male and female, in his image, and both that image and our genders will continue in the world to come. Males will still be males; females will be females. Though we will not need sexual relations, we will enjoy gendered relations even as we do now, only enhanced because sin will be a thing of the past.

But will the lack of sex make us dissatisfied in the resurrection? No, because we will be fulfilled by our relationship with the living God and other believers, which will be better than our best relationships, including sexual ones, now. In fact, sex only approximates the kind of intimacy we will experience in the new creation. It will be far better.

In a nutshell, while the marriage bond and sexual relations are dissolved at death, in the world to come the most important aspects of marriage will be improved. Fellowship with God and one another and deep friendships will be better than we can even imagine at present. We will love our spouses more and enjoy their company forever.

Will There Be Sorrow in Heaven over Those in Hell?

Scripture presents the final state of believers as the new earth, where we will be so in love with God, who first loved us in Christ, that all other loves will fade away by comparison, even for loved ones and friends who did not know Christ.

First, God and his judgments are just, as the Scriptures affirm (Deut. 32:4; Rom. 2:2–5). But God also "is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). And so in this life Christians ask God to save many people, especially those they love most.

Second, it is on the basis of this just judgment that God justly sends people to hell. The blood of the righteous, slain by those opposed to God, calls out to him for justice (Rev. 6:9–11). And justice is what God finally gives to all those who refuse his offer of salvation, consigning them to eternal punishment. In fact, for God to do otherwise would be for him to deny himself, which is impossible. This leads us to a third point.

Third, God's Word affirms what is difficult for us to conceive at present: we will praise God for showing his justice on the last day. We all want justice, especially when we are victims. And justice is what God promises in the future. The angel calls the saints to praise God for the fall of Babylon: "Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!" (18:20). God is both just and loving, and we will praise him for his justice toward the wicked and grace toward the righteous.

There will be no sorrow in heaven over those in hell, because God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (21:4).[33]

What Kind of Bodies Will We Have in Heaven?

Astonishingly, the Bible teaches that at his return the all-powerful Christ will change our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body: "Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself" (Phil. 3:20–21).

How does Paul describe our resurrected bodies? First, they will not be perishable or mortal, as our current bodies are, but imperishable and immortal (1 Cor. 15:42, 53–54). They will not be subject to illness, decay, or other loss. Our bodies will be raised as they were created to be—without the effects of the fall.

Second, our new bodies will be glorious (v. 43). Our present bodies are "sown in dishonor," ingloriously put into graves. Our resurrection bodies, however, will be "raised in glory" (v. 43) so as to be "like his glorious body" (Phil. 3:20–21).

Third, they will be powerful (1 Cor. 15:43). The apostle says they are "sown in weakness" but "raised in power" (v. 43). Unlike our current situation, in the next life we will never get tired or lack strength to do God's will. No longer will the spirit be willing but the flesh weak (Mark 14:38). Rather, body and spirit will be united and willing and able to serve God in the new earth.

Fourth, our resurrected bodies will be spiritual (1 Cor. 15:44). In the "resurrection chapter" Paul does not mean "nonphysical" when he describes our bodies as "spiritual." Rather, he means that our new bodies will be dominated by the Holy Spirit so as always to be eager to do God's will.

We have seen four ways our new bodies are not like our current ones. But this is only a part of the picture. It is important to underline the continuity between our present and future bodies! According to Romans 8:11, in the resurrection the God "who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to [our] mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in [us]." Paul stirs our imagination when he compares present and future bodies to seed and plant (1 Cor. 15:37). Though the seed bears little resemblance to the plant it becomes (and hence the four ways our bodies will be different from our current ones), there is continuity between seed and full-grown plant. Tulips come from tulip bulbs; roses from rosebushes. Similarly, *our own bodies* will be raised from the dead imperishable and

immortal, glorious, powerful, and spiritual.

Will the Current Earth Be Completely Destroyed and a Brand-New Earth Created?

Isaiah foresees the new heavens and the new earth: “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind” (Isa. 65:17; cf. 66:22–23). He predicts a future life that is new (65:17), joyous (v. 19), secure (vv. 20–23), peaceful (vv. 24–25), unending, universal, and worshipful (66:23). Many of these themes are picked up in the last two chapters of the Bible.

Jesus too promises a new world, the renewal of all things:

> Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. (Matt. 19:28–29)

Paul also longs for the new heaven and earth, the new creation:

> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:19–23)

The apostle presents the redemption of believers as a microcosm of the redemption of creation. By God’s grace we will be completely redeemed. We will have great glory (vv. 18, 21) and be freed from groaning over our struggles with sin (v. 23). We await our final adoption, “the redemption of our bodies” (v. 23), resurrection from the dead.

Thinking about our resurrection helps us to understand Paul’s words about the redemption of the cosmos. Our resurrection will involve a complete renewal of

our present persons—body and soul. And just as we will not be destroyed but renewed, so it is with God's creation. We are a microcosm of the macrocosm of creation. Even as we long for final salvation, the creation, personified as an expectant mother, does too. The creation is eager to "be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (v. 21). The creation longs for the curse's removal (vv. 20–22). This is not destruction and re-creation but great renovation of the present world. Paul's words help us to understand Peter's.

Peter also looked for the new heavens and earth. He emphasizes the difference between the present creation and the new one (2 Pet. 3:10–12). On the basis of his words some have argued for the extinction of the present cosmos and the creation of a totally new one:

> The heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire. (v. 7)
>
> The heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved. (v. 10)
>
> The heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! (v. 12)

Although those verses seem to teach destruction and re-creation, they do not. I say this for five reasons.

First, in the preceding verse Peter says: "The world that then existed was deluged with water and perished" (v. 6). "Perished" here does not speak of a literal destruction of the world but of its cleansing through the judgment of unbelievers in the flood. Similarly, when Peter speaks of heaven and earth being "burned up and dissolved," the result is not their destruction but that "the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed" under the glare of divine judgment (vv. 7, 10). The language of burning does not mean obliteration but is metaphorical of a deep cleansing of the earth, as in Noah's day.

Second, Peter compares the fates of the earth and unbelievers: "The heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly" (v. 7). The "destruction of the ungodly" does not include their extinction of being. Instead, it is figurative for the loss of all that is worthwhile in human life and signifies never-ending, conscious punishment (Matt. 25:41, 46; 2 Thess. 1:5–9; Rev. 20:10–15).

Third, all this fits Peter's description of the new heaven and the new earth:

“We are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13). He envisions a cleansing of sinners from the creation, resulting in righteousness rather than in an obliteration of the earth. Heide is apt: “When he [Peter] describes the new heavens and new earth, it is not a place with new physical substances or new elements of creation. He describes it as a place where ‘righteousness dwells.’”[34]

Fourth, such a view brings Peter into contradiction with Paul in Romans 8:20–21 and John in Revelation 22:3, both of whom speak of the removal of the curse, not the extinction and re-creation of the world.

Fifth, Romans 8:22–23 presents human beings and the creation as microcosm and macrocosm. Even as God will not annihilate and re-create us but will cleanse and transform us, so he will do for his world.

In Peter’s mind the governing model for the new creation is the complete perfection of the world, for redemption must reach as far as the damage of sin and its curse.

John in Revelation also sees the new heaven and the new earth. The passages we have surveyed point to this: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. . . . And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new’” (Rev. 21:1, 5).

In a vision John sees the new heaven and earth replace the first heaven and earth. Does the language here and in 20:11—which speaks of “earth and sky” fleeing away from the presence of the awesome judge, so that “no place was found for them”—indicate the destruction of the present world? It does not if we understand John’s apocalyptic vision.

Revelation 21:1 must be understood in light of 20:11. Placed alongside 6:15–16, where sinners try to hide from “the wrath of the Lamb,” 20:11 does not indicate the annihilation of the creation. In 20:11 the whole created order is personified as contaminated by human sin and fleeing God’s holy presence. This fleeing is symbolic of the comprehensiveness of the final judgment.

But what does 21:1 mean when it says, “the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more”? The words are not literal but rather descriptive of what John sees in his vision—the earth and the sea disappearing. The first heaven and death had departed from his sight. “He is using symbolic language familiar to his audience to emphasize the fact that the final judgment is over.”[35] Similar to 2 Peter 3, John symbolically communicates that a comprehensive purging of sin has taken place. But what about the disappearance of the sea, which, like the

heavens and earth, has disappeared in John's vision? Dennis Johnson answers well:

> The "sea" that no longer exists symbolizes the realm from which chaos and rebellion have emerged to ravage the first earth. . . . It was from the sea that John saw the beast emerge to receive the dragon's devilish power and wage his devilish war against the saints (Rev. 13:1). The sea in heaven is calm and clear as glass (15:2), but the earthly sea that gave rise to the beast stormed with restless, threatening rebellion. Its absence from the new earth further dramatizes the new home's peace and purity.[36]

Therefore, when God speaks in Revelation 21:5 he does not say, "I am making all things *anew*" but, "I am making all things *new*." I conclude from this survey of the words of Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, Peter, and John in Revelation that God will not completely destroy the current earth and create a brand-new earth. Instead, he will subject the present earth to a deep cleansing so as to renew it and fit it for his presence and that of his holy people.

A Roadmap to This Book

Our families have benefited from AAA's TripTik Travel Planner many times. A road map is a big help when exploring unfamiliar territory by car. It is the same for readers of a book, and for that reason we provide a road map. The foundation of each book in the Theology in Community series is Holy Scripture. Accordingly, this volume begins with Ray Ortlund's treatment, "Heaven in the Old Testament." Because final salvation receives more attention in the New Testament than in the Old, four chapters are allotted to it. Jonathan Pennington explores "Heaven in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts." Stephen Wellum tackles the difficult subject "Heaven in Paul's Letters." Jon Laansma takes up a neglected topic, "Heaven in the General Epistles," with some surprising results. Andreas Köstenberger, an expert in the Johannine literature, pens "Heaven in John's Gospel and Revelation."

Those five chapters provide a solid base upon which the rest of the volume stands. Robert Peterson, coauthor of a book on heaven,[37] in "Pictures of Heaven" traces five biblical images through the historical stages of creation, rebellion, redemption, and restoration: heaven and earth, Sabbath rest, the kingdom of God, God's presence, and God's glory. Our study would be lacking without attention to the history of the church's understanding of heaven, the very

thing Gerald Bray provides in "The History of Heaven." Stephen F. Noll, who wrote an important book on angels,[38] here brings his expertise to bear with "Angels and Heaven." Ajith Fernando, director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka, is better qualified to write his essay, "Heaven for Persecuted Saints," than any other contributor to this book. David B. Calhoun, who has far outlived medical predictions of his death by cancer and who knows his subject, writes "The Hope of Heaven."

We invite readers to accompany us on a tour of heaven, all the while respecting the fact that although the human heart cannot imagine "what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9), God himself has graciously revealed some of this in his Holy Word.

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[1] Ciampa and Rosner sum up matters well: "God prepares things beyond human comprehension for those who are his. . . . The reason Paul and other Christian teachers can declare God's wisdom, 'the things he has prepared' for all believers to receive, even though these things are inaccessible to humans, is that they have been *revealed* to them. The word *for* connects this verse [10] with vv. 6, 7, and 9 and introduces the necessary explanation. . . . The 'revelation' to which Paul here refers is not the illumination given to all believers, but the disclosure of God's full purposes in the cross and Christ Jesus to the apostolic preachers, which they in turn pass on to those who love him, with the goal that they might become 'mature.'" Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 128–29, emphasis added.

[2] Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 108.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 109.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., 110.

[9] *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 582.

[10] Richard Kyle, *The Last Days Are Here Again: A History of the End Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 51.

[11] Ibid., 52.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Betty J. Eadie, *Embraced by the Light: The Most Profound and Complete Near-Death Experience Ever* (New York: Bantam, 1992), dedication.

[14] Ibid., 1, 117–19, 125, 133–34.

[15] Ibid., 44.

[16] Ibid., 46, emphasis original.
[17] Ibid., 85.
[18] Ibid., 88, emphasis original.
[19] Ibid., 44.
[20] Ibid., 47.
[21] Ibid., 61, 73.
[22] Ibid., 124.
[23] Ibid., 39, 63, 69, 80, 85, 100, 114, 147.
[24] Kyle, *The Last Days Are Here Again*, 158–59.
[25] Ibid., 159.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Dan C. Barber and Robert A. Peterson, *Life Everlasting: The Unfolding Story of Heaven* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), 198.
[28] For fuller answers to these and other questions, see ibid., 197–212.
[29] For more detail, see Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995), 139–59; and Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *Hell under Fire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 169–94.
[30] "The doctrine of purgatory clearly demonstrates that even when the guilt of sin has been taken away, punishment for it or the consequences of it may remain to be expiated or cleansed. They often are. In fact, in purgatory the souls of those who died in the charity of God and truly repentant, but who had not made satisfaction with adequate penance for their sins and omissions are cleansed after death with punishments designed to purge away their debt." Austin P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 64.
[31] For more on purgatory, see Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, 225–28.
[32] K. Scott Oliphint and Sinclair B. Ferguson, *If I Should Die Before I Wake: What Is beyond This Life?* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2005), 84.
[33] For more on this subject, see Morgan and Peterson, *Hell under Fire*, 142–51.
[34] Gale Z. Heide, "What Is New about the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3," *JETS* 40 (March 1997): 54.
[35] Ibid., 43.
[36] Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 303–4.
[37] Barber and Peterson, *Life Everlasting*.
[38] Stephen Noll, *Angels of Light, Powers of Darkness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

2

HEAVEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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The word *heaven* appears in the Bible as early as its opening chapter: “And God called the expanse Heaven” (Gen. 1:8). The “expanse” is the canopy of sky above. Not surprisingly, this Hebrew word for heaven is illustrated by its Arabic cognate, which means “to be high, lofty, raised.”[1] But the rest of the Bible goes on to show that “heaven” is higher than it first appears.

We need not wait until Revelation 21–22 to start seeing the heights of heaven. The whole Bible is the story of heaven above coming down to earth, deity coming down to humanity, grace coming down to the undeserving, to lift them up. To appreciate more fully how the biblical drama unfolds, one must read the Bible in two directions: from the beginning to the end, which is obvious, but also from the end to the beginning, which is less obvious but more illuminating. The eschatology illuminates the protology. This study of heaven and the Old Testament is premised in the validity of this two-directional reading of the Bible, centered in Jesus and his gospel.

Heaven appears in the Old Testament story in three ways: first, by episodic references; second, by developed narratives; and, third, by symbolic suggestions clarified in the New Testament.

Episodic References

Brief though they are, episodic references to heaven in the Old Testament should not be overlooked. The Bible instructs us not only by its explicit teachings but also by its embedded assumptions and givens. Indeed, its assumptions are some of its most revealing teachings.

What then do we learn from the Old Testament's offhand comments about heaven? Here is a representative sample. Heaven intervenes in human affairs with judgments from above that for this reason cannot be evaded (Gen. 19:24). The one who chose Israel could have made any nation his own, for all things belong to him, including heaven and "the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it" (Deut. 10:14; cf. 1 Kings 8:27; Neh. 9:6). "The heaven of heavens" is not an additional heaven but the totality of heaven, even as "all that is in it" clarifies the full extent of "the earth." The point is that the God who chose Israel is no local deity but far transcends all created reality. He was not stuck with Israel, therefore; he freely chose them (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26–29). Heaven is set apart as God's "holy habitation" (Deut. 26:15; cf. 1 Kings 8:30, 39, 43, 49; 2 Chron. 30:27). He dwells on high, not in the sense that he is uninvolved below but in the sense that he is above all earthly change, unlike the Baals, who died and rose and died and rose within the cycle of the annual seasons.

The holy habitation of God in heaven means he is not limited, nor can he be manipulated, but he makes the ultimate claim on man dwelling below. Elijah's life on earth ended when the Lord took him "up to heaven" (2 Kings 2:1, 11). Old Testament believers usually categorized the afterlife as a descent into Sheol (e.g., Gen. 37:35). But the death of the controversial prophet Elijah was attested by God with his dramatic seal of approval, an ascent into heaven above. The Lord's throne is in heaven (Ps. 11:4; cf. Ps. 2:4) and therefore unthreatened by earthly powers and final in its judgments. And not only is heaven his throne, but the earth is his footstool (Isa. 66:1). All created reality lies at his feet. This means that rather than to man-made temples or cathedrals, this high God comes down to the humble and contrite that tremble at his word (v. 2). Finally, as the prophetic faith clung to his sovereignty during hard times, the later literature of the Old Testament often refers to "the God of heaven" (e.g., 2 Chron. 36:23; Ezra 1:2). Indeed, the biblical interpretation of historical events is summarized in this simple but trenchant conviction: "Heaven rules" (Dan. 4:26).

If this sprinkling of Old Testament comments was all we knew about heaven, we would still have enough for a decisive answer to Dostoevsky's chilling but valid principle, namely, that if there is no higher world and thus no moral reckoning beyond this world, no afterlife and no final reward or punishment, then everything is permissible.[2] But the Old Testament tells us more.

Developed Narratives

Genesis 28

Six Old Testament passages enlarge our understanding of heaven. The first time the veil is drawn back and we are allowed a more sustained look into heaven, its vision is one of surprising grace. In Genesis 28, Jacob is not seeking God. He is running from his troubled past with Esau and toward a troubled future with Laban. But God interrupts him on the way. The striking thing is that the Lord does not reproach Jacob or even mention his embarrassing failures. His only message is one of gracious promise:

> Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (vv. 10–17)

The text is marked by four uses of "behold" (vv. 12, 13, 15). This Hebrew particle—*hinneh*—attracts special attention to what follows.[3] Three things thus compel our attention in the passage: "There, a ladder! Oh, angels! And look, the Lord Himself!"[4] Then the fourth "behold" interprets the theological significance of the first three: "Behold, I am with you" (v. 15).

The three focal points of the text deserve brief comment. First, the ladder: "And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven" (v. 12). The unique Hebrew *sullam* might mean "ladder," as in the ESV text. But since angels are ascending and descending on this structure, the ESV marginal reading, "a flight of steps," seems more likely.[5] The appearance is that of an ancient ziggurat, built as a human attempt to reach

up to God. One thinks, naturally, of Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel. But the pagan concept is corrected here, for this structure provided by God stretches down earthward and up heavenward, taking the Hebrew wording literally. The point is the divine removal of every obstacle and divine provision of complete access, even as we see in God incarnate, Jesus himself (John 1:51).

Second, the angels: "And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!" (Gen. 28:12). All his life Jacob has felt that he has to survive by his wits, and it has not gone well for him. He has never realized how involved God really is on his behalf. Now he sees the messengers of God running errands for their Lord, accomplishing a myriad of his gracious purposes on earth and returning to heaven for more orders. Jacob is not abandoned to himself. His future does not depend on his own devices. He has an ally in God, a God highly active on his behalf through "ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation" (Heb. 1:14).

Third, the Lord: "And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac' " (Gen. 28:13). How Jacob's past is forgiven and his future redefined is not at all dependent on who he is and what he can do but entirely on who the Lord is and what he can do. All of Jacob's hopes find their fulfillment in this one great reality: "I am the LORD." Commenting on a similarly absolute claim of God in Genesis 17:1, Marcus Dods paraphrases the force of this wonderful message of all-sufficient divine grace:

> I am the Almighty God, able to fulfill your highest hopes and accomplish for you the brightest ideal that ever my words set before you. There is no need of paring down the promise until it squares with human probabilities, no need of relinquishing one hope it has begotten, no need of adopting some interpretation of it which may make it seem easier to fulfill, and no need of striving to fulfill it in any second-rate way. All possibility lies in this: I am the Almighty God.[6]

The primary takeaway for Jacob from these three sights is defined by the fourth "behold," in Genesis 28:15: "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." In amazing grace, God assures Jacob he is "willing to cast his lot with this man, to stand with him in places of threat."[7] Jacob's existence is now guaranteed by all that God is.

The patriarch's response, appropriately, is stunned amazement: "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it. . . . How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (vv. 16–17). What Jacob had previously seen as his lonely and precarious existence is in fact the place of God's very presence, and now Jacob feels it. Now he can see that the hidden reality of his daily life, sins and troubles notwithstanding, is nothing less than mercies from on high moving toward an unworthy man in all his need. One again thinks of Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel, for *Bab-ilu*/Babylon means "gate of gods."[8] That impressive culture saw itself as the entry point for heaven on earth through human self-exaltation. But the gospel of Genesis reverses this way of thinking. It is the God of heaven who is moving down toward earth to take over. The only hope for this world, therefore, comes from beyond this world and is not subject to human control or manipulation.

The first impression of heaven revealed in the Old Testament is that of radical divine grace secretly but faithfully involved on behalf of the helpless, below.

Exodus 24

The second passage is Exodus 24 and the confirmation of the Sinaitic covenant. Representing the people of God, its leaders are summoned into God's presence, still worshiping "from afar" (v. 1).

> Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank. (vv. 9–11)

"Heaven" in verse 10 refers not to the abode of God but to the visible skies. Still, this passage opens a view into heaven seen from outside, from underneath, and just a glimpse. What is the insight provided here?

At Mount Sinai the leaders of Israel gather for an audience with their King. Surprisingly and bluntly, the Bible says, "They saw the God of Israel" (v. 10). Since the *visio dei* was fatal for sinners (33:20), theologians have long resisted the plain force of these words. The Hebrew is straightforward. But the Septuagint inserts its own meaning: "And they saw the place where the God of Israel stood." So do the Targumim: "They saw the glory of the God of Israel." And Saadia's Arabic version: "And they saw the angel of the God of Israel."

Maimonides construed the experience as metaphorical: “All these instances [including Exodus 24:10] refer to intellectual perception, and by no means to perception with the eye as in its literal meaning.”[9] Similar measures are taken to explain verse 11, where the Hebrew clearly says, “They beheld God.” Doubtless, those words must be qualified in some sense. But we must not explain them away with glib evasions. After all, what would be the point of noting that “he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel” (v. 11) if the nature of their experience was to be attenuated into something less than direct and personal? The danger was real because the sight was real. They beheld God.

But it is not God himself the text describes. The focus is directed lower: “There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness” (v. 10). What the leaders of Israel talked about after this experience was not what God himself looked like (Deut. 4:15). Their lasting impression was what lay beneath God’s feet. Lifting their eyes from the slopes of Sinai, they found themselves gazing up through the pavement of the heavenly throne room (cf. Ezek. 1:26; Rev. 4:6). Rather than opaque, the tile work was translucent and of great value—sapphire stone “like the very heaven for clearness,” that is, like the sky on a perfect day: beautiful blue, with nothing to mar or impair the view. God *wanted* heaven above to become visible from below and beautiful to the human eye.

In the presence of the high King, consistent with the vivid reality of the experience, the representatives of the people “ate and drank” (Ex. 24:1). Not only did they survive the experience of seeing God; they thrived. Presumably, the food came from the peace offerings referred to in verse 5. But the covenant was sealed by a sacred meal (cf. Gen. 31:44–46) as a matter of personal fellowship, not mere legal demand.

The insight of Exodus 24 into the reality of heaven is this: there is more to God than the law, as is obvious even at the ratification of the law. “Further up and further in,” to borrow from C. S. Lewis, higher than the heights of Sinai and its furthest reaching and most searching demands, far above the best we can achieve, the gracious Lord of heaven is inviting sinners into personal communion with himself. His highest category for us is not demand but welcome.

1 Kings 22

The third narrative view into heaven is provided in 1 Kings 22. The prophet Micaiah is shown the councils of God above as Jehoshaphat and Ahab form their

plans below. The news for Ahab is not good:

> And Micaiah said, “Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, ‘I will entice him.’ And the LORD said to him, ‘By what means?’ And he said, ‘I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And he said, ‘You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.’ Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you.” (vv. 19–23)

Two things stand out—one theological, the other moral. Theologically, are we to understand that God in heaven above works by committee? Does he need or even benefit from the ideas of his angelic servants? The prophet Isaiah asked,

> Who has directed[10] the Spirit of the LORD,
> or what man shows him his counsel?
> Whom did he consult,
> and who made him understand?
> Who taught him the path of justice,
> and taught him knowledge,
> and showed him the way of understanding? (Isa. 40:13–14)

Given the Old Testament’s clarity about the sovereign independence of God, the vision of heaven here in 1 Kings 22 is fascinating. The King is holding court. His angelic armies stand before him at attention, awaiting orders. But he puts a challenge to them: “Who will entice Ahab,” even to his defeat (v. 20)? Hands go up all over the room, with various proposals. Then one angelic spirit steps forward with a bold plan: “I will . . . be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets” (v. 22). He gets the job.

It is worth noting that God is the one who raises the question of a strategy for bringing Ahab down. The topic does not emerge from the angelic hosts, nor is it prompted by any inadequacy in God. Moreover, the outcome concerning Ahab is certain. The Lord intends to judge him. In addition, it is the Lord’s commission

and promise that make the angel's mission successful. The only question is one of method.

Still, 1 Kings 22 reminds us that the flinty objectivity of the Bible resists dogmatic over-categorization. I myself see the theological anomaly embedded in this passage as more delightful than problematic—God would, in some real sense, without diminishing himself, draw his mighty angelic servants into discussion and collaboration. And I gladly echo the restraint of John Calvin when he says God's sovereignty is "a secret so much excelling the insight of the human mind that I am not ashamed to confess ignorance. Far be it from any of the faithful to be ashamed of ignorance of what the Lord withdraws."[11]

The positive exegetical function of this surprising account of heaven is its contrast with the earthly counsels of Jehoshaphat and Ahab. The human kings are sitting on their grandiose earthly thrones (v. 10). But there is a higher throne above (v. 19). The false prophets of Samaria stand before the human kings with one message of foolish encouragement (vv. 11–12). But the superhuman hosts of heaven stand before the divine King with multiple strategies for overruling destruction (vv. 19–21). There is nothing in the text to require a limited view of God—quite the opposite. He is not a helpless spectator as events unfold on earth. He sits enthroned in heaven "above all earthly powers," to quote Luther, bringing judgment with inescapable inevitability.

What raises eyebrows here, concerning morality, is that God would get involved in enticing Ahab by a lie made plausible and popular through the false prophets. The thrice repeated "entice" is the key word (vv. 20, 21, 22). The older standard of Hebrew lexicography defined this word strongly as "deceive"[12]; the newer authority defines it more moderately as "persuade, convince."[13] But, however this Hebrew verb is nuanced, the problem remains in the explicit phrase "a lying spirit" in verses 22 and 23.

Does heaven tell lies? No. But heaven can use lies. Ahab says to Micaiah, "How many times shall I make you swear that you speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?" (v. 16). Outwardly, Ahab not only desires but demands the truth. But, in reality, his heart is open only to flattering assurances. What he wants is impossible—true flattery from heaven through the mouth of a true prophet so that he can then disregard God and do what he wants to anyway. What better plan to defeat such a man, therefore, than by strengthening the illusion he loves? Micaiah does give Ahab fair warning of defeat: "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd" (v. 17). But Ahab dismisses it as the same-old same-old blah-blah-blah (v. 18). It is then that

the prophet reveals God's purpose of judgment. Zedekiah the false prophet responds by mistreating Micaiah, Ahab has him arrested, and the king proceeds toward his own destruction under the power of his chosen lies.

What becomes visible about heaven from 1 Kings 22? The God who rules there is so shrewd that he can advance his purposes on earth through his angelic host without making himself dependent on them. He is so shrewd that he can bring doom through the false promises of false prophets without falsifying himself. And as it was then, so it is now: "Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness" (2 Thess. 2:11–12). Truly, God is not mocked.

Job 1–2

The fourth passage is Job 1–2. The text does not explicitly locate this drama in heaven, but its situation stands in contrast with the earth (1:7–8; 2:2–3) and is identified as "the presence of the LORD" (1:12; 2:7). The heavenly vision unfolds in two nearly parallel episodes:

> Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. (1:6–12)

> Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. And the LORD said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on

> the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason." Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. (2:1–7)

Three questions invite reflection. First, why is this in the Bible at all? One reason is to press us toward a more realistic understanding of our own lives. We might read the story of Job as a rare and extreme example of godly suffering. In this case, the message would be, "Look at this worst-case scenario. If you can see the truth here in Job's life, then surely in your comparatively small problems . . ." Alternatively, we might read the story as a representative and even common experience of godly suffering. In this case, the message would be, "Here is what all of God's people can expect of life. It is where God calls us all to trust him." The reasoning of James, namely, that the Old Testament prophets and the sufferer Job teach us what it means to wait patiently on the Lord (James 5:7–11), creates the presumption that the book of Job is indeed to be read as a guide to standard-issue experience for all of God's people. This being so, the visit of Satan to the court of heaven, though mysterious to us, should be accepted as paradigmatic of the startling reality we are involved in. Job 1–2 is giving us insight into our own lives.

Second, what does "Satan" mean? In the Hebrew text this word is marked by the definite article—"the Satan"—more like a title than a name. But its force here combines two uses of the root *stn*—to oppose and to accuse.[14] Satan opposes God by accusing Job. The latter's sufferings consist not only in his afflictions as such but also in the inquisitional accusing torments of his so-called friends, their outlook apparently inspired by Satan (4:12–21). The crisis of Job's existence is not pain, horrible as it is, but the insinuation of *guilty* pain for which, his friends believe, he has no one to blame but himself. This common experience among the godly, though instigated by Satan, is nevertheless finally traceable to heaven above. "You incited me against him," God says (2:3). Satan is true to his name.

Third, that Satan appears in heaven itself—is this home invasion? Is heaven violated? Is God rivaled? What are we to think of the God of Job 1–2? It is important to see Satan's role in the book of Job as essential to the drama but still minor. His malice leads to Job's sufferings, but he disappears from the book after chapter 2, like Judas in the story of Jesus. When the tension of this story is finally resolved in chapter 42, Satan does not reappear. Only God appears, for only God is needed. The author attributes to God alone final responsibility for Job's sufferings as "all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him" (42:11). This is consistent with how the story begins. Satan to God: "But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has" (1:11). God to Satan: "Behold, all that he has is in your hand" (v. 12). Satan to God: "But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh" (2:5). God to Satan: "Behold, he is in your hand" (v. 6). Job is put into Satan's hand, but Satan is held in God's hand. "There is evil here, but not dualism."[15] God lures Satan into a humiliating defeat, Job is memorialized as a triumphant saint, we are instructed in the reality of our lives, and heaven remains inviolate.

What then do we learn of heaven from Job 1–2? The message is summed up well in the classic commentary by Franz Delitzsch when he speaks of "heaven, where everything that is done on earth has its unseen roots, its final cause."[16] Yes, the objecting thoughts well up in our minds as we consider that strong theology. But we join Job in saying, "I lay my hand on my mouth" (40:4). The sovereignty of heaven over our sufferings on earth is our biggest perplexity in this life, but it is also our only hope.

Isaiah 6

The fifth passage is Isaiah 6, where God calls the prophet to the difficult ministry of hardening people's hearts by proclaiming the only truth that could soften them, if only they had not already passed the point of no return. It begins when heaven is opened up to him one day while worshiping at the temple in Jerusalem:

> In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

> “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
> the whole earth is full of his glory!”
>
> And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” (vv. 1–7)

The temple provides an entry point into ultimacy, the throne room of the King. Through the earthly keyhole, so to speak, Isaiah is enabled to see into heaven above. Two great realities are deeply impressed upon him.

First, the holiness of God. The Hebrew root for *holy* points to “that which is marked off, separated, withdrawn from ordinary use.”[17] Who God is as God—so infinitely superior to the burning seraphim that they must cover themselves in his presence—demands the unique threefold superlative “Holy, Holy, Holy,” that is, intensely and infinitely holy.[18] He is set apart by his moral majesty: “The Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness” (5:16). He is hazardous to all who are unholy: “The Light[19] of Israel will become a fire, and his Holy One a flame, and it will burn and devour” (10:17). Who he is defies our categories, incomparable with all below: “To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One” (40:25). He dwells in eternal transcendence, beyond our reach: “For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place’” (57:15). At the sight of the Holy One of Israel, guilty little Isaiah panics.

Second, the grace of God. One of the seraphim peels off from his flight path to dive straight at terrified Isaiah. The angel is holding a burning coal from the altar. He holds it with tongs not because it is hot—he himself is a burning one, for that is what *seraph* means—but because it is sacred. But taken from the place of sacrifice, this hot coal, signifying atonement, though untouchable, touches Isaiah. He does not defile the atonement. The atonement purifies him. This grace is powerful grace, grace greater than all our sin. And now, rather than remaining a mere concept, this grace is applied to Isaiah personally with a touch, as *felt* forgiveness: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and

your sin atoned for" (6:7). A surprise comes down to Isaiah from heaven above. The one he most dreads—pure, industrial-strength deity—is the one, the only one, who can release him from anxiety and qualify him for service.

What is the insight into heaven of Isaiah 6? It is a twofold message. On the one hand, heaven is a dangerous place. Without the grace of God, we might as well walk into a blast furnace to be incinerated. On the other hand, with the grace of God, heaven is a safe place, the only safe place. The various human opinions of us here in this world, including our opinions of ourselves—often a confused mixture of glib self-assurance and angry self-condemnation—matter nothing, less than nothing. All that finally matters is the verdict of heaven. And heaven is the one source of forgiveness in the universe. "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7).

Daniel 7

Our final passage is Daniel 7. The power of this text lies in its contrast between the clash of human kingdoms on earth (vv. 3–8), so savage as to be branded bestial, and the sublime rule of God's humane kingdom coming down from heaven above to triumph "forever, forever and ever" (v. 18). Verses 9–10, shifting from prose to poetry, set the scene:

> As I looked,
>
> thrones were placed,
> and the Ancient of Days took his seat;
> his clothing was white as snow,
> and the hair of his head like pure wool;
> his throne was fiery flames;
> its wheels were burning fire.
> A stream of fire issued
> and came out from before him;
> a thousand thousands served him,
> and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;
> the court sat in judgment,
> and the books were opened.

The court of heaven convenes. At the center is one venerable, majestic, and pure, with vast angelic armies at his command. What are four earthly kingdoms to these myriad superhuman agents of the Judge? The only one qualified to rule the world is fully equipped in every respect to do so.

The assurance of the vision is strong. God can be trusted with the entirety of world history. Far above the reach of earthly opposition, a hope stands as sure as

heaven itself that the historical cycles of violent rise and decline will be forever broken. How will this hope come down to us? It will come through a final judgment. The database of heaven is keeping a careful record of every human deed (Rev. 20:12). Nothing escapes the all-seeing eyes of God. His memory is comprehensive and infallible, with instant recall. Therefore, as Daniel 7:10 concludes, with every sufferer on the edge of his seat, glad for the heavenly books to show the truth so long denied in this world of spin and cover-up, longing for the Ancient of Days to put an end to corrupt earthly power, what, in fact, is God's overruling plan for this world?

> I saw in the night visions,
>
> and behold, with the clouds of heaven
> there came one like a son of man,
> and he came to the Ancient of Days
> and was presented before him.
> And to him was given dominion
> and glory and a kingdom,
> that all peoples, nations, and languages
> should serve him;
> his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
> which shall not pass away,
> and his kingdom one
> that shall not be destroyed. (vv. 13–14)

The royal "one like a son of man" in verse 13 stands in contrast to the beasts of earthly power in verses 3–8. Finally, a humane King, one like us, to rule us![20] The Semitic idiom "son of man" emphasizes his authentic humanity[21] while the surrounding context argues his deity.[22] For everyone who has settled the matter of the authority of Christ, there is no question about the identity of this person. There was no doubt in the mind of Christ himself:

> Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." (Mark 14:61–62)

What is the insight into heaven here in Daniel 7? It is that God's final judgment at the end of history will not bring annihilation but humanization. The kingdom of this world will be "taken away" from those currently holding power; through Jesus our Messiah the new and lasting kingdom will be "given to the

people of the saints of the Most High" (vv. 26–27). Quite wonderfully, then, heaven is the most humane and humanizing place in the universe. We do not look to this world for the restoration of our human dignity. It will come down to us through the perfect Son of Man. A. A. Hodge drew out the implications:

> Heaven, as the eternal home of the divine man and of all the redeemed members of the human race, must necessarily be thoroughly human in its structure, conditions, and activities. Its joys and occupations must be all rational, moral, emotional, voluntary and active. There must be the exercise of all the faculties, the gratification of all tastes, the development of all latent capacities, the realization of all ideals. The reason, the intellectual curiosity, the imagination, the aesthetic instincts, the holy affections, the social affinities, the inexhaustible resources of strength and power native to the human soul, must all find in heaven exercise and satisfaction. . . . Heaven will prove the consummate flower and fruit of the whole creation and of all the history of the universe.[23]

Symbolic Suggestions

Returning now to the principle that the eschatology illuminates the protology, our final view into heaven is prompted and guided by Revelation 21–22. The two chapters parallel one another, with 21:1–8 restated and enlarged in 21:9–22:5.[24] Many lines of biblical expectation converge here. For example, negatively and surprisingly, no temple is found in heaven (21:22). God had said, "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (Ex. 25:8). The sacred precincts of the tabernacle and temple, cleansed by the sacrificial system, constituted ground zero for the saving presence of God among sinners. But in the *eschaton*, everything provisional is fulfilled and transcended. Now the divine presence is fully manifested, directly given, and immediately felt, with God himself and the Lamb being the eternal temple of the redeemed. Other connections with the Old Testament are clearly apparent in Revelation 21–22. But heaven is represented here primarily in the forms of a city and a bride:

> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (21:2)

The two metaphors, city and bride, point to the same reality (vv. 9–10). From one perspective, heaven as our eternal home will be an organized social

collectivity, like a city. From another perspective, heaven as our endless experience will be an ideal romance, like a bride on her wedding day. But the two merge into one experience, as Augustine instructs us:

> Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greater glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, "You are my glory."[25]

Heaven will be an eternal community sharing this love for God without diminution or dissent. Both insights into heaven—city and bride—are rooted in and shed light on the Old Testament.

As for the city, it begins in Genesis 4. None other than the violent persecutor Cain invented it: "Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch" (v. 17). God planted a garden, but Cain built a city. Doomed by God to be "a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth" (v. 12) because he murdered his godly brother, Cain satisfied his need for security and belonging by his own strategy—a city. In this way he kept the divine curse from exerting its full impact on him.[26] A city, therefore, is more than a mere collection of buildings. It was meant, from the beginning, to establish a buffer between the rebellious self and the judging God. It provided a way to thrive without depending on God or facing up to oneself. It was established as a monument to human self-salvation.

There can be no surprise that Cain's mentality of self-fortification reappears in intensified form at Babel, the height of defiant human autonomy: "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves" (11:4). But God said to Abram, "I will . . . make your name great" (12:2).

Cain's city was never complete. The Hebrew does not literally say, "he built a city," but literally, "he was building a city."[27] He spent his life building it because it was never big enough, secure enough. He named it Enoch after his son, whose name suggests "dedication."[28] Cain dedicated his life to his city project for his own glory through his son. His city and family thus stood for his successful defeat of God's curse upon him—as he saw it, anyway.

What then does God do with this man-made symbol of anxiety, guilt, and

pride? He redeems it. He even takes it into heaven. God takes the garden of Eden from Genesis 2 and the city of Enoch from Genesis 4 and combines them into one heavenly garden-city in Revelation 21–22, his own eternal dwelling place with his people:

> Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. (22:1–3)

The prophetic vision invites us into a world so new we can scarcely imagine it, yet not unlike our present world. The eternal garden-city will be refreshed by a river flowing with the water of life as an outpouring of God's very presence. The Tree of Life will heal all who partake of it. There will be no need of caution or care, for every aspect of the curse will be redeemed. It is a picture of endless human rejuvenation.[29] In this way, the Old Testament story of the city is more than fulfilled. It is fulfilled with, so to speak, excess: "Eschatology not only recapitulates the protology . . . but escalates it."[30]

As for the bride, she appears first in Genesis 2. After making the first woman from Adam's flesh, "God himself, like a father of the bride, leads the woman to the man"[31]:

> Then the man said,
>
> "This at last is bone of my bones
> and flesh of my flesh;
> she shall be called Woman,
> because she was taken out of Man."
>
> Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (vv. 23–25)

The most striking thing about Genesis 2, following immediately upon the cosmic grandeur of Genesis 1, is its simple homeliness. The outlook shifts from "God created the heavens and the earth" (1:1) to "the LORD God planted a

garden in Eden" (2:8), from mankind dignified with the divine image to Adam enthralled by his wife. This movement is certainly not from the sublime to the ridiculous but from the sublime to the familiar and even common. Our eyes might miss the deeper significance of the story were it not for New Testament revelation.

After quoting Genesis 2:24, the apostle Paul writes, "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). For Paul, a mystery is not an unknowable truth but rather an insight that God must reveal for us to know it. No amount of human genius or research could discern it. The mystery, the insight, present but hidden in Genesis 2 but now revealed clearly in the fullness of the gospel, has to do not with Adam and Eve but with Christ and the church. Human marriage, significant in itself as a unique "one flesh" union, points to the ultimate union of "one spirit" between the believer and Christ (1 Cor. 6:15–17). Our engagement to Christ calls for "a sincere and pure devotion" in this life so that we might be presented to him as a pure virgin in the next (2 Cor. 11:1–3). But the most important point here is that Christ and the church are not, according to Paul's reasoning in Ephesians 5, a metaphor for understanding the reality of human marriage; human marriage is to be seen as a metaphor for understanding the reality of Christ and the church. This being so, the marriage of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 is not a forced intrusion jarring with the magnificence of Genesis 1. It deserves a place in the Genesis narrative as an early hint at ultimacy in heaven, where we will be always loved and never shamed.

Thanks to Revelation 21:2 and 9, we have every right to see the Genesis account of Adam and Eve as not only instructive for the conduct of a godly marriage but also, and far more, suggestive of our Savior's eternal love for us—especially when we deserve to be shamed—and our belonging to him. The final reason marriage is to be held in honor among all (Heb. 13:4) is not that marriage in this life is heavenly but that heaven will be a marriage—*the* marriage.

> May it not be said that the ravishing passions and passionate ravishings of most purely spiritual, chaste, and ardent love, burning like coals of juniper, and flaming forth in the excellentest expressions imaginable, do quite surpass, transcend and out-vie those of the most strongly affectionate lovers in the world, whether wooers or married persons? Nay, these scarcely serve darkly to shadow forth those.[32]

Conclusion

Pervasive throughout the Old Testament is a conviction that heaven above is clearly separate from earth below. Qohelet bluntly articulates one practical implication: “Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few” (Eccles. 5:2). But as the biblical vision comes to finality, astonishingly, we see heaven coming down to earth, transforming earth into the dwelling place of God (Rev. 21:2–3).

The Old Testament itself hints at this final breakthrough of overruling grace. The prophet Isaiah foresees the complete renovation of all things in “new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17; 66:22). In contrast with “the former troubles” of our existence in this broken creation (65:16), the renewed universe will finally be the place “in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13). “The first heaven and the first earth” of Genesis 1:1 will pass away (Rev. 21:1), nature yielding to super-nature. But the new creation will remain the creation. The change will be the eternal dwelling place of God—heaven above in the proper sense—descending to become the dwelling place of redeemed mankind as well.

In the end, which will have no end, “even the contrast between heaven and earth is gone. For all the things that are in heaven and on earth have been gathered up in Christ as head (Eph.1:10).”[33] This, and nothing less, is the measure of our salvation.

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[1] Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (New York: Frederic Ungar, 1956), I.4, p. 1433.

[2] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), 103.

[3] “In this way [this] content acquires a particular prominence within a larger context.” C. H. J. van der Merwe, J. A. Naudé, and J. H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 329.

[4] Jan Fokkelmann, quoted in Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 488.

[5] L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), s.v. “stepped ramp, flight of steps.”

[6] Marcus Dods, *The Book of Genesis* (New York: Armstrong, 1902), 161.

[7] Walter Brueggemann, quoted in Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 391.

[8] Gerald A. Larue, *Babylon and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1969), 69.

[9] Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, I.4.

[10] ESV marginal translation. ESV text: “Who has measured . . . ?”

[11] John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: Clarke, 1961), 124.

[12] BDB, s.v. “patah.”

[13] Koehler and Baumgartner, *Lexicon*, 985.

[14] John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 72n7.

[15] Francis I. Anderson, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), 83.

[16] C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Job* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), I:52.

[17] Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), I:270.

[18] J. C. L. Gibson, *Davidson’s Introductory Hebrew Grammar: Syntax* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 42.

[19] With other commentators, I construe this as a title for the God of Israel because of the parallelism. ESV: “The light of Israel.”

[20] “He is what every human being should be if he is true to type.” Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978), 143.

[21] Koehler and Baumgartner, *Lexicon*, 1839, glosses with “a man.”

[22] Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., “The Deity of Christ and the Old Testament,” in *The Deity of Christ*, Theology in Community, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 52–56.

[23] A. A. Hodge, *Evangelical Theology: A Course of Popular Lectures* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 400–401.

[24] G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 1039.

[25] Marcus Dods, ed., *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo: The City of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1872), 2:49.

[26] Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 1–9.

[27] Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1991), 411.

[28] The verbal form of the root is used in Deut. 20:5 for dedicating a new home.

[29] T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 155–57.

[30] G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 368.

[31] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 84.

[32] Margaret Durham, “The Epistle Dedicatory,” in James Durham, *Clavis Cantici* (1668), http://www.puritansermons.com/durham/durham_epistle.htm.

[33] Herman Bavinck, *Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 729–30.

3

HEAVEN IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS AND ACTS

JONATHAN T. PENNINGTON



It is well worth observing that the first sentence of the Bible refers to heaven ("In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," Gen. 1:1) and that, on the other end of the canon, the last two chapters of the Bible give a detailed vision of heaven's coming to earth (Revelation 21–22). A 30,000-foot flyover of Holy Scripture reveals this to be not a mere coincidence; "heaven" and the closely related phrase "heaven and earth" are pervasive throughout the Bible. It should be no surprise, then, that when we tune our antennae to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts,[1] we find the same language appearing frequently, likewise proving to be very important for our understanding of God's revelation. In this chapter we will explore the language, usage, and theological significance of *heaven* in these four books.

***Heaven*: Usage and Meaning**

Usage of Heaven

The word we typically translate *heaven* (Gk. *ouranos*, which appears most directly in English as the planet name Uranus) occurs 161 times in the Synoptics and Acts.[2] The breakdown by book can be seen in chart 3.1.

Chart 3.1

Occurrences of *Ouranos**

Matthew	82

Mark	18
Luke	35
Acts	26
Total	161

* This number is for all the occurrences of the noun *ouranos*. If one searches for the root word in other parts of speech, the number grows to 172, with 9 occurrences of the adjective "heavenly" (*ouranios*, 7 times in Matthew, 1 time each in Luke and Acts) and 2 of the adverb "from heaven" (*ouranothen*, both in Acts).

We can immediately see that one author in particular, Matthew, uses heaven language significantly more than the others, but the word occurs with regular frequency in all four books.

Moving beyond the mere frequency of this word, we note *heaven* has the potential to communicate more than one idea. On the one hand, it is used to refer to the visible, created realm above the earth. This includes the atmosphere and the place of the stars, sun, moon, and planets. In contemporary English we still sometimes use the word in this way, such as in the phrase "The planets up in the heavens" or in the Bible-echoing phrase "The heavens declare his glory."

On the other hand, *heaven* in the Bible often refers to the invisible dwelling place of God and his angels. So, too, in contemporary English we use *heaven* in this way, referring to the place where we believe God is, where people go when they die (and according to Hollywood, all dogs as well), and even as a generic way to refer to God or some power above, such as in the phrase "Heaven help us!"

In Scripture *heaven* can be used in either of these ways, referring to the part of the created realm that is above us or to the divine abode. It is interesting to note that in English we make this distinction by using the plural ("heavens") for the created realm and the singular for the place of God's dwelling. The Bible does not consistently make such a distinction between singular and plural forms of *heaven* (though some of its authors do[3]), so the reader often must determine which sense of *heaven* is being referenced when the word appears. It will be of benefit to explore this twofold sense of *heaven*.

Visible, Created Sense of Heaven

In the Synoptic Gospels and Acts we find many examples of *heaven* applied to the created realm above and the abode of God. On the created realm or "skies" side of the ledger, we regularly see the phrase "the birds of heaven"[4] (typically translated now as "birds of the air"), which is a borrowed phrase from the Old

Testament, where it was used to distinguish wild birds that fly in the sky from domestic fowl, such as chickens.[5] There is clearly no reference here to the divine above, but rather *heaven* refers to the created space above the earth. In other instances, *heaven* is used to refer to sky and atmospheric bodies in general. Luke 4:25 tells us that during the days of Elijah "the heavens were shut," meaning that there was no rain. The related adverb "from heaven" (*ouranothen*) is used in the same way in Acts 14:17 in reference to God's giving rain from heaven. Luke 17:24 also speaks of lightning flashing from one part of the heavens to the other, referring to the sky. And in verse 29 we are reminded that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by God, who rained down fire and brimstone "from heaven," likely referring to showers that resulted from some kind of volcanic activity.[6]

Heaven can also refer to the created celestial realm, as in the mention of stars falling from heaven (Matt. 24:29) at the *eschaton*. This reference bleeds over into the divine, as will be discussed below, but this verse clearly refers to visible stars (albeit using them metaphorically) that are part of the created heavens. Two times in Acts we also see the phrase "under heaven," which is used to mean something like "in all of God's creation"—men from every nation "under heaven" were in Jerusalem (2:5), and there is no other name "under heaven" by which people can be saved (4:12). Finally, the created-realm sense of *heaven* occurs several times in the stock pairing of heaven with earth. We will treat these occurrences separately below, but we can note here several places where, in this conjunction of words, *heaven* refers to the created realm. For example, "heaven and earth" will pass away (Matt. 5:18; 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 16:17; 21:33) refers to all of creation. Similarly, God is referred to as the one who has made "heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them" in Acts 4:24 and 14:15.

Divine Sense of Heaven

The other main pole of meaning of *heaven*—the place of God's dwelling, and by extension, God himself—is found even more frequently in the books we are discussing.[7] There are several regularly recurring expressions that use *heaven* in this way. Several times Jesus refers to our reward or treasure "in heaven" (Matt. 5:12; 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 6:23; 12:33; 18:22), meaning primarily "with God" and "in a time to come" more than a specific spatial reference. Related to this is the expression in Luke 10:20 in which Jesus directs his disciples to rejoice not in their authority over demons but rather that "[their] names are written in heaven." This is referring to the disciples' being citizens of God's kingdom and is similar to speaking about reward in heaven. It is clearly on the "divine abode"

side of the ledger, as Jesus is not referring to a first-century version of first-century skywriting: “Rejoice that your names are written in the skies!”

This use of *heaven* can also refer to God himself. We see this, for example, in the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees regarding the source of John the Baptist’s ministry (Matt. 21:25; cf. Mark 11:30–31; Luke 20:4–5). Jesus challenges his opponents to answer the question about whether John’s baptism was “from heaven or from man.” Here *heaven* clearly serves metonymically to refer to God; that is, heaven as the dwelling place of God is employed as a way to refer to God himself. This is a common occurrence.[8]

Another example of this kind of heaven//God metonymy is found in Acts 2:2, where we read that at Pentecost there came “from heaven” a violent sound like that of a rushing wind. This is clearly understood to be the work of the Holy Spirit, sent by God. This is also what is indicated in Luke 11:13, where we read that our Father God will freely give the Holy Spirit “from heaven” to those who ask.[9] Likewise, in Acts 11:9 we read that Peter heard “a voice from heaven” instructing him in his vision. This is similar to the recounting of Paul’s conversion experience (9:3; 22:6), where a light shone from heaven. Later, in 26:19, Paul uses the adjective *heavenly* (*ouranios*) to describe his conversion and calling as coming from a “heavenly vision.” He also uses the adverbial form “from heaven” (*ouranothen*) in 26:13 to describe this light “from heaven” that was brighter than the sun.

Yet another probable example of the metonymic usage of *heaven* is when the returning Prodigal Son says to his father that he has sinned “unto heaven” (Luke 15:18, 21 [ESV “against”). It is not entirely clear whether this means “against God” directly or rather something more like “unto the heights of heaven,” but either way the reference is to sinning against God.[10]

Heaven is also described as the place where the angels dwell, beholding the face of God (Matt. 18:10; 22:30; 24:36; Mark 12:25; 13:32), and whence they come, such as to minister to Jesus at Gethsemane (Luke 22:43). The adjective *heavenly* is employed similarly in 2:13 to refer to the heavenly host that appear to the shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth. Luke 15:7 uses *heaven* in a way that refers to both the angelic host and to God himself, when we read there is “more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents” than over ninety-nine people who do not need to repent. That this clearly refers to God and the angelic host of heaven can be seen in the parallel parable that follows, where the same point is made with slightly altered language: “There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (v. 10).

Another aspect of heaven as the dwelling of angels is seen where Jesus says he saw Satan "fall like lightning from heaven" (10:18). Although it is not explained here, we understand this to be a reference to his banishment from the presence of God.[11] Also on the dark side of heaven-connected angelic beings is what is sometimes called the "host of heaven." This can also be a positive reference in Scripture (1 Kings 22:19; Neh. 9:6) but is used in a negative way of angelic beings opposed to God and responsible for the nations' idol worship (Deut. 4:19; 17:3; 2 Kings 17:16; 21:3; 23:4; 2 Chron. 33:3, 5; Isa. 24:21; 34:4; Jer. 8:2; 19:13.). That is likely its meaning in Stephen's speech, in which God gives the Israelites over to worshiping "the host of heaven" (Acts 7:42). With the same referent, Jesus promises that at the *eschaton* "the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (Matt. 24:29; Mark 13:25; Luke 21:26).[12]

Beyond all these varied and frequent uses of *heaven* in the divine sense, there are three particularly important ways in which the Synoptic Gospels and Acts employ *heaven* to refer to God and the divine realm. These are the expressions "Father in heaven" (and the related "heavenly Father"), "kingdom of heaven," and the many references to Jesus' ascension and dwelling in heaven.

The theme of God as father is not a dominant one in the Old Testament, but neither is it unknown. References to God as father increase in the Second Temple literature before blossoming much more fully in the New Testament and beyond.[13] In the Synoptic Gospels and Acts God is referred to as "Father" sixty-eight times, most frequently in Matthew.[14] Within the scope of God as father, he is described as "in heaven" or "heavenly." God is described as being "our Father in heaven" in Mark 11:25 and thirteen more times in Matthew.[15] The related phrase, "heavenly Father," is found another seven times in Matthew.[16] Talking about God as a heavenly Father becomes common and familiar for much of later Christianity down to today. It finds its origins in Jesus' emphasis on his sonship relationship with God and in his invitation to us as "fellow heirs" with him (Rom. 8:17). In light of the consistent emphasis throughout the Bible on God's presence in heaven, it is natural and appropriate for Jesus (and the Gospel writers) to combine the fatherhood theme with God's dwelling in heaven.

"Kingdom of heaven" is another of the important and unique uses of *heaven* language in our literature, and once again it finds particular emphasis (indeed, its origins in Christian terminology, I would suggest) in the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew uses this phrase thirty-two times.[17] The rest of the New Testament refers to the same thing—the reign of God—with the more familiar and generic

phrase “the kingdom of God.” There is no difference in reference or denotation of these phrases. In this way, “kingdom of heaven” is another example of the metonymical use of *heaven* to refer to God. Matthew describes the reign and rule of God as “the kingdom of heaven” particularly to emphasize God’s kingdom is heavenly and from heaven, especially in contrast with all competing earthly kingdoms, those of both the Jewish leadership and the Roman Empire. Again we see the divine sense of *heaven* being emphasized, here in contrast with the earth.

Finally, we may observe one important use of the divine sense of *heaven* in Acts in reference to Jesus’ ascension and dwelling there. This is found in Acts 2:34, where in his Pentecost sermon Peter observes that as great as King David was, it could never be said of him that he ascended like Jesus into the heavens and sat down at the right hand of God. But this is precisely what Jesus did. Also, in responding to the Jewish leadership in 3:21, Peter states that Jesus the Christ must be received by/in heaven “until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets.” And most vividly, only moments before his martyrdom, Stephen “gazed into heaven” and saw the glory of God, with Jesus standing at his right hand. He then cried out that he beheld the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing with God (7:55–56). These four uses of *heaven* to refer to Jesus’ post-resurrection ascension and dwelling place are significant not only as divine uses of *heaven* but particularly for the claims they implicitly make about the divinity of Jesus himself. We have already seen *heaven* used often as the place where God is and from whence he speaks and works. Now Jesus is counted on that side of the ledger in referring to the place and work of God.[18]

Heaven and Earth

No discussion of heaven in Scripture would be complete without a discussion of a key phrase—indeed, a key idea—in which *heaven* appears as a crucial part: the phrase “heaven and earth.” It is appropriate to discuss it at this juncture because its usage straddles the created and divine senses of *heaven* just discussed above. That is, *heaven* in the phrase “heaven and earth” functions at times in reference to the created realm and at other times to the divine abode.

“Heaven and earth” is a stock phrase throughout the Bible, beginning in its very first verse in Genesis. Studies on heaven in the Old Testament have rightly observed that one cannot speak meaningfully about heaven without also closely considering its relationship to earth.[19] Heaven and earth are paired together around 185 times in the Old Testament in a variety of ways. Sometimes the

phrase appears in its simple conjunctive form, “heaven and earth,” while at other times “heaven” and “earth” appear in parallel lines or sentences, as is typical in Hebrew literature. For example, Psalm 73:25 reads, “Whom have I in *heaven* but you? And there is nothing on *earth* that I desire besides you.” And several times we see parallel uses such as in reference to the “birds of heaven” in conjunction with the “beasts of the earth” (e.g., Deut. 28:26; Ps. 79:2; Ezek. 29:5; Jer. 7:33).

These last examples provide an insight into the ways “heaven and earth” function with both the created and divine senses of *heaven* seen throughout. In the example of Psalm 73:25 (which is typical), the connotation of *heaven* is on the divine side of the equation, serving as a contrast to earth. God’s dwelling in heaven is put into an antithetic parallel with earth. This sentiment can be found in many places throughout the Old Testament, such as in Ecclesiastes 5:2: “Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you are on earth”; and in Psalm 115:16: “The heavens are the LORD’s heavens, but the earth he has given to the sons of man.” This contrastive sense of “heaven and earth” naturally and intentionally emphasizes the divine realm of heaven.

Likewise, we find the created sense of *heaven* in the Old Testament’s use of the “heaven and earth” phrase. We have already noted Genesis 1:1, which functions in this way. We read other examples such as Leviticus 26:19, which speaks of God’s making the heavens like iron and the earth like bronze in reference to a lack of rain in the sky and the resulting dryness on earth. These uses are *merismatic*, meaning the literary custom of using two extremes to communicate the whole. “Heaven” and “earth” are the opposite poles of the created reality and thus are commonly used in the Bible to refer to all of creation. Our words *world*, *universe*, and *creation* are later developments that eventually supplant in our minds the typical biblical way of describing what God has made as “heaven and earth.”

All this background is important for our examination of the Synoptics and Acts. The New Testament authors drink from the deep well of the Old Testament and think and write in the same way. Indeed, we find the phrase “heaven and earth” appearing frequently in our literature and functioning in the same two ways.

Examples of heaven and earth being employed in the merismatic, “all creation” manner include references to God as the “Lord of heaven and earth” (Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21; Acts 17:24) and maker of “the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them” (Acts 4:24; 14:15). We also read several

times of “heaven and earth” passing away (Matt. 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 16:17; 21:33). Elsewhere Jesus critiques the hypocrites who can discern the appearance of the earth and heaven but not the significance of the present age Jesus is inaugurating (Luke 12:56). In his Pentecost sermon (quoting from the book of Joel), Peter says that God will in these last days grant great wonders in the sky (heaven) above and on the earth below (Acts 2:19). And Jesus announces that at his second coming the angels will gather his elect from all the world —“from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mark 13:27).

At the same time, we find the contrastive, divine-realm versus created-realm sense of *heaven* in the heaven-and-earth pairs. This sense is especially highlighted and developed by Matthew.[20] For example, the divine sense of *heaven* in contrast to earth is operative at the core of the Lord’s Prayer. In 6:9–10 the request made of “Our Father in heaven” is that as things are *in heaven*, so would they become *on earth*—specifically, the hallowing of his name, his reign being established, and his will being done. Similarly, in verses 19–20 we are told to store up treasures not *on earth* (because of their impermanence) but instead with our Father *in heaven*. In another set of well-known Matthean passages, Jesus teaches that whatever his disciples bind or loose *on earth* will also be bound or loosed *in heaven* (16:19; 18:18), referring to decisions of doctrine and discipline the church makes. At the end of Matthew’s Gospel Jesus commissions his disciples on the basis of the fact that now, post-resurrection, “all authority in heaven and on earth” has been given to him (28:18). In one sense this could be easily understood as the merismatic kind of pairing of heaven and earth, emphasizing the *all*-ness of the authority—it extends throughout all creation. This reading would not be wrong—Jesus is certainly saying this. At the same time, there seems to be more going on. That is, his apparent earthly authority during his physical ministry (cf. esp. Matt. 9:6; Mark 2:10; Luke 5:24) has now been completed and wedded with his heavenly authority by his faithful passion, death, and resurrection (cf. Rom. 1:4).

This combination of merismatic and contrastive uses of *heaven* in the heaven-and-earth pair can also be seen in a passage such as Acts 7:49 (coming itself from Isa. 66:1), where the Lord calls “heaven” his throne and the “earth” his footstool. Reflection upon this reveals that *heaven* is being used here both in the merismatic, combined sense—referring to *all* of creation as God’s—and in the contrastive sense—contrasting the Lord’s throne in heaven (the divine realm) with his earthly tabernacle/temple/dwelling with people on earth. This dual or happily ambiguous usage of *heaven* leads directly into the final element of our

survey of *heaven* language in the Synoptics and Acts.

Happy Ambiguity/Overlap in the Meaning of Heaven

So far we have observed that *heaven* is a frequently used term rich in meaning. Its semantic range is broad enough to refer to the created realm of the air, including all the celestial bodies, and at the same time to the distinct realm of the Creator separate from his creation in the divine abode. He is so closely associated with heaven that *heaven* itself can serve metonymically to refer to God and his activities. This conjoined connection *and* distinction between the Creator and the created is a crucial aspect of the biblical witness to who God is and his relation to us.

The weight and mystery of this connection is seen in the fact that *heaven* not only functions with the distinct uses of "created realm" versus "divine abode" but also that in many instances there is an intentional overlap or happy ambiguity in the uses of *heaven*. That is, while the distinction between the two uses exists, there is an inherent connection between the created realm *above* and the divine realm *above* that is often manifest when *heaven* appears.

We find several such examples of an overlapping ambiguity of heaven in the Synoptics and Acts. For example, at Jesus' baptism we read that the "heavens were opened" as the voice of God thundered out in speech (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10–11; Luke 3:21–22; cf. Acts 10:11). On the one hand, this is apparently a reference to the clouds above and something visible in the sky—the text reads that Jesus, looking up, saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove (bodily, according to Luke). Yet it is not difficult to see more here than just a reference to visible skies above; we also find a reference to the work of the Spirit and the divine sense of *heaven* whence God's voice comes forth. This dual sense or ambiguity is inherent and important.

Similarly, when people pray, they typically look upward to the skies as they address God in heaven. For example, Jesus looks up to pray in blessing the bread (Matt. 14:19; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16) and when healing a deaf and dumb man (Mark 7:34), while the humble tax collector in Luke's parable (Luke 18:13) would not even lift his eyes to heaven out of reverence for God. Likewise, we read that Stephen at his martyrdom looked steadily upward into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at his right hand (Acts 7:55–56). In all these cases there is a natural dual sense of *heaven*: it is the upward (created) place to which people visibly and physically look (or are afraid to) while also addressing God in his invisible heavenly abode.

Another example is heaven as the place where signs are and from whence such images and realities come. Speaking of a time of future tribulation, Jesus warns of earthquakes, famines, pestilence, persecutions, and "terrors and great signs from heaven" (Luke 21:11). The double reference is not difficult to detect. The parallel with what precedes indicates these "terrors and great signs" are part of the created order, corresponding to the earthquakes, etc. At the same time, "great terrors and signs from heaven" is more than a meteorological reference; God is clearly the source of such calamities, and to say they are "from heaven" gives these events a divine weightiness. This is similar to the idea when, in immature zeal, James and John ask Jesus if he wants them to pray for fire to "come down from heaven and consume" a Samaritan village (9:54).

On the positive side of signs, in Peter's vision in Joppa (Acts 10:9–16; retold in 11:5–10) we read that the vision proceeded when "the heavens opened" (10:11; cf. Matt. 3:16 and parallels) and a great animal-filled vessel descended from heaven. After three divine pronouncements to Peter, the vision ends abruptly when the vessel returns to heaven (Acts 10:16). Again we see an inextricable overlap in reference here. The vision is a seeing of something physical coming down from the skies and returning there, while at the same time this is undoubtedly a divine revelation; hence the appropriate use of *heaven*. We may also put in this category Saul's conversion experience and the great light that suddenly shone around him, though it was midday (9:3; repeated with more detail in 22:6). This once again refers to a phenomenon in the skies, yet it overlaps with God as the one speaking from heaven. This is also the sense when Jesus speaks of the appearing of "the sign of the Son of Man" in heaven (Matt. 24:30).

Finally, in this category of ambiguous uses we can observe the many times the motion of angels or Jesus himself is described in terms of descending from or ascending to heaven. Angels, who are messengers from the heavenly realm, are often described in conjunction with heaven in its dual senses. For example, in Matthew 28:2 we are told that an angel of the Lord "descended from heaven," rolled away the stone, and sat upon it. This emphasizes the origins of the angel's divine abode and at the same time the act of his descent and appearance in the created realm. Going the opposite direction of motion, we read in Luke 2:15 of the angels' appearance to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth and their return to heaven. Both the visible appearance and the invisible divine sense are present here.

We see the same usage of *heaven* with reference to Jesus' motions. For

example, we have the image of Jesus' promised return coming on or with "the clouds of heaven" with great power and glory (Matt. 24:30; Mark 14:62; repeated in Matt. 26:64).[21] This language, which comes directly from Daniel 7:13, is a classic example of the dual meanings of *heaven* combined in one instance. Initially—and correctly—"the clouds of heaven" evokes the created realm above. At the same time, there are strong implications and evocations of the divine, not only because Jesus is somehow flying on these clouds but also because he is obviously coming from God in heaven, even as the vision in Daniel shows.

Jesus will return from heaven on the clouds because he first ascended to heaven in the same way, as several texts emphasize. Luke and Acts highlight the ascension of Jesus "into heaven" (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:10–11), even while his disciples look on. Thus once again we see the inextricable overlap of the created and divine realms. The disciples physically see Jesus ascending, and indeed even after he has disappeared from sight they continue to gaze upward (Acts 1:11). Yet obviously the physical Jesus is not now merely hanging out in the clouds but has been received into the invisible dwelling place of God, heaven.[22]

Abiding Theological Significance

Having surveyed the frequent use of *heaven* in the Synoptics and Acts and analyzed it according to its uses, we are now in a position to explore the theological significance of this language. First, we will explore how this survey of *heaven* language relates to broader theological truths of redemption. Second, we will examine how the change in our use of *heaven* in the modern period relates to a major change in worldview.

Heaven *Language as It Relates to Redemption*

It has long been popular to think of the end goal of God's redemptive work as life with God in heaven. For this reason, a disembodied, cloud-based (that is, physical clouds, not digital backup!) existence is the most common evocation that the word *heaven* creates. But our examination of the actual use of *heaven* in the Synoptics and Acts reveals a strikingly different conception. As we have seen, *heaven*'s meaning is at the same time broader than this and narrower. It is broader in that *heaven* language has both a creational sense and a divine one. But it is narrower in that *heaven* is not used in the Bible to refer to a generic, ethereal, postmortem existence; rather, it is used specifically to refer to God himself and the place from which he comes and reveals himself *on earth*.

A broader examination of *heaven* language throughout the Bible would, I suggest, confirm this view and likewise provide little support to the popular view of heaven as the end goal of redemption. In other words, our findings regarding *heaven* language in the Synoptics and Acts are not unique but consistent with the whole of the canon. The main place in the Bible that could lead one to think of heaven as ethereal existence is Revelation 4–5, but it is essential to note that this vision of the intermediate state, as in heaven with God (cf. also 2 Corinthians 5), is *not* how the vision of redemption ends, even in Revelation. Rather, the *telos* or final state of God's redemption is the bringing of heaven *to earth* and an embodied life in God's kingdom, as Revelation 21–22 shows.[23]

Within the Synoptic Gospels and Acts there are a couple of ways in which one might also read *heaven* language as confirming the popularized view of a heavenly existence after death, though this would be a mistaken reading. This often occurs with the ideas of having rewards in heaven and Jesus himself being in heaven. In the latter case, the fuller biblical understanding helps us see clearly that while the New Testament does strongly emphasize Jesus' heavenly ascension and current residence in heaven, the point is just as strongly emphasized that he will return *from heaven* to bring justice and establish his reign on the earth (cf. Acts 1:11; 3:21). As the Apostles' Creed rightly teaches us to confess, "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God. *From there* he will come again to judge the living and the dead." Thus, the New Testament's emphasis on Jesus' heavenly dwelling is not the end of the story.

Slightly more difficult to understand is how the Bible's talk about rewards in heaven correlates to the heaven-on-earth understanding of full redemption. Jesus speaks of our having rewards in heaven many times,[24] and this undoubtedly has fed the idea that we will live forever with God in heaven above, enjoying such rewards. However, this is a theological misstep. We must recognize that when rewards are promised "in heaven," this is precisely the metonymical use of *heaven* to refer to God (in contrast with "on earth") that was discussed above. Typical is the example of Matthew 6:19–21, in which Jesus exhorts us to "lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven"—not on earth—because of their permanent value there. When we read the context of that teaching, it becomes apparent it is not a cosmological or eschatological teaching about where we will live forever. Rather, the point is to contrast the foolishness of living our lives for the praise of others (vv. 1–18) or for the false sense of security that money gives (vv. 22–34) with the wisdom of orienting our lives toward God. Heaven and earth are used as contrasts, one denoting God and the permanent, reliable good and the other

speaking of the impermanence of humanity and its ways. Thus, even the idea of heavenly rewards does not speak against the fuller understanding of redemption as heaven's coming to earth.

On the positive side, there are several places in the Synoptics and Acts that do use *heaven* language to hint at this broader and deeper biblical idea of full redemption.

One of the most obvious places has already been mentioned: the Lord's Prayer. The vision of Jesus' instructive prayer, which stands at the center of the Sermon on the Mount,[25] teaches precisely what we find elsewhere—redemption completed is not the removal of humans from earth to a heavenly existence but rather the bringing of all that is heaven, including God himself, to earth (Matt. 6:9–10). Also worth noting again is Matthew's unique phrase "kingdom of heaven." As mentioned above, this does not refer to some other type or time of God's reign than does the phrase "kingdom of God"; these two expressions have precisely the same referent. Rather, the point of Matthew's contribution of this phrase to Christian understanding is to make clear and pointed the *contrast* that exists between heavenly realities and earthly ones, looking forward all the while to the removal of this tension through Christ's redemptive work and the *eschaton*. To speak of the "kingdom of heaven" is to highlight the need for redemption to come from God and to recreate an earth in redemption (cf. Rom. 8:18–25).

Moving beyond the specifics of *heaven* language, we see this heaven-coming-to-earth view of salvation and the *eschaton* hinted in some other ways in the Synoptics and Acts. For example, the language and promise of final redemption as a "new genesis" (*palingenesia*) in Matthew 19:28 ties into this fuller understanding of redemption as restoration of creation. Related is the familiar language of "eternal life." This expression, popular in Christian parlance, comes mostly from the Gospel of John but also finds origin in the Synoptic tradition. And its usage there very clearly shows that "eternal life" does not mean removal from earth to heaven but rather entering into God's kingdom, a place on earth where and when Christ will reign fully, as we see throughout the New Testament. This intentional overlapping connection can be seen, for example, by comparing Mark 9:43 with 9:47, and 10:17 with 10:23–24. In each of these instances, "entering into life" or "eternal life" is used synonymously with "entering into the kingdom of God." Thus, rather than understanding eternal life as heavenly existence, it actually fits squarely into the broader biblical language of being a part of God's kingdom, precisely what we have seen depicted in the

Lord's Prayer (and elsewhere) as God's bringing his good reign from heaven to earth.

Heaven *Language as It Relates to Worldview*

Moving beyond the issue of how heaven relates to redemption, we should also explore how *heaven* language connects intimately with the issue of worldview. To put it succinctly and pointedly, I suggest that a close examination of the varied uses of *heaven* language—especially paying attention to the ambiguous uses—reveals that in the modern period there has been a major shift in worldview regarding heaven that adversely affects our theological understanding of God's relation to and work in the world. This is a rather high claim to make, I realize, based on the brief data presented above. Let me unpack and support this thesis.

We shall begin by way of example with the mid-twentieth-century "space race." Certainly, one of the most amazing developments in human history is the exploration of space that occurred in the last half of the 1900s. At the turn of the twentieth century, rocket technology was still in its infancy; by 1969 the first of several humans successfully stood on the moon, 238,000 miles away, and returned to earth. These were heady days for the scientific community, the crowning achievement in many ways for the modern branches of mathematics, physics, communications, and aeronautics.

Much of this development was motivated, no doubt, by national pride and security concerns during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet bloc. Indeed, the US was not the first nation to successfully launch a man into spatial orbit, and this was a cause of great concern for Americans (following upon the fearful reality of the Russian satellite Sputnik). The first man in space was Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, who became a worldwide celebrity and icon of Soviet propaganda.

What does all this have to do with *heaven* in the Bible? Notably, in a speech some time later, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev referred to Gagarin's famous flight and remarked that although he flew into the heavens, he didn't see any god there. Khrushchev's statement had an intentionally antireligious edge in accord with Soviet attempts to squelch religious belief.

More important for our purposes, this seemingly simple (and religiously naïve) statement is one window into a major change of worldview that had occurred in the modern period regarding the cosmos. Khrushchev's statement is an intentional claim that modern science and progress has surpassed the foolish

religious views of generations past.[26] This paradigm shift in thinking about the structure of the universe and God's place in it was a change that began, of course, much before Khrushchev. His antireligious reference to the heavens is not a necessary function of this worldview change, but it is not atypical. It reflects the development of a scientific view of the world that itself is a function of the Enlightenment and rise of rationalism.

Khrushchev is representative of the modern scientific reaction to the view of the cosmos that dominated throughout most of human history and is represented in the Bible—the universe is created by God (or gods in other views) and full of supernatural beings and God himself. In the scientific worldview—the one that allowed for developments that resulted in the space race—this view of the "heavens" is completely replaced with the vast, nearly immeasurable, mostly empty realm of space. In fact, in relatively short time an entirely new vocabulary comes into existence that surpasses and supplants the older terms. *Cosmos*, *universe*, *space*, *air*, and *skies* replace *creation* and *heavens*. One only needs to pay attention to how we as modern people—Christian or not—refer to the world to see this change.

Additionally, if one compares English translations of older times—or better, looks at the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible—it becomes apparent that our language has changed. For the uses of *ouranos* discussed above, we often no longer translate these with "heaven"; we translate with phrases such as "the birds of the air." Moreover, I would suggest that in contemporary speech, apart from those deeply influenced by the Bible, *heaven* is almost completely lost in reference to the created realm. That is, one who reads the Bible regularly may take little notice of phrases such "all men under heaven" and "the heavens are declaring his glory," but for others this language is quite unfamiliar and archaic sounding. Additionally, even among those who would not blink in reading "all men under heaven," very few would ever utter such an expression, preferring "everyone in the world."

The point is that our use of language both *reflects* and *affects* our perception of reality. The widespread loss in modern English of using the word *heaven* to refer to the created realm (common in the biblical accounts) both reflects a change in our view of the structure and makeup of the world and affects our understanding by perpetuating and deepening this change.

It is not only the move away from using *heaven* to refer to the created realm that evinces this shift; it is especially seen when we consider the ambiguous uses of *heaven*. That is, the many uses of *heaven* where there is an inextricable

overlap of meaning particularly show how much our view of the world has changed in this modern, scientific era, even for Bible-believing Christians. We no longer use *heaven* in this richly ambiguous way but only in the divine sense. This comes from and perpetuates a worldview quite different from the biblical one. For modern Christians, we function with a largely dichotomous view of the world—there is the real, physical world and the invisible, spiritual world, the natural and the supernatural. But this is remarkably different from the worldview found in the Bible (and still in many cultures today), wherein there is one world filled with spiritual realities.

Our divorce of the created-realm sense of *heaven* from the divine realm (due to our scientific worldview) has injected a foreign element into our understanding of Holy Scripture and God's work in the world. The divine realm has become for us an abstraction rather than a concrete reality. Compared to the real world around us, heaven is more a concept than a reality. Whereas in the biblical worldview it is entirely natural and appropriate to use the same word *heaven* to refer to any space above the earth *and* the place of God's dwelling, for us in the scientific age we are not even aware of the loss of this connection.

Implications and Applications

So what should we do about this change in thinking about the world? I am not suggesting that we will somehow instantaneously regain a biblical worldview if we start using *heaven* in the intentionally overlapping way we find in the Bible. Thus, I would not recommend that we insist that all evening news reporters say, "We'll expect partly cloudy heavens tomorrow," nor that we should have Christian meteorologists who speak that way on our own provincial television stations. But we as believers in the triune God, who has spoken through Holy Scripture, must recalibrate our thinking in terms of God's depiction of the reality of the world—as his creation—before we think of it in modern scientific ways.

There are several aspects of our understanding of God and his work in the world that we can regain when we move away from the dichotomous worldview of a purely scientific understanding of the universe.[27] First, we can make much more sense of the way the New Testament (and the other Second Temple literature) describes the world as full of supernatural beings. One of the clearest places this biblical worldview peeks out—even though we often know not what to do about it, especially in modern Western civilization—is in comments such as those in Ephesians and Colossians. Paul makes several references to authorities, rulers, and powers "in the heavenly places" whom Christ rules over

completely, thereby giving us dominion as well (Eph. 1:20–23; 3:10; 4:10; 6:10–12; Col. 1:15–17; 2:8–15).

This worldview is also found in the Gospels and Acts, with their many references to angels and demons. There are many Christians who believe in the Bible's testimony and do not deny the reality of angels and demons, yet their belief is an abstraction more than a reality; many of us rarely think of angelic or demonic activity. This is a function not of a lack of belief in God or in the Bible but the deeply pervasive influence of a scientific view of the world as empty space. In sharp contrast is the biblical worldview that trafficks in the reality of mediating, revealing, and tempting activity done by spiritual beings. It is difficult to even gauge how greatly this worldview difference affects our daily living and theological constructions.

Another significant impact that regaining a biblical worldview of the cosmos can have is understanding the purpose of cosmological language. Specifically, we must realize all cosmological language in the Bible is ethical before it is scientifically descriptive. That is, the purpose of all biblical language and discussion of heaven, heaven and earth, and other descriptions of the world is first and foremost to make theological and ethical claims. It *is* describing the state and structure of the world but not for scientific reasons, as we suppose; it is to teach and instruct about how to be in the world as created and ruled by God. This can be helpfully described with the German terms *Weltbild* and *Weltanschauung* and their deep overlap. The Weltbild is the description or depiction of the world in its structure. The Weltanschauung is one's understanding of how the world functions—worldview, we might say. The point is that from a modern scientific approach to the world, these two things are unrelated. The description of the nature of the cosmos (as vast, empty space developing from the big bang, or based on spatial relativity, etc.) has nothing to do with morality, ethics, religion, government, or social relations. But from a biblical perspective (and indeed for nearly all cosmology in the ancient world), Weltbild and Weltanschauung are inseparable. The structure of the universe is a symbol and is in fact the reality of the whole world pervasively. Thus when biblical writers from Genesis 1:1 through Revelation 22:21 describe the world cosmologically, they are describing the reality of all things ethically and theologically. I have argued elsewhere that this is one of the main reasons so much language about heaven and about heaven and earth appears in Matthew—he is emphasizing a contrast between God's reign (based in heaven) and humanity's dominion (based on earth).[28] This is not just a literary emphasis of

Matthew but is a consistent way of approaching the world throughout all of the Bible.[29]

In fact, it would not be overstatement to suggest that the gospel, Christian identity, and Christian understanding overall are built upon a distinction between the two realms of heaven and earth, described with what seem to be merely cosmological terms. Jesus' mission is to announce and, through his death and resurrection, effect the coming reign of God. This is found in its most pointed form in the instructive prayer that Jesus taught his disciples—that God's name would be hallowed, his kingdom come, and his will be done *on earth as it is in heaven*. This is not merely data showing a first-century Jewish understanding of the structure of the world (as heaven and earth) but is the foundational use of the reality of the world's structure to describe what God is doing through Jesus Christ.

Thus our survey of *heaven* and related terms shows this language to be pervasive in the Gospels and Acts, but, more importantly, it serves a clear purpose: to depict the world in such a way that we learn to orient ourselves to what God is doing in the world.[30] This was important in the ancient world, and is all the more so for us who now unintentionally divorce the reality of God from the cosmos, thereby blinding us to a key aspect of the biblical worldview.

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[1] This chapter addresses heaven in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), so called because they look so much alike and are apparently dependent on one another, especially in contrast to the Gospel of John. Acts is also covered here because of its close relationship with the Gospel of Luke, who authored both books. The Gospel of John is treated elsewhere in this volume in conjunction with Revelation, which likewise comes from the same author, John. Thanks to my research assistant, Brian Renshaw, for help in tracking down several sources.

[2] This is based on the main text of the NA^{27} edition of the Greek NT. For fuller discussion see Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 125–26.

[3] I have argued at length that the Gospel of Matthew does make just such a distinction by using plural forms to refer to God and his dwelling and singular forms to the created realm and in "heaven and earth pairs," but this appears to be Matthew's particular usage and certainly is not consistent across all biblical authors. See my *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*.

[4] Matt. 6:26; 8:20; 13:32; Mark 4:32; Luke 8:5; 9:58; 13:19; Acts 10:12; 11:6.

[5] L&N, s.v. *ouranos*.

[6] This is not to say God was not the cause of this destruction, only to suggest (along with much of the history of interpretation) the instrument by which God superintended his judgment on these cities appears to have been some kind of volcanic activity, hence its description as the raining of fire and brimstone.

[7] This dominant use of *heaven* is not unique to the NT but finds precedent in the OT and much of the Second Temple literature, including the Dead Sea Scrolls. As Carol Newsom has stated, "Heaven is, above all, the place of God's presence and rule, as well as the place of the holy angels who serve God and have knowledge of truth and mysteries." Carol Newsom, "Heaven," in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Lawrence Schiffman and James VanderKam (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1:338–40.

[8] Such use of metonymy is very common in language, not only in reference to God. We often say, "The White House announced today . . ." to refer generally to a statement coming from some unspecified person or spokesman within the White House, which by extension means coming from the authority of the president of the United States. It should be noted that the use of *heaven* as a metonym for God in the NT does *not* necessitate or prove first-century Jews were using *heaven* to avoid the name of God (as a reverential circumlocution). For a discussion and debunking of this myth see my *Heaven and Earth*, chap. 1.

[9] It should be noted that this is not the typical way this verse is translated; it is often rendered along the lines of "the heavenly Father giving the Holy Spirit." The problem with this translation is that it depends on an inferior textual reading that includes the article (*ho*), thus encouraging a reading of "the Father *who* is from heaven." Moreover, this is problematic because the ways God is described as the "heavenly Father" or "Father in heaven" (see discussion below) are quite different from Luke's text here. His wording indicates that "from heaven" (*ex ouranou*) refers to the Holy Spirit's coming from heaven, not as an adjective describing the Father, who in any case would be oddly described here as "from heaven" rather than "in heaven."

[10] For further discussion see my *Heaven and Earth*, 23–24n34.

[11] Traditionally this text has been connected to Isa. 14:12.

[12] In both Acts 7:42 and Matt. 24:29 (and par.), the "powers of heaven" could be understood as a general expression that includes the sun, moon, and stars. However, the connotation here is stronger than a mere physical reference and is making an ethical and religious claim. This is because in the ancient world, these celestial bodies were intimately tied to and often identified with heavenly beings. See, e.g., the discussion of many texts that connect angels and stars in Dale C. Allison Jr., *Studies in Matthew: Interpretations Past and Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 36–41.

[13] For a fuller discussion of God as father in the OT and related literature, see my *Heaven and Earth*, 217–30. For a helpful overview of the fatherhood of God theme in Scripture, see Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2000).

[14] The frequency is uneven, with Matthew referring to God as Father forty-four times; Mark, four times; Luke, seventeen times; and Acts, three times. This is to be contrasted also with the Gospel of John, which refers to God as Father some 109 times.

[15] The occurrences in Matthew are 5:16, 45; 6:1, 9; 7:11, 21; 10:32, 33; 12:50; 16:17; 18:10, 14, 19. Many English translations read "heavenly Father" also in Luke 11:13, but as discussed in note 9 above, this is a mistranslation.

[16] Matthew alone in the Gospels refers to God in this way. These occurrences are 5:48; 6:14, 26, 32; 15:13; 18:35; 23:9. The adjective "heavenly" (*ouranios*) also occurs in Luke 2:13 and Acts 26:19, as mentioned above.

[17] For a full discussion of the origins and function of "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew, see *Heaven and Earth*, 279–330. One may also consult beneficially the discussion in Robert Yarbrough's chapters on the kingdom in *The Kingdom of God*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 95–151.

[18] "By including Jesus in the full cosmic scope of God's sovereignty, NT terminology places Jesus clearly on the divine side of the distinction between God and 'all things.'" Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 176.

[19] Cornelis Houtman, *Der Himmel im Alten Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 2. For further discussion on "heaven and earth" in the OT, see my *Heaven and Earth*, 163–91.

[20] But this contrastive sense is found not *only* in Matthew, certainly. For example, cf. John 3:31; Acts 7:49; 1 Cor. 15:47; Eph. 1:9–10.

[21] It is a curiosity that in the closely parallel verses of Matt. 24:30, Mark 14:62, and Luke 21:27—all quoting from Dan. 7:13—Luke alone lacks the phrase on or with "the clouds of heaven." As this last phrase is present in the Danielic text (both Greek versions), it is difficult to understand why it is lacking in Luke.

[22] Although probably not part of the original writing of the Gospel of Mark, several very old Greek manuscripts appended to the end of the second Gospel speak in a similar way about Jesus' physical ascent and now residing in heaven with God (Mark 16:19).

[23] Of course, much more could be said along these lines, and good discussions can be found in various systematic theology treatments as well as other books. For example, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1158–67; or Herman Bavinck, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), chaps. 12–18. Also very helpful is the clear teaching on this topic in N. T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008). Biblically, one should also reread passages such as Rom. 8 and 1 Cor. 15, which are familiar but have often not been read with ears to hear concerning their testimony about the end goal of redemption.

[24] Matt. 5:12; Mark 10:21; Luke 6:19–21, 23; 10:20; 12:33; 18:22; 19:21.

[25] For an insightful analysis of the structure of the Sermon on the Mount, see Dale C. Allison Jr., "Structure, Biographical Impulse, and the *Imitatio Christi*," in his *Studies in Matthew*, 142–55.

[26] Coincidentally, this remark is not far removed chronologically or ideologically from Rudolf Bultmann's famous "demythologizing" shot across the bow of the Bible about modern man's inability to believe in the Bible's three-decker universe. Cf. his *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961).

[27] Note I am not making a comment here about "creation science" as opposed to "evolutionary science." Indeed, I think the debate between "creation scientists" and "evolutionary scientists" is intramural when it comes to scientific method. There is a worldview difference between these two camps, no doubt, but it is not coextensive with the worldview difference I am exploring here between a biblical worldview and that of scientific rationalism.

[28] See Pennington, *Heaven and Earth*.

[29] For a working out of this *Weltbild* and *Weltanschauung* view across the NT, see Jonathan T. Pennington and Sean McDonough, eds., *Cosmology and New Testament Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2008). More work could still be done on tracing the heaven and earth theme throughout the rest of the canon.

[30] A very helpful survey of apocalyptic language in the Bible and its importance in the modern world can be found in Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

4

HEAVEN IN PAUL'S LETTERS

STEPHEN J. WELLUM



When thinking of the subject of heaven, many ideas come to people's minds. Many of our ideas arise from tradition or culture instead of Scripture. For some, heaven is a place where disembodied spirits enjoy eternal bliss on far-off shores removed from any kind of existence on earth. For others it is a place of unending church services, where the last line of the chorus plays over and over again. For still others heaven is viewed merely in terms of a great family reunion, with little focus on enjoyment of the presence and glory of our great triune covenant Lord in a renewed universe. Given this diverse and often contradictory thought about heaven within the church, it is crucial to bring our thought captive to Scripture. The subject of the final state of God's people is one of great importance for both our present living and our future hope. Biblical teaching about heaven is always meant to encourage and spur us on to faith and obedience in our present lives (1 Cor. 15:58; Phil. 3:12–16; Heb. 10:25; 2 Pet. 3:11–13) as we anticipate the glorious appearing of our Lord and the consummation of all things.

Our focus in this chapter is Paul's view of heaven. What did Paul teach regarding the final state of believers? What may we hope for as we live in anticipation of the end? As in other chapters in this book, this study cannot delve into all aspects of Pauline eschatology. It will not discuss the diverse issues surrounding Christ's parousia, the status of a millennial age, or even final judgment.[1] Even though these topics are important in their own right, our focus is limited to Paul's teaching on heaven. We will approach our subject in three steps: (1) the Old Testament background to Paul's understanding of heaven; (2)

basic structures of Paul's thought; and (3) a specific focus on the believer's final, future state prior to and as a result of Christ's return.

Old Testament Background to Paul's Understanding of Heaven

In order to understand Paul's view of heaven, we must locate his thinking in the wider context of the Old Testament.[2] Paul's teaching does not come to us in a vacuum. It is thoroughly rooted in the Old Testament story line, which progressively unfolds God's purposes in creation, the disastrous consequences of the fall, and the gracious promise of redemption, and which in the prophets anticipates a reversal of sin and death and the dawning of a new creation. Let us briefly sketch the Old Testament story line of creation-fall-redemption in order to set the stage for Paul's teaching about heaven and our final state.

Creation

From the opening pages of Scripture, God identifies himself as the sovereign creator and providential Lord. It may seem strange to start with creation in order to understand heaven, but, as in most doctrinal areas, one cannot fully grasp them without first going back to creation. Let us develop four crucial points from creation for rightly comprehending heaven.

First, God is identified as the creator of "the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Here the expression refers to the entire created order, what we call the universe, with the "earth" focusing on the place where humans and animals dwell and the "heavens" on the place where God dwells and rules.[3] This is why in the Old Testament, *heaven*(*s*) (Heb. *shamayim*) can denote "sky" or "air," referring to the atmosphere just above the earth (Gen. 1:20), the firmament in which the sun and moon and stars are located (v. 17), as well as God's abode (Ps. 2:4), including angelic hosts.[4] Yet, given God's spiritual nature and omnipresence, we are not to think of "heavens and earth" in primarily spatial categories. God and heaven are not merely "up" and the earth "down." Rather, heaven is the spiritual realm where God dwells that presently exists alongside the created world, thus underscoring the foundational Creator-creation distinction of the biblical worldview.[5]

Second, as creator, God is the sovereign ruler and king of the universe. Even though the expression "kingdom of God" is not found directly in the Old Testament, Graeme Goldsworthy is right to assert that "the idea of the rule of God over creation, over all creatures, over the kingdoms of the world, and in a

unique and special way, over his chosen and redeemed people, is the very heart of the message of the Hebrew scriptures."[6] Additionally, God's kingly work in creation is never presented as an end in itself; it is rather the beginning of space-time history and the outworking of his eternal plan for the universe that leads to a specific *telos*. In this way, creation and eschatology are interdependent. Creation leads to providence; both creation and providence establish the eschatological direction of God's plan, particularly worked out in terms of specific covenantal relationships God enters into with his creation that, in the end, lead to a specific goal centered in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:9–10; Col. 1:15–20). As redemptive history unfolds, we increasingly discover what God's appointed *telos* for the universe and his people is.

Third, Scripture insists God created everything "good" (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), indeed "very good" (v. 31), including finite, temporal, and material-spiritual creatures.[7] An important implication of this truth is that Scripture nowhere elevates spiritual realities over the physical, since both are created by God with value. As Michael Horton notes, "Human beings—in the totality of their existence as spiritual and physical—belong in this world of time and space. There is no place for the idea of divine soul longing to transcend its creaturely finitude in order to return to a primordial condition of eternal preexistence in the unity of being."[8] However, in insisting on the goodness of God's initial creation, the Bible also sets the stage for what goes wrong—sin, death, and destruction—and, thankfully, the promise of God in the sending of the Messiah to set things right. Thus, as a result of the fall, the entire universe is affected by sin, including our body and soul, but in Christ both are redeemed, hence the scriptural emphasis on the resurrection of our bodies to live in God's presence forever in a new creation (see 1 Corinthians 15; Revelation 21–22). Importantly, as Horton observes, "the original creation is therefore the correlate for the new-creation imagery of the prophets and apostles."[9] Ultimately the whole drama of redemptive history anticipates, as D. A. Carson writes, "the restoration of goodness, even the transformation to a greater glory, of the universe gone wrong (Rom. 8:21), and arrives finally at the dawning of a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21–22; cf. Isa. 65:17), the home of righteousness (2 Peter 3:13)."[10]

Fourth, creation establishes the unique covenantal representation of Adam for the human race, which eventually sets up the crucial Adam-Christ typological relationship in Scripture. Biblically and theologically it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the Adam-Christ relationship for understanding

the story line of Scripture. All human beings fall under the representative headship of two people: Adam and Christ. In Scripture, Adam is not merely the first created man; he also serves as the covenant mediator and representative for all humanity.[11] In Adam humanity is represented, which speaks of the incredible role God has given humanity to serve as his vice-regents to rule over creation as his servant kings; it also entails that "in Adam," when he sins, the entire human race *and* creation are affected. That is why, as Goldsworthy notes, "when man falls because of sin the creation is made to fall with him."[12] It is also why to restore the whole creation, God must work through a greater Adam, God's own Son, who must become man in order to restore the human race through his triumphant cross work on our behalf as our new covenant head.

As God's plan unfolds, and especially in light of Adam's sin, all tied to the "old creation" is now characterized by sin, death, and judgment. By contrast, and especially from the perspective of the Old Testament prophets, Christ represents all that is associated with "the age to come," which is described in terms of a "new covenant" and a "new creation" characterized by salvation, life, and an entirely new order.[13] This is why Scripture ultimately subsumes Jew and Gentile under Adam—anyone who is "in Adam," given Adam's disobedience, now comes into this world dead in their sins and under the judicial sentence of God (Eph. 2:1–3). Adam's headship has the deeper privilege of more than ordinary fatherhood. It also includes the dignity of defining what it means to be human, for he stands not merely as our physical but also as our covenantal head. As the apostle Paul later states, being human is equivalent to bearing his image, but to be identified with Christ is equivalent to being part of the "new creation" and participating in the realities of that age associated with salvation, life, and the power of the Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45–49). Doug Moo captures this point well:

> All people, Paul teaches, stand in relationship to one of two men, whose actions determine the eternal destiny of all who belong to them. Either one "belongs to" Adam and is under sentence of death because of his sin, or disobedience, or one belongs to Christ and is assured of eternal life because of his "righteous" act, or obedience. The actions of Adam and Christ then are similar in having "epochal" significance.[14]

even though, as Moo notes, there is massive discontinuity between these two men since "Christ's act is able completely to overcome the effects of Adam's."[15]

In addition, the role of Adam and the creation covenant are also important for

establishing foundational typological patterns crucial in grasping "heaven" and thus our final state as God's people. For example, think of the creation week's culminating in the *rest* of God on the seventh day after he declares everything "very good" (Gen. 1:31). This not only speaks of God's entering into covenantal enjoyment of his creation; it also establishes a pattern that serves to ground the Sabbath law in the time of Moses (Ex. 20:8–11) and ultimately points forward to a greater "rest" to come in Christ's work, consummated in our final state in the new creation and "heavenly city" (see Heb. 3:7–4:13; 11:16; 12:22–24; cf. Revelation 21–22).[16] Or think of the close connection between Eden as a temple sanctuary, the emphasis on the land tied to creation, and how these structures eventually find their fulfillment in our Lord Jesus, who replaces the temple and ushers in the land/new creation, thus bringing us to our eternal home and rest in a new creation.[17] Or think of the establishment of marriage in Genesis 2:24–25 and how through the biblical covenants marriage typifies a greater reality—God's relation to his people—and points forward to the end of all things in the new creation.[18] In all these ways the creation covenant establishes in seed form patterns that picture something of what heaven is, which now in Christ we see in full bloom due to his coming and work.

Fall

Unfortunately, Adam as our representative head disobeyed. Given his covenantal role, when he fell, we fell, and the entire creation was affected. In Adam, the reality and power of sin, death, and the curse were introduced into God's good world. Now the human race is under a death sentence—spiritually and physically (see Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:1–3). Even worse, we who were made to know, love, and serve God—who were to enjoy "rest" and God's heavenly presence on earth—are now enemies of God, living under his judgment and wrath (Gen. 3:17–24; Eph. 2:1–3).

As the punishment of our sin is described in Genesis 3, the consequences of it become more evident. The breakdown of the covenant relationship results in a horrible twofold alienation: (1) alienation between God and humans, and (2) alienation between humans and creation (which results in further alienation from others, our inheritance of the garden, and the entire created order). God drives us from Eden; he blocks entrance to the Tree of Life, signifying our life-giving fellowship in God's heavenly presence has been lost. In his justice and holiness, God places the cherubim to block entrance to Eden. Scripture is clear: the only way back to God's covenantal presence is forward by God's provision of a

redeemer. From Genesis 3 on, the story line of Scripture teaches that our only hope for a reversal of this desperate situation is God's provision alone. The only hope for Adam's helpless race is found in the last Adam, who does not fail and through his obedience wins for us redemption and a new creation.

Redemption

After describing the awful effects of sin upon God's good creation, he—thankfully, and solely due to his sovereign grace—does not leave us to ourselves. A word of promise is given (Gen. 3:15). The triune God as universal King and Lord will act to bring his *saving reign* to this world and make all things right. He will take the initiative to put sin and evil down. Over time and through the biblical covenants, God's initial promise receives greater clarity, definition, and development. Ultimately God's saving kingdom comes to this world through the great antitype of all the previous covenant mediators, our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the context of God's initial promise to save and reverse the effects of the fall, Goldsworthy correctly notes, "The background to God's work of rescuing sinners is his commitment to his creation."[19] Given God's eternal plan, there is no hint that God's creation of the universe was "on a trial basis, or with a view to scrapping it after a period of time."[20] Rather, the Genesis narrative, especially with the pronouncement that everything was very good (1:31), is best understood as God's approval of all he had made *and* his commitment to it. In fact, as Goldsworthy notes, "The strength of God's commitment becomes clearer as the narrative progresses. Mankind's rebellion brings judgment but not instant destruction. God preserves order in the universe and in human society, and at the same time begins to reveal his purposes to overcome the effects of human sin."[21] And it is precisely these purposes to reverse the effects of sin in all of its diverse dimensions, to destroy the powers of "this present age" and ultimately usher in a "new creation," that the story line of Scripture develops in terms of the triune God's great plan of redemption, unfolded through the biblical covenants and anticipated in the coming of a future redeemer. Why is this important to emphasize for our purposes? When Scripture thinks of the final state of God's people, i.e., "heaven," and the enjoyment of God's presence in covenant relationship, it is always in "creation–new creation" categories.

As God's plan of redemption unfolds in the Old Testament, it is the prophets who pick up these promises, hopes, and expectations. The prophets proclaim a future age of renewal by recapitulating the history of redemption and projecting it into the future. In the "latter days" the covenant Lord will come and save his

people through a new exodus, a new Jerusalem, and a greater Davidic king to usher in God's eternal kingdom and *saving* reign (Isa. 9:6–7; 11:1–16; 52:13–53:12; Jer. 31:29–34; Ezekiel 34). When this occurs, the YHWH and Messiah will make all things right and reverse the effects of sin and death. The Old Testament's vision of the end, particularly in Isaiah, speaks of our future state not as disembodied spirits floating on the clouds but in terms of a renewed creation/Eden and resurrection state (Isa. 11:6–9; 65:17–25; cf. Dan. 12:1–2).

It should not surprise us that this teaching serves as the backdrop to the New Testament. In exactly the same way as the Old Testament, yet in greater clarity and specificity now that Christ has come, the New Testament speaks of the final heavenly abode as a created place (Luke 24:51; John 14:2–4; 1 Pet. 3:22), as literally a new heavens and a new earth (Rev. 21:1). The same is true for Paul. Our heavenly hope is for a redeemed and reconciled creation living out its purpose in the presence of our covenant Lord forever (see Rom. 8:19–21; 1 Corinthians 15; cf. Col. 1:15–20). Let us now turn to how Paul picks up and develops these points from the Old Testament.

Basic Biblical-Theological Structures of Paul's Thought

Continuation of the Old Testament Story Line [22]

What is true of all the New Testament authors is true of Paul: he builds on the Old Testament teaching. The basic points from creation, fall, and redemption are assumed. Paul's vision of the final state of God's people is thoroughly Old Testament in outlook. Yet, like all New Testament authors, Paul acknowledges that in light of Christ's coming, what God promised and the prophets anticipated is now here in Christ. In fact, in Christ greater clarity has now resulted, especially in understanding the future state of the believer, so that what the Old Testament only hinted at is now made clearer. That is why Paul can say that in Christ "life and immortality" have now been brought to light (2 Tim. 1:10; cf. 2 Cor. 4:6). A helpful way of thinking about the incredible realities Christ has ushered in and their impact on our understanding of our future state is to think in terms of inaugurated eschatology, a key structure of New Testament theology, specifically Paul's.

Inaugurated Eschatology[23]

The entire New Testament consistently announces that in Christ, God's saving kingdom and reign have broken into this world.[24] "Kingdom of God" does *not*

primarily refer to a certain geographical location. The phrase tells us more about God (the fact that he reigns) than anything else. But the New Testament is clear: in Jesus, the long-awaited kingdom has come, and the rule of sin and death has been destroyed. Through Jesus' obedient life and cross work, he has *inaugurated* the kingdom over which he now rules and reigns—it is *already* here—in fulfillment of what the prophets predicted. The New Testament also stresses that even though the kingdom is now here, it is still *not yet* in that it awaits its consummation in Christ's return. This *already-not yet* tension that characterizes New Testament eschatology is famously known as "inaugurated eschatology"; i.e., the "last days" the Old Testament anticipated and predicted have actually arrived in the coming of our Lord Jesus yet still await full consummation.

In the New Testament, this tension is presented in a number of ways. For example, in regard to the kingdom of God, the covenant Lord who rules over all (e.g., Pss. 93:1; 97:1; 99:1; 103:19; Dan. 4:34–35) has now brought his saving reign and rule to this fallen world in Jesus Christ, evidenced by the coming of the Spirit (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20) and miraculous signs and preaching (Luke 4:16–30; cf. Isa. 29:18; 58:6; 61:1–2). Truly in Jesus, as he himself announces, God's saving rule has broken into this world (Matt. 4:17). However, even though the kingdom is now here, Jesus still teaches us to pray "Your kingdom come" (6:10) and speaks to his disciples of a future day when he will come "in his kingdom" (16:28; Luke 23:51), "which clearly refers to the future fulfillment of the kingdom promise."[25]

The same must be said about the coming of the Spirit. Because Jesus has come and has won victory in his cross work, he has poured out the *promised* Spirit (Acts 2; cf. John 14–16; Eph. 1:13–14). However, the gift of the Spirit is the *arrabōn*, the deposit and guarantee of our promised inheritance awaiting us in the consummation.[26] Thus, the reception of the Spirit means one has become a participant in the new mode of existence associated with the future age and now partakes of the powers of the "age to come." Yet the New Testament insists that what the Spirit gives is only a foretaste of far greater blessings to come. As Hoekema summarizes, "We may say that in the possession of the Spirit we who are in Christ have a foretaste of the blessings of the age to come, and a pledge and guarantee of the resurrection of the body. Yet we have only the firstfruits. We look forward to the final consummation of the kingdom of God, when we shall enjoy these blessings to the full."[27] In these ways and many more, the New Testament teaches that in Christ the "last days" (*eschaton*) have arrived but are not yet consummated in all of their fullness.

This tension can also be explained in terms of a restructuring of the Old Testament redemptive-historical timeline. From an Old Testament perspective, there is a distinction between "this present age"—an age characterized by sin, death, and opposition to God as represented by earthly kingdoms—and "the age to come"—an age in which the covenant Lord will come to rescue his people through his Messiah and to usher in his kingdom, i.e., his saving rule and reign. But how are these two ages related to each other? David Wells nicely states the relationship: "These two ages were related to one another in a chronological sequence. This αἰών ended with the coming to earth of the Messiah, and with his arrival there began the heavenly αἰών."[28] In other words, from an Old Testament perspective, there would only be one coming of the Lord and Messiah in power and might. And when the Lord and Messiah would finally come and usher in the "last days" and the "age to come" (that associated with heaven), it would be an age characterized by the eschatological hope of the prophets, namely, salvation, judgment, and the new creation. All of these great realities will come at once. However, the New Testament modifies this basic timeline. Instead it speaks of two comings of the Messiah, not just one, as well as an overlap of the ages. In the first coming—all that is associated with the Son's incarnation, life, and cross work—the "age to come" is now here, just like the prophets anticipated. But, even though the future age is in principle here, it is not fully here until Christ returns in glory and power. As such, "this present age" continues until the second coming, even though the "age to come" has been inaugurated in Christ. In this sense, there is an overlap of the ages.

What does all of this have to do with heaven? One cannot fully grasp what Paul means by *heaven* unless one places his thought within the overall framework of inaugurated eschatology. So, for example, in Paul and the New Testament, Christ has inaugurated the kingdom so that in reality, the *heavenly* age has broken into this world—*heaven has come to earth*. In Christ, the triune God of heaven has ushered in his saving rule and reign on earth that is now here in and through his people even though it still awaits the not yet. The Son, who has come from heaven (Eph. 4:9; Rom. 10:6), has returned to heaven (Eph. 4:10; 6:9; Col. 4:1; cf. Rom. 8:34), and will come again from heaven (Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:16; 2 Thess. 1:7), has done a work that *presently* has brought the rule of heaven to earth. For Paul, then, heaven is more than merely a future reality, even though it is that. Paul can call heaven our eternal home (2 Cor. 5:1, 2; Phil. 3:20; cf. Gal. 4:26) and where our hoped-for salvation is being kept (Col. 1:5). In another sense heaven denotes, Maile explains,

> a spiritual sphere coexisting with the material world of space and time; it is where the exalted Christ now is, seated at God's right hand. Not only that; the believer is united with Christ, is "in Christ," and as such belongs already to the company of heaven (Phil. 3:20) and can be thought of as being seated with Christ in the heavenly realms (Eph. 2:6). Even now the believer's life is "hidden with Christ in God," and the "things above" should be the focus of the believer's attention and should provide the orientation and goal of the Christian's life here and now.[29]

In fact, in Christ, as Paul uniquely develops in Ephesians, all our *spiritual* blessings, i.e., those pertaining or belonging to the Spirit, are ours now "in the *heavenly realms*" (*en tois epouraniois*) even though we are presently living on earth, awaiting his return from heaven.[30] To grasp what Paul is saying, one must place his thought within the two-age, redemptive-historical timeline discussed above. As Peter O'Brien reminds us, in Paul the phrase

> *in the heavenly realms* is not describing some celestial topography. . . . *In the heavenly realms* is bound up with the divine saving events and is to be understood within a Pauline eschatological perspective. In line with the Jewish two-age structure heaven is seen from the perspective of the age to come, which has now been inaugurated by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. At the same time, it is still part of this present evil age until the final consummation, for hostile powers are currently active in the heavenly realms (cf. 3:10; 6:12).[31]

In addition, as O'Brien continues, in Christ believers are linked to this *heavenly realm* because the gracious gifts of salvation are "not simply future benefits but are a present reality for us, since they have already been won for us by God's saving action in Christ."[32] Even now, we as believers live as citizens of *heaven*, seated with Christ in the *heavenlies* (Eph. 2:6; Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:3), while on earth we live between the two advents of Christ, increasingly conformed to Christ (2 Cor. 3:18) and awaiting his return. We now participate in Christ's rule and reign even though we still await our final inheritance. In Christ we now enter eternal life (Rom. 6:4) and are already participants in the end-time *new creation* (2 Cor. 5:17) even though we long for the dawning of our inheritance of eternal life (Gal. 6:8) and the fullness of the new creation. In all these ways, as believers we now experience heaven in our salvation in Christ as

we grow in grace.

However, as important as it is to stress the *present* or *already* aspects we now enjoy, there is still a *future* or *not-yet* aspect that is essential to remember if we are to grasp the depth and breadth of what Paul teaches in regard to the future state of the believer. As Robert Reymond reminds us from Paul,

> While our inward man is renewed daily, our outward man (*ho exō anthrōpos*), the body, and the whole universe await the resurrection (2 Cor. 4:16–18; Rom. 8:10ff). Neither we nor any other Christians are ruling and reigning now in the way that we shall (1 Cor. 4:8). Thus our perspective must be, on the one hand, that of a humble and thankful participation in the victory of the inward man here, and on the other hand, expectant anticipation of the victory of the body and that of the united body and soul together in the Eschaton in a new heaven and new earth.[33]

With this in mind, let us now turn from the *already* to the *not yet* focus of inaugurated eschatology. What is our future state as believers, initially in death prior to our Lord's return and later as a result of Christ's parousia and the consummation of all things?

The Christian's Final State and Heaven

The Intermediate State

For Paul and the entire New Testament, our *ultimate* hope is found in Christ's return and the resurrection (1 Thess. 4:13–18; cf. 1 Cor. 15:26). Yet prior to Christ's return, there is a temporary state for believers between their death and resurrection, what has been called the "intermediate state." Unlike some have proposed, it is incorrect to think that Paul did not foresee believers' dying before Christ's parousia. In fact, this is why he desires to inform the church about the fate of deceased believers.[34] Prior to Christ's return, those believers who have died in Christ have either "fallen asleep" (*koimasthai*; cf. 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20; 1 Thess. 4:13ff) or are "sleeping" (*katheudein*; Eph. 5:14; 1 Thess. 5:10).[35] This description, as Ridderbos notes, does not entail a lack of "all activity and consciousness."[36] Instead, it is a way of speaking of a state between our present and final states that Paul can describe as "far better" than our present existence.

Philippians 1:21–24 is probably the clearest text on this point: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain [*kerdos*]. If I am to live in the flesh, that means

fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better [*pollō mallon kreisson*]. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account."[37] It is difficult to deny that Paul is contrasting life here on earth with being "with Christ," which is described as not remaining in the flesh.[38] It is possible to think Paul anticipates being with Christ in his resurrection, but because Paul assumes an instantaneous benefit in his death, it is better to think in terms of an intermediate state. This is not to say Paul views his present life as insignificant; he does desire to remain in the body so he can continue to serve the church. Yet to depart and be "with Christ" is viewed as *better*, even though it is not the final resurrection state. For Paul, the believer's union with Christ cannot be broken even in death, even though death is an enemy that must be destroyed finally in Christ's return (Rom. 8:18–39). Furthermore, as Horton reminds us, nowhere does Paul view the death of a believer "as a benign deliverer, the sunset that is as beautiful as the sunrise, or as a portal to a 'better life.'"[39] Death brings legitimate tears and grief, yet we do not mourn as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). Our union with Christ is stronger than the power of death; even if the intermediate state is temporary, Scripture views it as better because we are "with Christ." In Christ the sting and power of death has been removed as we await our resurrection, for we depart to dwell in the presence of Christ in a living, conscious way (see Luke 16:22; 23:43; Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:8; Rev. 6:9–11; 14:13). Even though this intermediate state is never called "heaven" in Scripture, in theology we speak of it as such because we go to be "with Christ," who is now there (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1) and whence will return (Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:16; 2 Thess. 1:7).

In recent days, however, some evangelicals have disputed the reality of the intermediate state. Operating with a nonreductive physicalism, they deny that Scripture teaches a body-soul distinction and thus at death a temporary disembodied state awaiting the consummation.[40] Yet this view is very difficult to maintain, for a couple of reasons. First, Scripture overall teaches a holistic duality, i.e., a distinction between body and soul, even though Scripture views us holistically. Due to the effects of sin and death, we know body and soul can be separated, at least temporarily.[41] Second, as noted above, it is due to such passages as Philippians 1:21–23 (cf. Matt. 10:28; Luke 23:43: Heb. 12:23; Rev. 6:9–11), which affirm a disembodied intermediate state, that we have grounds to affirm that deceased believers are presently "with Christ" in a "better" state,

which minimally implies a self-conscious, real, and living relationship.

In fact, it is best to interpret 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 in this way as well. Even though this text has generated a lot of discussion, it does seem to imply an intermediate state.[42] In these verses, Paul speaks of being "away from the body and being at home with the Lord" (v. 8), with "the death of the believer being the transitional event moving the believer from one 'home' to the other."[43] This seems to imply a period of time between our death and resurrection. To come to this conclusion, as Reymond notes, the "*crux interpretum* centers around this phrase in verse 8 and the correlative terms 'house,' 'building,' and 'eternal in the heavens' (v. 1), and the concepts of 'clothed' and 'naked' (vv. 2–4)."[44] Some have appealed to the present tense "we have" (*echomen*) in verse 1 and the references to "house," "building," and "eternal in the heavens" to say we receive our resurrection body at death and thus conclude this text does not teach a disembodied existence. But more likely, as Schreiner argues, "the present tense is used to denote the confidence and certainty of the reception of the resurrection body."[45] This makes a lot of sense especially given that the terms "desiring to be clothed" (v. 2) and "naked" (v. 3) are best viewed as references to our intermediate existence apart from our resurrection bodies while we are present with the Lord.

Moreover, considering the combination of this with "away from the body" and "at home with the Lord" (v. 8) over against "away from the Lord" and "at home in the body" (v. 6) and the note of preference for that conditional over our present earthly existence, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Paul is teaching that we continue to exist independent of our bodies for a temporary period of time. As Reymond rightly observes, "What Paul would most prefer would be that he might be alive at the return of the Lord and be clothed with the resurrection body without laying the mortal body down in death (vv. 2–4). But even the intermediate state is better by far than this present existence, beset as the present is with sin in which we have less direct communion with the Lord (v. 6)."[46]

However, even though there are excellent grounds to affirm the reality of the intermediate state, Paul says little about it. Instead, his primary focus is on the future, final, resurrection state. Ridderbos is correct to note, "It is certainly true therefore that to be with Christ after death and before the resurrection does not have the full redemptive significance in Paul's epistles that the resurrection has."[47] In death, believers are not separated from Christ; we are with him (Rom.

8:38; Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:1–10), but even then we await the consummation of all things at Christ's return. Let us now turn to discussing Paul's view of our final state and eternal home.

The Future and Final State

The final goal of God's redemptive purposes, planned from eternity, is the uniting of all things *in heaven and earth* in Christ (Eph. 1:9–10).[48] In Ephesians and elsewhere in Paul (see Col. 1:15–20), Christ as God the Son incarnate is the one in whom God chooses to sum up (*anakephalaiōsis*) all things, the one in whom reconciliation of this disrupted, fallen creation will take place. Sin and its effects in both the angelic and human realms have disrupted God's good universe. However, in Christ reconciliation and restoration have now taken place in his death and resurrection (Col. 1:20–22), but it still awaits the *not-yet* realities of the consummation. But it is important to note, given the believer's covenantal union with Christ, that our future hope and final state is intimately bound up with him. What he has achieved is now ours; what he will complete and consummate is ours—a future, certain hope that entails nothing less than our bodily resurrection, transformation, and glorification in a renewed new creation. There are many texts that teach these glorious truths, but we will focus on two.

Romans 8:18–25. Romans 8 is an incredible text of confidence and assurance for the believer in Christ. After proclaiming how our Lord has broken the power of sin and death by his cross and resurrection, and how the era of sin and death has ceased due to the inauguration of the promised new covenant age, evidenced by the Spirit's enabling believers to begin to live out what we are in Christ, and how the church as God's new humanity is now receiving promises made to Israel as God's adopted children—heirs and coheirs with Christ, ultimately awaiting our inheritance in a new creation (vv. 1–17; cf. Isa. 65:17; 66:22)—Paul makes clear that the new creation is not only our future hope but also the end of all things. In the truest sense, then, heaven in terms of the final state of the believer is our dwelling in the presence of our triune God in our resurrection bodies in a renewed universe forever.

This is made clear by Paul's comparing and contrasting our present condition with what is to come. Presently we endure suffering, but along with creation we long for the end of all things, when everything will be made new. In fact, Paul personifies creation as one who eagerly expects (*apokaradokia*, "eager expectation") and longs for (*apekdechetai*, "eagerly wait for") the *eschaton*, when the children of God will be made known publicly.[49] What Paul envisions is

precisely what the Old Testament teaches. As noted above, the link between creation and God's redemptive work in humans is close. Since it was by Adam and his rebellion that creation came under its curse and present abnormality, it will be by the work of the last Adam that both creation and God's people will be redeemed from the curse. Creation, then, in this personified way groans under the curse but longs for the fulfillment of all God has pledged in his new-covenant promises.

This point is further reinforced in Romans 8:20–22. Paul explains (*gar*) why the entire created order anticipates so avidly the future revelation of God's children.[50] Due to Adam's sin, God has subjected the creation to frustration or futility (*mataiotēti*) by placing a curse upon it (cf. Gen. 3:17–19). The futility is also described in terms of "the bondage to corruption" (*tēs douleias tēs phthoras*), which entails "corruption, decay, and death, which pervade the natural world."[51] As a result, the entire creation groans (*systenazei*) and suffers birth pangs (*synōdinei*) along with believers. Both of these verbs signify that the created order has not fulfilled its purpose. Its frustration and failure to reach its full potential, thankfully, anticipates something greater, namely, being liberated from its bondage (Rom. 8:21), which, in light of Old Testament expectation, anticipates the fulfillment of creation's purpose in the new creation.

When will this take place? It will take place on the final day, when Christ returns, and we, as the children of God, are publicly revealed (v. 23). But what is important to note is how Paul links our redemption (adoption) and resurrection. In fact, in placing "the redemption of our bodies" (*tēn apolytrōsin tou sōmatos hēmōn*) in apposition to our public revelation of our adoption, Paul underscores the fact our final state is organically related to our resurrection from the dead. Heaven, in the final-state sense, does not take place until the end. Until that day, believers, along with the entire created order, long for our Lord's return. Until then, even though we are already in Christ, we still groan; we have not yet obtained the resurrection of the dead and full realities of the new creation. Yet our groaning is in hope—our future inheritance is sure, evidenced and sealed by the Spirit. Even though we experience suffering now, our eschatological inheritance is sure; our sovereign, triune God works out everything for our good —all of life's circumstances will accomplish the goal of conforming us to Christ and bringing us safely to our heavenly home (v. 28; Gal. 4:26).

What will this future age be like? Romans 8:19–22 certainly entails indescribable glory. Creation itself longs for it, as do believers (vv. 23–25); the assumption is that this new creation will be a perfect world, without sin and all

of its corrosive effects. Adam's sin and all of its ramifications will be reversed. Creation will be set free, death and every demonic power will be defeated, and all creation will pay homage to Christ (Phil. 2:10–11) as all enemies are put under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25–27). Not only will we enjoy this world; we will also rule with Christ as his covenant people, inheriting God's kingdom and our heavenly home (1 Cor. 6:9–10; 15:50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5).

1 Corinthians 15. This chapter is the most detailed discussion in Paul of our final state, linking that final state to our bodily resurrection and the renewing of the entire creation. As elsewhere, Paul does not teach salvation as simply "going to heaven when I die;"[52] he instead grounds our *ultimate* hope in the "the resurrection of the body and life everlasting." In the consummation, not only earth but heaven itself will become new. Human bodies will be reunited with their souls, and, as Horton beautifully states, heaven and earth will become "one cosmic sanctuary of everlasting joy."[53] Interestingly, it was false ideas in the Corinthian church that led Paul to write this wonderful chapter. Sadly, this church had adopted false ideas of spirituality that were leading to disastrous conclusions. Not only were they leading to a partisan spirit within the church (chaps. 1–3), immorality (chap. 5), lawsuits between believers (chap. 6), and abuse of the Lord's Supper and spiritual gifts (chaps. 11–14); it was also leading to a denial of the future, bodily resurrection state that 15:12 makes clear. It is important to note that they were not denying the reality of an afterlife. Rather, they were denying the resurrection of the dead in terms of its bodily, new-creation features.

How did they come to such a belief? Probably it was due to a false view of spirituality, of what it means to be *pneumatikos* ("spiritual"). As Gordon Fee elaborates, "In their view, by the reception of the Spirit, and especially the gift of tongues, they thought that they had already entered the true spirituality that is to be (4:8); already they had begun a form of angelic existence (13:1; cf. 4:9; 7:1–7) in which the body was unnecessary and unwanted, and would finally be destroyed."[54] Thus, for them life in the Spirit seemed to entail the undesirability and superfluousness of the future bodily resurrection of believers. It is hard to know for sure, but Fee thinks at least two historical realities merged to bring about the Corinthians' actual denial of a bodily resurrection.[55] First, it is possible that the doctrine of the resurrection was not well articulated in early years, especially among Gentiles. No doubt, Christ's resurrection was affirmed as central in securing for believers salvation from sin and hope for the future. But would that hope necessarily have been thought of in terms of our resurrection,

especially given the fact so few Christians would have yet died and coupled with a longing for an imminent parousia? Second—and probably more significant—it seemed a false theology began to gain ground in Corinth after Paul's departure that not only denied the value and significance of the body but also was "over-realized" in its eschatological focus. The Corinthians rightly saw in the coming of Christ the dawning of blessings of God's kingdom and "age to come" realities, but they failed to grasp there was a *not yet* reality tied to the second coming of Christ still to come. In so doing, they so exaggerated their present "spiritual" state that they thought they had already entered into the final state. Thus, some of them began to deny the reality of a future bodily resurrection and become careless about their present lives in terms of how they lived and what they did with their bodies.[56]

Paul was not pleased with this turn of events. He was deeply concerned about their false ideas of spirituality—their denial of a future bodily resurrection was, in reality, a denial of the gospel. For Paul, Christ's resurrection is *the* resurrection, that which the Scriptures anticipated, the firstfruits of the final consummated state still to come. Paul rightly views Jesus' cross and resurrection as *the* event that restores what was lost under Adam and ushers in a new creation. But if this is so, we as believers *must* participate in it due to our faith union with our covenant head. Denying our bodily resurrection is tantamount to denying Christ's resurrection. Paul is horrified by the false teaching of the Corinthian church. Ironically, we should be thankful for this sad confusion in Corinth—not because we rejoice in the Corinthians' errors, but because in 1 Corinthians 15, under inspiration of the Spirit, we have for all generations one of the greatest theological treasures of the church. In Paul's response to the Corinthians' denial of the future bodily resurrection of believers, we discover anew the centrality and utter significance of Christ's resurrection to God's redemptive purposes and the glorious hope that is ours as those who are found in Christ. Let us briefly unpack the text as we think about the wonder and glory of our future state in Christ.

Paul begins addressing the Corinthians' aberrant theology by reminding them of what they both hold in common: the objective reality of Christ's resurrection. There is no evidence the Corinthians denied the reality of Christ's resurrection; it was the link between Christ's resurrection and ours they were confused about. That is why Paul in verses 1–2 and 11 appeals to that which they believe and upon which have taken their stand. And it is from this common conviction that Paul will argue against their assertion that there is no resurrection of the dead.

With an explanatory “for” (*gar*) in verse 3 Paul proceeds to introduce the gospel message he had received and passed on, that “of first importance.” What is important about this early confession is its clear grasp of the significance of the death and resurrection of Christ. “Christ died for (*hyper*) our sins.” In this simple statement the horrific realities of human depravity, alienation between God and human beings, and death as the just penalty for sin are assumed, built upon the Old Testament Scriptures. Christ’s death is viewed as substitutionary and vicarious, linked to God’s plan in redemptive history—evidenced by the expression “in accordance with the Scriptures.” In verse 4 Paul stresses both the burial and resurrection of Christ. In linking both of these together, Paul is clearly emphasizing the reality of Christ’s death and thus the bodily nature of his resurrection. Christ’s resurrection was not to be viewed as some bodiless “spiritual” renewal of life after death. This emphasis is also underscored by the stress placed upon his resurrection appearances (vv. 5–8). Just as Christ was truly dead and buried, so he was truly raised from the dead and seen by a large number of witnesses on a variety of occasions and circumstances. After recounting God’s sovereign electing grace in his life, Paul in verse 11 comes back full circle to verses 1–2 and the common confession of Christ’s resurrection they affirm but do not see implications of for their own bodily resurrection.

On the basis of their common confession, Paul now turns to a reductio ad absurdum argument. His purpose is to demonstrate that their view is logically inconsistent and should thus be rejected. Concerning belief in Christ’s resurrection (vv. 1–11) yet denial of our own future resurrection (v. 12), Paul establishes an internal contradiction between these two beliefs. Both beliefs cannot be held simultaneously if one is to remain consistent in one’s overall theology. And even worse: if the Corinthians consistently deny the future resurrection of believers, it will inevitably lead to a denial of the resurrection of Christ and thus the gospel. Indeed, the stakes could not be higher!

Paul begins in verses 12–19 by hypothetically granting their viewpoint for sake of argument and then draws the entailment of it, that Christ is not raised (v. 13). But, of course, given the common confession of the church that Christ has indeed been raised (vv. 1–11), the Corinthian position is contradictory and thus impossible. It is important to note that what Paul assumes, even though he does not fully argue it until verses 20–28, is an intimate, indissoluble, covenantal relation between the believer and Christ. If Christ is raised, the believer must too be raised; if the believer is not raised, then Christ is not raised.[57] Paul then begins to flesh out at least four disastrous implications of denying Christ’s

resurrection (vv. 14–19): (1) if Christ has not been raised, both the people's faith and apostolic preaching is "in vain," that is, without basis; (2) if Christ is not raised, the apostles who have proclaimed the resurrection are false witnesses, distorters of the truth (v. 15); (3) if Christ is not raised, there is a sense in which God is implicated as well (vv. 15–16); and (4) if Christ is not raised, Christian faith is futile in a further sense: "you are still in your sins" (v. 17), and dead believers are forever lost (v. 18). If Christ has not been raised, what guarantee is there that his death "for our sins according to the Scriptures" (v. 3) accomplished anything? A dead savior is no savior at all. And all those who have trusted Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and who have now died are forever lost if he is not raised (v. 18). Indeed, these are disastrous implications! Paul concludes in verse 19 by stating, "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people the most to be pitied."

In verses 20–28 Paul now reverses his argument by appealing to what the Corinthians and he have in common, the conviction that Christ is indeed raised. What again grounds Paul's argument is an entire biblical theology following the story line of Scripture. In fact, Paul assumes at least three truths foundational to his argument: (1) Paul views the coming, life, death, and resurrection of Christ in thoroughly redemptive-historical and eschatological categories.[58] As God's Son, the last Adam (vv. 21–22), Christ has inaugurated a new creation, supremely evidenced in his death, resurrection, and gift of the Spirit. As such, he has ushered in the promised "age to come" from the Old Testament even though the consummation of this age awaits his second coming. Furthermore, even though the resurrection of believers is not until the parousia, Christ's resurrection serves as the ground and guarantee that all those who are "in Christ" shall be raised, patterned after his glorious resurrection. (2) Paul assumes an indissoluble covenantal union between the resurrection of Christ and the bodily resurrection of believers, which makes sense in light of the Adam-Christ typological contrast in verses 21–22. What then happens to Christ must also happen to his people. Fee captures this point well: "Thus Christ is the firstfruits; he is God's pledge that all who are his will be raised from the dead. The inevitable process of death begun in Adam will be reversed by the equally inevitable process of 'bringing to life' begun in Christ. Therefore, it is not possible for the Corinthians to say there is no resurrection of the dead. Such a resurrection is necessitated by Christ's."[59] (3) Paul views the resurrection of Christ in light of God's sovereign purposes and the fact that not all of God's enemies have been subjected to him and destroyed, specifically the enemy of death. But, precisely because *God* raised

Jesus triumphantly from the dead, Paul is confident God has set in motion an "inevitable chain of events"[60] that will only be completed when all of God's enemies are destroyed, including death itself. That is why Christ's resurrection *demands* our resurrection: if we are not raised bodily from the grave, death is never truly defeated and God can never be "all in all." Ultimately, unless death is destroyed and we are raised, God's place as sovereign Lord of creation, history, and redemption is in question. That is the point Paul stresses in verses 23–26 by emphasizing the order of events that lead to the consummation—Christ's resurrection is the firstfruits (v. 23); then (*epeita*), at his coming, believers will be raised (v. 23); then (*eita*) there will be the end or goal (*telos*) of human history, when the Lord Jesus hands over the kingdom to God the Father after having destroyed every foe and enemy, including the last enemy, death (vv. 24–26).

Paul finishes his powerful argument in verses 29–34 by once again hypothetically assuming the Corinthian viewpoint and then drawing the logical conclusion: if they are correct, his and their present practices are inconsistent with their viewpoint. Ultimately, he puts his finger on their overall problem: what the Corinthians fail to realize is that through Christ's resurrection, the Father has set in motion a chain of events that will ensure the fulfillment of all of his redemptive purposes, including our bodily resurrection.

Paul takes up a new issue in verse 35: the *nature* of the resurrection body and future state of the believer. In spite of his appeal in verse 34 to the knowledge of God, and hence the sovereign power of God, he anticipates a skeptical objection, introduced by a strong contrastive: "But [*alla*] someone will ask, 'How [*pōs*][61] are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?'" (v. 35). Paul now makes clear our future resurrection is a *physical* resurrection in a *transformed body*, patterned after Christ and perfectly suited for our final state. Due to the intimate relationship between Christ and his people, there must of necessity be a bodily resurrection for believers since Christ was raised bodily. However, our resurrection body is not merely a resuscitation of a dead body; rather, it is a body adapted to the new conditions of the future. There is, then, both continuity and discontinuity between our present bodies and those of the resurrection. Our present body is earthly, natural (*psychikon*), and subject to decay, but the raised body is heavenly, spiritual (*pneumatikon*), and incorruptible. The final result is a glorious resurrection transformation of both the dead and the living wherein the final enemy—death—is swallowed up in victory.

There are three interlocking and ascending steps Paul makes: (1) an appeal to

the natural order God made to argue for the *reasonableness* of the resurrection body (vv. 36–44); (2) an appeal to the nature of Christ's resurrection body to argue for the *certainty* of the resurrection body (vv. 45–49); and (3) an appeal for the *absolute necessity* of the resurrection in order for believers to enter our heavenly existence and God's plan of redemption to be complete (vv. 50–57). Let us briefly comment on each of these steps.

First, in verses 36–44 Paul appeals to what God has made in the natural order, to seeds and kinds of bodies (*sōma*)—an analogy and appeal from the known to the unknown. Paul links the way God has ordered the natural world with the *reasonableness* of the resurrection body. Paul first appeals to how God has designed a seed. One ought to notice from nature that it is only when the seed is sown and dies that life comes (v. 36). Death, then, is a kind of precondition for life, not in the sense that Paul thinks death is an inevitable fact of the universe but in the sense that God has so ordered nature, particularly the seed, so that it "demonstrates that *out of death* a new expression of life springs forth."[62] Even in death God's purposes are not thwarted. Why should the Corinthians find it incredible that, in the case of their death, the resurrection body comes as a new expression of life? "What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable" (v. 42).

Paul then goes one step further: not only does the seed in the natural realm demonstrate that life arises out of death, but it also displays that the life that comes forth does so in a *transformed* body (vv. 37–38). In other words, the end product of the seed planted in the ground does *not* look like the original seed, even though there is obviously some kind of continuity. By analogy, if God has so arranged and ordered the natural realm in this way, it ought to be easy to imagine him able to transform our present body, which will die and be buried, into that of a transformed resurrection body. Paul concludes: "It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power" (v. 43). Lastly, Paul observes, God gives to each seed a body adapted to its own kind of existence (vv. 38–41). By analogy, if God has so ordered the natural realm this way, why is it hard to imagine God doing this in the case of the resurrection body? Just as God creates every seed or thing with a body adapted to its own kind of existence, so God gives us resurrection bodies adapted to a future resurrection existence. Paul concludes: "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body [*sōma pneumatikon*]" (v. 44), i.e., a body adapted for our final consummated state—dominated by the Spirit of God and living in a new creation.[63]

Second, in verses 45–49 Paul does not want to leave his argument merely at the *reasonable* level; he instead wants to argue for *certainty* of our resurrection body due to our union with Christ. He once again develops the Adam-Christ typological relation, this time to demonstrate that the *kind* of body we will have as believers is patterned after Christ's resurrection body. In verse 45 Paul quotes from Genesis 2:7. Paul's main point is that Adam was given a certain kind of body at creation—a natural (*psychē*) body, a body of the earth, a body subject to death and decay as a result of sin—and "in Adam" we bear his likeness. But Christ is different; he is a life-giving spirit (*pneuma zōopoioun*), and his life is the life of heaven itself. As the head of his people, his resurrection body, thankfully, becomes the pattern for us—a *certain* pattern. But, Paul reminds the Corinthians, our reality of a resurrection patterned after Christ's resurrection is still future. Just as we have worn the image of Adam, so we shall wear[64] the "image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor. 15:49). Even though the new order Christ inaugurated has already broken in, we must still await a future when our lowly bodies will be transformed, fitted for the condition of the consummated state. This is what the Corinthians have failed to understand.

Third, in verses 50–57 Paul finishes this glorious chapter by raising his argument a notch. He is not content to argue for merely the *reasonableness* or even the *certainty* of our resurrection body. He insists for the absolute *necessity* of it. Our perishable and mortal body must *(dei*) be clothed with that which is imperishable and immortal (v. 53). Believers, dead or alive, *must* be transformed in order to enter the kingdom of God in its fullness (see vv. 50, 53–54). As Hoekema comments: "It is impossible for us in our present state of being, in our present bodies, weak and perishable as they are, to inherit the full blessings of the life to come. There must be change."[65] Once again, this was something the Corinthians forgot. They were influenced by false beliefs that ultimately undermined the significance of the physical order. Paul does not agree. The triune God of redemption is also the God of creation; because sin has marred God's good order, redemption is not complete until sin and death are destroyed. For death to be destroyed completely, there must of necessity be the resurrection of the dead. Biblically, one cannot think of the final state of believers without resurrected, transformed bodies. Considering creation-fall structures, as noted above, if God is truly to redeem his people and transform this world, not only must Christ be raised—*we must be raised with him*. Without Christ's resurrection, without our resurrection in him, there is no biblical salvation. This is why all those who die in Christ and those who are alive when Christ returns

will, and must, be raised and transformed. God's plan of salvation is only complete when it is so.

When will this take place? At the end, in an instant, when the trumpet sounds.[66] Those who are alive when Christ returns will be transformed (v. 51). Those who are dead will come out of their graves—transformed (v. 52). And it *must* be so. Our bodies, whether dead or alive, in their present "natural" form must be transformed into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ and his glorious resurrection body. For it is only then that what Christ inaugurated in his first coming will be consummated in his second. As Fee states so well, "The long chain of decay and death inaugurated by the first Adam will finally be irrevocably broken by the last Adam."[67] Death itself, the last enemy, will finally and definitively be destroyed.

What implications does this have for our understanding of heaven? For Paul, and the entire Bible, heaven must be viewed in new-creation terms: raised, transformed, and glorified people forever dwelling in God's presence, living in a renewed universe, carrying out our tasks as image bearers for his glory. In such a state, as Paul wonderfully teaches, our resurrection bodies will be imperishable (*phtharton*) and immortal (*athanasian*), that is, sustained by God's power and grace forever. Like Christ's resurrection body, our resurrection bodies will be fitted for the new creation. They will not be susceptible to disease or death. They will be physical bodies raised in glory and power and "dominated and directed by the Holy Spirit" (*pneumatikos*), having some kind of continuity with our present bodies but being gloriously transformed.

Concluding Reflection

What a fitting way to conclude this chapter—thinking about Paul's view of heaven. Here is Paul's vision of our final state. Is it any wonder that Paul finishes his treatment of our resurrection bodies by taunting death before turning to exuberant praise? (1 Cor. 15:54–57). He knows what is true of all believers: if Christ does not return before he dies, he will be laid in the grave. In spite of that, he looks in the face of the reality of death and mocks it solely due to the glorious work of Christ Jesus our Lord. In Jesus' death and resurrection, death has been destroyed because sin has been paid for and the demands of the law have been met (v. 56). Jesus has nailed our sin to his cross, thus securing our justification, reconciliation, and redemption. In breaking the power of sin and satisfying the demands of the law, he has destroyed the power of death and removed its sting. Ours is the victory in Christ Jesus. In his resurrection the end has dawned; even

though we may die before he returns, we shall—indeed we must—be raised, for we are in Christ, safe and secure. Even though we now still bear the marks of this present, fallen age, Christ's coming, death, and resurrection are our surety and guarantee. What should be our response? "Therefore," Paul concludes, "stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (v. 58), for it is that which will last for all eternity.

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[1] For comprehensive treatments of Pauline eschatology, see Thomas Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001); Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975); Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (repr. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1986); cf. Alan Hultberg et al. *Three Views on The Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010); Darrell Bock, *Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999); Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979).

[2] For a development of this point, see G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011).

[3] J. F. Maile, "Heaven, Heavenlies, Paradise," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 381, notes this point: "Basic to OT understanding is the duality of heaven and earth which together make up the material creation, an idea retained throughout Scripture, culminating in the promise of a new heaven and a new earth."

[4] See P. S. Johnston, "Heaven," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. D. Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 540–42.

[5] In line with the OT, Paul adopts the same view. He uses the word *heaven* (Gk. *ouranos*) 21 times, which includes the description of the universe as the heavens and the earth (1 Cor. 8:5; Eph. 1:10; 3:15; Col. 1:16) and the place where God dwells and from where the Son came down (Eph. 4:9; Rom. 10:6), to which he returned (Eph. 4:10), where he now is (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1; cf. Rom. 8:34), and whence he will return (Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:16; 2 Thess. 1:7). In addition, he also uses the term to refer to the believer's eternal home (2 Cor. 5:1, 2; Phil. 3:20; cf. Gal. 4:26), where our hoped-for salvation is being kept (Col. 1:5) as we await the coming of our Lord (see Maile, "Heaven, Heavenlies, Paradise," 381).

[6] Graeme Goldsworthy, "Kingdom of God," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 618.

[7] There is debate over the nature of God's "good" creation. Some argue that "goodness" is merely a correspondence between divine intention and the universe, which was suitable to fulfill the purpose for which it was brought into being. This view does not necessitate a "perfect" world and thus can allow for death prior to human sin. See William Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 20–22. A better option is to see "goodness" in moral terms, thus arguing that death, pain, and suffering did not exist prior to the fall and that these realities in the created order are due to Adam's sin (see Gen. 2:17; 3:19; Rom. 5:12; 8:19–22). For this view, see, e.g., Andrew S. Kulikovsky, *Creation, Fall, Restoration: A Biblical Theology of Creation* (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2009), 204–20.

[8] Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 328.

[9] Ibid., 334.

[10] D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 202.

[11] For a development of these points see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

[12] Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 96.

[13] On these points see Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle*, NSBT 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001); Ridderbos, *Paul*, 44–90; Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 41–116.

[14] Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 315.

[15] Ibid.

[16] For a development of these ideas see Dan C. Barber and Robert A. Peterson, *Life Everlasting: The Unfolding Story of Heaven* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), 53–82, 123–53.

[17] See G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

[18] See Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *God's Unfaithful Wife*, NSBT 2 (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity, 2003).

[19] Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 112.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] To see how the NT builds on the OT story line, see Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 129–772.

[23] For a more detailed discussion of inaugurated eschatology, see Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 41–116; Hoekema, *Bible and the Future*, 3–75; Ridderbos, *Paul*, 44–90; Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 1–41.

[24] In the Gospels, "kingdom of God" occurs four times in Matthew, fourteen in Mark, thirty-two in Luke, and four in John. Matthew also uses "kingdom of heaven" thirty-two times (see Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 45–49). There is no evidence of a major theological distinction between "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God." Instead, in Matthew the two expressions are basically synonymous, except, as Jonathan Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*, NovTSup 126 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2007), 67–76, has shown, "kingdom of heaven" stresses God's kingdom is from above and represents his rule over all earthly kingdoms. In addition, in Christ heaven has come to earth.

[25] Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 51. The "not yet" reality of the kingdom is also seen in such texts as Matt. 5:3–12; 8:11–12; 13:24–30, 36–43; 22:1–14; 25:1–13, 31–46; 26:29.

[26] The "already-not yet" tension vis-à-vis the Spirit's relation to the believer is worked out in five ways in the NT. First, the Spirit testifies of our "sonship" (Gal. 4:4–5; Rom. 8:14–27). The Spirit bears witness that we are the children of God now, even though we still await our full rights associated with sonship. Second, the role of the Spirit is that of "firstfruits" (*aparchē*—1 Cor. 15:20, 23; Rom. 8:23), which speaks of what we have now, yet await in the future. Third, the Spirit is our "pledge" or "deposit" (*arrabōn*—2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14) guaranteeing our future inheritance. Fourth, the Holy Spirit is also called a "seal" (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 4:30; 1:13), which signifies believers are nothing less than God's possession. Fifth, the Spirit is related to the resurrection of our bodies (Rom. 1:3–4; 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:42–44). The Spirit is said to be active in relation to not only Christ's resurrection but ours as well, which signifies our bodies shall be raised from the dead, just as Christ was risen from the dead, so we may share in the glorious existence of the final, consummated state. For a further discussion of these points see Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 55–67.

[27] Ibid., 67.

[28] David F. Wells, *The Person of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1984), 29.

[29] Maile, "Heaven, Heavenlies, Paradise," 382.

[30] For a discussion of "heavenly realms" in Ephesians, see Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 96–97. This expression is exclusive to Ephesians (1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12).

[31] Ibid., 97, emphasis original.

[32] Ibid.

[33] R. L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1016–17.

[34] On this issue see the helpful discussion in Ridderbos, *Paul*, 495–508; L. J. Kreitzer, "Intermediate State," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 43–41.

[35] See Ridderbos, *Paul*, 497.

[36] Ibid.

[37] For a more complete treatment see Kreitzer, "Intermediate State," 438–41; Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 116–37.

[38] See Schreiner, *Paul*, 467; O'Brien, *Philippians*, 116–37.

[39] Horton, *Christian Faith*, 911.

[40] See, e.g., Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008).

[41] See John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

[42] Some have argued 2 Corinthians 5 reflects a change in Paul's theology regarding the status of the believer at death. It is argued that in 1 Corinthians, Paul believes the resurrection of believers will coincide with Christ's coming (15:23–24, 52), yet now Paul seems to teach resurrection will occur immediately upon death. The problem with this view is that Paul in addressing the same church should have clarified this change of viewpoint, but he does not. It is better to see his teaching in both epistles remaining the same and consistent. On this debate see Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 851–57; Ridderbos, *Paul*, 499–508; Murray J. Harris, *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990).

[43] Kreitzer, "Intermediate State," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 439.

[44] Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, 1018.

[45] Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 856. This interpretation is confirmed by Phil. 3:20–21, likely written after 2 Corinthians, where Paul expects the present body to be transformed when Christ appears.

[46] Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, 1018.

[47] Ridderbos, *Paul*, 506. Also see Schreiner, *Paul*, 466–67, who makes the same point.

[48] For a helpful discussion of this text, see O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 108–15.

[49] Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 434–35, rightly argues the language used by Paul refers to the eschatological end of all things (cf. Rom. 8:23, 25; 1 Cor. 1:7; Gal. 5:5; Phil. 3:20).

[50] There is a debate over the meaning of *ktisis*. It best refers to the nonhuman creation Paul personifies. See Schreiner, *Romans*, 435.

[51] Ibid., 436.

[52] Horton, *Christian Faith*, 915.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 715.

[55] Ibid., 715–17.

[56] See, e.g., 1 Cor. 5:1–12; 6:12–20; 7:1–8:13. For more on the "over-realized" eschatology of the Corinthians see Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 40–41, 1169–78; and Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 25.

[57] On this point see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), 33–74; Ridderbos, *Paul*, 44–90; Schreiner, *Paul*, 456–59.

[58] See Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 746.

[59] Ibid., 751.

[60] Ibid., 747.

[61] Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1261, argues the emphasis is on "how" in the sense of "how is it possible?"

[62] Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 781; cf. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1264.

[63] On this point see Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 249–50, and Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 167–71.

[64] There is a textual issue of whether v. 49 should read future indicative, "we shall wear," or aorist subjunctive, "let us wear." I have followed the former. For contrary viewpoints see Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1288–89, who opts for the future, and Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 794–95, who opts for the aorist subjunctive.

[65] Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 251. Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 802n28, argues *dei* is a divinely ordained necessity.

[66] I will not discuss the debate regarding the timing of these events, the rapture, and the possibility of a millennium. See n1 for some resources on these topics.

[67] Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 803.

5

HEAVEN IN THE GENERAL EPISTLES

JON LAANSMA



From now on, let's talk about heaven.
Grace Verwys[1]

Most speculation about heaven is either indulged or held in contempt. Either way, if by *heaven* we mean only a place and state separate from our present world, with special interest in its features, pleasures, and securities, then the comment of my informed colleague might be apt: "There isn't much about heaven in those letters," meaning Hebrews through Jude, the so-called General Epistles. We would do better, however, first to listen to these letters. Or rather, we do well to bring our existing beliefs consciously and fully to our reading, there to have them examined. Our judgments might change. Among other things, "above and below" or "now and then" cannot be kept as distinct as they sometimes are. Again, we perceive in the scriptural tradition that heaven is not spun out of speculation on the postmortem existence of humans but is the "place" of a holy God who has driven humankind out of his presence, yet who, by inhabiting heaven, remains present to his creation; it has become that which is humankind's reconciliation in the person of the Son of God through the Holy Spirit. Moreover, as we reread the General Epistles with this changed understanding, it occurs to us that a good deal that would seem irrelevant to our theme is of its very essence when viewed from the perspective of what mattered to the writers of these epistles.

Just one critical note needs to be registered immediately: the "sober truth is

that without a full disclosure on sin, the gospel of grace becomes impertinent, unnecessary, and finally uninteresting."[2] To the extent that this is not seen, there will be, no doubt, the perennial impulse to shoulder past grace to learn what heaven will "really" be, what truly satisfying things and experiences it might hold. The biblical authors we are about to survey never really get that far but seem compelled to linger over grace, and we will have no choice but to hang back with them.

Hebrews

With its vision of the heavenly Jerusalem and the true temple, Hebrews would seem to be the exception to what we just said. The concern of Hebrews, however, is to use its cartographic and architectural images not as things to look *at* but as things to look *along*, things *through* which to see this gracious Lord and his great salvation.

The Greek word most commonly glossed in English as *heaven* (οὐρανός) occurs in Hebrews as both the highest tier of the created and visible realm (1:10; 4:14; 7:26;[3] 11:12) and the transcendent abode of God (8:1; 9:23, 24; 12:23, 25, 26), which may be distinguished like so even though it is not finally clear that these are entirely distinct realms in the writer's imagination. Additionally, the cognate Greek adjective (ἐπουράνιος) is used of the abode of God (3:1; 6:4; 8:5; 9:23; 11:16; 12:22). Excluding the passages that refer to the visible heavens of the cosmos as a feature of that which will be "rolled up like a robe" (see 1:12)—in spite of the ambiguity just noted—and including others that do not necessarily use the word itself, the dominant conception of heaven is as the place of the divine throne, situated within the Most Holy Place of the heavenly tabernacle. It belongs to what is created—it represents the presence of God in his creation rather than his renunciation and abandonment—and itself requires cleansing (8:2; 9:11; 11:10, 16; cf. 9:23). It is characterized as the "resting place" promised to Israel (3:7–4:11); the place promised Abraham as an inheritance (11:8); a city having foundations whose architect and builder is God (11:10); a coming city (13:14) and world (2:5; cf. 10:1); a fatherland (11:14); a heavenly [place] (11:16); Mount Zion and the city of the living God; the heavenly Jerusalem. It is a place of myriad angels; a festal gathering; the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven; the place of God, who is judge of all; the place of spirits made perfect; of Jesus, mediator of the new covenant (12:22–24). It is also designated simply as "glory," into which God is leading many children (2:10).

That much is a mere catalog of its images, and one might think we could mine each of them to gain special knowledge of heaven as a place. A systematic pursuit of that nature would, however, tend toward the conclusion that the place of God's presence and the salvation that effects access to it were depicted in these ways in the interest of understanding more than pictorial realism. The motifs are too changing and fluid to suggest otherwise. Surely these particular images were not optional or merely culturally convenient; surely they were not merely rhetorically exploited for a Jewish readership but rather were and remain inspired, canonical, and necessary for "seeing" what must be seen, what cannot be seen otherwise. That said, they do not exist for their own sake but as ways of revealing the Son and his great salvation.[4]

Another thought augments this and needs to be pursued briefly; it momentarily takes us further afield but bears on all of the writings we will survey. Whatever our stated principles, we tend to supplement what is revealed of heaven in Scripture, if not bypass it altogether, by projecting our hopes and desires based on present experience. The procedure itself of seeing heaven through the immanent earthly is, however, a dicey one when all we truly "know" of heaven, for its part, is what stood among us in the person of the Son, as this is given us chiefly in the narratives of the transfiguration (cf. 2 Pet. 1:16–18) and resurrection, including 1 Corinthians 15. What we see in the resurrected Son is decidedly of the nature of radical continuity impossibly coterminous with radical discontinuity—the *same* body, the same man, wounds and all, yet new and *different*, not soulish and earthly but spiritual and heavenly (1 Cor. 15:39–49). To put it strongly, it is both *renewal* of all that is and at the same time termination of all that is followed by the appearance of something simply *new*, not merely a new beginning but the beginning as such; it is the resurrection of the truly dead.

So it is not that we know nothing. We know heaven is tangibly real. We not only saw it and saw him; we even had meals of this-worldly fish with him. We know, too, that it will be a work entirely, exclusively, of God's *grace*, not our works; it will come by the logic not of cause and effect but of death and resurrection; not in the course of natural development but by the miraculous act of the free God. Yet measuring heaven's nature from our unholy, unenlightened instincts of good and evil, desirable and undesirable, our guesses at continuity and discontinuity, is so unreliable as to be useless and rejected. This is said hyperbolically[5] but with a point: we finally know heaven by gazing at Jesus. We finally make heaven known by pointing to the name of Jesus, by doing what witnesses do, which is all that we can do. That witness is entirely derivative from

the inspired, verbal witnesses of the Scriptures, which are finally all what Mark so felicitously said of his Gospel (Mark 1:1), that it is the gospel "of" Jesus Christ—*of* in the senses of both *by* and *about* him.[6] Hebrews, with its varied and fluid cultic imagery, constitutes a part of that inspired, canonical, christologically integrated witness that yields to us a vision outside of which we have no possibility of knowledge of these things, whether that knowledge is merely theoretical or fully relational.

Hebrews is at bottom the promissory speech act of *forgiveness* (10:18); it is a performative word that effects by its very pronouncement cleansing for the seed of Abraham, the seed that is now finally and actually made God's family, God's household, through the incarnation and priestly office of God's Son, himself the seed of Abraham, himself that Word; forgiveness once and for all, uttered and accomplished by God in and as the Son and in accordance with what God had spoken by Moses and all the prophets. This brings to its concluding moment the long history of God and those who believed him through the years of waiting. Accordingly, it opens access in the present to the presence of God, formerly unapproachable in his holiness but now "the throne of grace" for the people. It inaugurates the achievement of the promise God made to all humanity in Psalm 8, the truth of which was to be found exclusively in the Son and only thereby for his fellow children.

The drama is not yet closed, however, as that closing moment undergoes elongation for the sake of God's mission. "These last days" are days of arrival but also of continued waiting while the Son waits for all his enemies to be made a footstool for his feet and while those who believe that the promise is the Son voice back their gratitude by rendering pleasing worship, learning what it means to be genuine sons and daughters of God, going outside the camp, and bearing Jesus' reproach for the sake of his mission, because "here we have no lasting city but we seek the city that is to come" (Heb. 13:14). The destination is thus the holy city, the cosmos cleansed through Christ's once-and-for-all sacrifice and reconstituted as God's dwelling.[7] Meanwhile and forevermore, the Son has become their text, their Scripture, and their God in whom they find themselves, their family, their history, and their inheritance.

In sum: covenantal faithfulness of the God of Abraham, the keeping of a promise, arrival, forgiveness, holiness, righteousness, peace, entrance, dwelling, the home and family of God, celebration, worship—this is some of heaven as it opens to our eyes in Hebrews. About all these, more should be said, but we have limited space, so we round out our sketch with just a few further thoughts.

Heaven in Hebrews could not be rightly understood if we attempted to define it only as the *future* of believers. It is, rather, that which has begun *already* to harrow the hell of this world in the qualitatively distinct epoch of "these last days" (1:2; 9:26); it is the holy that has already invaded the sphere of the profane and triumphed over its power (2:14–15); it has broken out of the restricted space of the temple's precincts to sanctify the people en masse (13:12). Those who obey its word of forgiveness have already participated in ("tasted") the heavenly gift; they have already become partakers of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the coming age (6:4–5). They have been enveloped by the holy, by heaven, and are incorporated into its sphere; they are the sanctified, the saints (2:11; 3:1; 6:10; 10:10, 14, 29; 13:24). Heaven is thus that which both orients and resources their present existence. It is their true city, their true state, and their true nation to which alone they give their allegiance, which alone they regard as their home and destination (2:5; 11:10, 14–16; 12:22–24; 13:14; cf. Gal. 4:26; Phil. 3:20; Rev. 21:2). It is not a city *as such*, as if unknown and foreign to us, but rather it is the city of Jerusalem, Zion, which we know, whose ethos has been revealed to us and which has indeed had a history among us.[8] It is the *heavenly* Jerusalem, where, as we saw in Jesus' resurrection, *heavenly* means not only "other" and "different"—it is certainly that (Heb. 12:26–27; 8:4–5)—but at the same time the present creation cleansed and transfigured through the one who is priest and sacrifice.[9] That cleansing and transfiguration is what is already secretly true of the pilgrim people, by virtue of which they already approach the throne of grace (4:14–16; 10:19–25) even now, before Christ's second appearance (9:28).

Heaven is founded on a perfect offering "through the eternal Spirit" (9:14), an offering that satisfies "once for all" (9:2; 10:10) and results in the removal of sin through his sacrifice—where there is forgiveness there is no longer any offering for sins to be made. It is everlasting mercy and grace—sheer mercy and grace grounded in *nothing* else than that this is a God who does not lie and so will never rescind his promise.[10] Put the other way around, heaven is the mercy of a God with whom there is no change or shadow of turning, who, because he chose it—and for no other reason—gave us birth by the word of truth (James 1:17–18). It depends not merely for the present age but for all eternity on the merciful intercession of Jesus; because it depends on his Word and nothing else, it is unshakeable, firm, commanding of faith (Heb. 4:15–16; 6:13, 18; 7:25; 12:27).

Heaven in Hebrews is decidedly a *place*, a destination, and one powerfully resonating name for that place is the resting place (κατάπαυσις) of the coming

world (2:5), the fatherland (11:14), Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem in which is the great and festive Sabbath celebration (3:7–4:11; 12:22; cf. Isa. 66:22–23). The Sabbath climax of creation is ushered in by the Son. Again, like everything else in Hebrews it tells us that the story of the patriarchs and their children related by the prophets of old was always the story of the Son, of Jesus, in whom is the Yes for all the promises of God (2 Cor. 1:20), who is the mediator of the new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance (Heb. 9:15; cf. Deut. 12:9–14; 2 Sam. 7:1–17; 1 Kings 8; Acts 7). Heaven is thus a destination attained only through endurance, but it brings not the ephemeral experience of arrival we know in this life but the eternally sustained joy and happiness of full human life. It is the "peaceful fruit of righteousness" that is yielded by the process of perfecting discipline under which all true sons and daughters must go (Heb. 12:11, 23; 6:7), for their Melchizedekian priest is both King of righteousness and King of peace (7:2), whose scepter is the scepter of uprightness and who loves righteousness and justice (Ps. 45:6–7; Heb. 1:8–9). These may seem to be disparate strands, and to some extent they are distinct motifs within Hebrews, though one can see how they coalesce by setting them against their Old Testament contexts, of which Isaiah 32 can serve as an example:

> Behold, a king will reign in righteousness,
> and princes will rule in justice.
> Each will be like a hiding place from the wind,
> a shelter from the storm,
> like streams of water in a dry place,
> like the shade of a great rock in a weary land. . . .
>
> Rise up, you women who are at ease, hear my voice;
> you complacent daughters, give ear to my speech. . . .
> Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields,
> for the fruitful vine,
> for the soil of my people
> growing up in thorns and briers,
> yes, for all the joyous houses
> in the exultant city.
> For the palace is forsaken,
> the populous city deserted;
> the hill and the watchtower
> will become dens forever,
> a joy of wild donkeys,
> a pasture of flocks;
> until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high,
> and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field,
> and the fruitful field is deemed a forest.

> Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,
> and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.
> And the effect of righteousness will be peace,
> and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.
> My people will abide in a peaceful habitation,
> in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places. (vv. 1–18)

It is nearly impossible to provide one simple image of heaven that summarizes the vision of Hebrews unless it is to say that it is the whole world of the Old Testament Scriptures as it was intended to be in creation and the redemption of Israel—all brought to its goal and perfect form in the Son of God. It is necessary for its readers, Jews and Gentiles both, to embrace their identity as children of Abraham, that is, to embrace their Israelite identity and cultural heritage, and *only* then to see heaven as the perfection of their hopes.

James

Moving from Hebrews to James requires that we virtually begin anew. It is true that if a biblical theological reading is a canonical reading, then it works from the assumption that the one reality remains the subject matter of the language of each writer, and on both these and historical grounds we expect (and find) continuity between the different New Testament witnesses. But if it is to be exercised in *biblical* theology, we make it our task to look at things from James's distinctive position. In brief, James contains the idea of heaven as both present and future, as we saw in Hebrews, with its attention given primarily to the "wisdom that [already] comes down from above" (3:15), to heaven's imminent justice, and to how these enable believers to navigate the economic and social realities of their present world.

James uses the word οὐρανός just twice, once for the visible heavens of creation (5:18) and again for the place of God's abode (v. 12). It may be that verse 18 is intended in a twofold sense, however, alluding at once to the visible heavens and as a metonym for the God who answered Elijah's prayers; the application for the present is clearly with respect to the fruit of heaven's blessings (cf. v. 7). The presence of heaven in wisdom's descent was just noticed (3:15). James also speaks of the coming salvation (1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:20) in creational terms (1:18) and as the kingdom God promised those who love him (2:5); likewise, those who endure trial in the present will ultimately receive the crown of life God also promised to those who love him (1:12); they will find a high station (v. 9) and every good and perfect gift (v. 17). The more sustained reflection on heaven is 5:7–11; here the experience of heaven that will come

with the Lord's parousia is paralleled with the farmer's precious fruit of the earth and the end of Job's story in God's purpose, for "the Lord is compassionate and merciful."

James's teaching on future salvation is set against the backdrop of the suffering of the poor at the hands of the wealthy and powerful (1:9–11; 2:1–7; 5:1–6),[11] a situation well known from Israel's prophets—whom James echoes (e.g., Isa. 5:9 in James 5:4; Jer. 12:3 in James 5:5)—and as a constant of world history. Along with the other New Testament writers he conceptualizes the present as the "last days" of creation—indeed, the Lord's parousia has drawn near (5:8, 9)[12]—during which it is particularly foolish to hoard wealth (vv. 1–6). Those who do hoard wealth in these days are ultimately banded with those who murdered Jesus himself (v. 6).[13] In this there is no hint of a philosophical opposition of material and spiritual, this-worldly (bad) and otherworldly (good). There is no correlation of poverty *as such* with righteousness and God's mercy on the one hand, and prosperity *as such* with unrighteousness and God's judgment on the other. At points James's words against the wealthy are categorical and damning, yet he also takes a more reforming posture (1:27; 2:1–26; 4:1–17).[14] At its root are finally the competing allegiances isolated by Jesus: "You cannot serve both God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24), where *mammon* designates wealth and property.[15] There is a fundamental claim of lordship that divides categorically and exclusively at this point of human life, playing itself out in the quiet of an individual soul, in casual meals, publicly in every village and city, on the grand scale of civilizations, but ultimately and singularly on the cross (James 2:7; cf. Luke 14:7–14; 16:13–15; 18:18–30; John 11:47–50; 1 Cor. 2:8).

Heaven and earth are thus understood at this juncture of social and economic existence, so we must give it a little direct attention. It appears that, in fact, most of those in James's audience are among the poor—their plight has stripped away delusions of self-sufficiency, robbed them of the opportunity to exploit and oppress and live in luxury, and encouraged a living dependence on God for sustenance and justice; in at least some cases their poverty may be the direct result of their piety, even their Christian identity. Though they are nothing in the eyes of those who are something, they are loved of God and chosen; they will see right done by the defender of orphans and widows. Yet they are not free of the same drives and desires upon which the wealthy have occasion to act (e.g., 1:14–15; 2:1–13; 4:1–12), and there is no glorification of poverty as a state of

life, certainly no encouragement to cultivate it. There is rather a recognition that the cross has tipped the scales of history, exposing the love of mammon for what it is once and for all and marking the triumph of God's righteousness, thereby ushering in history's final days, in which the perennial war of righteousness and unrighteousness, God and mammon, is only intensified and brought to its head (Rev. 12:13–17; 1 Tim. 4:1–5; 2 Tim. 3:1–5). It remains only to choose sides, which does not involve a commitment to a *principle* such as asceticism or a specific economic theory (even if these might have their place in application) but a full, very personal and direct dependence on the God who is alone the judge and provider; a spirit of unreserved generosity from the heart, as those who need nothing and have everything to give; the wisdom of charity and peacemaking (James 3:13–18); and a resolute and profoundly active faith that walks into the maw of poverty and persecution without flinching, refusing to take matters into its own hands but determined to wait for God (heaven) to prove his faithfulness. It is, in short, to obey Jesus (Matthew 5–7) more literally than most have allowed.

The desire for wealth, the life of self-dependence and faithless planning, the amassing of riches, the spirit of stinginess and self-indulgence—all these were bad enough when condemned by the prophets of old but are the epitome of folly when practiced in the full light of what the present is. The coming of the Lord is at hand! The judge stands at the door (James 5:3, 5, 7–9)! Surely these are not metaphors for personal or national upheaval in an ongoing sequence of natural history. What awaits is rather on the order of Jesus' own death and resurrection, and that means both termination and renewal of a wholly different sort. There looms a time of world-ending, conclusive judgment (3:1; 5:1–6, 9, 12) that will bring about a reversal of fortunes (1:9–11). It is carried out "under the law of liberty" (2:12) and founded on mercy (2:13; 5:11), yet "judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy" (2:13), where mercy is understood as faith's *activity* of mercy (vv. 14–26)—which brings us back to heaven's bearing on the present. Faith will persevere in such a life of mercy and peacemaking in the conviction, opposed by all the evidence of scientific knowledge, that the harvest will materialize at the Lord's coming (5:7; 3:18; Matt. 5:3–11). Such faith also refuses to yield to the urges to make war on each other out of a friendship with the world (James 4:1–12; 5:9), meaning out of the same spirit of greed and rapine. It is characterized rather by the patience of Job (5:11), whose story did not lead to a theology of health and wealth—as if the relief and reward would arrive in advance of the Lord's coming—but to an expectation that things

would continue on as they were and find their settlement only upon the arrival of the Judge.

This is as far as we can go in speaking of heaven in James. Heaven's wisdom —the "wisdom from above" (3:13–18)—is to find embodiment in persons of faith, who will in the natural course of things be exposed to the ravages of evil now but will discover full justice at the Lord's coming. Theirs will be a crown of life and God's kingdom. These and other images of heaven are consistent with those encountered more fully elsewhere in the canon. It is James's interest less to elaborate on these future things, however, than to mention them by way of renewing our resolve to live as those who belong to that world and (to say the same thing) stake our lives on God's faithfulness to his promises.

Yet saying that much leaves the necessity to underscore once again that here in James is no vision of "heaven on earth," if by that is meant a vision that creates heaven's conditions on earth in the present in the form of sustainable societal structures. Even the attempt to establish such structures in this spirit would seem deeply wrongheaded in the light of James's teaching. The otherworldly identity of the justice and life that James foresees is just that: *other*worldly, waiting for its inauguration in the coming (parousia) of the Lord. To be sure, it is an otherworldly reality that finds entrance now, comes down from above now, and finds expression through persons of faith, which is like opening a window to let heaven's life-giving air into our foul space. Certainly that involves us as members of a given society with responsibilities to effect changes for the better. In that sense heaven is indeed already on earth.[16] But for James this possibility is dependent precisely on its otherworldly source, and its realization is only at very great personal cost to those who so live. Servants are not above their master, after all. Such faith runs counter to the wisdom that is earthly and demonic (3:15), and everywhere in James the expectation is that of trials (1:2, 12) and exploitation (2:5–7; 5:4, 6, 10–11) for the righteous that continue unabated till the end. There is no possibility of relenting from living as heaven's children, but just as surely there is no hope proffered of a change of conditions until it is personally brought about by the Lord at his coming. It will, however, be brought about, for "the Lord is compassionate and merciful," and in that is the whole essence of heaven.

1 Peter

Somewhat like James, 1 Peter speaks of heaven against the backdrop of the present age and its suffering, injustice, ungodliness, impermanence, corruption,

and opposition to God. Like Hebrews, though without its sustained development of heaven as the heavenly tabernacle, 1 Peter hits us with a veritable kaleidoscope of Old Testament types, with much the same cumulative effect. The emphasis of 1 Peter falls on heaven's penetration into the present, with its orienting hope and provision thereby providing glimpses of what is to come.

The word οὐρανός (1 Pet. 1:4, 12; 3:22) is used for the place of God's abode, where the incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading inheritance of the saints, founded on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is kept secure and ready to be revealed in the last time (1:3–5). Heaven is thus an impenetrable fortress, a bank guarded by the power of God himself. The inheritance of the elect sojourners[17] is there because their Lord is there. In the last time, in the revelation of Jesus Christ, their faith, much reviled in the present (3:8–4:19) but the means through which God's power extends from heaven to guard them (1:5), will be found unto praise and glory and honor (1:7) and result in the salvation (1:5, 9, 10; 2:2; 3:21; 4:18) of their very lives (1:9).[18] This sequence corresponds to the primary and normative pattern of Christ himself, whose story had been inscribed ahead of time in the prophets by the Spirit sent from heaven; his story involved first suffering and only then glory (1:11).[19] That pattern overarches the whole of 1 Peter, recurring in 4:13 and 5:1, 10. The hope of resurrection, after all, assumes that one first dies. Now, since "all flesh is like grass" (1:24), mortality is common to all, not an option; if anything it is intensified and accelerated for the faithful. So it belongs to the great blessedness of believers that their suffering and death find a trustworthy example in their Lord. By grace, through faith, they participate in the meaning and redemptive power of their Lord's suffering and death (2:21–25; 3:8–4:19; Col. 1:24; 2 Cor. 4:7–18), and ultimately they will be raised to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. They therefore take up their cross, resolutely despising its shame for the joy set before them (Heb. 12:2), and follow him.

In 1 Peter 1:13 that future joy is characterized simply as "grace" being borne to them in the revelation of Jesus Christ—underscoring as beautifully as can be expressed in language the eternal foundation of salvation and the character of that experience to come, and at the same time underscoring the condition (grace!) under which alone it can be "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading." No sooner is grace affirmed, however, than the complementary assertion is added that their Father judges and will judge[20] them impartially according to each person's work (1:17; 4:5–6, 17), for it is precisely the fruit of holy grace to oppose and condemn all unrighteousness and bring full human life to birth (v.

23), not as if bringing a mechanical response (grace does not make us *less* human!) but through the fullness of willing obedience. This, too, betokens the full measure of life to come as an obedience that will renew each day with spontaneous joy in reflection of the ever-renewing mercies of God (Lam. 3:23).

Accordingly, they are exhorted to purify themselves[21] in "the obedience of the truth," for they were not granted this new birth through corruptible seed but incorruptible, namely, the living and abiding word of God (1 Pet. 1:22–25). Therein, in the divine (heavenly) word, is the generative and indestructible power of their new life coupled with its quality as an existence that has no part in the perishability and corruption, including *moral* corruption, of the present age. That word—along with all else that promotes health in the church—is like milk they are to crave so that they will grow into the spiritual house whose chosen and precious cornerstone is Jesus Christ, for the one who believes in him will never be put to shame (2:1–10). Heaven is thus the place of ultimate and final *vindication*; not only the removal of disgrace but the gaining of glory and praise.

Heaven is, moreover, their genuine home just as in Hebrews, for in the present world they are "resident foreigners and sojourners" (2:11; 1:1).[22] It is therefore from heaven that they must take their bearings on their identity and roles. Indeed they must live as aliens in a land at war with their homeland, not secretly but openly as a witness, that the nations will glorify God in the day of his visitation (2:11–12; cf. Isa. 10:3).

In the teaching to the members of the Christian households, heaven is referenced or implied. Slaves are pointed to the example of Christ's suffering as pattern, provision, *and promise*, for "he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Pet. 2:24). Women are encouraged to cultivate the "hidden" beauty of the heart, which is precious in God's sight (3:4); we may think of the words of Jesus, that his own will be rewarded by the God who sees what is done in secret (Matt. 6:4, 6, 18; 5:3–10). Likewise, the shepherd elders are pointedly referred to this hope to heighten their sense of accountability and their resolve; they can expect an unfading crown of glory, that is, the prize that is glory (1 Pet. 5:4).[23] Such a reward befits their labor but seemingly does not surpass the hope of their fellow saints (1:4, 7). The point is not that of preserving in the world to come our present worldly system of ecclesiastical rankings but more simply that of providing encouragement and motivation for a life fraught with its own costs, traps, and temptations.

For all believers the hope won through a life patterned on Christ's is the

inheritance of a blessing and experience of good days (3:9–10). Again Christ serves as both pattern and provision in his having died in the flesh and been made alive in the spirit[24] and going into heaven, with angels, authorities, and powers in subjection to him (vv. 18–22). Believers are therefore to arm themselves with the same way of thinking, "for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin" (4:1)—an exciting prophecy of a world to come, to which we conform ourselves from within the present evil age. They should not think it strange if they undergo fiery trials now but should rather rejoice as they fellowship in the sufferings of Christ, so that in the revelation of his glory they might rejoice and be glad (vv. 12–13). That revelation is about[25] to happen (5:1), which heightens its ability to motivate and probably bespeaks its effectual presence. Like the sun about to break over the horizon, its radiance is already causing the darkness to scatter.

Finally, at the letter's close all believers are called upon to humble themselves under God's mighty hand in order that he might exalt them in time (5:6). Given the larger themes of the letter, this is probably to be understood in ultimate more than immediate terms. Likewise, what awaits believers is God's "eternal glory in Christ Jesus" into which they were called and the confidence that after a short period of suffering, God will restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish them (v. 10). This also may have this-worldly application even while its ultimate referent is the "end of all things" (4:7).

In light of Peter's teaching in this letter, which draws together strands we saw highlighted in both Hebrews and James, perhaps it must be said that the truest test of sound knowledge of heaven consists of the quality and habits of life in the present. The words of Jesus—"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21)—are of comprehensive significance. Or, as with the faithful of Hebrews 11, it is a matter of seeking a "better country" than any we now inhabit (vv. 14–16), for "here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come" (13:14). Against the persistent, dark caricature of such a hope as detached, self-interested, and ultimately nothing more than an excuse for personally, socially, ecologically irresponsible living, one can only observe that the precise opposite is the vision of the Scriptures and the lived example of the faithful tradition.[26] It is properly to charity, love, righteousness, and justice that all this gives rise, which are necessarily domestic, civic, economic, and ecological in nature. To fail there in the present is to demonstrate a false hope for heaven. Yet the effect of a heaven-filled church on its city will be no less than was that of Chernobyl on its environs, where evil is what suffers catastrophic

destruction and *shalom* is what is radiated. The heavenly city, whose temple is already being erected in the very midst of the earthly cities (1 Pet. 2:1–10), can only wreak havoc on our Babylons (5:13; Revelation 18; 2 Cor. 6:14–18) precisely in its obedient submission to their governments and promotion of the good (1 Pet. 2:11–17). It will refuse their overtures of peace and make no tacitly compromising alliance with them in their efforts to build heaven on earth, no matter how convincingly they renounce evil and extol the good—even if they seem to be preaching the gospel itself. It knows the one possible source of peace in the justice of God worked in his Son.

Jesus is Lord. His claim is exclusive or is no claim at all. And if the salt loses its saltiness, what is it good for? Too often the world recognizes that incompatibility more clearly than the children of light, too many of whom are far too eager to make those very alliances. The world, however, sees the peace of God as a dagger at its heart and therefore responds with greater decisiveness. As Jesus said, students are not above their teacher and must expect the same abuse (Matt. 10:16–25). Just for that reason, Peter writes, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. . . . Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good" (1 Pet. 4:12–13, 19).

2 Peter

The treatment of heaven in 2 Peter is sufficiently distinct from 1 Peter to merit a separate discussion.[27] Certain false teachers had challenged the apostles' teaching about the Lord's promised return. Peter's answer to that challenge, including his description of the end of this world and what lies beyond, provides the most striking contribution to our theme. As with the other New Testament writings, however, we will take into view the whole of this letter.

Heaven's presence is felt as soon as the letter begins in that Jesus' divine power has given believers everything that leads to[28] life and godliness; this gift consists in (comes through) the knowledge of the one who called them (i.e., Jesus) by his own glory and power. Through his glory and power he has given promises with the intent that through them believers might become sharers of the divine nature, having fled the world's corruption. Sharing in his divine nature here does not mean they will be divinized but by grace will, upon their "entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord" (2 Pet. 1:11), become god-*like*, being

granted immortality and incorruptibility (see 1 Pet. 1:22–25).[29]

The "promises" of 2 Peter 1:4 refer to the promises associated with the Lord's parousia (3:4–13), which is in turn associated with the glory of the transfiguration (1:16–18). The focus accordingly falls on *conceptual content* that has come into the believers' possession—knowledge, promises—and on human ethical choices in rational response to this content. This rational aspect is not less heavenly for being rational, but it can be observed that all of this is saturated with heaven's presence in other ways as well. Peter prays that "grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord" (1:2); it is Jesus' "divine power" that gives all things; his "glory and excellence" call believers; the Holy Spirit bore the prophets as they spoke (v. 21); believers are to grow "in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (3:18). Through their active involvement in this grace and knowledge they will make their calling and election sure (1:10), and their entrance into the eternal kingdom will be richly granted (v. 11).

In its own way, the opposition to these heavenly promises clarifies the hope. The readers are warned against the presence of false teachers, whose destruction does not slumber and whose history serves as a type of both their judgment and the sure salvation of the righteous. We can note, then, the heavenly fate of the faithful foreshadowed by way of contrast with the condemnation, chains of gloom, destruction, punishment, corruption, and accursed state of the apostates (2:4–22). From all this the Lord knows how to guard and rescue the righteous (vv. 5, 7, 9).

The false teaching itself is characteristic of the rebellion of "the last days" (3:3), which is to say that its epoch has begun.[30] These teachers mock the promise of the parousia by observing that things go on as normal, as they always have.[31] Were they attentive and sincere readers of the Scriptures (v. 5) they would have taken to heart that the Lord's time is different from humanity's,[32] and his delay is due to his desire to extend mercy (vv. 8–9). Likewise they would have understood that the present order of heaven and earth is reserved for a judgment and destruction (ἀπωλείας) by fire, just as Noah's world underwent "destruction" (ἀπώλετο) by water (vv. 5–7). What this means, however, is less than fully clear since both the language and the conception of what follows in verses 8–13 are disputed. Moreover, the same caution we expressed earlier against the expectation of a pictorial realism and strict literalism is very much in order here. The upshot of at least one set of exegetical decisions, however, is that

what is foretold here is not the annihilation of the cosmos[33] so much as its utter exposure to the judgment of God,[34] leading via that judgment to what can only be described as a *new* heavens and earth, as God had promised (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; cf. Rev. 21:1), in which righteousness (alone) dwells. Believers are thus to have no part in this corruptible and doomed age but rather participate in its heavenly life now by cultivating the virtues that correspond to the knowledge and promises God has given them (2 Pet. 1:1–11; 2:20–22; 3:11) so that when all things are exposed to the all-seeing eyes of God, the judge, they will be "found . . . at peace" (3:14) and their entrance into the eternal kingdom richly provided (1:11).

To resume an earlier thread, heaven in 2 Peter is no escapist's fantasy. It is something, rather, from which there is no escape. It, or rather, this God, has in his holy grace, merciful righteousness, and patient wisdom invaded the sphere of the profane so as to incorporate it into his own sphere—for salvation or judgment, either of which is in the sphere of his love. This has already begun with "these last days," but there is a future divide marked out by the promised parousia and the new creation, wherein there will be no unrighteousness but only righteousness (3:13). Hope for that day, if it is authentic, is marked out not by disengagement with this world but by full engagement with that world to come *within and on behalf of* this world and thus by being caught up in the sanctifying advance of God's love that desires all to come to repentance (3:9).

1–3 John

As we move on to John's letters, we encounter a very different atmosphere and must once again be willing to start over and look at everything through his eyes, to some extent as if for the first time. These three letters do not use the word οὐρανός or its cognates, but this hardly constitutes an omission of the idea of heaven. They anticipate the end of the present age (2:8, 17, 18, 28; 3:2–3; 4:17; references are to 1 John unless otherwise indicated) and glance ahead to the life to come after the judgment (2:17; 3:2–3; 2 John 8), but their primary emphasis is on the eternal life[35] that is found *already* in the person of Jesus Christ; not merely "in" him, as if through him, but *as* him, for he *is* that life. As with the other letters already surveyed, but in a more pronounced fashion, the spheres of above and below, of then and now, overlap. "The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining" (2:8); "The world is passing away along with its desires" (v. 17); "It is the last hour" (v. 18). Accordingly, "in Jesus the distinction between the two ages has collapsed, so that believers in Jesus are able

to experience end-time blessings already in the here and now, most notably eternal, abundant life."[36] The sense in which we are already "in" heaven now is brought into special focus.

To survey the letters: Jesus himself is that life (1:2; 5:20), though the idea is expressed in a variety of ways: this life, which comes through the Son (4:9) and is in him (4:11; 5:11), was promised to believers (2:25); they have gone over from death into it (3:14); God gives it to them in the Son (4:11); those who have the Son and believe in his name have eternal life (5:12–13). Accordingly, emphasis falls on abiding in him (2:6, 24, 27, 28; 3:6, 24; 4:13), in God (2:5, 14, 24; 4:13, 15, 16), in love (4:16, since God is love), or in the light (2:10). Or else it is that the Son (3:24; 4:13), the word/truth/teaching (2:4, 14, 24; 2 John 2, 9), the anointing (2:27), God's seed (3:9), eternal life (3:15), the love of God (3:17), or God himself (4:12, 13, 15, 16) remains or ought to remain in believers; the one who does the will of God "abides" forever (2:17). Fittingly, the letter is capped in this way: "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He [Jesus] is the true God and eternal life" (5:20).[37] The single line that follows—"Children, keep yourselves from idols"—gathers up the whole of the Old Testament polemic against idolatry and places its full weight on teachings that depart from the acknowledgment of Jesus as the one who is and in whom is found "the true God and eternal life."

This point deserves further emphasis inasmuch as this promised life is equivalent to the hope of heaven. Theologians have for excellent reasons been driven by Scripture inexorably to the conclusion that there is no revelation or atonement *external* to the person of the Son and no way to separate the speech and work of God.[38] The Son *is* the revelation of God and *is* salvation. This is certainly not to speak of absorption into the being of God. It will be no less true then than now that creation, as new creation, will not be God but will exist as wholly distinct from him. Then, as now, we will exist within an environment finally of one fabric with us. As it is a place "in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13), we can only anticipate that it will flourish beyond imagination in all the ways that already provoke our awe and enlarge our souls. But it is to acknowledge that the same Scriptures that lead to that insistence on the distinction between God and creation teach us Jesus Christ is the true God and *is himself* our eternal life (1 John 5:20; cf. 1:2).[39] All that is good, true, and beautiful is found there, in him alone. He and the enjoyment of him constitute the sum of heaven, however else it is conceived.

Particularly with this emphasis on the present enjoyment of eternal life, another window on heaven derives from the ways in which that life is described: fellowship of love with other believers and the Father and Son (1:3, 7; 3:11, 14; 4:1–21); full joy (1:4); cleansing from all sin and unrighteousness (1:7, 9); forgiveness of sins (1:9; 2:12); propitiation[40] for sins (2:2; 4:10); knowledge of the Father (2:3, 13, 14; 4:7); victory over the Evil One or the world (2:13, 14; 4:4; 5:4–5); knowledge of the truth and the true God (2:20, 21, 27; 5:20); birth from God (2:29; 3:9; 4:4–7; 5:1–4, 18–20); bestowal of inconceivable love, such that they are called children of God and are in fact such (3:1); boldness[41] and freedom from shame (2:28; 3:21; 5:14); freedom to ask anything of him, knowing he listens (3:22; 5:13–15); fear's being utterly cast out before the Father (4:17–18); God's testimony within (5:10). Believers have an intercessor (one who appears in another's behalf) with the Father (2:1);[42] a Savior (4:14); an anointing of the Spirit (2:20; 3:24; 4:14); and confidence that God knows all things and that our vindication ultimately rests on his knowledge and love, even more than our own (3:20; 4:10, 16–19).[43] Jesus Christ was revealed that he might take away sin (3:5) and destroy the works of the Devil (3:8); the effect of this and birth from God is that such a one does not sin (3:4–10). He laid down his life for others, thereby demonstrating God's love (3:16), and he keeps the believer safe from the Evil One (5:18).

When John anticipates what is to come, it is in terms of boldness and freedom from shame before Christ at his coming, which are conditioned on remaining in him (2:28–3:3; 4:17–19); he also speaks of a "full reward" (2 John 8). Full status as sons and daughters is already given, though what that ultimately involves has not yet been revealed except that we know that when we see him as he is, we will be like him (3:2). We do know he is pure,[44] so those who harbor the hope they will be like him necessarily purify themselves just as he is pure. But what that future "sight" involves and the change it works are not further developed, so we are left to take our cues from John's imagery as we consider other canonical passages that seem to speak of the same thing—a process of glorification that begins when one turns to the Lord and culminates in bodily resurrection, all of which conforms us to the image of God's Son (e.g., Romans 6–8; 1 Corinthians 15; 2 Cor. 3:7–18; Col. 3:4). Likewise for John, that conformity is already true now (1 John 4:17), but we await its fullness and completion (3:2); we can say we are already "in heaven" (or heaven is in us) as a foretaste of its goal. Either way, by anticipation (3:2) or realization (4:17), the revelation we receive touching

heaven supplies wisdom and life for the present phase of that process.

Jude

Perhaps the primary contribution Jude makes to our understanding of heaven is by way of contrast, calling to mind the past disruptions of heaven in the angels that rebelled, the gloom reserved for all who come under judgment, and the life that merits that condemnation; in this he parallels 2 Peter 2. Yet in the short sections that precede and follow his bracing exhortation he provides potent hints of the good he had desired to make his theme (v. 3).[45] For all its similarities to 2 Peter, Jude gives us yet another distinct perspective.

In response to the violation of God's grace among false teachers, we see heaven's counterpoint. Rather than finding in the holy grace of heaven the spirit of grateful obedience and holiness of life that it gives, they twist it into the hateful rebellion of hell itself (v. 4). It is nothing short of an assault on heaven *from within* by those chosen and restored to paradise at the price of God's own life. The proverbs Peter invokes in the closely parallel context of 2 Peter 2:22 are apt: "The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire." Both Jude and 2 Peter 2 recall the warning of 1 Corinthians 10:1–13, wherein Israel shared in the saving blessings of God and yet willfully succumbed to temptation and fell under God's displeasure (cf. Jude 5). The warning of Hebrews 5:11–6:12 bears its own similarities. The history of Jude's false teachers replicates that of the "Watchers"—the traditional name for the angels of Genesis 6:1–4[46]—who did not keep their allotted domain but left their habitation and so have been kept in eternal chains under gloom for the great day of judgment, giving a glimpse into the past history of heaven. For the rest, as in 2 Peter 2, heaven is the implied contrast to the judgment foretold for the false teachers.

It is striking that in the face of this, it is above all the *mercy* of God that is fronted for the called, loved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ (Jude 1–2, 21). Believers are to keep themselves in the love of God while they look forward to "the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life" (v. 21). As the theologian Karl Barth said,

> The mercy of God lies in His readiness to share in sympathy the distress of another, a readiness which springs from His inmost nature and stamps all His being and doing. It lies, therefore, in His will, springing from the depths of His nature and characterising it, to take the initiative Himself

> for the removal of this distress. For the fact that God participates in it by sympathy implies that He is really present in its midst, and this means again that He wills that it should not be, that He wills therefore to remove it.[47]

This mercy is finally fulfilled not when God suspends his righteousness, but when he himself, as the Son, does righteousness in taking upon himself his own condemnation of sin.

The presence of heaven is felt now not in its distinction between the ungodly, whose destruction is the theme of Jude 4–19, and those who do not deserve such a judgment. It is felt and known, rather, in its extension of mercy, for mercy is known by those who agree that God is right in finding them deserving of his judgment and rejection and in his decision to exercise that judgment on himself so they can no longer regard themselves as rejected. It is known, then, only when one keeps oneself in the love of God[48]—which comes only because he wills it and not for any merit or cause within us—while waiting for that mercy of the Lord, without which they cannot hope to escape the gloom of judgment. Even the possibility of regret over sin's occasioning mercy is extinguished when God is celebrated as the merciful God.

In that mercy heaven will be the full measure of all the blessings mentioned by Jude. In his greeting he speaks of the called who are "beloved *in* God," which probably means "those whom God loves are taken into the intimate fellowship of God's love, embraced and enfolded by his love. To be in God's love is to be 'in God.'"[49] They are also "kept for Jesus Christ," which means he will guard them from stumbling and present them blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy (v. 24), where "his glory" is the approaching "mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 21). Whatever else it will be, heaven will be the full measure of God's mercy, peace, and love (v. 2). As in Hebrews, it will be constituted by his act of ushering us into his own presence as the only God, our Savior, to whom alone through Jesus Christ our Lord belong glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever (vv. 24–25).

Conclusion

When it comes to heaven, the line between sanctified imagination and idle speculation is thin.[50] There is a time to imagine beyond what is written, but there is a need constantly to return to what the apostolic authors actually said, and this has been our task in this chapter.

When I was young, I stood near the base of a glacier with one of my older brothers and tried to follow the direction of his finger as he pointed out a distant and well-camouflaged group of mountain sheep. Because of the distance it proved harder than I expected, even as I pressed in close and peered along his arm. The foregoing exposition of the General Epistles is quite analogous to that attempt. Others claim to have journeyed to heaven, to the throne room of God, but I have not. As a guide I am limited to the attempt to "press in close" and look along the pointing arm of these canonical witnesses.

Very few words are permitted for a summary, so I will begin with a general comment, followed by three notes on characteristic features of these letters. Our modest aim has been to represent the distinctive perspectives on heaven of these eight canonical witnesses by sketching in their primary contours and conveying their pastoral intentions. These writings do not read like guides to heaven's geography, furniture, treasures, and the like, though in what they say they encourage and instruct our imaginations in ways that bring profound good to the world around us and ourselves. Likewise, these letters cannot be reduced to either the anthropocentric or theocentric visions that have tended to alternate and emerge in ever-changing forms through church history, even though they give impetus to both.[51] Their attention is on the name from which all that is good and worthy in these disparate visions derives. Moreover, for all the ways in which these letters have called us to focus on the implications of heaven for this-worldly conduct, it is patent that they are of a different spirit than the modern turn toward life before death.[52] Heaven's reality is palpable and precious to these writers, enabling them to see the present world for what it is, catching them up in God's redemptive love for that world, commanding them to give glory to God in patient endurance, commanding them to accept his mercy and grace by faith, summoning them forward toward history's goal with hope, and leaving room only for thanksgiving forevermore.

Complementing this general comment are three specific observations. One way to express a key to these letters' vision of heaven is the phrase "back to the future." Hebrews might be the most systematic expression of the principle, but it is the fundamental approach of all of these letters: heaven is the perfection of Israel's hopes as expressed in her Scriptures. This is not to be limited to Old Testament passages that foretell a future idyllic state. All of Israel's covenantal Scriptures projected a world that was only more or less realized in her history but provides the shape of all sanctified hopes. As we commented in regard to Hebrews, it is not as if the future city is a city unknown to us. If it were, we

might well wonder what it is supposed to mean that we are to live as citizens of that city, requiring as that does some knowledge of a city's laws and ethos. But this is a city that we do know, for it has been foreshadowed in types and particularly in the Jerusalem of Israel's history. By looking back we can see ahead. We must first become Israelites, children of Abraham, and recognize Jesus did not come to abolish the law of Moses—not one small stroke of the pen—but to fulfill it. Though these writers think and write in Greek as authors thoroughly socialized in the Greco-Roman world of the first century, they are not conjuring notions of heaven by playing linguistically imaginative games, channeling archetypes or creatively arranging religious pebbles into an appealing mosaic (2 Pet. 1:16–21). Heaven for them is not the fulfillment of *any* hope but of *these* hopes, the hopes of Israel's Scriptures.

Second, their hope is thoroughly christological, which means several things. The principle we just mentioned assumes the Old Testament Scriptures are being read through the Son—indeed, they are not the Word of God apart from the Son—while the Son is being seen through the Old Testament. By the same token, heaven is bound up with the Son, who is present to his church even now; there is an important sense in which the heavenly Jerusalem has already come down. Because their hope is christological, the overwhelming wonder of heaven is the grace and mercy present and active in the Son. In that, of course, is acceptance of the sweeping judgment pronounced on sin in the Son's death; it is impossible any longer to wink at sin or harbor any other hope than the justification that comes through faith. Or again, for the same christological reason, their hopes revolve around reconciliation and fellowship, both with the triune God and with his people. Likewise, the Son illuminates the way to heaven as suffering first, glory later—death and then resurrection. He is, moreover, the destination, for he is in his person eternal life.

Third, as just noted, because their hopes are christological, they are resurrectional and new creational. Resurrection, as we witness it in Jesus' bodily resurrection—including the empty tomb and his appearances among us—involves radical continuity and discontinuity. Accordingly, the apostolic hopes revolve around a transformation that is foreshadowed in God's previous work and properly characterized by metaphors—such as the redemption, restoration, and renewal of the present physical creation—not only shaping notions of what is hoped for but bearing deep-running implications for life now, before death. This hope is not a retreat and escape but an advance and reclamation. It is for good reason it is called a victory, a conquering. Yet as true as this note of

continuity is, the logic of resurrection must also be characterized as a radically new beginning. It is a beginning in which believers already participate within the present age but which awaits a future crisis: namely, the second appearance of the Son, “not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb. 9:28), and in him the resurrection and judgment that usher in a final and comprehensive transformation. Grace reigns, forgiveness goes unchallenged, sin and death and their wounds are cast out, perfection is achieved and made permanent. Things will be different, irreversibly so, and only in keeping with God’s own perfections. The hope of heaven compels us to make clear that the present world is impermanent, and wisdom requires all of us to become citizens of a city that is holy and therefore incompatible with the present age. Our lives, just as Jesus’ did, mediate the life of that world to this one in tangible ways, and yet in that very mediation our lives are a standing challenge to this age and a witness to one qualitatively different. A witness and an invitation.

These three aspects find their center in the person of the Son of God, without whom the Old Testament Scriptures are not the Word of God, who is himself eternal life, and whose resurrection brings to birth the new heavens and the new earth. Indeed, the denial of heaven, in principle or practice, is finally the denial of Jesus’ death and resurrection from the dead. In his death, his no is spoken to the sin and death of this age, while his yes is spoken to the work of God that is cleansed and redeemed; in his resurrection, his yes to the new creation is uttered. Accordingly, the confession of hope expressed in the epigram at the head of this chapter was not, for Marv and Grace, a matter of giving up on this life and turning away to another but of embracing what alone is true life, therein discovering light and life for these days when we live, and live abundantly, as resident aliens, in gratitude seeking the city that is coming.[53]

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[1] On Thanksgiving Day, 2012, Marv Verwys, aged ninety-five, went with his wife, Grace, to the emergency room, where the doctors informed Grace he would live only days. When Marv asked why they were not leaving the hospital that day after his tests, she told him he had a cancer of the blood, and they could not operate. “Am I going to die?” “We’re all going to die, and I may die before you. But it looks like you are going to go before me, so now we need to look towards heaven. From now on, let’s talk about heaven.”

[2] Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 199.

[3] 4:14 and 7:26 are ambiguous.

[4] One readily thinks of Rev. 21:22: “And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the

Almighty and the Lamb."

[5] See Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), on the place of imagination in Christian hope.

[6] I am not taking liberties in using the word *gospel* of the OT Scriptures; cf. Heb. 4:2, 6.

[7] Heb. 9:23 speaks of the cleansing of the heavenly things, which in its flow of thought strongly implies heaven itself, the place of the heavenly tabernacle. A full discussion is not possible or necessary in the present context. Eight proposed lines of interpretation of 9:23 are listed by Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 477.

[8] This makes the relation of gospel and law utterly relevant to our theme, though we merely mention it here. It is proper to note here we have the image "of a city, not a garden," which contributes to a theology of human culture. If we get no further, however, we will have missed the larger point that it is not any city but a very particular city whose past was both a reflection and foreshadowing of the Son (Heb. 8:5; 9:9, 23; 10:1), who is himself our future.

[9] This last claim regarding the reclamation of the entire cosmos is not obvious from Heb. 12:25–27 and other passages, leading many to think otherwise. I have tried to defend it in Jon C. Laansma, "Hidden Stories in Hebrews: Cosmology and Theology," in *A Cloud of Witnesses: The Theology of Hebrews in Its Ancient Contexts*, LNTS 387, ed. Richard Bauckham, Daniel Driver, Trevor Hart, and Nathan MacDonald (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 9–18, following in some ways the work of William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, WBC 47B (Dallas: Word, 1991), 435–91.

[10] We must get out of our heads entirely the notion that works on us like a force of gravity, namely, that God somehow answers to a more general law of the right. He acts from and for himself. Our hope has no other foundation, but with this foundation it is firm.

[11] It should be noted that the economic aspect of the struggle so prominent in James was not missing in Hebrews but was an essential part of its situation (10:32–34; 11:26 [cf. 13:13]; 12:16) and so could also be brought into reflections on its vision of final salvation.

[12] Whether he thinks of this nearness as something that could happen anytime (indeterminately imminent) or as soon to happen is an open question when his language is considered in isolation. It is certain he does think creation's history has reached its last chapter, bringing qualitative changes to the world in the overflow of heaven's blessings and heightened implications for righteousness and wickedness.

[13] More literally, "You murdered the righteous one," which can be taken generically or as a reference to an individual. Even if it is taken generically it seems likely Jesus is intended as the ultimate righteous and poor one who was murdered.

[14] James does not succumb to the temptation to pander to either the wealthy or the poor. The well-to-do have the upper hand, and most of James's audience would seem to be of the have-nots and oppressed, but he has bracing, uncompromising words for all, wealthy and poor alike. The root of things is not economic, after all.

[15] In keeping with biblical emphasis we single out money, but, as my father has reminded me, there are many currencies of power in this world: knowledge and degree credentials, office, athleticism, artistic talent, physical beauty, and more. All of these can become mammon.

[16] Moreover, in another frame of reference we affirm that the progress of God's redemption within history, bound up with the life to which James exhorts us, is *inexorable* as he builds his temple stone by stone (e.g., 1 Pet. 2:4–10). More generally, on the "possibility of progress," see Bauckham and Hart, *Hope*, 174–210.

[17] The word παρεπίδημος in 1:1 (2:11) is defined by BDAG, s.v., as pertaining "to staying for a while in a strange or foreign place, *sojourning, residing temporarily*."

[18] Literally 1:9 speaks of the "salvation of your souls" (ὑμῶν σωτηρίαν ψυχῶν). It is clear that for Peter, as for Jesus, the salvation of "souls" indicates the salvation of the *whole* person, the resurrected (1:3, 21; 3:21) body and soul. It is the counterpart of the call not to fear those who can put only the body to death in

contrast to God, who alone has the authority to destroy *both* body and soul in hell (Matt. 10:28). It can be taken for granted that the one who has power over the fate of the soul has power over the fate of the body. This manner of speaking has less to do, then, with a theory about the "parts" of a human than the limits of human authority on one hand and the power of God on the other.

[19] This verse can also be read in reference to the sufferings and glory of the followers of Jesus; cf. BDAG, s.v. δόξα.

[20] The present participle of 1:17 (κρίνοντα) may indicate the ongoing judgment of God during the course of their sojourning (4:17) but would assuredly include the future and ultimate judgment.

[21] Again, literally, their "souls."

[22] This understanding of the language of 1:1 and 2:11 is strongly challenged by Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005). She does view the language as bearing theological associations, though not in terms of the recipients' "vertical" relationship to heaven as their primary home but more *horizontally*, "primarily as defining the relationship between the Christian and unbelieving society" (62). I accept her argument regarding the sociological force of the language (more tentatively her specific historical reconstruction), which is vital, but continue to hear *as well* the vertical (and future) theological implications for primary identity. Most of my summary of 1 Peter does not hang on this point, in any event.

[23] The word for *crown* (στέφανος) often denotes "a wreath made of foliage or designed to resemble foliage and worn by one of high status or held in high regard," but it is likely that in some passages such as the present, "the imagery of the wreath becomes less and less distinct, yet without loss of its primary significance as a symbol of exceptional merit," so that the meaning is closer to "award or prize for exceptional service or conduct, *prize, reward*" (BDAG).

[24] Or, in the (Holy) Spirit.

[25] The wording in 5:1 (τῆς μελλούσης ἀποκαλύπτεσθαι δόξης) could indicate this event is going to happen at *some* time, is *destined* to happen, or is *on the point of* happening (about to be); the last would be its meaning here (cf. 4:7). Even so, the same ambiguity we noted in James is true here; the wording may signal something that either could happen at any moment (indeterminate imminence) or was expected to happen very soon, whether within days or a few years.

[26] Jerry L. Walls, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 200, confronts modern conventional wisdom that a hope for heaven is morally weak and inimical and that its renunciation is morally courageous and socially productive, a view that is quietly ubiquitous even among many of faith; likewise, Gary Scott Smith, *Heaven in the American Imagination* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 238. Bruce Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens*, First-Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), has argued that 1 Peter, harboring no weak hope for heaven as future glory, summons Christians to act as public benefactors within their cities.

[27] The word οὐρανός occurs six times (1:18; 3:5, 7, 10, 12, 13), most of which refer to the visible skies. We will pass over 1:12–15, though it would be a passage to discuss in a more general treatment of the state of believers between death and resurrection (the "intermediate state"), which bears on heaven. Taken on its own, however, 2 Pet. 1:12–15 gives little away, so the reader should see 2 Cor. 5:1–10.

[28] ESV = "pertains to."

[29] See Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, WBC 50 (Waco: Word, 1983), 180–81, with many parallels from the NT's environment.

[30] Cf. 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1, where it also is clear a description of evil's advance in the last days is in fact a description of what is already true in the present.

[31] The background for the views of the false teachers has been sought in different directions, especially among the Epicureans (J. Neyrey, "The Form and Background of the Polemic in 2 Peter," *JBL* 99 [1980]: 407–31; Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 294) or the Stoics (E. Adams, *The Stars Will Fall from Heaven: Cosmic*

Catastrophe in the New Testament and Its World, LNTS 347 [London: T&T Clark, 2007]; John Dennis, "Cosmology in the Petrine Literature and Jude," in *Cosmology and New Testament Theology*, LNTS 355, ed. Jonathan T. Pennington and Sean M. McDonough [London: T&T Clark, 2008], 157–77). Modern voices sound similar themes, e.g., Marcelo Gleiser, "A Guarantee: The World Will Not End on Friday," posted Dec. 19, 2012; http://www.npr.org/blogs/13.7/2012/12/19/167530202.

[32] The text neither states nor implies a theory as to chronology. The allusion to Ps. 90:4 is a way of addressing the misinterpretation of the time already elapsed and the failure to sympathize with God's aims; it involves no speculation about how much longer the delay might continue.

[33] At the very least, the verbal parallel just noted between the "destruction" of Noah's flood and the "destruction" by fire yet to come should give us pause before we conclude that the text indicates something like annihilation or the abolition of creation. Indeed, the language of 1:4–11, the urging in 3:11–14 to live now in continuity with the character of the world to come in which righteousness dwells (v. 13), and the very hope of personal existence (even if 2 Peter as a discourse does not speak explicitly of bodily resurrection) in that new world all bespeak continuity between the present and future worlds. The general emphasis of 3:1–13 does fall on discontinuity, however, so as to highlight the motifs of judgment and separation from what is unholy.

[34] This is probably the sense of 3:10, accepting the reading εὑρεθήσεται instead of οὐχ εὑρεθήσεται as in NA[28]. A variety of textual and interpretive options are discussed along with potential parallels by Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 314–21, before he settles on the meaning we have adopted. The image of v. 10 may be of the visible heavens, along with their heavenly bodies, the sun, moon, and stars (στοιχεῖα), functioning like a veil between earth and the holy realm of God's presence, being rolled back and burned up so that the earth, particularly its inhabitants, are fully exposed to the eyes of God (ibid.). Also in 3:12 it is the heavens and heavenly bodies that are destroyed, giving way to the new heavens and earth.

[35] The character of that eternal life as "abundant life" (see John 10:10) is not as thematic in 1 John as in John's Gospel. Because of the false teaching, the emphasis on 1 John falls on how that eternal life in all its aspects comes into our possession (e.g., 5:11–13, 20). Necessarily and naturally, however, this does involve teaching on the nature of that life, on which see below.

[36] Andreas Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 297, commenting on the Johannine corpus broadly.

[37] For a defense of this translation, see I. H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 254–55.

[38] Cf., e.g., T. F. Torrance, *Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity: 2008), 37, 107–9, 184; Torrance, *Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 93–94, 124–25, 148–53.

[39] Mysteriously unifying these seemingly contradictory assertions is the person of Christ himself, in whom our human nature, and thus the new creation, is united to God; he is both true human and true God, "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation." Analogically, one can notice how the Lord's insistence that he is *himself* the inheritance of the Levites (e.g., Num. 18:20; Deut. 10:9) does not mean they have no earthly land or food (e.g., Num. 35:1–5; Deut. 14:29; 18:1–2).

[40] The sense of the Greek term ἱλασμός has been much discussed, with some arguing it relates to "expiation" (the removal of an offense, neutralizing or cancelling sin) and others arguing for "propitiation" (turning away the wrath of the offended party). In the present passage, where the image of the advocate is present in 2:1, it conveys the idea of a propitiatory sacrifice; Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 117–18.

[41] The word signifies "a state of boldness and confidence, courage, confidence, boldness, fearlessness, especially in the presence of persons of high rank" (BDAG, s.v. παρρησία). It often relates to boldness of speech, and that would be its use throughout 1 John, as is apparent from 5:14.

[42] John does not stress the eternal nature of this advocacy as does Hebrews, but it is entailed in its relation to the eternal life in which it is involved.

[43] Presumably, God's knowledge of all things in 3:20 alludes especially to his ultimate and perfect knowledge of who believers are as a result of his forgiveness and cleansing. "The point is not that God is merciful and forgiving (which, of course, John assumes), but that he has the full knowledge on which to base a just verdict concerning us. Consequently, we have grounds for confidence" (Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 198). The idea of 4:17–19 in its own way asserts the grounds for this: "As he is [righteous and in a right relationship with his Father] so also are we [by God's holy grace] in this world."

[44] The word ἁγνός signifies moral purity that qualifies one for entrance into God's holy presence.

[45] Jude, like 1–3 John, makes no use of the Greek word οὐρανός.

[46] The history of the tradition in Jewish and Christian interpretation is summarized by Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 51; see *1 Enoch* 6–19; 21; 86–88; 106:13–15, 17; *Jub*. 4:15, 22; 5:1; CD 2:17–19; 1QapGen 2:1; *Tg. Ps.-J.* Gen. 6:1–4; *T. Reub.* 5:6–7; *T. Napht*. 3:5; *2 Apoc. Bar.* 56:10–14. Jude appears to be dependent on *1 Enoch* 6–19.

[47] CD, 2/1, 369.

[48] Keeping themselves in the "love of God" (v. 21) involves both the submission to God's love for them (vv. 1, 24–25) and the concomitant obedience of walking in that same love (vv. 22–23); v. 20 represents both sides of that at once. The logic of Matt. 5:48; 6:14–15; 18:33 lurks behind this.

[49] Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 26.

[50] We may expect that upon arrival our response will simultaneously be, "This is *nothing* like what we imagined," and, "Yes, we see that this is *exactly* what you were talking about."

[51] Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 353–58. As they summarize it, "Some Christians expect to spend heavenly life in 'eternal solitude with God alone'" (the theocentric version), while other Christians "cannot conceive of blessedness without being reunited with friends, spouse, children, or relatives" (the anthropocentric vision). Both emphases are richly represented by the tradition. They postulate that at the root of this bifurcation is the dual command of love of God and love of neighbor. We may add that insofar as that is true, it remains that in the Son those parallel lines meet, for in him above all, as both our God and human brother/friend, we love at once both God and neighbor—indeed, "the least of these," and him above even our closest family.

[52] Ibid., 358, comment on this twentieth-century turn, represented *within* the church as much as without: "Here we have something quite new and unprecedented in the history of Christianity: the discontinuity with traditional belief is greater than the continuity."

[53] Marv was able to return home and live a few more days of routine, rising for breakfast at table with Grace. Finally his strength gave out and he could not stand. On December 2, eleven days after their trip to the emergency room, Grace told him she released him and would be okay. Later that day Marv fell asleep in the Lord. They were married sixty-seven years. Marv's final days were lived in profound peace of faith. Grace continues in that same hope.

6

HEAVEN IN JOHN'S GOSPEL AND REVELATION

ANDREAS J. KÖSTENBERGER



It is somewhat ironic that John is responsible for providing the church with both the clearest statements of realized eschatology and the richest descriptions of the future state of the people of God in the entire Bible.[1] On the one hand, John's Gospel highlights how eternal life begins in the present for believers in Christ. On the other hand, the book of Revelation elaborates in some detail on the sublime beauty and grandeur of God's new creation in which believers will one day live. This chapter will explore the distinctive contribution that John makes in his Gospel and Revelation to helping us understand what heaven is and what it is like.

At the outset, it is important to clarify the scope of the study. This chapter focuses on heaven, or more specifically, the final eternal state of God's people. It is not devoted to discussing eschatology more broadly conceived, including Christ's second coming, the final judgment, the intermediate state, or the millennium. These things are all important and will be discussed briefly when necessary but cannot all be covered in detail in a single chapter. Only if we keep this limitation in mind will we be able to do justice to the subject of heaven in the books under discussion.

Heaven in John's Gospel

John's Gospel presents us with three important considerations concerning heaven. First, John primarily discusses heaven as the present abode of God.

Second, John presents eternal life, which Christians generally associate with their future in heaven, as a present reality for believers. Third, John describes the believer's future, eternal abode as dwelling in Jesus' "Father's house."

Heaven as the Present Abode of God

John primarily thinks about heaven as the present abode and dwelling place of God. This is evident by looking at each instance of the word *heaven* (*ouranos*) in his Gospel. Of the sixteen occurrences of the expression *heaven* in John's Gospel, eleven clearly present heaven as the presently existing realm of God (1:51; 3:13, 31; 6:32, 33, 38, 41, 42, 50, 51, 58; cf. the adjective "heavenly" in 3:12).[2] It is God's spiritual realm that exists alongside the present world, albeit invisible to human eyes. Once, John uses "heaven" as a circumlocution for God (3:27). In some references, heaven as the abode of God seems indistinguishable from the physical heavens (1:32; 6:31; 12:28; 17:1), but the fact that God is spirit (4:24) precludes a one-to-one correspondence of God's dwelling place to the created heavens. Heaven for John is not simply or primarily "up" but rather the spiritual realm and abode of God that presently exist alongside the created world.

This understanding of heaven is further emphasized by the Johannine dualism of "above" and "below." Thus John writes, "He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all" (3:31; cf. 1:51; 3:13–14; 8:23). "Above" consistently designates heaven as God's realm while "below" refers to the earth.[3] John's emphasis on Jesus' descent and ascent, also described as his coming from the Father and going back to the Father, supports this above/below dualism. Jesus came (descended) from heaven (above) to earth (below) and after his resurrection went (ascended) back to the Father (1:9; 3:19; 5:43; 7:28; 9:39; 12:46–47; 13:1, 3; 14:4, 5, 12, 28; 16:5, 7, 10, 17, 28; 17:11, 13; 18:37).[4] These expressions in turn are part of an overarching "journey theme" in John's Gospel[5] and solidly locate heaven as the present abode and realm of God and the place from which Jesus came and to which he returned.

Heaven on Earth? The Beginning of Eternal Life in Christ

If heaven is the present abode and dwelling place of God, something unprecedented took place in Jesus' life and ministry: heaven came down to earth, and in Jesus the realm above invaded the world below. This is the significance of

Jesus' statement to his disciples that "you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (1:51). It is in Jesus himself that his followers receive an apocalyptic unveiling of heaven, and Jesus is the "new Bethel" where heaven and earth, God and humankind, meet.[6] Jesus is the fullness of God's divine self-expression (1:14–18; cf. 1:1).[7]

Likewise, when Martha affirms her belief in a future resurrection on the last day (11:24), Jesus astoundingly claims that, in his own person, the resurrection of the last day was present at that very moment and that those who believe in him will experience it at the present time (vv. 25–26). In fact, in John's narrative Martha represents conventional Jewish eschatology, focused on the future, while Jesus points out the realized aspect. Elsewhere, John affirms that the eternal life of the future new age—heaven—has already begun for those who believe in Jesus (5:24; 10:10; 17:3).[8] Thus John represents Jesus as saying, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (5:24).

This emphasis on the beginning of eternal life in the present—commonly dubbed "realized eschatology"—has led some scholars to conclude that John had no conception of a future heaven where believers would someday live. Rudolf Bultmann and C. H. Dodd, for different reasons, both famously argued that John had no future eschatology, that is, that John did not believe in anything similar to a future heaven for believers but rather held to a fully realized eschatology.[9] Bultmann attributed references to a future resurrection (5:28–29; 6:39, 40, 44, 54) to a later ecclesiastical redactor while Dodd conceived of the Gospel's realized eschatology as a way to deal with the unforeseen delay in Christ's second coming.[10]

However, these proposals have not carried the day, and subsequent scholarship has rejected the thesis of a radically realized Johannine eschatology. Instead, it is now widely believed that Jesus taught a form of "inaugurated eschatology" that holds present and future aspects of Jesus' end-time teachings in proper tension.[11] Inaugurated eschatology posits that the kingdom of God, the age to come, and eternal life have already begun through Jesus' earthly ministry yet still await final consummation at a future time when believers will fully live in the age to come, that is, God's new creation. In and through Christ, believers have access to end-time blessings, to heaven, and to God's throne already in the here and now, yet they still long for the future day when their mortal bodies will be completely transformed, and they will dwell forever in God's presence—the

“Father’s house.”

Heaven as a Future Destination: The Father’s House in John 14:1–4

We have seen that John discusses heaven primarily as the present realm and abode of God that exists alongside the present world while remaining unseen by humans at the present time. We have also seen that John focuses on the experience of eternal life in Jesus at the present time as it is mediated through the Holy Spirit in the case of those who believe in Christ in this life. Alongside these emphases, John also briefly describes the future place at which believers will one day dwell as Jesus’ “Father’s house,” describing it as a location with “many rooms”:[12]

> Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going. (John 14:1–4)

That is the main passage in John’s Gospel that refers to a future place where believers will dwell with Christ. The setting for this passage is the so-called Farewell Discourse (13:31–16:33), where Jesus prepares his followers for his departure after which he will no longer be physically with them. Jesus comforts the disciples by making clear that his departure is only temporary and that it is necessary for him to return to the Father in order to prepare a place for them, after which time he will return and bring them with him. Jesus does not describe his Father’s house beyond noting the large number of dwelling places and the abundant room available for Jesus’ followers.[13] This emphasis assures believers that they have a sure and certain place guaranteed for them: “The point is not the lavishness of each apartment, but the fact that such ample provision has been made that there is more than enough space for every one of Jesus’ disciples to join him in his Father’s home.”[14] The comfort comes from the certainty that a place has been prepared for believers to dwell with God forever, not by explicit, detailed descriptions of those dwellings. The fact that the site of these eternal dwellings is the Father’s house is enough.

The only other occurrence of the word “room” or “single dwelling” (*monē*) in the New Testament is found in John 14:23, where Jesus promises that he and his

Father will make their home within those who love him. This reference should not be read back into the reference to dwelling places in verse 2, however. Verse 23 refers to God's spiritual indwelling of believers, which is realized in and through the person of the Holy Spirit, while verse 2 points to the future dwelling of believers with God in a reality external to the believers.[15]

Because the expression "my Father's house" refers to the Jerusalem temple in 2:16, some have argued that Jesus is here referring to some kind of heavenly temple. While possible, this connection is tenuous and should probably be discounted for at least the following five reasons.[16] First, there is no indication in the present context that the temple is in view. Second, the reference to the temple as God's house in chapter 2 is fairly distant from the reference to the "Father's house" in chapter 14. Third, John's Gospel explicitly presents Jesus himself as the replacement of the temple (see esp. 2:21).[17] Fourth, there is in John's Gospel a remarkable silence with regard to the temple in the second half of the Gospel (chaps. 13–21), most likely because this portion assumes Jesus' exaltation with God the Father and his replacement of the earthly sanctuary as the proper place of worship.[18] Fifth, in agreement with this, Revelation makes clear that there will be no temple in God's future new creation and joining of heaven and earth (Rev. 21:22).

For these and other reasons, it is more likely that Jesus is describing the final state of believers ("heaven") as the Father's extended household.[19] It was common in the culture of Jesus' day for many dwelling units to be combined to form an extended household.[20] When a son would marry, it was customary for that son to add to his father's house so that the entire estate grew into a large compound. As one commentator notes, "He who goes to the Father prepares a place there for those who belong to Him. He establishes them as members of the Father's household. He makes His home accessible to them as a final place of residence."[21]

This proposal is strengthened by the presentation of Jesus as the heavenly messianic bridegroom elsewhere in the Gospel and in Revelation (John 3:29; Rev. 21:2). Jesus' promise that he would come again to bring his followers to his Father's house is reminiscent of similar language in Song of Solomon 8:2, where the bride says that she will take her lover to her mother's house. Jews in the first century would have interpreted a son's preparing a place and coming to bring people to his father's house when the time had come as wedding rather than temple imagery.

Summary

John's Gospel presents heaven primarily as the present abode and dwelling place of God the Father. In and through Jesus' ministry, heaven is opened and in a very real sense comes down to earth. Through the indwelling and empowering ministry of the Holy Spirit, believers experience eternal life in the present as a foretaste of their final, eternal, joyous dwelling in God's new creation. What is more, John describes the future state of believers as an extended household, comforting his followers by guaranteeing them a future place in God's own realm and abode. The heaven where God now dwells, the "Father's house," was made known and rendered accessible to humankind in and through Jesus as mediated by the Holy Spirit, and one day in the future believers will have full access to the Father when they forever dwell with him in his house and abode. The book of Revelation greatly expands and sharpens this picture of believers' final state.

Heaven in Revelation

Just as we saw with John's Gospel, heaven in Revelation primarily points to the current abode and dwelling place of God, where God's reign is uncontested and where God presently receives the worship he deserves, in contrast to earth where his reign is continually challenged as others spuriously claim ultimate lordship. In the final climactic vision of the book, John sees the New Jerusalem coming down to earth, symbolizing the joining of God's realm with the realm of humans in God's new creation.[22] Heaven is not some location out in space or in the clouds where Christians hope to someday live in disembodied form. Christians' hope for heaven is rather for resurrection and eternal life in God's new creation, where heaven and earth are joined and God dwells fully in the midst of his creation and his people. This implies both continuity and discontinuity with our present experience of what it means to be human and to live in the world. In God's new creation, believers will be fully human, perfectly reflecting the image of God without sin and exercising the representative rule of God's creation for which we were created (Gen. 1:26–30).

Heaven (ouranos)

The Greek word for heaven, *ouranos*, occurs fifty times in Revelation and refers to either the present dwelling place or abode of God (3:12; 4:2; 5:3, 13; 8:1; 11:13, 15, 19; 12:1, 3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 12; 13:6; 14:17; 15:1, 5; 16:11; 18:20; 19:1, 11, 14; 20:1) or the present sky or physical heavens (6:13, 14; 8:10; 9:1; 11:6;

13:13; 16:21; 18:5; 20:9, 11; 21:1). In several places, it is ambiguous and hard to determine which of these two referents is intended by the term (4:1; 10:1, 4, 5, 6, 8; 11:12; 14:2, 7, 13; 18:1, 4; 21:2, 10). This matches what we observed concerning the Gospel of John and raises an interesting point of contrast with the contemporary common use of "heaven" opposite "hell" to describe the final state of believers or where Christians go when they die.

Ouranos is never used to describe the final state of believers in the Gospel of John and Revelation but always refers to either the present abode and realm of God or the physical sky and heavens. Because of this fact, our exploration of the final state of believers in Revelation will not be based on a word study of *ouranos* but will require an examination of the symbols, figures, and allusions to the future life of believers throughout the book. The remainder of this chapter will proceed in three stages. First, I will examine the culminating visionary account of the final state of believers in 21:1–22:5. Second, I will examine other allusions to the future life of believers in God's new creation throughout the book. Finally, I will conclude by looking at the rhetorical force of the visionary descriptions of the final state of believers ("heaven") in Revelation.

John's Final Climactic Vision: New Creation (21:1–22:5)

The final state of believers receives its fullest description in Revelation in 21:1–22:5, which structurally consists of two mutually interpreting visions of God's new creation and the New Jerusalem (21:1–8; 21:9–22:5).[23] Because of the great deal of overlap, these two final visions will be discussed together. Bracketing out questions of the nature of the millennium, it is clear in the narrative that God's new creation is preceded by the bodily return of Christ, the resurrection of all the dead throughout history, and the final judgment (19:11–16; 20:11–15; cf. 1:7).

Despite the highly figurative description of believers' future state in these final visions, it is possible to register several definitive affirmations.[24] The future life of believers in their resurrection bodies will entail life in God's new creation; the direct presence of God with humanity; the permanent removal of all the pain, sorrow, and suffering of the present world; ultimate security, safety, and protection; and a reversal of the effects of the curse and the fall.[25]

The New Creation (21:1). The final state of believers is preeminently described in Revelation as their resurrected life in God's newly created (or re-created) earth: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more" (21:1; cf. Isa. 65:17; 66:22). God is praised throughout Revelation because he created all

things (Rev. 4:11; 10:6; 14:7). By extension, the celebration of God's power and ability to create is also a celebration of his power and ability to re-create. When we affirm our belief in God's creation of the universe, we are affirming our belief and hope that he will one day re-create it. God's new creation is also anticipated by visions of judgment throughout Revelation. The seven seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments figuratively narrate the dissolution and destruction of the present cosmos (de-creation) in anticipation of God's final and glorious re-creation of heaven and earth, where everything that corrupted the first creation will be absent.[26] God's creation of a new heaven and a new earth points to a newness in quality (usually indicated by *kainos*) and not in time (usually indicated by *neos*).[27] These two Greek words for "new" can be synonymous depending on the context, but the unfolding visions stress that the use of *kainos* in 21:1 points to the qualitative newness of God's new creation.[28]

When the vision of the future contained in Revelation 21:1 is compared with Paul's description of Christians as "new creation" in 2 Corinthians 5:17, an important truth emerges. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the future, new creation seen by John has already broken into the present, old creation. Those who are united to Christ by faith (symbolized by baptism) become part of this new creation even as they live in the broken, fallen old creation: this present world. Christians therefore live in the midst of tension and conflict. Although believers definitively belong to the new creation, have been filled with God's Spirit, and are being inwardly transformed day by day into Christ's likeness, we still live in this broken world filled with temptation, sin, suffering, pain, and death and long for final consummation at the return of Christ. Revelation 21:1–22:5 does not describe the new creation inaugurated by Christ in which believers presently partake but the final perfection, completion, and life of God's people in his newly (re)made world.[29]

God's Direct Presence with Humanity (21:3). The preeminent characteristic of God's new creation will be his direct presence with his people with no distance or separation. "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (21:3).[30] The significance of the descent of the New Jerusalem (v. 2) is interpreted to be that "the dwelling place [*skēnē*; tent, tabernacle] of God is with man. He will dwell [*skēnoō*] with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God" (v. 3). The use of the Greek noun *skēnē* (along with the verb) recalls the incarnation and John's statement that "the

Word became flesh and dwelt [*skēnoō*] among us" (John 1:14), signaling the fulfillment of God's promise to tabernacle with his people in the wilderness (Lev. 26:11–12) and of the prophetic vision that God's dwelling place [*kataskēnōsis*, LXX] would one day be among his people forever (Ezek. 37:27).[31] Throughout the Gospel of John and Revelation, the dwelling of God is in heaven in distinction from earth, but in God's new creation these two distinct spatial realities merge. God's dwelling is now with resurrected people on a newly created earth.

In the old creation—this present world—such direct access to God would prove fatal to sinful humanity. The Israelites had to keep their distance from Mount Sinai in order not to be consumed; only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, and no one had seen God at any time (John 1:18; cf. 1 John 4:12). Because Christians are part of God's new creation right now in the present, we are indwelt by his Holy Spirit and, according to the book of Hebrews, have confident access to approach God in prayer because of Christ's sacrifice, but because we are in this old creation, God is not directly dwelling among us. In God's new creation this will not be the case, and God will dwell directly with and among his people.

How is it that Christians celebrate the presence of God in their midst in this old creation, yet, according to Revelation 21, God's presence with his people is a yet future reality? God's presence with his people in the present is through his indwelling Spirit. An imperfect illustration may be drawn from human relationships. Most people have experienced times in life when they are geographically separated from loved ones: betrothed, spouse, children, parents, or close friends. There are many ways in which we may communicate, encourage, and express our love to others long-distance through the phone, the Internet, Skype, video conferencing, or e-mail. I suppose some people even still send letters through the post office. All these means of communication and "presence" are wonderful, but they are not the same as being directly face-to-face with loved ones: greeting and hugging them at the airport terminal or bus station or seeing them pull into the driveway and get out of the car. It is great to talk on the phone, but it is far better to talk face-to-face.[32] In God's new creation his dwelling place (heaven) will not be separated from mankind; rather, God will directly dwell with his people.

The Wiping Away of All the Pain, Sorrow, and Suffering of This Present World (21:4). Revelation 21:4 contains one of the most powerful images in Revelation and perhaps the entire Bible in its description of the activity of God as he dwells

with his people: “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” The all-powerful, transcendent, holy creator and ruler of all creation is pictured as intimately and tenderly wiping the tears away from the eyes of his people. God’s presence and direct rule of his people is characterized by love and compassion and not the oppression and brutality that often characterize human power and authority in the present world.

Not only will God bring complete and ultimate comfort to our pain, but the sources of our pain will no longer exist: “Death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (v. 4b). Everything that causes tears, suffering, and pain will have passed away with the old creation and will have no place in God’s new creation. God does not just remove sorrow from human existence, but he banishes the sources of pain and sorrow. Death and the “former things” will have passed away. God will make “all things new” (v. 5).

Security, Safety, and Protection (21:9–21, 25). The magnificent and detailed description of the New Jerusalem describes the security and safety of God’s people in God’s new creation:[33]

> But let us pay more attention to the absolute security of the New Jerusalem. The city is perched on a mountain so huge and high that no invading army could possibly gain a foothold on it (21:10). The city-wall is so thick and high—144 cubits thick and naturally as high as the city itself, it would appear, since 144 cubits would not at all be high in comparison with the city’s height of 12,000 stadia—the city-wall is so thick and high that no invading army could penetrate or scale it if they were able to gain a foothold on the mountain (21:12a). Standing guard at each gate is an angel, more than a match for any invader (21:12b). Twelve mammoth stones, interspersed between the gates, support the wall (21:14a). John is not describing an eternally secure place. He is describing eternally secure peoples.[34]

The visionary descriptions of the city indicate unsurpassed wealth, security, safety, and protection. It has powerful gates and walls, but the gates will never be shut because there will be no night, threat, or danger (v. 25).[35] In stark contrast to the dangers encountered by God’s people in the old creation in the form of natural disasters, sickness, and the persecuting power of the evil trinity (the Dragon and the two beasts), there will be no worrying about our own safety and

that of our loved ones in God's new creation. The extravagant wealth contained in the building materials of the New Jerusalem also contrasts with the economic and social deprivation experienced by many of God's people in the old creation because of their faithful witness to Christ.

The Restoration of Eden and the Reversal of the Fall (22:1–5). God's new creation in which believers will one day live eternally is described as a restored and perfected Eden.[36] Several motifs in these verses allude to the description of paradise in Genesis 2–3: the river of life (Rev. 22:1; cf. Gen. 2:10; Ezek. 47:1–9; Zech. 14:8); the Tree of Life (Rev. 22:2; cf. Gen. 3:22; Ezek. 47:12); and the removal of every cursed thing (Rev. 22:3; cf. Gen. 3:14–19; Zech. 14:11).[37] These connections indicate that God's new creation will entail a restoration of all that was lost when humanity originally rebelled against God. When humanity rebelled against God, they were removed from the garden so that they could not eat from the Tree of Life and live forever, but in God's newly created world without sin, people have full access to the Tree of Life.

Humanity's rebellion resulted in a cursed and broken world that groans and longs for freedom from corruption (cf. Rom. 8:19–23).[38] The world, paradise, became a corrupt place filled with broken, sinful, selfish people who use, hurt, and oppress one another. Revelation declares that in God's new creation everything cursed as a result of mankind's rebellion against God will be completely removed.[39] Verse 3 of the well-known Christmas carol "Joy to the World" captures the hope expressed in these verses:

> No more let sins and sorrows grow,
> Nor thorns infest the ground;
> He comes to make his blessings flow
> Far as the curse is found,
> Far as the curse is found,
> Far as, far as, the curse is found.[40]

Revelation 22:5 concludes with the promise that God's people "will reign forever and ever." Thus, humankind will finally and fully be able to fulfill the purpose for which we were originally created: to represent God as his image in representatively ruling his creation (Gen. 1:26–28).

Visions of God's New Creation throughout Revelation

In addition to John's final climactic visions of God's new creation in Revelation 21:1–22:5, there are brief descriptions of the final state in 7:15–17 and 11:15–18 and allusions to it in the letters to the seven churches in the promises to believers

who overcome (2:7, 11, 17, 26–27; 3:5, 12, 21).

The description of the innumerable multitude before the throne in 7:9–17 possesses temporal ambiguity and seems to describe the state of deceased believers in the presence of God throughout the church age and the final state of believers in God's new creation.[41] However, the description of the believers, particularly in verses 16–17, connects this vision with the final state of believers as described in 21:3–6: "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (7:16–17). Believers will not experience the hunger or thirst associated with deprivation in this present world; they will have access to springs of living water; and God will be present in their midst to wipe away every tear.

The events associated with the blowing of the seventh trumpet and the final advent of Christ's kingdom are not narrated but rather assumed and celebrated in song (11:15–18). This hymn celebrates the coming of Christ's eternal kingdom on earth (God's new creation, not the millennial kingdom) and allusively refers to the return of Christ, the resurrection, final judgment, and eternal salvation:[42]

> The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever. (11:15b)

> We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,
> who is and who was,
> for you have taken your great power
> and begun to reign.
> The nations raged,
> but your wrath came,
> and the time for the dead to be judged,
> and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints,
> and those who fear your name,
> both small and great,
> and for destroying the destroyers of the earth. (vv. 17b –18)

The description of God as the one "who is and who was and who is to come" (1:4, 8; 4:8) is here stated as "who is and who was" because at this point in the visionary narrative, God has come to his creation.[43] This coming corresponds with the establishment of Christ's eternal kingdom on earth (11:15b). The "time for the dead to be judged" refers to the final resurrection, and "rewarding your servants" points ahead to the description of God's new creation discussed above.

Revelation 21:7 contains a promise that "the one who conquers will have this heritage" (or "will inherit these things"). This promise likely refers to the things just mentioned in verses 1–6 but likely also has a broader referent and includes each of the similarly worded promises to the conquerors in the letters to the seven churches earlier in the book.[44] Most of the initial promises are explicitly fulfilled in the visions at the end of Revelation:

> Eating from the tree of life (2:7 = 22:2), not hurt by the second death (2:11 = 21:7–8), the hidden manna and the white stone (2:17 = 19:9), a bright stone and the morning star (2:17, 28 = 21:11, 18–21, 23; 22:5, 16), name in the book of life and acknowledged before the Father (3:5 = 21:27), bright garments (3:5 = 19:7–8, 21:2, 9–10), a pillar in the temple (3:12 = 21:22–23), participation in the New Jerusalem (3:12 = 21:2), the name of God written (3:12 = 22:4), and sitting with Christ on his throne (2:26–27; 3:21 = 20:4; 22:3–5).[45]

The initial promises at the conclusion of each of the seven letters anticipate the final consummation that is finally described in 21:1–22:5. They emphasize the same points discussed above: life in God's new creation will entail God's direct presence, the removal of all sorrow and pain, ultimate security and protection, and a restoration of Eden and reversal of the curse.

The Rhetorical Force of "Heaven" in Revelation: What Do These Visions Do?

Revelation does not provide visions and descriptions of the final state of believers in God's new creation just to provide Christians with information and to satisfy their curiosity. These visions are intended to affect and change the readers and hearers: they do something. Visions of the final state of believers in Revelation function as comfort and encouragement, motivation and warning, and invitation.

Comfort and Encouragement. Believers in Asia Minor at the end of the first century who refused to participate in emperor worship and other local rituals and expressions of worship at the pagan temples experienced social ostracism, economic deprivation, general persecution, and possible martyrdom.[46] There has been some discussion concerning the extent of Roman persecution of Christians in Asia Minor at the end of the first century, because there is no extant edict against Christianity from Domitian's reign.[47] Had the persecution already begun,

or was it only anticipated? The recent martyrdom of Antipas at Pergamum (Rev. 2:13) supports the contention that real persecution had begun, at least on a local level, and the messages and visions of Revelation assume that persecution will intensify for those who bear faithful witness to the lordship of Christ and refuse to compromise with the surrounding pagan culture.

To believers suffering persecution and experiencing difficulty for their faithful witness—from the first century through the twenty-first—the visions throughout Revelation of the final, eternal state bring great comfort and encouragement. The present experience of deprivation, loss, poverty, pain, ostracism, and death in this old creation is contrasted by visions of eternal joy, security, wealth, inclusion, and blessedness in God's new creation. God's promised great eschatological reversal—where the last will be first and the first last—comforts believers in the present, often in the midst of intense persecution, while we wait for the return of Christ, final consummation, and the day when God will personally and individually wipe every tear from our eyes.

Motivation and Warning. These visions of the final eternal state not only provide comfort and encouragement but also function to motivate and warn. All the blessings associated with life in God's new creation are promised to those who overcome or conquer (21:7). These visions function to motivate believers to overcome the Beast, sin, and temptation to compromise in order to avoid persecution or advance economically and socially. The promises to the ones who overcome function as an overarching theme for the entire book and embody the main rhetorical theme of Revelation. The book as a whole represents a massive prophetic-apocalyptic exhortation to believers designed to motivate them to overcome, endure, remain faithful, witness, and not compromise. The book motivates this overcoming endurance through visions of the future, God's kingdom, heaven, eternal reward, and life in God's new creation—and their opposite, eternal punishment. God's message to the church rings out loud and clear. You must overcome! Do not grow weary in your obedience and witness! Do not compromise with the sin, lust, and idolatry of your surrounding culture! Overcome!

This motivation to endure is accompanied by severe warnings: "But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death" (21:8). At first, the mention of punishment in the lake of fire may seem out of place, being surrounded by descriptions of the eternal happiness and bliss of God's new creation, but the

inclusion of verse 8 makes perfect sense when it is remembered that these visions of God's new creation were not given to provide information to the intellectually curious but to motivate obedience and warn those who are tempted to compromise with the Beast.[48]

The function of this verse as a warning to Christians who are tempted to compromise is evident from the first word of the "vice list": "the cowardly" (*deilos*). There are many vice lists throughout the New Testament, but none of them begins with, or even includes, *deilos*. This term is particularly suited to describe those professing Christians who are tempted to turn back in the face of persecution and buckle under pressure in order to avoid tribulation or just to advance economically and enjoy upward social mobility. The mention of *deilos* highlights Jesus' exhortation to the churches: you must overcome.[49] Cowardice will keep people from overcoming and will make them compromise with sin and deny Christ when persecution strikes, as persecution surely will. This note of warning designed to motivate believers to overcome is echoed in verse 27: "But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life."

Invitation. Finally, these visions of God's new creation function as an invitation to the reader to join God's people and experience future life in God's new creation, an invitation for all who are thirsty to come: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price" (22:17).

This invitation is based on God's promise in 21:6 and the description of the water of life flowing from the throne of God in the New Jerusalem (22:1–2; cf. 7:17; Isa. 55:1): "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment" (Rev. 21:6).

With these promises and invitations, the visions of God's future new creation in Revelation function evangelistically to call any and every reader, all those who are thirsty, to join the people of God and experience God's promised blessings. This invitation goes out to believers as well, exhorting them to persevere with the hope of full and final satisfaction in God's new creation.[50]

Do Believers Go to Heaven When They Die?

Before concluding this chapter, I want to briefly address a practical issue raised by this study. Is it biblical, at least on the basis of the Gospel of John and

Revelation, to speak of believers' "going to heaven" when they die? As we have seen, *heaven* is never used in the Gospel of John or Revelation to describe the final state of believers or the place where they will spend eternity. Rather, we are told that believers are going to spend eternity in their resurrected bodies on God's new earth. Nevertheless, little harm is done by the popular usage of the word *heaven* to describe where believers go when they die.

While believers will enter God's presence upon death even prior to the final resurrection,[51] the preeminent characteristic of future life in God's newly created world is the direct presence of God among his people. The present cosmological distinction between heaven as God's present abode and the physical earth will be removed, and thus heaven and earth will be joined.[52] God's realm and abode will be the same as that of believers on earth in his new creation.

In this way, it is legitimate to speak of the future state of believers as "life in heaven," as long as Christians are also taught that this does not entail hope for disembodied existence at some remote place but concrete, bodily, resurrected dwelling on God's new earth, where he will permanently live with his people. It will be life in the Father's house, that is, the new creation. In that future state, redeemed humanity will not be inactive but will continue to fulfill God's original mandate to rule his creation as his representatives made in his image (Rev. 22:5; cf. Gen. 1:26–28).

Conclusion

Both the Gospel of John and Revelation consistently employ *heaven* (*ouranos*) to describe either the present abode and dwelling place of God or the physical sky and heavens. The Gospel of John makes a distinctive contribution by emphasizing the joining of heaven and earth in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ and the present experience of eternal life available to believers through the Holy Spirit. Revelation makes a distinctive contribution by describing God's future, eternal, new creation as a permanent joining of heaven and earth whereby God's dwelling place and abode will merge with that of man's and will result in his direct presence in and among his people.

This life in God's new creation, the Father's house, will be characterized by God's presence; the absence of death, sorrow, and pain; complete security and protection; and a restoration of Eden and removal of the curse. In the absence of sin, humankind will be equipped and enabled to fulfill God's original mandate for humanity in his image to representatively rule his creation. These visions in Revelation of God's new creation are designed to comfort, encourage, motivate,

warn, and invite its readers to repent, join God's people, persevere, and inherit the promises. May we respond appropriately to this prophetic-apocalyptic exhortation, because "these words are trustworthy and true" (Rev. 22:6).[53]

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[1] See Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 810–14, for arguments in support of the common authorship of John's Gospel and Revelation.

[2] See the brief overview in Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical Theological Overview* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 8–10.

[3] For a discussion of John's worldview, including "above" and "below," see my *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, BTNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 275–92, esp. 287–88.

[4] For more development of this theme see my *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), chap. 3.

[5] See ibid., 126.

[6] D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 163–64; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 84–87; Ben Witherington, *John's Wisdom* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1995), 72.

[7] Köstenberger, *John*, 25–27, 40–50.

[8] "Life" and "eternal life" are used interchangeably throughout the Gospel. See 1:4; 3:15–16, 36; 4:10, 14, 36; 5:21, 24–26, 28–29; 6:27, 33, 35, 40, 47, 48, 51, 53, 54, 57–58, 63, 68; 7:38; 8:12; 10:10, 28; 11:25–26; 12:25, 50; 14:6, 19; 17:2–3; 20:31.

[9] Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, trans. George R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971); Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribner's, 1951, 1955), 2:75–92; C. H. Dodd, "The Kingdom of God Has Come," *ExpTim* 48 (1936): 138–42; Dodd, "The Background of the Fourth Gospel," *BJRL* 19 (1935): 329–43.

[10] Bultmann, *Gospel of John*, 261; C. H. Dodd, *The Coming of Christ* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 6–7.

[11] George R. Beasley-Murray, *Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 1–14; Beasley-Murray, "The Eschatology of the Fourth Gospel," *EvQ* 18 (1946): 97–108; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 320–23; Darrell L. Bock, "The Kingdom of God in New Testament Theology," in *Looking into the Future: Evangelical Studies in Eschatology*, ed. David W. Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 32–33.

[12] Other references that indicate a futuristic eschatology include 5:28–29; 6:39–40, 44, 54; 11:23–26; 12:48; although these references do not focus on heaven.

[13] The idea that these rooms or dwelling places indicate mansions has made its way into hymnody and common conceptions of heaven, but there is little good evidence to support the notion that we will have mansions in heaven. The concept of "mansions" comes from the Latin word *mansio* through William Tyndale's 1526 translation of the NT into English from the Latin Vulgate. The Latin word refers to a stopover place and did not carry the meaning of large, luxurious quasi-palaces associated with mansions in the English language today. The Greek word *monē* simply means "room" or "single dwelling."

[14] Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 489.

[15] R. H. Gundry, "In My Father's House Are Many *Monai* (John 14:2)," *ZNW* 58 (1967): 68–72,

inadequately recognizes this point. See the critique in Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 488–89.

[16] See, in particular, J. McCaffrey, *The House with Many Rooms: The Temple Theme of Jn. 14,2–3*, Analecta biblica 114 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1988), 63.

[17] See my "The Destruction of the Second Temple and the Composition of the Fourth Gospel," in *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John*, ed. John Lierman, WUNT 2/219 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2006), 69–108.

[18] See esp. ibid., 106; Köstenberger, *Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 433. See also Paul M. Hoskins, *Jesus as the Fulfillment of the Temple in the Gospel of John*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2007).

[19] Contra N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 150, who argues that *monai* is used here to describe the intermediate state because it "is regularly used in ancient Greek not for a final resting place but for a temporary halt on a journey that will take you somewhere else in the long run."

[20] McCaffrey, *House with Many Rooms*, 50–51, discusses how "father's house" designates a (patriarchal) family in the Septuagint (Gk. translation of the OT) and extrabiblical literature.

[21] Gottlob Schrenck, "*patēr*," *TDNT* 5:997.

[22] Cf. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 19, who writes, "God made heaven and earth; at the last he will remake both and join them together forever. And when we come to the picture of the actual end in Revelation 21–22, we find not ransomed souls making their way to a disembodied heaven but rather the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, uniting the two in a lasting embrace."

[23] For detailed discussion of these visions with an emphasis on the OT background see William Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning: Revelation 21–22 and the Old Testament*, Moore Theological College Lecture Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985); David Mathewson, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Meaning and Function of the Old Testament in Revelation 21.1–22.5*, JSNTSup 238 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003). Also useful, though requiring critical discernment, are Bruce J. Malina, *The New Jerusalem in the Revelation of John: The City as Symbol of Life with God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000); and Eva Maria Räpple, *The Metaphor of the City in the Apocalypse of John*, Studies in Biblical Literature 67 (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

[24] See G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 1040, concerning the figurative nature of these visions.

[25] These visions, particularly that of the New Jerusalem, figuratively portray the perfected community of God's people, but several elements that will be discussed below extend beyond a description of resurrected believers to describe the new world in which they will live. Cf. Robert H. Gundry, "The New Jerusalem: People as Place, not Place for People," *NovT* 29 (1987): 254–64; Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 1041.

[26] This is the significance of the absence of the sea in God's new creation (21:1). The sea in the ancient world commonly symbolized chaos, evil, turbulence, and insubordination (cf. Job 38:8–11; Ps. 89:9; Isa. 57:20). See Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 99; Grant Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 730–31; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1042.

[27] Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1040.

[28] Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 98, rightly notes that "whether John would have us think of the new heavens and new earth as a transformation of the existing order, or whether this present cosmos will come to an end and a new creation will replace it, is not quite clear. In any case, the word *new* used by John does not mean simply another, but a new kind of heaven and earth. The new creation will have some continuity with creation as we now know it, yet it will be radically different."

[29] Contra M. R. Mulholland, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990): 314–16; and J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (Grand

Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010), 169, 176, who argue that these visions partially describe the church age.

[30] The covenantal nature of this language is evident throughout the OT. Cf. Gen. 17:7; Ex. 6:7; 29:45; Lev. 26:12; Num. 15:41; Deut. 29:13; 2 Sam. 7:24; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; Ezek. 11:20; 34:24; 36:28; 37:23, 27; and Zech. 8:8.

[31] Cf. Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010), 239.

[32] For a Johannine example, see 2 John 12: "Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete."

[33] Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 190.

[34] Gundry, "New Jerusalem," 260.

[35] So George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 284–85. Contra M. Rissi, *The Future of the World: An Exegetical Study of Revelation 19.11–22:15*, SBT 23 (London: SCM, 1972), 74, who argues for a form of universalism based on the open gates.

[36] This is in keeping with the common Jewish apocalyptic understanding that the end time will reflect the beginning. *Test. Dan* 5:12 notes that at the end the "saints will rest in Eden." Cf. *Barn.* 6:13, where it is said that God "will make the end like the beginning." See Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 1103, for further background discussion. Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 289, writes, "Then . . . in 22:1–5 the city itself evolves into a kind of restored Eden, so as to embrace not just a restored Israel (with a 'new Jerusalem,' which has no temple) but a renewed earth as well."

[37] Connections with Genesis 3 are evident elsewhere in Revelation, particularly in Revelation 12, which connects with Gen. 3:15 around the shared themes of woman, Serpent, seed, and warfare or enmity.

[38] Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 191, draws attention to these verses in Romans and notes that John's vision of God's new creation "envisions the salvation of the whole of creation, not only the redemption of individual souls."

[39] Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 102.

[40] Isaac Watts, "Joy to the World," 1719.

[41] Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 443, writes, "The scene in Rev. 7:9–17 does not only portray God's protection of Christians on earth or only the final reward of the church living only at the climax of history. Vv 13–14 portray the *overall process* of those who persevere and enter into and begin to participate in the enjoyment of God's presence and eternal blessings" (emphasis original).

[42] Space precludes discussion of the structure of Revelation, but the description here following the sounding of the seventh trumpet along with the angel's promise "that there would be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled" (Rev. 10:6–7) seems to demand some version of recapitulation or parallelism, at least with regard to the seventh seal, trumpet, and bowl. For a detailed discussion see Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 831–45.

[43] See the helpful discussion of this phrase in Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 28–30.

[44] Osborne, *Revelation*, 739.

[45] Ibid., drawn from Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 1058.

[46] For detailed discussion of the seven churches in the first century see W. M. Ramsey, *The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994); and especially C. J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1986).

[47] See in particular Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 815–23; and David A. deSilva, *Seeing Things John's Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville, KY:

Westminster, 2009), 29–64. See also Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 84; Leonard Thompson, "A Sociological Analysis of the Tribulation in the Apocalypse of John," *Semeia* 36 (1986): 147–74; J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (London: SCM, 1979); Hemer, *Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); and Jan A. Du Rand, "A Socio-Psychological View of the Effect of the Language (Parole) of the Apocalypse of John," *Neot* 24 (1990): 351–65, esp. 355.

[48] Fee, *Revelation*, 295.

[49] Osborne, *Revelation*, 741, highlights the explicit contrast drawn between those who overcome and the cowardly.

[50] For the inclusion of God's people in the addressees of this invitation see Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 1149.

[51] See the depictions of believers in passages such as Rev. 6:9–19; 7:9–17; 12:10–12; 13:6; 14:13; and 15:2–3. Cf. Charles H. Giblin, "The Millennium (Rev 20.4–6) as Heaven," *NTS* 45 (1999): 553–70, who discusses each of these texts among others under the rubric of "vertical eschatology" (555).

[52] James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 253, notes, "In the old order God dwelt in heaven; in the new order God tabernacles with his people. The three-level world is in the process of collapsing into one world, removing the separation between heaven and earth, between God and his people."

[53] I am grateful to my research assistant Alex Stewart for his help in preparing this essay.

7

PICTURES OF HEAVEN

ROBERT A. PETERSON

A story is told of a conversation between Saint Augustine and a small boy on the Mediterranean shoreline of North Africa near Carthage around the year AD 400. The great Christian theologian was in the midst of writing his famous book on the Trinity and found himself overwhelmed at the task, so he took a walk on the beach. What overwhelmed Augustine was the seeming futility of his efforts to capture the greatness of God in the pages of a book. Alister McGrath tells the surprising twist to the story:

> While wandering across the sand he noticed a small boy scooping seawater into his hands, and pouring as much as his small hands could hold into a hole he had earlier hollowed in the sand. Puzzled, Augustine watched as the lad repeated his action again and again.
>
> Eventually, his curiosity got the better of him. What, he asked the boy, did he think he was doing? The reply probably perplexed him still further. The youth was in the process of emptying the ocean into the small cavity he had scooped out in the hot sand. Augustine was dismissive: how could such a vast body of water be contained in such a small hole? The boy was equally dismissive in return: how could Augustine expect to contain the vast mystery of God in the mere words of a book?[1]

None of the contributors to this volume are under the delusion their chapters will exhaust all the mysteries of the final shape of salvation. Moreover, all the

chapters together cannot contain God's heaven. In fact, all the books in the world could not adequately describe the glories of the age to come.

Nevertheless, God has opened his holy mouth, spoken forth his Holy Word, and given us his Holy Spirit, and we are responsible to read his Word, contemplate it, and to the best of our ability set forth its teaching about every topic it addresses, including heaven. After teaching Christian theology professionally for thirty-three years, two things have become clear to me. First, the Bible is a storybook; it tells a true story, whose story line goes like this: creation—fall—redemption—consummation. Second, within the story the Bible is also a picture book; it paints pictures to communicate many of its truths. I will sketch five of Scripture's most important pictures of heaven. And I will trace each picture through the four stages of the story line (creation, fall, redemption, and consummation).[2]

- Heaven and earth
- Sabbath rest
- The kingdom of God
- The presence of God
- The glory of God

Heaven and Earth

Creation: Heaven and Earth Made

The first picture is the most important of all, that of God's creation of the heaven and the earth, which will culminate in the new heaven and the new earth. The Bible begins, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Genesis was written during Israel's wilderness wanderings before they were a nation and had their own land. Unlike the peoples they were to displace in Canaan, they were to worship the true and living creator-God.

Against the backdrop of the Redeemer's delivering the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, they learn that their God, Yahweh, created everything. The God of Israel is the God of the universe. Moreover, God's creation reflects its creator (Ps. 19:1).

Humankind is not the result of random biological processes. Rather, "the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gen. 2:7). Only humankind is created in God's image, male and female. This image includes humankind's task to rule over the earth and care for it on behalf of the Creator.

The image of God is not solely spiritual in nature. We are a unity of body and soul, whole persons.

When no suitable helper is found among the animals, God forms one out of Adam's rib. Adam's helper is to be Eve. The first pair was to worship God by the caretaking of creation and creatively expressing whatever their hearts desired, resulting in the ongoing praise of his glory. There was only one limitation for their task—they were not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (v. 17).

Fall: Heaven and Earth Marred

When Adam and Eve are tempted by the Devil, they disobey God and irreparably damage the peace and beauty of God's good creation. The blessings of creation are now tainted by the curses of the fall.

God pronounces a curse for Adam's sin: "Cursed is the ground because of you" (3:17). The ground as created was to bring forth plentiful vegetation for humans and animals alike to eat. Now, due to Adam's sin, the ground is subjected to an alien unfruitfulness (Rom. 8:20). All that was good and beautiful —the harmony of human beings, beasts, and ground—is disrupted by the pollution of Adam's sin.

The most glaring reversal of blessing befalls Eve. The blessing of male and female to "multiply" (Gen. 1:28) now turns to curse: "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children" (3:16). The pain extends to miscarriage, birth defects, diseases, and even the untimely death of children.

The next reversal strikes the very marriage relationship. Eve's desire is changed from one of helping her husband to helping herself (v. 16),[3] just as she "helped herself" to the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. For both husband and wife, the curse introduces opposition and self-centeredness into the marriage covenant, where there once was mutuality and self-sacrifice.

Humankind's charge to work and keep the garden is no longer easy, because of sin. Now, instead of cooperating with Adam in perfect harmony, the ground only grudgingly produces "thorns and thistles" (v. 18), with the result that humans will live only "by the sweat of" their faces (v. 19).

Redemption: Heaven and Earth Waiting

Tsunamis, earthquakes, and tornadoes, though called "natural disasters," are unnatural results of the brokenness of this world (Rom. 8:19–22). With the first

advent of Jesus Christ, the decisive blow against the Devil was struck. But the world has not yet been purified of the corruption of the works of the Devil. Jesus' stilling the great storm on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:39) is a foretaste of the Creator's once again issuing his command, this time to all of heaven and earth, and causing all chaos to cease.

There is also much human brokenness: "We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23). Our bodies are weak and eventually die. More deeply, we struggle "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). We struggle against our own sinful tendencies (Rom. 6:12–19), a world that hates God (John 16:33), and the schemes of Satan (2 Cor. 10:3–6).

Yet even in our struggles there is hope. The power of sin has been broken (Rom. 6:6), and we "toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within" us (Col. 1:29).

Is Christ's work in the world progressing? In terms of the overall mission of God, yes, since more people worship Christ than ever before. God's work of special grace abounds in Christ and in his church in the conversion of the lost. The gospel is going forth into more new places and back into places like the Middle East. Most estimates today place the number of Christians worldwide, including nominal ones, at around two billion.

Consummation: Heaven and Earth in Righteousness

Isaiah foresees the new heavens and the new earth: "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind" (Isa. 65:17; cf. 66:22–23). He predicts a future life that is new (65:17); joyous (v. 19); secure (vv. 20–23); peaceful (vv. 24–25); unending, universal, and worshipful (66:23). The last two chapters of the Bible pick up many of these themes.

Jesus too promises a new world, the renewal of all things: "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life" (Matt. 19:28–29).

Paul also longs for the new heaven and earth, the new creation:

> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:19–23)

The apostle presents the redemption of believers as a microcosm of the redemption of creation. By God's grace we will be completely redeemed. We will have great glory (vv. 18, 21) and be freed from groaning over our struggles with sin (v. 23). We await our final adoption, "the redemption of our bodies" (v. 23), resurrection from the dead.

Thinking about our resurrection helps us to understand Paul's words about the redemption of the cosmos. Our resurrection will involve a complete renewal of our present persons—body and soul. And just as we will not be destroyed but renewed, so it is with God's creation. We are a microcosm of the macrocosm of the creation. Even as we long for final salvation, so does the creation, personified as an expectant mother. The creation is eager to "be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (v. 21). The creation longs for the curse's removal (vv. 20–22). This is not destruction and re-creation but great renovation of the present world. Paul's words help us to understand Peter's.

Peter also looks for the new heavens and earth. He emphasizes the difference between the present creation and the new one (2 Pet. 3:10–12). On the basis of his words some have argued for the extinction of the present cosmos and the creation of a totally new one:

> The heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire. (v. 7)

> The heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved. (v. 10)

> The heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! (v. 12)

Although those verses seem to teach destruction and re-creation, they do not. I say this for four reasons.

First, in the preceding verse Peter says: “The world that then existed was deluged with water and perished” (v. 6). “Perished” here does not speak of a literal destruction of the world but of its cleansing through the judgment of unbelievers in Noah’s flood. Similarly, when Peter speaks of the heaven’s and earth’s being “burned up and dissolved,” the result is not their destruction but that “the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed” under the glare of divine judgment (vv. 7, 10). The language of burning does not mean obliteration but is metaphorical of a deep cleansing of the earth, as in Noah’s day.

Second, Peter compares the fates of the earth and of unbelievers: “The heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly” (v. 7). The “destruction of the ungodly” does not entail their extinction of being. Instead, it is figurative for the loss of all that is worthwhile in human life and signifies never-ending, conscious punishment (Matt. 25:41, 46; Rev. 20:10–15).

Third, all of this fits Peter’s description of the new heaven and the new earth: “We are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13). He envisions a cleansing of sinners from the creation, resulting in righteousness rather than an obliteration of the earth. Heide is apt: “When he [Peter] describes the new heavens and new earth, it is not a place with new physical substances or new elements of creation. He describes it as a place where ‘righteousness dwells.’”[4]

Fourth, such a view brings Peter into contradiction with Paul in Romans 8:20–21 and John in Revelation 22:3, both of whom speak of the removal of the curse, not the extinction and re-creation of the world.

In Peter’s mind the governing model for the new creation is the complete perfection of the world, for redemption must reach as far as the damage of sin and its curse.

John in Revelation also sees the new heaven and the new earth. The passages we have surveyed point to this one: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. . . . And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new’” (Rev. 21:1, 5).

In a vision John sees the new heaven and earth replace the first heaven and earth. Does the language here and in 20:11—which speaks of “earth and sky”

fleeing away from the presence of the awesome Judge, so that "no place was found for them"—indicate the destruction of the present world? It does not if we understand John's apocalyptic vision.

Revelation 21:1 must be understood in light of 20:11. This does not indicate the annihilation of the creation, placing 20:11 alongside 6:15–16, where sinners try to flee from "the wrath of the Lamb." In 20:11 the whole created order is personified as contaminated by human sin and fleeing God's holy presence. This fleeing is symbolic of the comprehensiveness of the final judgment.

But what does 21:1 mean when it says, "The first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more"? The words are not literal but rather describe what John sees in his vision—he sees earth and the sea disappear. The first heaven and death had departed from his sight. "He is using symbolic language familiar to his audience to emphasize the fact that the final judgment is over."[5] Similar to 2 Peter 3, John symbolically communicates that a comprehensive purging of sin has taken place. But what about the disappearance of the sea, which, like the heavens and earth, has disappeared in John's vision? Dennis Johnson answers well:

> The "sea" that no longer exists symbolizes the realm from which chaos and rebellion have emerged to ravage the first earth. . . . It was from the sea that John saw the beast emerge to receive the dragon's devilish power and wage his devilish war against the saints (Rev. 13:1). The sea in heaven is calm and clear as glass (15:2), but the earthly sea that gave rise to the beast stormed with restless, threatening rebellion. Its absence from the new earth further dramatizes the new home's peace and purity.[6]

Therefore, when God speaks in Revelation 21:5, he does not say, "I am making all things *anew*," but "I am making all things *new*." I conclude from this survey of the words of Isaiah, Jesus, Paul, Peter, and John in Revelation that God will not completely destroy the current earth and create a brand-new earth. Instead, he will subject the present earth to a deep cleansing so as to renew it and fit it for his presence and that of his holy people.

Sabbath Rest

Creation: Divine Rest

Moses closes the creation narrative: "So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation"

(Gen. 2:3). The word “rested” is the Hebrew *shabat*, from which the concept of the Sabbath was developed. Far from the superstitions of surrounding nations, who also observed special days, Israel’s Sabbath day was a day of joy, a celebration of God, for it was his own celebration of completing his creative work (Ex. 31:14, 16; Deut. 5:12, 15).[7]

Why does God rest? Certainly he does not grow tired (Ps. 121:4; Isa. 40:28). Rather, God ceased from his creative activity; his work was finished. Thus the explanation of the commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work. . . . For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day” (Ex. 20:8–11).

Genesis 2:15 hints at what is later made explicit: God’s presence brings rest. To be in God’s presence is to enjoy his rest, to be under his care. Because Adam and Eve lived in Eden, God’s resting place, they participated in his own perfect rest. Adam’s work was “restful” because it was done in perfect holiness. But it became arduous when sin disturbed the rest of Eden.

Fall: Disturbed Rest

Sin disrupts the rest experienced in Eden because it disrupts communion with God. Thus Adam and Eve hide from God’s presence (Gen. 3:8). The first disruption comes in the Lord God’s curse of the Serpent: “I will put enmity between you [the Serpent] and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (v. 15). Sin introduces a grand conflict, the source of all other conflicts.

God’s righteous judgment of Adam multiplies the disruption of rest: “Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life. . . . By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread” (vv. 17–19). Farming illustrates the difficulty of work; farmers labor because the work itself is hard, and that because of the curse of sin.

Not having a place to call “home” is so difficult. And that’s what happened to Adam and Eve as a result of their sin. Eden would no longer be their home (vv. 23–24).

Redemption: Promised Rest

Joshua enjoins the people: “Remember the word that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded you, saying, ‘The LORD your God is providing you a place of

rest and will give you this land'" (Josh. 1:13). As they cross over into Canaan, God reminds them he fulfilled his word to give them rest, and Joshua sets up stones commemorating the people's reception of the land (4:19–24). In Canaan they found the rest that had eluded them for so long, including rest from their enemies (11:23; 14:15; 21:44).[8]

But the rest did not last long. The book of Judges presents a cycle of rebellion: Israel's downward spiral begins with *sin*, which leads to *subjugation*, which draws the people back to God through *supplication*, after which God provides *salvation* by raising up a judge to rescue them. In between these cycles, we read, "So the land had rest" (Judg. 3:11, 30; 5:31; 8:28). But these periods of rest were only temporary lulls from trouble. Why? Because of sin in the people's hearts, they did not yet find permanent rest.

The kingships of David and Solomon bring the first real experience of rest for several generations. God gives David "rest from all his surrounding enemies" (2 Sam. 7:1), and Israel enjoys prosperity. David desires to build a magnificent dwelling to honor his King. Through Nathan the prophet the Lord declines David's offer and also says: "I will give you rest from all your enemies" (v. 11). David's rest was God-given, but it was not the final rest. That would come only from his "offspring after" him, whose throne will "be established forever" (v. 16).

By the time Jesus is born, Israel has lost all traces of rest. Their kings failed them. Six hundred years earlier their nation had been carried off to captivity again because of unfaithfulness to the Lord. While they have returned and rebuilt the holy place in Jerusalem, things are simply not the same. The former glory of Israel is shrouded in Roman control. Where is the Lord's promised rest?

Jesus answers this very question. He reveals himself to be the heir of God's ancient promise to David in 2 Samuel 7: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28–30). Jesus' words are astounding! He is both Lord and King. He gives everlasting rest and will administer that rest forever.

The words "weary" and "heavy laden" underscore hardships in a broken world. Jesus' solution is not easy: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (v. 29). How can the tired find rest by taking on another burden? The paradox is resolved in the words, "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (v. 30). Because of

Adam's sin, no one has been wholly faithful to the Lord. It is, as Peter says later concerning the Jews, "a yoke on the neck . . . that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10). Jesus offers a different yoke, one that is easy and light. But how can that be? Because he has borne the burden no one else can bear, we can enter his rest.

Jesus is the answer—the answer to the endless warring of God's people against their enemies, the answer to the weariness of their labor, and the place for which wandering souls have been searching since the fall.

Consummation: Perfect Rest

Through his perfect life and atoning death, Jesus opened the door for us to participate in God's perfect rest in a way unavailable since the garden of Eden. The rest Jesus brings is a conquering of the effects of the fall—evil itself. As King and conqueror he is now restoring rest to his whole kingdom.

In a famous passage, the author of Hebrews outlines a brief theology of rest. Reflecting on the Old Testament, he explains that if Canaan had been the final rest promised by God, then God would never have spoken to David in Psalm 95 about another rest yet to be obtained. "So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his" (Heb. 4:9–10). The comparison is this: God did all his work and then rested from it on the seventh day. Similarly, Christians, having completed all that the Lord ordained for them to do (Eph. 2:10), will cease from all their activities in this life and enter into God's creational rest, that is, the completion of all their labor.

Now, this rest is obtained only by faith (Heb. 4:2–3). For Israel, the promise of God was the land of Canaan. For us it is the promised rest based on the finished work of our Great High Priest, "who passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God" (v. 14). By faith in that finished work we are united to God and enter into his rest. That is why "there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (v. 9).

The apostle John adds: "And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!'" (Rev. 14:13). Of course, our works in and of themselves never earn God's favor. For, in fact, our righteous deeds are possible only by the ongoing work of the Father, "who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). They are produced only in those who abide in the vine Jesus, without

whom we can do nothing (John 15:5). They are the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). Our good works, then, find their source and power in the holy Trinity.

In the beginning all of life was in a state of perfect harmony. Creation was at rest. And sin disturbed that rest. The remedy to our restlessness is therefore the same as the remedy for sin. And since Jesus Christ became a curse for us in his death, he redeemed us from the law's curse (3:13). We await the full realization of Christ's victory. John writes, "No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him" (Rev. 22:3; cf. 21:3–4). Then will we truly be at rest with God, creation, and ourselves.

The ways our rest is disturbed in the West are minor compared to the suffering of many believers in persecuted lands. Those in North Korea, China, and South Sudan know disturbance of rest in terrible ways that we do not. But it will not always be so. Jesus says, "I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star. . . . Surely I am coming soon" (22:16, 20). Why does Jesus include a reference to David? He does so because the promise was given to David and his heir, "Violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly. . . . And I will give you rest from all your enemies" (2 Sam. 7:10–11). A third of the book of Revelation describes the defeat of those enemies. It is fitting, then, that Jesus refers to himself as the Davidic heir who is established upon the throne of God's kingdom forever, the one to whom God grants perfect rest from all adversaries.

The finality of judgment makes this rest lasting. Just before the promise of rest, there is a vision of final judgment: the idolater "will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented. . . . And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night" (Rev. 14:10–11). The wicked seemingly have more ease in this life than the righteous. Ironically, in the next life the tables will be turned. Those who struggled for righteousness will enjoy rest, while those who refused to bow their hearts to Jesus Christ will suffer unrest.

"Displacement" is when people are forced to relocate due to political or ethnic unrest. According to International Christian Concern, about 105,000 Christians are martyred annually. Their families and friends are often displaced. This is why Scripture describes us as strangers and aliens in this world (Heb. 11:13).

Jesus speaks of Christians' having a permanent home with him and the Father: "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And . . . I will come again and will take you to myself" (John 14:1–3). Jesus' words encourage disciples who have left their

homes to follow him. And he goes away to prepare their permanent home. The hope of the gospel is the hope of an everlasting home with Jesus Christ in the Father's house, never to be disturbed or displaced again.

The Kingdom of God[9]

Creation: The Kingdom Inaugurated

Genesis 1 tells of God's establishment of his created kingdom and vice-regents who rule on his behalf. It portrays a king sitting on his throne, issuing forth his sovereign decrees of creation. He alone is King.

He is also Israel's covenant God. For God's people, reading Genesis in the Sinai wilderness, it is a "narrative recounting how God initially establishes his kingdom and thereby justifies his kingly claim to possess and dispose of whatever *is*, and correspondingly, why the land [of Canaan] rightfully belongs to Israel as [the Lord's] people"[10] (Gen. 15:18; Deut. 31:16–20).

When the text declares humankind as created in his image (Gen. 1:26–28), it uses the language of kingship: "dominion" and "subdue." As a result of being God's image bearers, humankind is empowered as royal rulers in his place.

Fall: The Kingdom at War

God's kingdom enjoys perfect peace until Adam and Eve rebel. The Serpent, the antagonist of the story, is in cahoots with an as-yet-unknown evil power, later revealed to be Satan (Gen. 3:1).[11]

In Genesis 3, Satan denies the King's decree of 2:17 and, using brazen deception, questions the motivation and character of the King. He seduces Eve with the lures of self-exaltation and instant gratification.

God's vice-regents fail miserably to execute their kingly duties. The human condition degrades until the flood, when "the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth" (6:5). Even after God cleanses the earth, preserving only Noah and his family, the sin of Adam and Eve continues to be manifested.

From the very first attempted coup, the Scriptures affirm the ongoing sovereignty of God. Even with the terrible effects of Adam's sin, the Lord's kingship remains (Ps. 103:19).

Redemption: The Kingdom Victorious

God promises victory when he curses the Serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall

bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). The Bible subsequently records many conflicts between God's kingdom and that of the evil prince of this world.

The King accomplishes great victories for his people. He uses Abraham and ordinary men to defeat the powerful alliance of five kings and their professional armies and rescue Abraham's nephew, Lot (Genesis 14). He uses Moses and ten devastating plagues to vanquish the great potentate Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt and liberate the Israelites (Exodus 7–14). He uses David, a shepherd boy, to defeat the Philistine champion, Goliath (1 Samuel 17). God covenants with David to establish a king forever from his offspring. Henceforth the promise of a king from David's lineage is interwoven with the promise of a redeemer, the Messiah.

The New Testament identifies Jesus Christ as this Messiah, the heir to David's throne, who will restore forever the kingdom to God's people. When Jesus, the Son of God, declares, ". . . before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58), he identifies himself with the Lord God—who is vastly greater than Abraham.

Jesus rescues his people by dying and rising for them and thus also overcomes the Devil (John 10:11; 12:31; 16:11). Paul exalts Christ's crucifixion: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3). And the apostle extols Jesus' resurrection: "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 57).

The Son of God became a man to die to vanquish the Evil One and deliver God's people from the terrible bondage of sin (Heb. 2:14–15). Through the exodus, Moses led the captives of Egypt to freedom at Sinai, but he could not free them from sin. What Moses' law was powerless to do, God did by sending his Son (Rom. 8:1–3), whose death forever broke the bonds of slavery to sin for all believers (6:10, 18, 22; Gal. 4:4–7).

Ezekiel describes the future work of Christ, the Shepherd of God's people (Ezek. 34:23–28). Jesus begins his public ministry by declaring, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). Ezekiel's day has arrived; the Son of David, the King, will conquer all the enemies of God's people. Day by day his ministry evidences his divine kingship in his authoritative teaching, supernatural healings, and authority over demons. The Shepherd-King has come, died, and risen, and will protect his people (Heb. 13:20–21). And when he comes again to gather his flock forever, the promise to David will be fully realized: "The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe

away every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 7:17).

Consummation: The Kingdom at Peace

The final battle in Revelation 16–20 acts as prelude to the vision of renewed creation in chapters 21–22. The new kingdom will be established only when God grants complete victory.

The climax of the book is the final outcome of the war between good and evil.[12] The war is a struggle between two opposing powers, the Trinity and the counterfeit trinity.[13] The throne of the Father and the Lamb battles against the throne of Satan (2:13; 13:2; 16:10). John's visions center on God the Father, who sits on the throne (3:21; 4:2–5:1), and Jesus Christ his Son, Lord and heir of David (22:16), who sits at the Father's right hand (3:21; 22:1, 3). They also focus on the struggle between the Trinity and "the great dragon . . . that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan" (12:9).

Revelation is replete with battles.[14] Regardless of whether one associates the characters in Revelation with actual political nations (e.g., Rome), this is clear: the active power behind these agents is the Devil. The conflict between good and evil intensifies as the book progresses, as the increasing scope of the plagues shows. The visions escalate in scope of destruction, beginning with a quarter of the earth in chapter 6 (the seven seals), a third in chapters 8–9 (the seven trumpets), and everything in chapters 15–16 (the seven bowls).

Revelation 16–20 variously depicts the great victory of the Lamb, the King from David's line, who slays God's enemies and casts them into everlasting torment (19:20; 20:10). The kingdom of God will then exist as it was intended since creation (11:15–18). The foes, the "destroyers of the earth" (v. 18), are introduced at different points throughout the book: the Dragon (12:1–17), Satan, who is also the scarlet beast (17:1–14); the Beast of the sea together with the false prophet (13:1–10); and Babylon (14:9–18). Christ's victory over these enemies occurs in reverse order to that in which they are introduced.

The two foes depicted as proceeding from Satan remind Christians of the tactics of the Evil One in the garden, who deceived Eve and seduced her by false statements. Christ breaks this pattern, first defeating the world's seduction and then doing away with deception altogether.

The apostle John sees the fall of Babylon in Revelation 17–18. Babylon is portrayed as a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, "arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls" (17:4). She represents the seduction of all types of immorality—sex, power, wealth, pleasure—that oppose

God's holy people from Genesis 3 until the end. And on that day, Babylon will be judged—thrown down, never again to bewitch people with her seductions (18:21–23).

Seduction is a powerful weapon of Satan because it perverts the goodness of God's creation. Christ's victory over seduction means there will no longer be things to draw our hearts away from the purity of devotion to Christ (2 Cor. 11:3).

The second manifestation of Satan's attacks occurs in Revelation 13, where the Beast of the sea and the beast of the earth—later identified as the "false prophet" (Rev. 16:13; 19:20)—create a system to lure people to worship Satan. The two beasts cooperate in performing miracles, even imitating Christ's resurrection, to deceive "those who dwell on earth," that is, unbelievers.[15]

The two beasts together, then, depict the worldly systems orchestrated by Satan to draw people away from true knowledge of God. The original readers recognized some of these patterns in their day, but John's vision transcends any particular culture or nation.[16] The Scriptures exhort believers to be of sober mind (Rom. 12:3; 1 Pet. 1:13) because the world's systems oppose Christ's kingdom.

Christ's victory over deception creates tremendous hope. In the eternal kingdom Christians will enjoy amazing freedom because sin will be gone forever.

Satan, the "accuser," will also be defeated (Rev. 12:10–11). He began this war with his accusations in Genesis 3. He empowers his servants and is the deceiver of the whole world (Rev. 13:4; 12:9). After his minions are cast into the eternal lake of fire, he too is cast there, to be tormented with them forever (19:20; 20:10).

The external foes have been conquered. What remains is to put away sin from within God's people entirely (Eph. 4:24). John's visions depict this in their donning white garments, the righteous deeds of the saints (Rev. 3:5; 6:11; 7:13–14; 19:6–8). The phrase "it was granted" to Christ's bride (19:8) gives us understanding. The white garments were a gift to the saints, not earned by them. Christ conquered the enemy within us by his death and resurrection. The consummation of his victory will result in his church being "holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27).

Only the last enemy remains: death (1 Cor. 15:26). John sees death personified in Revelation 20:13–15 and destroyed in 21:4—"death shall be no more." Death is unnatural and contrary to God's design (Gen. 2:17). Even though believers are with the Lord when they die (Phil. 1:21–23), the Christian hope lies in the

resurrection and new creation (1 Thess. 4:13–17).

John closes his description of the New Jerusalem with these words: “Nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false” (Rev. 21:27). Without the presence of evil, the creation will exist for the first time (since the fall) without an influence pushing it away from God. The new creation is a place where only righteousness will flourish (2 Pet. 3:13). Based on Christ’s saving work, God declares us righteous now (Rom. 4:5; 5:1) and will perfect us in righteousness in the life to come (1 John 3:2–3). Resurrected and transformed believers will be as incapable of sinning as they are of undoing Christ’s death and resurrection. That is victory indeed!

The Presence of God[17]

Creation: Serving in God’s Presence

Ancient Israelites reading Genesis 1–3 would have underlined the Lord’s presence in the garden of Eden. They would have understood the garden as the first dwelling place and temple of the Lord God, in which Adam and Eve served and worshiped.[18]

The garden is planted by God near Eden (Gen. 2:8). A feature of palace and temple complexes in Moses’ day was a royal garden for the very powerful and important people (cf. Est. 1:5). The Lord himself is such a person.

One further indication that the garden of Eden is the Lord’s royal palace is the presence of his royal guard. Kings or gods protected their dwellings. So it is with Eden. The Lord stations his guardian cherubs at the edge of Eden to protect its sanctity against the return of then impure Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:24).

Not only is the garden of Eden the first royal dwelling place of the Lord God, but it is also his temple. Geographically, the garden’s entrance is on the east (3:24), as was the entrance to the tabernacle (Ex. 27:13–16). This suggests Moses is drawing a parallel between entering Eden and entering the tabernacle. Genesis 3 suggests God himself regularly walked in the garden (v. 8). But because of our first parents’ sin, they are afraid of facing their Maker and hide.

Fall: Banished from God’s Presence

When Eve and Adam eat the forbidden fruit, they disobey God’s command (Gen. 2:16–17). And since the garden of Eden is God’s first royal dwelling place, they rob God’s temple, his palace. Of course, it is impossible for them to hide from God’s presence. The hiding serves as an opportunity for dialogue between Adam and God. The presence of the Lord exposes disobedience to him, resulting in

fear, shame, and guilt.[19] After setting forth punishments for their disobedience, God banishes Adam and Eve from the garden (3:24) and his presence.

Redemption: Renewed by God's Presence

Mercifully, God banishes the first humans and their progeny from the garden so that they may not "take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever" (3:22). Sin has introduced death (2:17). To allow Adam and Eve to live forever in their condemnation would be cruel, for it would imprison them in a life of misery. To remedy the problem that sin has created, God provides a way to once again dwell among his people without contaminating his own holy presence.

After the exodus God meets with his people on Mount Sinai, and his holy presence descends in fire, smoke, and lightning. The people are afraid when God speaks and instead ask Moses to speak to them for God (Ex. 20:18–19).

God commands Moses to take up a contribution from the people, that they may "make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (25:8). This is to be a portable dwelling place designed by the Lord (25:40; 27:8). God provides for his sinful people to be present with him without defiling his holiness by instituting the sacrificial system. Obedience would result in the Lord's continued presence, protection from their enemies, and possession of the Promised Land. But disobedience would result in untold hardships and ultimately banishment into the hands of their enemies (Leviticus 26).

Later Israel obtains possession of the Promised Land, and God establishes a permanent dwelling place in Jerusalem (1 Kings 5–8). Solomon places the ark of the covenant within the temple, and the glory cloud of the Lord's presence fills the temple (8:10–11), just as it did the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34–38). Solomon prays that the people will always be faithful to the covenant (1 Kings 8:22–61). Israel, however, goes after other gods (v. 58). And the Lord, faithful to his covenant, gives Israel into the hands of their enemy—Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon—who burns down the temple (2 Kings 25:9), symbolizing the departure of the Lord's presence from among his rebellious people (Ezek. 10:1–22).

The apostle John records the answer to Solomon's prayer: the return of the presence of God among his people in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:1, 14). What God's people were powerless to perform, God himself did through his Son, Jesus Christ, who humbled himself, died, and arose to renew God's presence among his people (Rom. 8:3; Heb. 9:23–27).

About to leave his disciples, Jesus says he will not leave them alone: "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever,

even the Spirit of truth. . . . You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you" (John 14:16–17). All those indwelt by the Holy Spirit are the true temple, the true house of the living God (Eph. 2:18–22; 1 Pet. 2:5). Despite divisions among Christians, there is only one church and one true temple of the living God (1 Cor. 3:16). All are one, united by the indwelling presence of God's Spirit.

Consummation: Blessed with God's Presence

All along God has *stated* he is with his people; in Revelation God *pictures* his presence with them.

God promises blessing to the one who reads and those who keep "the words of" John's "prophecy" (Rev. 1:3). For John's original audience in Asia Minor to understand his message, they must have understood his imagery based on their knowledge at the time. And we must read Revelation as if we were their contemporaries.[20]

John writes, "Then I saw," or, "And I saw," because he is not interpreting the visions himself. John does not present the visions in the form of propositions, because they are metaphorical.

Both Testaments refer to God's people as his bride (Isa. 61:10; Jer. 2:2; John 3:29). This predisposes readers to understand John's references to "his Bride" as the collective worshipers of God (see Rev. 19:7–8).

The text says John "saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (21:2). In the Old Testament, Jerusalem was often used as a name for the people of God (e.g., Isa. 40:9; 52:1; 62:6). So it is here.

Revelation 21:1–27 forms a cohesive narrative unit. Consider the following verses:

> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (v. 2)
>
> Then came one of the seven angels . . . saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he . . . showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God." (vv. 9–11)

There are striking parallels between the two passages. The scene in 21:9–27 is related to that of verses 1–2. What place, then, do verses 3–8 play? There John records what he *heard* (vv. 3, 5). John signals in verse 1 that he sees the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth. As he sees this part of the vision, he twice hears a voice from the throne. John tells us about the voice before he

returns to the vision of the New Jerusalem and provides more details.

The imagery of the bride communicates that God is united to his people and dwells among them (v. 3). God is both transcendent creator and loving husband!

In addition to functioning as narrative links, 21:1–2 and 9–10 function as headings for the verses that follow. Verses 3–8 are easy to understand because they are written in propositional statements. He redeems all things in perfect righteousness.

Revelation 21:11–27 is different. The text shifts to description of John's vision. Helpfully, John links the two sections. What John hears from the voice on the throne in 21:3–8 he sees pictured in verses 11–27. Thus the whole of Revelation 21 describes the same heavenly reality, "the dwelling place of God . . . with man" (v. 3).

Should we understand the New Jerusalem as a future, physical city? John does not intend to suggest that a near 1,380-mile[21] cube will descend one day and land upon modern Jerusalem. The key is: how does this description of the New Jerusalem differ from the Jerusalem familiar to the original readers?

The city's description is partially derived from Isaiah 52:1. The imagery of the bride and the description of a place where "nothing unclean will ever enter" (Rev. 21:27) portray this new, sin-free state. Moreover, the city's "gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there" (v. 25). To avoid danger the gates of ancient cities were closed at sundown. In the new city there is no more danger, for sin and death have passed away (vv. 1, 4–5).

This temple dramatically differs from previous ones—Herod's temple in the first century and Solomon's in the Old Testament. While smaller objects within the tabernacle and temple were made of pure gold, larger elements were only overlaid with gold (Ex. 25:11–13, 24–28; 26:29, 37). In Revelation 21, however, the city and its streets, gates, and wall are gold or precious jewels through and through (vv. 11, 18–21). The city in which God dwells is the picture of glorious perfection.

What, then, does the scene of New Jerusalem depict? How would the original audience have understood it?

First, John intentionally focuses the reader's attention on the *shape* of the city more than its measurement: "The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia. Its length and width and height are equal" (v. 16). To first-century readers the measurement of 12,000 stadia would be astonishingly enormous. John describes the city as a cube. There is only one cubical structure recorded in the Old Testament—the Most Holy

Place (1 Kings 6:20). Thus the New Jerusalem functions as a Most Holy Place, where the presence of God dwells, but on a vastly grander scale.

Second, the climax of the story reads, “And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev. 21:22). The Old Testament temple was modeled largely upon the tabernacle, which was built according to “the pattern” shown to Moses (Ex. 25:9, 40). The tabernacle and temple were representations of the true tabernacle, the true Most Holy Place (Heb. 8:1–2). Revelation 21 portrays this true dwelling place of God. There is no more structure to separate the holy presence of God from the sinfulness of his people because there is no sin in the holy city. The fullness of God’s holy presence extends unabated throughout the new creation.

The image of the church as the bride of the Lamb pictures the intimate union between God and his people. The picture of the city-temple of God, the New Jerusalem, portrays the people of God as experiencing the fullness of the Lord’s presence in a way once only possible in the Most Holy Place. Each picture communicates the intimate, personal presence of God with his people. Taken together, they portray a scene that astonished believers’ minds in the first century —and does the same to ours today.

The Glory of God[22]

Creation: Crowned with Glory

When God created men and women, he gave them his own glory. “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’ ” (Gen. 1:26). The image of God in the Old Testament—apart from two figurative uses—always has physical form in view.[23] Our bodies bear the marks of their creator.

Humankind’s dominion is also tied to this image. “When the author of Genesis 1 claimed that man was made as the image of God, he meant that man was to be God’s representative on earth, ruling, or having dominion, on God’s behalf, like a king.”[24] In contrast to the dominant mind-set of the time, it is not only the king who bears God’s image but all, including men and women. This dominion, unique to humanity, is a royal stewardship over creation derived from the sovereign dominion of God over all things (Dan. 4:35). God has, as David says, “put all things under [our] feet,” that we might exercise “dominion over the works of [God’s] hands” (Ps. 8:6). God has crowned human beings “with glory and honor” (v. 5). Bearing God’s image is man’s and woman’s coronation in glory, their ruling as stewards of all creation.

The most basic of all human glories is the glory of being created (Gen. 1:27). God created because it was his good pleasure. And every person is valuable to God simply because he or she exists. The story of creation impresses upon us a glorious thought: since I am a unique human among all humans, I must be personally, individually special in the Creator's eyes.

Genesis 1:27 has glorious implications for individuals *and* for the whole people of God, for the responsibility of dominion falls on the shoulders of men and women as fellow image bearers (vv. 26–28). We collectively glorify God in a way otherwise impossible if only one gender existed.

It is not that people must be married to reflect God's glory. Jesus, *the* image of God, was unmarried. Rather, humankind was created in and for community, even as God himself exists in community: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Fall: Exchange of Glory

Jeremiah describes the folly of self-glorification:

> Has a nation changed its gods,
> even though they are no gods?
> But my people have changed their glory
> for that which does not profit.
> Be appalled, O heavens, at this;
> be shocked, be utterly desolate,
> declares the LORD,
> for my people have committed two evils:
> they have forsaken me,
> the fountain of living waters,
> and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
> broken cisterns that can hold no water. (Jer. 2:11–13)

We forsake the Creator and run to the creation, which by its very nature is no god at all (Hab. 2:16–20). As Paul says, each of us has "exchanged the truth about God for a lie" (Rom. 1:25).

Not only do all individuals fall short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23), but so do the people of God as a whole. The first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3), enjoins each of us personally and God's people communally. And yet in just a few days the entire camp of Israel abandoned that commandment and exchanged the glory of God for a golden image in the shape of a calf (32:1–6). The results of Israel's long love affair with idols are its two captivities. But God is merciful. Indeed, despite humanity's unfaithfulness, God remembers his covenant and brings glory from dust.

Redemption: Transformed in Glory

Since God's glory is embedded in our very creation as men and women in the image of God, there is still hope for human glory (Col. 1:27). Though thoroughly corrupted, the image of God is not annihilated by Adam's sin (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9). The problem of the fall is a problem not with God's glory but with our inability to live according to our created purpose. We need to "put on the new self" and to be "renewed in knowledge after the image of [our] creator" (Col. 3:10). We need someone to cleanse the pollution of our hearts and restore the shine to our tarnished lives. We need a glory redeemer.

Who alone can restore our lost glory? Our restorer of glory must be both God and man. Only one meets those qualifications (1:15, 18; Heb. 1:2–3). The eternal Son of God became incarnate as the true image of God and radiance of his glory to rescue us.

The author of Hebrews portrays this glory redeemer, Jesus Christ, the Son of God (2:5–10). To humanity was given original glory and dominion upon earth (vv. 6–8). But because of our sin, the earth is not yet in subjection to us (v. 8). To restore our glory Jesus had to become human so that he might defeat the power of sin (v. 9). At his ascension he was crowned with everlasting glory and honor. Christ's death and resurrection have irreversibly set in motion the final events of this age that will bring every believer into the redemptive fullness of his or her glory (v. 10).

This personal restoration of glory has a common purpose for all Christians: to unite us under one Father in one Spirit by one Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:4–5). As we gaze upon Christ, we gaze upon the image of God the Father himself (John 14:9; Col. 1:15), and as we do so, we are transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory (2 Cor. 3:18). The glory given to our first parents at creation is being increased in us as we become more like Christ. Because he has been glorified, we also will be (1 Cor. 15:51–53; 1 John 3:2).

Consummation: Brilliance in Glory

Our future is not a simple restoration of creational glory; it involves a greater glory than even that of Eden.

The destruction of our bodies is all around us: frailty, genetic defects, cancer, and so on. Yet God's Word encourages us: "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:16–18). A glorious life and inheritance are ours now,

guaranteed by the Spirit who indwells us (Eph. 1:13–14). And one day, when Christ comes to abolish sin and death forever, every disease will be healed and every evil abated forever (Rev. 21:4).

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the chief source of hope for Christians (1 Cor. 15:3–8, 12–22). Christ's atoning death, life-giving resurrection, and ascension (Rom. 5:10) announce him as both King and Savior of all humankind (Acts 2:36). When he returns we will participate in his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20–23). But not only is Christ the *means* by which we are resurrected; he is also the *model* for our future resurrected bodies (Rom. 6:5; Phil. 3:21; Col. 3:4) because the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead also dwells in us (Rom. 8:9–11).[25]

What does it mean that we shall "be like him" in the resurrection? Jesus mentions brightness: "The righteous will shine like the sun" (Matt. 13:43, quoting Dan. 12:2). The book of Revelation does too: "And the city [the New Jerusalem] has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev. 21:23, echoing Isa. 60:19).

Whereas our bodies are now characterized by this sin-cursed world, our resurrection bodies will be characterized by the glorious world to come (1 Cor. 15:36–39). Paul says our bodies now are the seed that in the resurrection will grow into a flourishing plant. Though our bodies now are weak because of sin (Matt. 26:41), in the resurrection they will be powerful (1 Cor. 15:43). In that day our bodies will be empowered for perfect service to Christ.

Note that we will be resurrected in *our own bodies*. Scripture teaches that our individuality continues in the resurrection. This is what Paul promises: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you" (Rom. 8:11). And it is an error to conclude from Jesus' words, "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matt. 22:30), that in the resurrection humans will be neither male nor female but asexual: though some of our needs will be different then, we will be male and female as at present and will enjoy gendered relationships forever.

God is faithful and will sanctify us completely when Jesus returns (1 Thess. 5:22–23), equipping us for life on "a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13). The apostle John agrees: "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). When Jesus

comes again, God will enable us to see the glorified Christ, and we will be changed by that seeing. We will be transformed and as a result will share his moral likeness. Our hearts, minds, and bodies will be made perfect.

Some Christians think that unless they attain a certain level of faithfulness, they will experience regret and loss at the coming of Christ. It is true that we all will stand before Christ and be examined (Rev. 1:14). But when Christ our advocate confesses us before his Father, we will come away approved, overflowing with divine love and joy (Matt. 10:32; Jude 24).

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). Christ's propitiation on the cross has brought us near to God by his own blood (3:25). And we will never be disappointed, because "hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (5:5). Our acceptance before God is based on God's freely given salvation, and therefore it can never be lost: "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:38–39).

Thus Scripture assures all believers they will one day enter eternally into the Father's joy and love. This produces overflowing joy because of the glory that divine love has conferred upon us. The master in the parable of the talents, God himself, says to both good servants: "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21, 23). The Lord of the universe cares much about what his servants have done. Here is complete fulfillment—to be praised by God at the end of the age.

When Jesus returns to make all things right, he will share his glorious inheritance—imperishable, undefiled, and unfading—with us (1 Pet. 1:3–4). The great prospect of sharing God's glory for all eternity affects our lives now. It enables us to love him in worship, work, and play. It enables us to love one another and invite others to love him. Praise the Lord!

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[1] Alister E. McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2003), 3.

[2] For a fuller treatment of these five pictures, see Dan C. Barber and Robert A. Peterson, *Life Everlasting: The Unfolding Story of Heaven*, Explorations in Biblical Theology (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), 17–50. I received much help from this book.

[3] This is a modification of the interpretation that the woman's desire is to "domineer" over the man. See Susan T. Foh, "What Is the Woman's Desire?" *WTJ* 37/3 (1975): 376–83.

[4] Gale Z. Heide, "What Is New about the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3," *JETS* 40 (March 1997): 54.

[5] Ibid., 43.

[6] Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 303–4.

[7] See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 35.

[8] On the moral questions surrounding the conquest of Canaan, see C. S. Cowles et al., *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, Counterpoints, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

[9] See also *The Kingdom of God*, Theology in Community, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

[10] Bruce R. Reichenbach, "Genesis 1 as a Theological-Political Narrative of Kingdom Establishment," *BBR* 13/1 (2003): 56, emphasis original.

[11] G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 655–56.

[12] Though Satan is stronger than we, he is subject to the will of the Lord (Job 1:6–12; Dan. 4:35).

[13] The counterfeit trinity includes the Dragon (like the Father, Rev. 12:3), the Beast of the sea with a "mortal wound [that] was healed" (like the Son, 13:1–3), and the false prophet (or beast of the earth, like the Spirit, 13:11–17).

[14] Scholars disagree on the millennium of Revelation 20, and I will avoid debates and focus on the eternal kingdom in the new creation. For millennial views, see Darrell L. Bock et al., *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999).

[15] Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 290; Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, TNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 166.

[16] Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 685–86.

[17] See also Lanier Burns, *The Nearness of God*, Explorations in Biblical Theology, ed. Robert A. Peterson (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009).

[18] G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 66. Beale's treatment provides a framework for the rest of this subsection.

[19] C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005), 174.

[20] So Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 1077.

[21] This assumes a stadion measures about 607 ft./185 m.

[22] See also *The Glory of God*, Theology in Community, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

[23] Bruce K Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 215.

[24] Ian Hart, "Genesis 1:1–2:3 as a Prologue to the Book of Genesis," *TynBul* 46/2 (1995): 319–20.

[25] N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 149.

8

THE HISTORY OF HEAVEN

GERALD BRAY



How can we say that heaven has a history? History implies time, and heaven is a state in which time does not exist.

What in Heaven's Name Are We Talking About?

Can heaven be described as a place? That is hard to say, because to our understanding there is no space where there is no time; but there is no doubt that most Christians have thought of heaven in spatial terms. The Bible presents it in that way, and it is hard to think of it otherwise. The Bible tells us that the Son of God came down from heaven and went back there once his mission on earth was accomplished and that those who believe in him will go to join him in heaven when they die (John 3:13–17). Those statements seem to imply that heaven has a time and space dimension and that it is constantly growing in population as new souls are added to it. If I am not there now, but expect to be before the twenty-first century is out, where shall I be going and how will my entrance be recorded if heaven has no past or future?

How time and eternity relate to each other is a mystery that has preoccupied the greatest minds of the church since the beginning. The Bible tells us that there was war in heaven and that Satan and his followers were cast out of it (Rev. 12:7–9). When and how did that happen? Satan was already in rebellion when God created the world, so it must have been before that, but when? We cannot say that evil has always been inherent in the spiritual realm, because that would imply that God created it, and we are told that everything he made is good (Gen. 1:31). We are also faced with the problem that although Satan was cast out of

heaven, he seems to have had ready access to it. Certainly he was there when he persuaded God to let him tempt Job! (Job 1:6). What does that mean? Is he still wandering about in the presence of God, or has he been ejected from heaven since Job's time?

Another important question concerns the incarnation of the Son. The issue here is whether the Son left heaven when he came to earth, or whether in some mysterious way he continued to reign there alongside his Father. The language of Scripture certainly suggests that he left, and there are some who have interpreted passages such as Philippians 2:7 in that sense.[1] According to that way of thinking, the Son later ascended into heaven and took back the glory that had been his from the beginning, a view which can also claim biblical support (see John 17:4–5). But John Calvin, among others, objected to this interpretation and insisted on what is called the *extra calvinisticum*, which holds that the incarnate Christ was also (*extra*) reigning in heaven with the Father and the Holy Spirit the whole time that he was on earth.[2] The logic of this is that God was not diminished by the incarnation of the Son, and so the whole Trinity must have remained in place during that time.

Oddly enough, there has been much less interest among theologians in the question of whether heaven grows by the constant admission of new believers. All Christians accept that this somehow happens, though there has been considerable disagreement about how and when it occurs. On the one side are those who insist that all who trust in Christ go to be with him as soon as they die, a view that is supported by the story of the thief on the cross and by the words of the apostle Paul (Luke 23:43; Phil. 1:21–23). Others have preferred to believe in a kind of soul sleep, according to which those who die in Christ will be kept in some sort of intermediate state until he returns in glory. This too finds some support in Scripture, though the precise meaning of the texts quoted in its defense is open to dispute (1 Thess. 4:15–17; Heb. 11:39–40). According to the Catholic tradition, only a few people go straight to heaven when they die because most of us are not good enough to get there immediately. Instead, we have to go through an extended period of cleansing in purgatory, a place invented by medieval theologians as a halfway house between earth and heaven.[3] At what point a soul leaves purgatory is unknown, though the Catholic Church insists that it is a temporary state and that the souls that have been purified go to heaven, not to hell. Some take longer than others to get there—that is all.

In the twentieth century, some theologians approached this issue by

suggesting that God himself may be growing and expanding, either by discovering new depths of love within his inner-Trinitarian relationships or by acts of ongoing creation or both. They abandoned what they claimed is the traditional notion that God is static, unchanging, and they embraced different forms of what is sometimes called "process theology," which seeks to discover and explain God's self-growth. If heaven is the place or dimension in which God is present, it must be growing and changing along with God, since otherwise they would get out of line with each other. Whatever we think about heaven, we can hardly imagine that God would outgrow it!

At a humbler level, it is probably true to say that most ordinary believers have thought of eternity as endless, ongoing time and have left it at that. They see their life after death in temporal continuity with their life here and now. It will differ from what we currently experience in any number of ways, but as far as the flow of time is concerned, there will be continuity between what we are living through now and what our life then will be—here today and there tomorrow, as it were. Most people assume that anyone who has led a decent life will end up in heaven, and especially that babies who die before reaching the age of responsibility go there automatically. Few people give much thought to what life in heaven is like, but those who do usually fall back on images of mawkish sentimentality—angels playing harps, for example—which only shows that they have no idea what they are talking about. The one thing that can be said in favor of this popular view is that it is a much more unified perception of the afterlife than was common in pre-Christian times, when notions of heaven were as varied and bizarre as the imaginations of those who came up with them.

We can sum up this discussion of the problem of relating eternity to time by saying that to write a history of heaven from the standpoint of those who live there is impossible for us, partly because we are outsiders and partly because we have no way of reconciling what to us seem like incompatible dimensions of reality. All we can do is trace what human beings have thought about heaven over the centuries, and this is essentially what a "history of heaven" has to be.

Heaven as Understood before the Coming of Christ

There has never been a time in human history when people have been unaware of the sky above them. Even the most primitive peoples know that they depend on the sun and rain for survival and that it is in their interests to have the right amount of both. They also know that the two things are incompatible, in the sense that it does not rain when the sun is shining and vice versa. It is not

surprising, therefore, that people should regard the sky with reverence and even worship its features in the hope of controlling or influencing it in some way. That much is common to virtually every known culture, but the details of how the sky is thought to work vary enormously from place to place. Given that opinions about this depend almost entirely on popular imagination, it is hardly surprising.

In more developed cultures, the sky is populated with spiritual beings, most of whom are pictured as superhuman, though occasionally they are portrayed as animals, such as cows or elephants, that hold the universe in place.[4] At a more sophisticated level, the movements of the stars are studied only until they become predictable, and then a class of astrologers emerges. These people not only study what we would call astronomy but also try to interpret the movements of the stars as indicators that relate directly to human life. The planets may come to be identified with gods and goddesses, and their movements are understood to represent divine activities that affect us in ways that only a trained astrologer can interpret. This kind of activity still goes on today all over the world and is remarkably popular, even though it has no scientific basis and is officially rejected by the intellectual establishment. But horoscopes defy all logic, and the fact that they are regularly printed in respectable newspapers reminds us that primitive ideas of how the sky determines our future are still alive and well, even in highly educated societies.

In most primitive cultures, heaven is a place inhabited by gods or other supernatural beings, but there is seldom any suggestion that humans are able to go there. It is true that many in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia believed that extraordinary people such as pharaohs and kings would regularly ascend into heaven, but that was because they were regarded as gods on earth who were merely returning home. After about 300 BC, however, we find ordinary people expressing a desire to be united with a god or godlike figure so that they too might go to heaven when they die. This was one of the factors that led to the development of so-called mystery cults, in which worshipers would seek to be so united to Osiris or to one of the other gods that a passage to heaven would be virtually guaranteed. The deification of human figures also became more popular, as can be seen in the cult of the Roman emperors, who were thought to become gods after their deaths. But even after taking these phenomena into account, the judgment of J. E. Wright remains valid:

> The idea of heaven as a place for royal, righteous, or good people was unknown to most ancient Near Eastern peoples. Humans had no part in

> what took place in the heavenly realm. . . . For the peoples of Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine, heaven was the realm of the gods alone, while the netherworld was the ultimate destiny of all humans.[5]

The Christian belief that heaven is the dwelling place of God and also the final resting place of those who believe in him was unknown in ancient times. In the Greek world, the gods dwelt on Mount Olympus, but the deserving dead went to the Elysian Fields, which were not at all the same thing. The life of the gods was supposedly eternal, or at least it was not bound to the limitations of human time, and they had their own life, which was often very active. The worthy dead, on the other hand, were at rest in a kind of blissful paradise, which was theirs as a reward for their sufferings and triumphs on earth. Exceptional men such as Achilles could become gods, but this was rare; most of the time the human and divine worlds were quite separate from each other. It should perhaps be said that "worth" in this context had little to do with good deeds or moral perfection as we understand them. To get into the Elysian Fields one had to be a great warrior, a man whose superhuman feats on earth made it appropriate for him to enjoy such a reward. Achilles was the legendary warrior *par excellence*, and it was his exceptional military prowess rather than anything else that allowed him to join the gods when he died. In the nature of the case, rewards of this kind were reserved for males. There may have been women to wait on them in the Elysian Fields, and there were certainly goddesses on Olympus, but there is no sign that the Greeks believed that females had the same opportunity as males to join the gods when they died. In ancient Greece women were inferior to men in every respect, and nowhere more so than in the options available to them after their deaths.

The lesser dead were consigned to Hades, a place of forgetfulness symbolized by the river Lethe ("forgetting") that had to be crossed to get into it. Quite what happened there was unknown, other than that the souls who went to Hades lived in a shadowy underworld ruled over by the god Pluto. Hades seems to have been a cold, dark, and dreary place, but at least the souls who went there were kept in being, and there is no indication that they suffered or were punished because of their misdeeds on earth. Just as morality had little to do with heaven, so it had little to do with Hades either. Hades was not much to look forward to but was better than nothing, and that seems to have been the general Greek attitude toward it.

In many ways, ancient Greek perceptions of heaven were similar to those of

Egypt and Mesopotamia, but over time certain distinctive features emerged. One of these was a concentration on the planets as opposed to the remoter stars. The Greeks adopted Babylonian astronomy but were more interested in creating a hierarchy of heavenly bodies that they believed rotated around the earth. There were seven of these—the sun and moon, of course, plus the planets Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, all named after the Olympian gods.[6] When the Greeks came into contact with the Jewish idea of the seven-day week, they assimilated these heavenly bodies into it, naming the days after each of them.[7] It seems to have been this that gave rise to the idea that there were seven heavens, of which the seventh was also the greatest. To their minds, that explained why the Jews worshiped their God on the seventh day, because he was the greatest of all the deities, and pagans sometimes equated him with Saturn because the day was named after him. The same idea may also be reflected in what the apostle Paul says about being caught up into the "third heaven," though the precise meaning of that is unclear (2 Cor. 12:2).[8]

Needless to say, the Jews themselves never accepted this idea, nor did the early Christians, who did their best to eliminate the pagan names for the days of the week. They wanted to replace them with simple numbers (second, third, fourth, etc.), keeping "Sabbath" for the seventh day and "Lord's day" for the following one. This system caught on in Greece, whence it spread to the Slavic countries, and it also survived in Portugal, but in most other places it failed to dislodge the pagan nomenclature.[9] If the names of the days of the week represent a syncretism of pagan and biblical ideas about heaven, it certainly cannot be said that the early Christians were prepared to adopt and legitimize this without protest or comment.

The other, more important way in which the Greeks altered the Near Eastern concept of heaven is due to the philosophers. Plato believed that ultimate reality was nonmaterial, being found in forms and ideas present in the supreme mind. Human beings share in that mind to a limited extent because they are rational souls that have been trapped in a material body. Under philosophical influence, some people came to believe that an individual soul could purify itself of the influence of matter and return to its original state. This was regarded as "good" as opposed to the evil that dominates our lives, thanks to the corruption that has been engendered by the mingling of the soul with matter. As a result of this, it came to be accepted that a "good" person could return to the heavenly realm whence his soul had originally come, but those who were trapped by the lusts of the material world would never manage to do that. Ideas like these made a

powerful impact on the early Christians, many of whom thought in similar terms, and overcoming them was one of the biggest challenges facing the church as it sought to evangelize the Greco-Roman world.

When we turn to ancient Israel, we notice that many of the ideas about heaven that circulated in the contemporary Middle East were present in Israelite culture as well. This was probably inevitable since the Israelites had sprung from Middle Eastern stock and thought along broadly similar lines. We know that the worship of Yahweh did not displace that of the Canaanite gods, whose presence among the Israelites was seen as a constant threat by those who followed the teachings of Yahweh. Only after the exile to Babylon in 586 BC was this problem overcome, and syncretism between the worship of Yahweh and that of other gods more or less ceased.

The fact that Yahwism took a long time to become established as the only religion of Israel should not blind us to the fact that it was present from a very early time. Its distinctive feature was that those who worshiped Yahweh believed that he was the only true God. This may not have been stated in so many words, but it was implied by the nature of the worship he demanded. His people were to have no other gods before or alongside him, nor were they to make any images for the purpose of depicting him, because he was the creator of all things (Ex. 20:3–5). As such, he was not only far superior to any material object but also high above the heavens, including the sun, the moon, and the stars that other nations worshiped as deities. That they were subject to Yahweh is made very clear by the psalmist who wrote, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). To the modern mind this seems fairly obvious, but in the context in which it was written it was a denial of the claims made by just about every other nation and its religion, and in the history of heaven that is how we must understand it.

Yahwistic monotheism had a radical and far-reaching effect on popular notions of the beyond. Once it was accepted, it was no longer possible to imagine a heaven filled with divine beings, living their own lives without reference to what was happening on earth. If there is only one God, then everything that exists must be under his control, and heaven and earth must be considered as a single reality, not as two separate and unconnected ones. This is what we find right at the beginning of the Old Testament, where God is said to have created the heavens and the earth together (Gen. 1:1). It also means that heaven and everything in it is part of the creation, not an extension of the Creator. The angels who dwell there are creatures subject to God’s will and are

not coequal deities. There is some evidence to suggest that Satan and his cohorts rebelled because they wanted to be like God, but they failed in this attempt and so were cast out of heaven (Jude 6). Whatever the case, heaven was not a place whose inhabitants enjoyed absolute equality with one another; there was a hierarchy of beings, all of whom were ranged in the service of Yahweh, who was fundamentally different from them.

Monotheism also means that there can be no intermediate beings, part God and part something else, as was common in ancient pagan religions. Some men, such as Enoch and Elijah, were taken up into God to presumably dwell with him in heaven, but they were exceptions and generally recognized as such (Gen. 5:24; 2 Kings 2:11). Later Israelite tradition suggested that something similar had happened to Moses, because there was no one in Israel who had seen God face-to-face as Moses had, but the biblical text says that he died and was buried in the normal way, although the location of his grave was not known (Deut. 34:5; see also vv. 10–12). Some people find echoes of the deification of pagan rulers in stories like these, but it is the differences rather than the similarities that are more significant. In pagan religions, deification was granted almost as a matter of course to earthly rulers, something that never happened in Israel. Those earthly rulers died and were buried, the assumption being that they passed briefly through the underworld before being exalted to their heavenly glory. Enoch and Elijah did not follow that route—they were taken up directly into heaven and did not see death. Finally, despite the great honor that Enoch and Elijah received, they never became divine beings. The case of Enoch is picked up in the New Testament, where it is said that he was rewarded on account of his great faith, but he is nevertheless listed as one among several other great men, and it is even implied that he did not enter the kingdom of heaven in the way that Christians do (Heb. 11:5, 39–40).

What the ancient Israelites thought happened to people after death is not clear from the Old Testament.[10] They seem to have thought that the dead went to a vaguely defined place called Sheol, which was rather like Hades, except that it was not ruled by its own god. In later times Sheol was identified with hell rather than with heaven, which ties in with the early Christian perception that the saints of the Old Testament did not enter the presence of God until the coming of Christ (Heb. 11:39–40). Having said that, there is no suggestion that being in Sheol meant that a soul was cut off from the presence of God. On the contrary, the psalmist writes:

> If I ascend to heaven, you are there!

> If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! (Ps. 139:8)

To him it made no difference. God is present everywhere in his creation, and those who are in a covenant relationship with him retain that relationship wherever they happen to be.

Whether the Jews had any equivalent to the Elysian Fields is harder to say. Jean Delumeau has suggested that the Christian concept of paradise was the result of a fusion between the Elysian Fields and the garden of Eden, but he claims that this does not appear until the early-church period and has no antecedents in Judaism.[11] This has been confirmed more recently by Martin Goodman, who cites two New Testament references to paradise and compares them to contemporary Jewish writers on the subject, concluding that "a simpler explanation of Josephus' reticence about the notion of paradise when he expatiated on Jewish beliefs about the fate of the righteous after death would be that the idea first attested in Luke's Gospel was not yet common among Jews. . . . It is a reasonable hypothesis that in this case the New Testament provides evidence of a Jewish concept still in its infancy, and that it was only later that it became widespread."[12]

There are also indications that the Israelites believed in the resurrection of the body, though Job's remark that after his skin had been destroyed he would see God in the flesh is difficult to interpret and makes no mention of going to heaven (Job 19:25). The Old Testament's teaching on the subject is unclear enough that it became the subject of debate between the Pharisees and the Sadducees in the time of Jesus. The Sadducees denied the resurrection, but Jesus sided with the Pharisees on the ground that God says that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. His point was that God is the God not of the dead but of the living, but this evidently struck his hearers as something they had never heard before (Matt. 22:32–33). Additionally, Jesus said nothing about where Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were living at the time, or when they had been resurrected, if indeed they had been at that point.

Jesus taught that many Gentiles would enter the kingdom of heaven along with the patriarchs of Israel (Matt. 8:11), and in one of his parables he talked about Lazarus's being in Abraham's bosom (in heaven), where the rich man suffering in hell saw him (Luke 16:22–23), but it is not entirely clear what he meant. In the first case, he may have been speaking about an eschatological fulfillment that had not yet arrived, and the second may be no more than an illustration, though it may give us some idea of what popular notions of heaven

and hell were like at that time.

In sum, while Jews did not think that physical death was the end of human existence and believed that their ancestors were alive and in the presence of God, the precise details remained somewhat vague. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, it seems that Jesus was tapping into a popular belief that the good go to heaven and the wicked to hell, but how widespread or official that belief was is impossible to say.[13] Jewish beliefs do not contradict what Jesus taught or what his disciples later proclaimed about the kingdom of heaven and the believer's relationship to it, but neither do they develop the idea in a way that would make the Christian approach seem perfectly natural and expected.

Heaven as Understood since the Coming of Christ

Our first clear indication that believers are meant to live with God forever comes from the teaching of Jesus. The New Testament is at pains to point out that as the Son of God, Jesus came down from heaven in order to raise us up to it (John 3:13–17; 6:38–41; Matt. 24:30–31; 1 Cor. 15:47). In other words, the first we hear about heaven as the abode of the faithful departed comes from someone whose natural habitat it is, and the fact that they go there is entirely dependent on their relationship to him.

The teaching of the New Testament brought perceptions of heaven then current in Jewish-Christian circles into much clearer focus. At one level heaven remained the mysterious dwelling place of God, out of our reach and beyond our understanding. But in another sense it became accessible because the Son of God had gone back to where he came from, taking us with him and seating us alongside him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). The kingdom of heaven that he would usher in was not merely something for us to observe; it was a spiritual reality in which we are called to participate as corulers, even to the extent of sharing with him in the judgment of the angels (1 Cor. 6:3). This has been made possible because Jesus Christ is our Great High Priest who has gone up to heaven, where he offers the sacrifice he made on the cross as the eternal propitiation for our sins (Heb. 9:11–10:14). Heaven and earth are now linked in a new way because the life we live here as believers has been transformed and is continually being sustained by something that is taking place in heaven.

That in turn means that our redemption in Christ must be worked out by our full and eternal integration into that heavenly reality. It is because we have been united with Christ in his death that we are united with him in his resurrection and ascension, which will culminate in our glorification alongside him. In heaven the

tribulations that afflict believers in this life will come to an end, and we shall have eternal rest, but that will be the fruit of victory over the forces of evil that we have to combat in this life. The Christian picture of heaven thus has a moral and spiritual dimension that is clearly distinguished from (and contrasted to) that of the Old Testament Sheol, which is now understood as the place where the wicked are punished. No longer was it a matter of relative indifference where we go after death. On the contrary, this life is now seen as a preparation for one or the other, and the Christian message is designed to ensure that we shall choose heaven, not hell, as our eternal abode.

In theological terms we could end the history of heaven at this point. The eschatological fulfillment of the promises made by Jesus to his disciples is still to come and must be regarded as prophecy, not history, even if we have been told what will eventually happen. But although Christian doctrine takes the New Testament as its reference point, a number of different perceptions of heaven have appeared over the two millennia since it was written that have influenced the way in which we interpret the biblical doctrine. Attempts to examine its inner workings began at a very early stage and have continued ever since, sometimes with surprising consequences. One of the earliest writers to give us a picture of how he saw heaven was Irenaeus (late second century), who wrote:

> As the elders say, those who are deemed to be worthy of a dwelling-place in heaven will go there, others will enjoy the delights of Paradise, and others will possess the splendor of the city. For everywhere the Savior will be seen according to the worthiness of those who see him. . . . There is a distinction between the habitation of those who produce a hundredfold, and the habitation of those who produce sixtyfold, and the habitation of those who produce thirtyfold. The first class will be taken up into heaven, the second class will dwell in Paradise and the last class will inhabit the city.[14]

This somewhat fanciful interpretation has a biblical basis, but Irenaeus manages to rearrange heaven into a hierarchical system of rewards based on the accomplishments of believers here on earth. This belief was also quite clearly stated by Origen:

> The apostolic teaching is that the soul, . . . after its departure from the world, will be recompensed according to its deserts. It is destined to

> obtain either an inheritance of eternal life and blessedness (if its actions have procured this for it) or to be delivered up to eternal fire and punishments (if the guilt of its crimes have brought it down to this).[15]

The belief that heaven is a place of reward for earthly suffering was particularly powerful during the centuries of martyrdom, and it became commonplace to say that those who died for Christ's sake would automatically go to be with him in heaven.[16] Ideas of this kind naturally led to speculation about who would be worthy to share in eternal bliss, which remained a major focus well into the medieval period. As time went on, many people became preoccupied with this question, especially after the legalization of Christianity brought persecution and martyrdom to an end. Gradually the idea grew that it is wise to prepare for the coming of the kingdom by imitating it as much as possible in advance. Out of that desire grew the monastic movement, which in its vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience did its best to replicate the life of heaven here on earth.

This in turn led to a picture of heaven as a place inhabited by high-achieving Christians, to whom the title *saint* was given. These saints included the martyrs, of course, but also a number of bishops and evangelists, as well as holy virgins who had dedicated their earthly lives to Christ to an exceptional degree. The vision of the monastery as a replica of heaven on earth also led to an emphasis on certain aspects, especially celibacy, that Jesus had spoken about (Matt. 22:30). Augustine (354–430) also exalted virginity as a foretaste of heaven, and his influence was such that this became the standard view for the next thousand years.[17]

Once it became accepted that Christians would spend eternity in heaven with Christ, speculation naturally arose as to what that life would be like. In his monumental *City of God*, Augustine dealt with this by saying that the chief activity of the blessed would be to contemplate God, but this did not exclude communication among the saints themselves.[18] To his mind, there would be no special friendships or family relations in heaven, where all the redeemed would be placed on an equal footing. But because they were all united in Christ, they would not be strangers to one another either. In other words, they would be like the angels, relating to one another in complete equality but uniformly dependent on God as the source of their eternal joy and happiness.

What was less clear was whether the heavenly state would resemble the garden of Eden (Paradise) or the urban environment symbolized by the New

Jerusalem. The Roman world was essentially urban, and so for people like Augustine the New Jerusalem took precedence. But the monastic life was more agricultural, and with the breakdown of city life in the post-Roman world, the theme of the garden reappeared. To many minds, heaven was a return to the innocence that had been lost at the fall of Adam and Eve, a recapitulation of human history that went back to the beginning. So powerful did this image become that by the fourteenth century, "paradise," the garden of eternal delights, had become the standard way of referring to heaven. This vision was brought to perfection by Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), whose epic poem *Divina Commedia*, which is divided into three roughly equal parts ("Hell," "Purgatory," and "Paradise"), became the standard picture of what heaven is like and remained so for the next three hundred years and more.

In Dante's vision, paradise is not merely the place of the highest bliss in the presence of God but also the context in which love comes to perfection. This theme had already been present in Augustine but in a general way that applied to all the redeemed. Dante individualized it by taking as his guide through the heavenly realm his deceased fiancée, Beatrice. Deprived of her love in this life, Dante believed that he would find it again in a more perfect form in heaven. It is easy to see this as a sharp contrast to the monastic vision of eternal celibacy, but that is probably a misperception. The perfection of the love of a man and woman for each other was no less chaste than the celibate life; the real difference is that it was fulfilled in the union of two particular people, not in the general company of all angelic beings. It was a relationship modeled on the picture of the bridegroom and his bride, presented to us as the culmination of the book of Revelation, the difference being that what the Bible presents as the union of Christ and the church was secularized as the perfect union between two human creatures.[19]

Another important medieval theme was that heaven is a place of light. God is light, as John reminds us (1 John 1:5), and so it is only to be expected that his dwelling place is a realm of perfect light, which was generally called the "empyrean."[20] It has a visible and even material quality, but one that is quite different from anything known on earth. In the words of Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, "Medieval authors assumed that such a luminous place [as heaven] could not be made of the four elements they knew: earth, water, air, and fire. The empyrean must be made of a fifth and nobler element, the quintessence, which must be something like pure light."[21] The invention of a quintessence allowed theologians to speculate that heaven might contain glorified material

substances such as human bodies, making it possible for the ascended body of Christ, as well as the resurrected bodies of the saints, to live in it without losing their fundamental character.[22] Jesus had said that the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father, which was taken to imply that the saints in heaven will reflect the divine light (Matt. 13:43).[23] That in turn allowed Albert the Great (c. 1193–1280) to say that "the saints will receive different degrees of clarity, according to their different degrees of merit."[24] In other words, heaven will contain not only a hierarchy of order but a hierarchy of virtue as well.

Yet for all the explorations of what heaven might be like, medieval theologians never formally transgressed the bounds laid down in the New Testament. In the words of McDannell and Lang, "The idea of heaven as paradise restored and the issue of human companionship in the next world made only tentative entrance in religious thought and the arts. . . . The longing for human love and companionship beyond death could be heard in the declarations of poets, but was never allowed to shape the teaching on the next life."[25] For that, the church had to wait until the Renaissance, with its idea that God and human beings were working together in harmony to make a better world. As human pleasures and concerns took on greater importance, so the vision of heaven was expanded to accommodate them. The garden paradise and the heavenly city were fused into a new synthesis in which human life was brought to perfection in a heavenly realm overseen by the presence and power of God but was essentially free to shape its own destiny in the way that Adam and Eve were originally meant to do.[26]

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of this era has been the now widespread belief that heaven will be a place of meeting again, of reconciling differences and of living together in peace and harmony. How far this might go was a matter of opinion, and Renaissance thinkers differed among themselves about the implications of their vision. For some it meant that the resurrected bodies will all be naked, the ultimate sign of equality and the way we were created. For others it meant that people of different ages and social classes will be able to mingle freely without the constraints imposed by human social order. Meeting old friends and establishing new relationships were both conceivable in such a heaven, where self-realization is possible without being bound by mere self-interest. The only snag with this charming picture is that God was more or less left out of it. He was always there in theory, of course, but more as the one who made it all possible than as the center of attention. Such a humanistic view of the

afterlife was bound to be called into question, and the outbreak of the Reformation provided the opportunity to correct the one-sidedness of the Renaissance picture of heaven.

Put succinctly, the Reformers restored God to the central place in heaven that he must occupy if heaven is to be what the Bible claims it is: the realization of the kingdom of God.[27] So strong was this emphasis in their writings that they had little to say about how the saints in heaven will live, other than pointing out that they will glorify their Savior. They did not entirely reject Renaissance notions of a reunion in heaven, but they were unhappy at the thought that the saints will be differentiated according to rank or reward. They also rejected the idea that the saints are perfect creatures, restored to the glory of Adam and Eve in Eden, because in reality they are sinners saved by grace. In themselves, the human inhabitants of heaven are the same as the human inhabitants of hell, the only difference being that those in heaven have been forgiven by being united to Christ, while those in hell have not. This view was a natural consequence of their understanding of salvation by grace through faith, not by works. Any person who thinks he deserves a place in heaven is guaranteed never to get there. On the other hand, God's power to forgive is so great that one might almost say that those who have sinned much are privileged because they have been forgiven more (see Luke 7:47). This attitude led their Catholic opponents to accuse them of antinomianism and even of encouraging immorality, but of course this was not the case. Their concern was to magnify the grace and glory of God, and everything they said about heaven pointed in that direction.

One aspect of heaven that the Reformers disagreed on was the possibility that some form of material body could be absorbed into the spiritual realm. Lutherans generally denied this, which led them to insist that the body of Christ, once it had ascended, must be ubiquitous (present everywhere) because of its union with the nature of God. Reformed (Calvinist) theologians, on the other hand, clung to the late medieval view that there is such a thing as a finite, spiritual body and interpreted the ascended body of Christ in that way. This apparently obscure difference of opinion acquired considerable practical importance because it led to a disagreement over the nature of Christ's presence in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. The Lutherans insisted that he is really there because of the ubiquity of his spiritual body, and the Reformed insisted with equal force that he is not because that spiritual body is not omnipresent. The legacy of this dispute can still be seen in the continuing separation of Lutheran and Reformed churches, though it must be said that

nowadays few people in either tradition feel strongly about it, and those who have studied the matter most closely generally think that it is a speculative question to which no definite answer can be given.

On the Catholic side, reaction to the Reformers' concentration on God led to greater emphasis being placed on the Virgin Mary, whose role as "queen of heaven," which had been recognized in medieval times, was now given much more prominence than it had previously enjoyed. Protestants naturally believed that this detracted from the worship of God, and although Catholics denied that, it is easy to see why they felt that way. In popular piety and art, Mary came to be presented as the gateway to heavenly bliss and the guarantor of access to God in a way that she had not previously been, and devotion to her took off accordingly. It is not often realized, but the Marian dogmas of the Roman church and most of the pilgrimage sites where she is meant to have made appearances (Lourdes, Fátima, and so on) are of modern origin and testify to Mary's increasing prominence in the Catholic vision of heaven.

That aside, it is still true to say that with the sixteenth-century Reformation, both Protestant and Catholic, we reach the limits of the doctrinal development of the concept of heaven, at least to date. In the centuries since then, the various views of heaven that have emerged have mixed and mingled in any number of ways. Official teachings and pronouncements tend to be reticent about the subject, but popular imagination fills the gap. The main common denominator is that heaven is always portrayed as a desirable goal, a place of rest and recovery from the troubles of this life and of reunion and reconciliation.

It is probably fair to say that in modern times, the real debate has not been about the nature of heaven but about whether there is such a place at all. From the time of the French Revolution onward, radical thinkers "stormed the gates of heaven," as they claimed, regarding the whole idea as a pious trick designed to keep the downtrodden satisfied with their lot here on earth. The revolutionaries wanted to destroy the myth and maintained that the goals that earlier generations had projected onto the hereafter could be realized on earth. Love, joy, peace, justice, and prosperity are not unattainable ideals but realistic aims that can be achieved by social and political means. Today, most people would agree that the utopian dreams of the more extreme revolutionaries have not been realized, but criticism of them has focused more on the means they used to obtain their ends than on the ends themselves. Modern capitalist democracies do not coerce their citizens in the way that communist dictatorships have done, but the consumerist dream of an abundant future is really no different from what Karl Marx and his

followers had in mind.

The difference is that Western societies believe that the free market is a more effective way of achieving the goal of creating heaven on earth than collectivist central planning is, and so far they have had the better of the argument. Whether our current abundance bears any relationship to heaven, though, is more than questionable. Material prosperity has been bought at a heavy price, with social breakdown, loneliness, and psychological disintegration replacing poverty and hunger as the curses of our age.

For Christians the dilemma this poses is the same as it has always been. We cannot reject the world we live in, but we cannot be entirely happy with it either. For us, belief in heaven is a reminder that on earth we have no abiding city, human life is transient, and the true joys are eternal. We live in this world as strangers who belong elsewhere and who are on our way home. We treat the world with respect because it too is created by God, but we do not invest in it for the long term. Heaven is our ultimate goal, and heaven is the presence of the everlasting God, whom we shall know and worship in union with Christ, the Lamb who once was slain and who now sits on its throne.

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[1] They have done this by interpreting the Greek word *ekenōsen* ("he emptied [himself]") to mean that he gave up his heavenly status and privileges.

[2] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:481 (2.13.4); 2:1,402 (4.17.30). Although attributed to Calvin, this view is in fact much older and can be found in a number of ancient and medieval Christian writers. See E. D. Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1966), for a full discussion.

[3] On this subject, see Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Originally published in French as *La Naissance du Purgatoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981).

[4] See J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000), for a full discussion of this.

[5] Ibid., 50.

[6] In English we use the Latin names of these gods. To the Greeks they were Hermes, Aphrodite, Ares, Zeus, and Cronus (Kronos).

[7] We still do this, though the Latin names of the gods (used in French, Spanish, and Italian) were changed to Anglo-Saxon ones, so that Týr replaced Mars, Odin replaced Mercury, Thor replaced Jupiter, and Frige replaced Venus. Saturn, however, managed to survive!

[8] Paul may have meant the "highest heaven," since three was a sacred number just as much as seven was, but there is no way of knowing this for sure. Origen, *Cels.* 6.21 (PG 11:1321), comments: "The Scriptures . . . do not speak of seven heavens, or of any definite number at all. Rather, they do appear to teach the existence of 'heavens,' whether that means the spheres of those bodies that the Greeks call 'planets' or

something more mysterious."

[9] The church was more successful with Sabbath and Lord's Day than with the others, as the evidence of the modern Romance languages attests.

[10] For a good summary, see Ray C. Ortlund Jr., "Heaven in the Old Testament," in this volume.

[11] Jean Delumeau, *A History of Paradise* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 6–15.

[12] Martin Goodman, "Paradise, Gardens and the Afterlife in the First Century CE," in *Paradise in Antiquity*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Guy Stroumsa (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 62–63.

[13] See the detailed discussion of this in I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 636–37. As Marshall puts it, "Nothing is said about where Abraham is thought to be. 'Abraham's bosom' is not a synonym for Paradise, although Abraham may be thought to be in Paradise." In other words, the meaning is unclear, and contemporary Jewish sources do not enlighten us any further.

[14] Irenaeus, *Haer*. 5:36.1–2 (PG 7:1222–23). The references to hundredfold, etc., are to the parable of the sower. See Matt. 13:23.

[15] *Orig. Princ.* 1.Preface.5 (PG 11:118).

[16] For a comprehensive list of the sources, see D. W. Bercot, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 427–36.

[17] Augustine, *Virginit.* 13 (PL 40: 401–2). See Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 54–59, for a full discussion.

[18] Augustine, *Civ.* 22.30 (PL 41: 802–4).

[19] See J. B. Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 151–85, for a detailed examination of Dante's Paradise.

[20] The word means "fiery place," but that aspect was not emphasized in the Middle Ages, which preferred to concentrate on the glory and splendor that the fire produced.

[21] McDannell and Lang, *Heaven*, 82–83.

[22] Alexander of Hales, *Summa Theologica* 4, 288ff.

[23] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, suppl. 84:2.

[24] Albertus Magnus, *Commentary on the Sentences*, 4:44, 31.

[25] McDannell and Lang, *Heaven*, 109–10.

[26] Ibid., 111–44, for a complete description of this.

[27] Ibid., 145–80.

9

ANGELS AND HEAVEN

STEPHEN F. NOLL



A discussion of heaven would not be complete without giving some attention to angels," writes John MacArthur.[1] We may state the question another way: Can there be a heaven without angels?

The question of angels poses an epistemological as well as a metaphysical conundrum. How can we know anything about angels, even whether they exist?[2] Is there some scientific angel detector available to the researcher? "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" asks the jesting skeptic—and does not stay for an answer. This scoffing question represents one common attitude toward angels in contemporary culture. On the other hand, there are many who see a multitude of the heavenly host "pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross," as the poet Francis Thompson put it.[3] MacArthur points to the large number of angel sightings in various contemporary media and concludes, "Much of this, of course, is little more than occult divination, sorcery and New Age–style mysticism."[4]

So, can there be a heaven without angels? Certainly the orthodox Christian answer to this question must be no. Evangelical Christians necessarily concede the reality of biblical angels, but they tend to caution against speculation into heavenly mysteries in favor of what Alister McGrath calls the "theocentric vision of heaven."[5] Recently, Randy Alcorn and N. T. Wright have sought to redress the notion that "going to heaven" comes at the expense of the resurrection life promised to the redeemed in the new earth.[6] In contesting the view of human destiny as sitting on a cloud with a harp, however, they neglect

the “invisible” character of the angelic world and its relation to the earth below.[7]

Angels: A Definition

Once we raise the larger question of what “all things invisible” might include, we must go one step further to seek an adequate definition of *angel*. The Hebrew word *mal’ak* and the Greek word *angelos* both mean “messenger” and are functional terms, speaking to angels’ mission rather than their identity. There can be earthly messengers as well as heavenly messengers; indeed, sometimes it is not clear which is which (Judg. 13:1–22). Another attractive definition is that angels are spirits, as noted in the epistle to the Hebrews: “Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve . . . ?” (Heb. 1:14). This passage, however, is the only place in Scripture where angels are called “spirits,” and it appears to be a conflation of ideas from the Psalms that identify the winds as God’s “messengers” (Pss. 103:21; 104:4). What we can say, based on the passage in Hebrews, is that angels are “spiritual beings.” I would argue, however, that heavenly angels have a personal or bodily—though not a body of flesh—identity distinct from a formless demonic spirit ever in search of a body (Mark 5:12). Likewise, angels are limited in both knowledge and location, whereas the Holy Spirit is all-knowing and omnipresent.[8]

Further, it is generally assumed that there are two kinds of angels: good and evil. The good angels include such figures as the cherubim and seraphim, the archangels and angel choirs; the evil angels include various deities, Satan, demons, and “principalities and powers.” Evil angels were created good and rebelled, and their condemnation is irremediable, though final judgment awaits in the lake of fire. “Elect angels” (1 Tim. 5:21), on the other hand, are forever pure and loyal to God.

Angels: A Biblical Theology

For evangelical Christians, a proper angelology must be, first and foremost, biblical. But in what sense can we speak of a biblical theology of angels? We have already seen the difficulties in defining the identity of angels. Furthermore, we must face the problem that the presence and persona of angels are quite varied within the body of Scripture. Angels, for instance, do not appear in the creation narrative of Genesis 1. The “angel of the Lord” is an almost God-like figure in parts of Genesis, Exodus, and Joshua but then disappears for long portions of the history books. Again, there are very few references to angels in the preexilic prophets, but they reappear in Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel.

Even more striking is the persona of Satan and the fallen angels. The paucity and obscurity of references to evil angels in the Old Testament have led some scholars to conclude that its Hebrew monotheism had no place for a personal evil being. By contrast, Satan and the demonic forces are quite prominent in the New Testament, especially the Gospels and the Revelation to John. So is it perhaps impossible to speak of a "doctrine" of angels, a comprehensive biblical angelology? I have argued at some length that it is possible, with a careful examination of the entire canon of Scripture, to discern a consistent understanding of angels, devils, and spiritual authorities.[9] I shall follow that presentation briefly in this essay.

God and the Gods

The fundamental teaching of the Old Testament is that "the LORD our God, the LORD is one," and he will tolerate no rival gods or idols before him (Deut. 6:4; Ex. 20:3). Given this teaching, it is perhaps surprising that the Old Testament has a number of references to other "gods" or "sons of god" (Heb. *elohim* and *bene elohim*) that are not simply carved from stone or wood. The "incomparability formula" is a primary literary strategy for exalting God's transcendent greatness: "For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD? Who among the sons of God is like the LORD, a god feared in the council of the holy ones?" (Ps. 89:6–7).[10] Most striking here is the reference to a heavenly "council," an idea akin to the pantheons of pagan religions.

While Psalm 89 identifies the divine council members as "holy ones" (so also Ps. 29:1–2; Job 38:7), Psalm 82 presents a much more problematic picture of God's condemning the spiritual rulers to ultimate death (see further below). This is the corrupt body before which the lying spirit or Satan appears (1 Kings 22:19–22; Job 1–2; Zech. 3:1–10).[11] One conclusion for a study of heaven may be that if "heaven" is the entire invisible world, it includes a variety of spiritual forces—some holy, some corrupt, and some demonic.

The divine council, it seems, is a compromised body, or is at least quite distant from the immediate presence of God. The Old Testament also hints, however, at an inner circle in heaven. In Genesis 18, Abraham sights "three men" approaching his tent at Mamre. Abraham addresses one of them as "Lord" (v. 3), and throughout the encounter the Lord (Yahweh) addresses Abraham and Sarah, but by the time these figures reach Sodom, they are referred to as "the two angels" (19:1). The most likely explanation of this encounter is that these divine

visitors are archangelic in character and that the one angel who speaks for the Lord is probably the “angel of the Lord” found elsewhere throughout the Old Testament; he is possibly Gabriel in Daniel and the New Testament.

One further hint of the heavenly hierarchy comes from the throne visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel (Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1). In both visions, the prophet sees something of the divine persona, bathed in glory and described with great circumspection. Associated with the divine presence are throne angels called “seraphim” in Isaiah and “cherubim” in Ezekiel. The seraphim stand beside the throne and cry “holy”; the cherubim carry aloft the divine chariot with the sound of mighty wings. I would call them “archetypal beings,” spiritual like the angels but combining features of human and animal natures. John’s vision in Revelation builds on the Old Testament foundation. He sees an inner council of twenty-four human-like elders with crowns and “four animals,” the royal types of wild and domestic animals (lion and ox), man, and birds (eagle).

The combination of the strongest assertions of the sole lordship and transcendence of the Lord God alongside references to other “divine beings” reflects the remarkable confidence in Old Testament monotheism. At the same time, it grants a certain credibility to the experiences of the divine in other cultures, even if these experiences ultimately lead to idolatry. Finally, it portrays a textured heaven that is still perfectly ordered by God’s will. Biblical monotheism thus avoids what Karl Barth referred to as “the religious glorification of the number ‘one’” and differentiates it from Islam in this regard.[12]

Angels and the Mystery of Creation

“I believe in God the Father, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.” The Nicene Creed follows Genesis 1:1 but also alludes to the creation of the angels. And surely anyone versed in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* knows that there is a vivid heavenly mythology to the prehistory of the earth. Why then is Scripture itself silent on this subject?

Perhaps mythology is the key to understanding this reticence. The ancient Near Eastern cosmologies all had elaborate myths of the birth of the gods and of the formation of the cosmos. Genesis, by contrast, is naturalistic in its description of the sun and moon—the greater and the lesser lights—of the various animals, including the great sea creatures, and finally of mankind itself. How does this world picture cohere with the references to the divine beings and angels in heaven? In my view, the author of Genesis portrays an opaque

atmospheric barrier between the divine and human worlds. This barrier may be penetrated from time to time by messengers from God or by a roving Adversary or by an entranced prophet, but it is impenetrable to normal human wisdom and imagination. I propose that this firmament represents the metaphysical distinction between the material, "empirical" world and the real but immaterial world.

Furthermore, the climax of creation, according to Genesis, is not the creation of the divine beings but of man, made uniquely in the image of God, male and female. How is it that God would overreach the hierarchy of heaven and focus his work on a creature of clay rather than on a spiritual being? Psalm 8 presents this mystery in a compelling way:

> O LORD, our Lord,
> how majestic is your name in all the earth!
> *You whose glory is chanted above by the mouth of godlings,*
> *you have established a bulwark against your foes,*
> to still the enemy and the avenger.
> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
> the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
> what is man that you are mindful of him,
> and the son of man that you care for him?
> Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
> and crowned him with glory and honor. (vv. 1–5; author's translation in italics)[13]

God's election of man rather than angels as his image bearer and covenant partner is a problem for Job in his quest for God's attention. One of his so-called comforters challenges Job's assurance of God's favor thus: "Can a mortal man be righteous before God? Can a man be pure before his Maker? Even in his servants he puts no trust, and his angels he charges with error" (Job 4:17; cf. 7:17–20; 25:2–6). Without dispelling this mystery, the Lord speaks personally to Job and assures him that he is a prince among God's creatures, even among those "sons of God" who sang for joy at the moment of creation (38:7).

Being made in God's image brings with it a primal temptation, as the snake insinuates: "You will be like gods [*elohim*]" (Gen. 3:5). Eve and then Adam, seeking the intuitive insight and immortality of a divine being, find instead the knowledge of sin and shame; the Lord, noting ironically that "the man has become like one of us," sentences them to exile from the Tree of Life and to ultimate return to dust. Cast out of Eden, the human race continues to test the boundaries of the angelic world (6:1–4; chaps. 11, 19).[14] Such hubristic forays lead to further judgments on humanity, with God setting his favor on the solitary

figures of Noah and Abraham.

The pattern of human grasping upward for the divine and of God's reaching down in mercy to save his wayward people reaches a final climax in the book of Daniel, which pits the worldly empires against the people of the Most High. Angelic warriors such as Michael and Gabriel intervene on behalf of God's elect, but the consummation comes with the presentation of the "son of man" to receive universal lordship from the Ancient of Days. Some scholars have posited that this figure is a mighty angel like Michael, but the term "son of man" can only refer to a human being, born of woman, and it is this human being who is exalted over even the mightiest of the angelic "princes."

Angels and the Triune God

As angels in the Old Testament are especially associated with the one God and with serving man in God's image, so also they are mentioned in the New Testament as witnesses of Jesus Christ, the God-Man.

Karl Barth describes angels as part of the "framework of mystery" that surrounds Jesus' life and ministry as portrayed in the Gospels, where angels appear at the beginning—at his birth and his temptation in the wilderness—and at the end—at the agony in the garden and at the resurrection—but nowhere else in between. Jesus' cryptic statement about the disciples' seeing the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man (John 1:51) may suggest the notion that angels stake out the boundaries between heaven and earth as the Son enters into human history.[15]

While Jesus himself has no angelic encounters during his ministry, he does speak in parable and prophecy of the role of angels at his second coming (Matt. 16:27; 24:31, 46; 25:31, 41; Mark 13:39, 49; 14:62; Luke 12:8–9). What is striking about these references is that the angels are given distinctly subordinate roles to him, just as in Daniel's visions even the mightiest angels are supporting actors to the exalted Son of Man.

The subordinate rank of angels in the Gospels is consistent with their portrayal in the apostolic confessions of the Epistles. Paul's reformulation of the Old Testament Shema ("Hear, O Israel") states:

> For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom

> we exist. (1 Cor. 8:5–6)

In accord with the Old Testament, Paul does not rule out the possible existence of other spiritual forces, but he places them in a totally different category of being from the one God and Jesus Christ. This pattern is reflected also in the early hymns found in the Epistles, where "all things . . . in heaven and earth" are created and reconciled in and through Christ (Col. 1:15–20) and "every knee . . . in heaven and on earth and under the earth" will bow to the exalted Son (Phil. 2:9–11).

The epistle to the Hebrews presents an extended treatment of the relationship of Christ to the angels. The author begins by identifying Christ as "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, . . . [who] upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:3). He goes on to show in a series of seven Old Testament proof texts that Christ is consistently identified with God in any comparison with angels, and he concludes that angels are Christ's servants, not his coworkers (vv. 5–14). Finally, in a profound meditation on Psalm 8, he wrestles with the fact that Christ "for a little while" was made lower than the angels *for our sake*:

> For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (2:16–17)

Finally, the Revelation to John draws a clear line between God and the angels, coming as it does "from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth" (Rev. 1:4–5; chaps. 4–5). Some contemporary scholars think the Christ figure of 1:12–16 is "angelomorphic," borrowing angelic characteristics from apocalyptic throne visions, but it is equally likely that it is the aura of heavenly glory that makes them seem similar.[16] While there may have been a tendency among some early Christian writers to identify the exalted Christ in some sense as an angel, the New Testament texts themselves consistently "clarify" the monotheism of the Old Testament as Trinitarian in substance, with the angels serving as heavenly witnesses on the other side of the divide between God and creature.[17] The radiance of the divine glory proceeds from the Son; the angels' glory is lunar

only.

The Fallen Angel

One cannot really deal theologically with the holiness of angels without also explaining its opposite, the evil angel and his companions. Many modern people have difficulty accepting the existence of a personal evil being, and many modern exegetes doubt that Satan has a biblical existence until after the exile in Babylon and the influence of Zoroastrian dualism on Judaism.[18] I do not find this convincing theologically or exegetically. From a theological point of view, it is hard to see how Satan invents himself in the middle of history; if he indeed has or had an angelic nature, then he was created and rebelled primordially. The obscurity of Satan may reflect the fragmentary way in which evil is encountered in the world, which may in fact be his own design—he is, after all, the Deceiver (*diabolos*).

Just as the angels are hidden from view in the creation accounts, so also there is no report of rebellion in heaven, although there are allusions to such a revolt in the prophets (Isa. 14:12–15; Ezek. 28:1–11). Readers of Genesis are challenged, along with Eve, to resist a prodigy, a talking snake who questions the truthfulness and goodness of God's command. Later in the Old Testament, readers are invited into the throne room to hear the insinuations made by the Accuser (the *satan*) against the righteous man Job. Job himself is not afforded this insight but must wrestle with suffering and iniquity by faith alone.

It is my contention that it is the Son of God who flushes out Satan's true identity and presents the church and world with a clear choice between spiritual good and evil. Satan's name and role are exposed fully in his encounter with Jesus in the wilderness. He is the primordial Tempter through whom sin and corruption entered the world. If it may be said that Jesus learned the meaning of sonship through being tempted, so also Satan learned the weakness of his own degraded angelic sonship and his impending doom.[19] At the command "Be gone," Satan departs the scene and never again appears in the presence of Jesus. At the same time, he remains active and indeed increases his activity on earth through his demons (Rev. 12:17).

Jesus is portrayed during his earthly ministry as an exorcist who grants similar power to his disciples, a power which they continue to exercise through the Holy Spirit as part of the apostolic mission (Mark 1:34; 3:14–15; Acts 5:15; 8:7; 19:11–17).[20] From these exorcisms, we learn that the demons are "unclean" or "evil" spirits, seeking bodies to inhabit and minds to captivate, and that they are

organized like an army or a household under a “prince of demons” called Beelzebul, whom Jesus identifies as Satan (Mark 3:22–27; 5:2–13).[21]

The climax and completion of the conquest of Satan and the demonic powers come with Jesus’ passion and death. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus claims to have seen Satan’s fall from heaven and places this event in the context of his own saving work and revelation of the Father (Luke 10:17–22). In John’s Gospel, Jesus identifies his own going to the Father with the judgment of the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Finally, in the Apocalypse, the birth and ascension of Jesus is the great sign that exposes Satan to be no longer the lowly “ancient serpent” but the hideous cosmic Dragon that provokes full-scale war in heaven (Rev. 12:1–8).

So is Satan an angel, even if fallen? There are numerous allusions in Scripture to Satan’s heavenly origin, not the least being our Lord’s own claim. He has a name, a title, and a singular personality, whereas the demons are called “spirits” with little personality. There are, however, also marks of lost status. Satan is never given bodily form and, except in the case of Jesus, always tempts through intermediaries; indeed, as the prince of demons, it follows that he himself is demonic, not angelic. Milton, in his portrayal of the change of Satan’s personality from the mighty Lucifer into a hissing snake, may have rightly grasped Satan’s nature as that of a ruined angel.[22]

Is Satan the origin of evil, or is he simply its agent? The problem of theodicy is well known: how can an all-good and all-powerful God create or allow evil to exist? Augustine sought to explain Satan’s fall in terms of choosing a lesser good, his own angelic beauty over God’s glory. In my view, this proposal obscures the enormity and utterly uncaused character of Satan’s hubris and rebellion.

This being said, can modern and postmodern people accept the reality of Satan and the demonic? Curiously, Karl Barth, who stated that “to deny the angels of God is to deny God himself,” goes on to claim that “the devil was never an angel.”[23] Walter Wink claims that Satan is real but a kind of negative potentiality that “arises out of the depths of mystery of God; but by our choices we do determine which side Satan is on.”[24] It is hard to see how a biblical Christian can accede to these proposals. Surely Satan, like the holy angels, is real, even if he must be portrayed imaginatively, as in the works of C. S. Lewis.[25]

Principalities and Powers

It is commonly thought that the idea of invisible "principalities and powers" first appears in the New Testament. This is not the case. An early reference comes from the Pentateuch: "When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of *the sons of God*" (Deut. 32:8).[26] What is striking about this passage is the assigning of divine council members as guardians of the various nations. Further, there is a sense in which even the celestial bodies—sun, moon, and stars—are seen to "govern" the nations, though they are not to be worshiped (4:19; 32:43 [LXX]; Sir. 17:17). This idea may also underlie Paul's comment that the Gentiles have access to the knowledge of God through the created order but have corrupted that knowledge by idolatry (Rom. 1:20–21).[27]

Idolatry, however, is not the only sin, as the angels of the nations themselves are corrupt. Psalm 82 offers a proleptic vision of judgment to come (cf. Isa. 24:21), with God arising to indict the divine rulers:

> God has taken his place in the divine council;
> in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:
> "How long will you judge unjustly
> and show partiality to the wicked?
> Give justice to the weak and the fatherless;
> maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.
> Rescue the weak and the needy;
> deliver them from the hand of the wicked."
>
> They have neither knowledge nor understanding,
> they walk about in darkness;
> all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
>
> I said, "You are gods,
> sons of the Most High, all of you;
> nevertheless, like men you shall die,
> and fall like any prince."
>
> Arise, O God, judge the earth;
> for you shall inherit all the nations! (Ps. 82:1–8)

Some translators (e.g., NASB) have mistakenly taken this assembly to be an earthly council of godlike rulers, although there is an intimate link between the heavenly and earthly government and the religions of the nations.

The idea of cosmic powers is taken in new directions after the exile. On the one hand, the Enoch literature develops a myth about the fallen "Watchers" who corrupt the human race at the time of the flood with technology, magic, and divination. These rebels are confined to the underworld but continue to exercise

influence on earth until the end times (*1 En*. 1–6; cf. 1 Pet. 3:19; 2 Pet. 2:4). On the other hand, the angels of the nations are replaced by Daniel's four beastly empires: the lion, the bear, the leopard, and the final blasphemous beast. Daniel explains that these four great beasts represent four kingdoms that arise out of the "earth," i.e., the underworld, inspired by the hubris of the fallen angels (Dan. 7:17). In both Enoch and Daniel, the angelic opponents of the fallen powers are the archangels, usually seen as four in number and for the first time named: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Sariel/Uriel (*1 En.* 9:1). Michael is identified as "your prince" who opposes the "prince of Persia" (Dan. 10:21; 12:1). While the first three beasts in Daniel's vision are symbolic, the empires have a real angelic prince who contends with Israel's princes and who is granted some continuing political power (7:12). The last beast is pure evil, exalting himself directly against the Most High and speaking blasphemy.[28]

The letters of Paul and the Revelation to John reflect the notion of an interim spiritual authority of the "principalities and powers" that will come to a climax with the arrival of the satanic beast and false prophet. Paul, it appears, has adopted Daniel's view that the earthly empires, Rome in particular, continue to exercise power into the present time. Like Jesus, Paul acknowledges and even appeals to Caesar for justice (Acts 25:11; cf. Rom. 13:1–8; 1 Pet. 2:13). Surely this is the same power which in Paul's view has been publicly superseded by Jesus Christ, who is the source of all authority, has disarmed the principalities through his death, and on whose behalf the church is called to proclaim the gospel before the principalities (Col. 1:16; 2:14–15; Eph. 3:10).

So while Paul seems to see a place for the principalities in the period between Christ's ascension and his coming again, he is under no illusion about them, urging believers to stand firm against "the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). He strikes a similar balance in addressing the Thessalonians about the end time. On the one hand, the restrainer is at work maintaining order during the period before the "man of lawlessness" ushers in utter chaos (2 Thess. 2:3–12). Both of these forces have a spiritual dimension; both may also be identified with a worldly power like Rome.

John foresees the endpoint of history, the final and complete apostasy of the "prince of this world," who is also identified with the Dragon. The Dragon, who is Satan, the "ancient serpent," is incarnated in two horrid beasts (Revelation 13). The first is a false messiah (antichrist) and his pseudo-kingdom; the second, the false prophet or "beast from the underworld," is false religion. Together these

demonic principalities wage war to the death against Christ and his people until Christ himself intervenes.

So for John, the crisis of history pits two intractably opposed powers. The first is thrown down from heaven. The second emerges before John's eyes as a new regime of seven angels of the churches and twenty-four angelic elders. The seven angels serve the church militant, much as the apostles and prophets do, warning and comforting believers during the interim age. The elders are priest princes and the true and eternal council of God's presence. They embody Jesus' ethic of royal service, casting down their crowns (the only angelic crowns in Scripture) in worship of God and the Lamb. The elders, like the dethroned principalities, have a special governing role as they prepare the way for a renewed and universal human royalty in the New Jerusalem earth as "the kings of the earth bring their glory into it" (21:24).

What are we to conclude about the principalities and powers? Are they angels, are they demons, or are they human rulers? I believe it is clear that they are angelic, but they are neither holy angels nor Satan's demonic cohort. They have indeed been infected by sin and are on their way to destruction, but they still share something of the honor of God's created order. In a sense, the principalities are impersonal, something like corrupt, faceless bureaucrats, holding down an office while taking bribes on the side. Christians are called on to respect them for the sake of their office, even while recognizing their transiency and even their potential for great evil.

One controversial idea in recent times, associated with the missiologist Peter Wagner, has been that of "territorial spirits."[29] Wagner advocates specific prayer against these forces in order to open new mission fields. Walter Wink has, in his own way, described the political ideologies as powers, not merely ideas to be wrestled with like Jacob wrestled the angel. Without endorsing all the implications of Wagner's and Wink's views, I think the Bible does suggest that there is a heavenly dimension to earthly political regimes and cultural mores.

Angel Messengers and Militants

Angels are spiritual messengers. Messengers were widely known in the ancient world as intermediaries sent by kings or gods. The messenger was a servant of the word and of the presence of the sender. Biblical angels are normally anonymous. Holy angels are always truthful and trustworthy, as opposed to the "lying spirit."

Angels appear in distinct roles during the dispensations of salvation history. In

the patriarchal period, the prime actor is the "angel of the Lord," who reveals obliquely the divine presence (an epiphany). The angel engages Abraham, to begin with, by appearing to his shunned concubine, Hagar (Gen. 16:7–14). Only after promising a future to her offspring does the angel, now appearing among the "three men," turn to the patriarch himself, announcing the birth of Isaac. At the climactic test on Mount Moriah, Abraham is alone until he raises the knife over his son, at which point the angel calls "from heaven," a sign of the greatness of God's faith in his chosen (22:11).

Jacob, in his old age, describes his entire life as a series of angelic encounters (48:15–16). This may seem overly pious coming from such a devious grasper, but his epiphanies themselves are double-edged. The angels Jacob sees on the heavenly staircase may be the border guards of the Promised Land Jacob is fleeing; at the same time, they are bound on errands for the divine King of the whole earth and hence will secretly watch over Jacob in his exile (28:12). Returning years later, Jacob continues his lifelong pattern of manipulating relatives only to encounter a "man" whom he cannot wrestle down but who blesses him and gives him a new name—Israel (32:25). Only then does he realize that he is the heir of the promise and in the presence of God.

Angels are prominent in accompanying God's people, particularly in the exodus from Egypt. The Lord himself appears to his people more directly at this time (a theophany) with the angels as acolytes, as an ancient piece of hymnody recounts: "The LORD came from Sinai . . . ; he shone forth . . . from the ten thousands of holy ones" (Deut. 33:2). The angel of the Lord continues to accompany the people from the Red Sea to the entry into the Promised Land, but Moses is the mediator par excellence of God's word.

The activity of angels is often of a military cast. At the exodus, the angel of the Lord leads "the host of Israel" (Ex. 14:19). Later the "captain of the host" appears to Joshua, strengthening him for battle (Josh. 5:13–15). Elijah and Elisha were both recipients of visions of heavenly chariots and armies (2 Kings 2:11–12; 6:17; 7:6). Angels often execute God's judgments, beginning with Sodom and extending to Ezekiel's prophetic visions of angels destroying Jerusalem (Ezekiel 9–10). This tradition was picked up full strength by the sectarians at Qumran who envisioned a final battle between the "sons of light" and "sons of darkness" that would be capped off by the intervention of Michael and his host (1QM 18:1–2). Not surprisingly, in this role angels are also associated with death (1 Chron. 21:12; 2 Chron. 32:21; Ps. 35:5–6; Isa. 37:36) and deliverance (Isa. 63:9).

Finally, angels are bringers of good news of dawning salvation. Since the time and manner of the day of the Lord is obscure, angels may serve as forerunners and interpreters. Zechariah and Daniel in particular are instructed by an angel as to the meaning of their end-time dreams (Zechariah 1–6; Daniel 10–12). Noncanonical apocalypses such as Enoch and *Jubilees* are also narrated by an angel.

In the New Testament, angels take a second rank to Christ and the Spirit, but they continue to appear as messengers and militants. The nativity, Easter, and Pentecost angels bring good news of the birth and resurrection and ascension of Christ. In one of Jesus' parables, the angels escort the beggar Lazarus to paradise (Luke 16:22). Angels appear from time to time to the apostles, as when Paul sees a "man of Macedonia" in his dream summoning him to bring the gospel to Europe (Acts 16:9). Finally, Jesus foresees angels coming with the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven and assisting in the final judgment (Matt. 13:39, 49; 16:27; 24:31, 36; 25:31, 41; Mark 14:62; Luke 12:8–9). Paul in his letters and John in the Apocalypse agree that an angel host will accompany Christ at his parousia (1 Thess. 3:13; 4:16; 2 Thess. 1:7; Rev. 19:11–14). The judgment includes not only humans but the disobedient angels and spirits as well, who are cast into the lake of fire once and for all (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 19:20; 20:10–15).[30]

Encountering angels as guides and guardians is, perhaps not surprisingly, the most common experience of angels in contemporary accounts.[31] Not unlike their biblical forebears, many people testify to having been visited by an angel, sometimes identified as a mere stranger, at a time of need and conflict. While one may be skeptical about any one such testimony, the cumulative experience of human beings with the unseen world, and with angels in particular, may place the burden of proof on those who doubt.

One special case has to do with personal guardian angels. The biblical basis for this notion is as thin as an angel body: two rather obscure texts.[32] In the first, Jesus says: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 18:10). In the second, the disciples in Acts, disbelieving that Peter could have escaped his prison and be at the gate, say to the serving girl: "You are out of your mind. . . . It is his angel!" (Acts 12:15). While these texts certainly can be interpreted as the basis for each believer's having a personal heavenly guardian, it may be more prudent simply to affirm that saints above take a personal interest in the lives of saints below, individually and corporately. Notably, there is no reference to a singular angel of death, an idea known in later

Jewish literature. Death, according to Paul, is personified as part of the human condition proceeding from sin, the last enemy defeated by Christ at his coming (1 Cor. 15:26).

Angels and the Fellowship of Heaven

One of the most powerful moments in the Anglican communion liturgy is "*sursum corda and sanctus*":

> Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord. . . . Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious name, saying "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts."

These words reach back to the vision of Isaiah and forward to the heavenly assembly in the epistle to the Hebrews (12:22–24) and the book of Revelation as a vivid expression of the communion that exists in heaven and earth of the one God.

It may come as a surprise to learn how little the idea of heaven and worship occurs in the Old Testament. Outside the particular ministry of the cherubim and seraphim, corporate praise by angels occurs in only two texts: Psalms 103 and 148. Both psalms involve a summons to universal praise, the former in ascending and the latter in descending order of hierarchy. In both psalms the emphasis is on the orderliness of praise, and we do not in fact hear the angels' singing. This reticence, it seems to me, is of a piece with the general tendency of the Old Testament not to utter mysteries too great for earthbound creatures.

The idea of a communion of men and angels has found striking expression in the Dead Sea texts, in which the members confess that "God has joined their Assembly to the Sons of Heaven to be a Council of the Community, a foundation of the building of holiness, an eternal plantation throughout all ages to come" (1QS 11:7; 1QH 11[3]:19–23). The so-called Angelic Liturgy from Qumran appears to be a cycle of thirteen Sabbath songs recited, so they imagined, in conjunction with the priestly angels of the heavenly sanctuary (4QShirShabb). Despite participating in the heavenly worship, it is clear that the covenanters expected that at the end of days, proper worship of God would be restored to a cleansed temple in Jerusalem.

With the chorus of angels at Jesus' birth, the New Testament proclaims that the heavens are opened. "No one has ever seen God," John concludes; "the only

God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (John 1:18). Jesus' revelation of the Father is also a revelation of the kingdom of heaven. The first phrase of the Lord's Prayer—"Our Father in the heavens"—followed by the petition that God's will be done "on earth as in heaven," suggests a coming harmony of heaven and earth. While angels never call God "Father," the idea of a "family above" is known in rabbinic literature and may lie behind Paul's prayer to "the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph. 3:14–15).

One characteristic of the heavenly household is the exclusive obedience given to the Father's will and service. Jesus calls his own disciples to put aside secondary attachments, especially those of family, for the sake of the kingdom. It is in this context that Jesus answers the Sadducees' question about marriage in heaven:

> Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels [Gk. *isangeloi*; cf. Matt. 12:25: 'like the angels'] and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection." (Luke 20:34–36)

Jesus is not saying that humans become angels at the resurrection. He does imply that there is no need for sexual reproduction in the kingdom of heaven. Given the complexities of marriage and singleness on earth, his words may be taken to mean that there are no exclusive marital relations in the future dispensation; this does not mean, however, that there are no intimate relations of love that extend from one age to the next.[33]

The coming of the Holy Spirit opens up a new relationship between the earthly and heavenly congregations, especially in worship. Like the worshipers at Qumran, Christians find themselves in a spiritual temple when they pray (1 Cor. 3:16). Paul, in his famous but laconic phrase—"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels" (13:1)—seems to say that glossolalia may be considered an angelic language of sorts. In the same breath, he warns that worshiping with the angels is of secondary importance to seeking unity in the Spirit and performing acts of love.

The idea of angelic worship may also be a key to one of the Bible's most obscure passages, where Paul exhorts women to cover their heads "because of

the angels" (11:10). Three explanations have been given for these angels: (1) they are envious or lustful angels like the fallen Watchers; (2) they are principalities who uphold the social order, including gender proprieties; or (3) they are the holy angels before whom women are to cover themselves with modesty. The last explanation seems best, given the ideas of the Christian assembly as a holy temple where prophecy and angelic language may be spoken. But why then, one might ask, do male prophets uncover their heads while female prophets cover theirs? Perhaps Paul's view is that while women are granted equal access to the presence of God in worship and prophecy, they need to acknowledge the "masculine" hierarchy of heaven by "taking authority for their head."[34]

Compared to all the other books of the Bible, the Revelation to John is bursting with angels, which should not surprise since it is narrated from heaven and is a vision of the end of evil and the marriage of heaven and earth. At the same time, John scrupulously distinguishes events in heaven involving the angels from events on earth concerning the saints.[35] The liturgies are sevenfold, involving angel-only (chaps. 4–5), human-only (14:2–4; 15:3–4), and joint choruses (7:9–12; 19:1–8) punctuated by a liturgical silence in heaven (8:1–2).

The book of Revelation recounts the fulfillment of the Lord's Prayer: "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God" (12:10). The heavens are purged, the Dragon and his allies are thrown into the lake of fire, and the New Jerusalem descends from heaven as part of a new heaven and a new earth. Although an angel gives John a guided tour of the new city, now measured in angel cubits and with angels posted at the gates, it is not a city teeming with angels. It is, after all, part of the new earth, while angels presumably continue to abide in heaven. There is a new communion of angels and men, united in their spheres while worshiping God and the Lamb, but they still retain their original created distinctives.

Among modern theologians, Karl Barth most fully reflects on the significance of angels as fellow citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Heaven and earth are always twofold, he says, and heaven must always take preference because it is the prime dwelling place of God, the source of invisible created reality, the angels. Second, heaven is a regime that is on the move with God in history, and angels are the entourage that accompanies God's coming. Finally, Barth claims that witness and worship are the essential marks of creaturely response to God's

gracious action, which brings us back to the *sursum corda*. Believers are invited to join in that chorus and to do so as "martyrs" along with the angels.[36]

Conclusion

So what can we say about the angels of heaven?[37] Surely they are as real as heaven itself, subject to the doubts of unaided reason and affirmed by the same revealed word of scriptural authority (Rev. 22:6). As Hamlet reminded his university colleague, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." A sentiment to which the angels, no doubt, add their amen.

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[1] John MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven: The Truth about Heaven, Angels and Eternal Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996), 147.

[2] Susan R. Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel: Celestial Spirits and Christian Claims about Jesu*s (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 6, begins by "bracketing the question of angels' existence."

[3] See Francis Thompson's "The Kingdom of God": "The angels keep their ancient places— / Turn but a stone and start a wing!" *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, ed. D. H. S. Nicholson and A. H. E. Lee (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1917), 245. Many Romantics, like William Blake and the pre-Raphaelites, sought to revive the angels as aesthetic objects even while doubting their ontological existence.

[4] MacArthur, *Glory of Heaven*, chaps. 1–2. Garrett, *No Ordinary Angel*, gives a somewhat more sympathetic but critical review of some of the most recent angel appearances in contemporary culture.

[5] Alister E. McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2003), 141–46.

[6] Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004); and N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

[7] See, e.g., Anthony DeStefano, *The Invisible World: Understanding Angels, Demons, and the Spiritual Realities That Surround Us* (New York: Doubleday, 2011).

[8] In Acts 8:26, an angel (exterior) addresses the evangelist Philip; in v. 27 the Spirit (interior) addresses him.

[9] Stephen F. Noll, *Angels of Light, Powers of Darkness: Thinking Biblically about Angels, Satan, and Principalities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998). See esp. 27–29 for the discussion of biblical theology.

[10] C. J. Labuschagne, *The Incomparability of Yahweh in the Old Testament* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1966).

[11] Zechariah's vision may suggest a purging of the old polytheistic council as part of God's judgment at the time of exile.

[12] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 2.1.448.

[13] My translation "godlings" is based on Ugaritic texts in which the lesser deities are sometimes called "nurslings of Athirat," El's wife. There is no reference in the OT to babies praising God. See Noll, *Angels of Light*, 58–61.

[14] Lexically, the "sons of God" who take wives from the daughters of men in Gen. 6:1–4 are not human but corrupted divine beings, a theme picked up and expanded at length in the pseudepigraphal Enoch literature.

[15] This idea informs the early Christian apocalypse called the Ascension of Isaiah 10–12, which describes Christ's descent through the seven heavens to earth. At his resurrection and ascension, the angelic gatekeepers marvel that they did not recognize him on the way down.

[16] Charles Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

[17] Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1998).

[18] Jeffrey Burton Russell has written the definitive "history of Satan." See *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

[19] Milton's Satan, *Paradise Lost*, 4.516, seeks to know "in what degree or meaning Thou art called Son of God, which bears no single sense."

[20] Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

[21] In the New Testament Satan is given the title "prince" (*archon*) but never "king" (*basileus*).

[22] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 10.504ff.

[23] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 3.3.373–430 (angels); 3.3.523 (Satan).

[24] Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 34.

[25] See, e.g., *Screwtape Letters* and *Perelandra*.

[26] The textual basis for the last phrase "sons of God" (*bene elohim*) comes from the Qumran manuscript, whereas the Masoretic text has "sons of Israel." The Greek Bible agrees with Qumran, translating "angels of God."

[27] In Paul's thought there is also a close connection between principalities and powers and "elements of the world" (Gal. 4:3).

[28] Many commentators identify the three beasts with Babylon, Media, and Persia, and the fourth as Greece, culminating with Antiochus IV Epiphanes (the "little horn," Dan. 7:8) who placed an idol in the Jerusalem sanctuary and banned the Mosaic law in Judea in 164 BC.

[29] *Engaging the Enemy: How to Fight and Defeat Territorial Spirits* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1991).

[30] Several NT passages (Jude 6; 1 Pet. 3:19; 2 Pet. 2:14) suggest a preliminary binding of the rebellious angels in Hades. This idea is found also in the books of Enoch and *Jubilees*.

[31] The literature on this subject is voluminous. See, e.g., Hope Price, *Angels: True Stories of How They Touch Our Lives* (London: Macmillan, 1993).

[32] From the Apocrypha see also the role of Raphael in the book of Tobit.

[33] Western churches have seen marriage as ceasing at death; the Orthodox, however, believe that in marriage the couple is sealed for all eternity, although without procreation in heaven.

[34] Despite some attempts to speak of "wearing an authority on the head," the better translation suggests that women voluntarily cover their heads out of reverence for God and Christ (cf. vv. 2–3).

[35] The vision of the martyrs in Rev. 7:1–12 is proleptic and hence not out of order.

[36] It is reported that the Uganda martyrs sang this hymn as they died in the fire: "In the midst of that dear City, Christ is reigning on His seat, / And the angels swing their censers in a ring about His feet. / O that I had wings of angels, Here to spread, and heaven-ward fly! / I would seek the gates of Zion, Far beyond the starry sky."

[37] For a summary, see Noll, *Angels of Light*, 202–5.

10

HEAVEN FOR PERSECUTED SAINTS

AJITH FERNANDO



Seven of the eight beatitudes that begin the Sermon on the Mount are about the character and behavior of blessed persons. Only the eighth is about what is done to blessed persons by others: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:10). This must have been particularly significant, as it is the only beatitude given a subsequent explanatory expansion (vv. 11–12).

Clearly, the topic of heaven for persecuted saints was important in the thinking of Jesus. His basic call to discipleship was to a cross (Mark 8:34), which included losing one’s “life for [Christ’s] sake and the gospel’s” (v. 35) and of not being “ashamed of [Christ] and of [his] words in this adulterous and sinful generation” (v. 38). These both imply persecution. Included in this discourse is the promise of final reward for those who take up the cross, which is described as saving one’s life as opposed to losing it (v. 35); as not forfeiting one’s soul (v. 36); and as acceptance by Christ when he comes with his holy angels (v. 38). Paul’s statement that “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12) adds to the conviction that the Bible considers persecution to be a basic aspect of discipleship. The gospel is so radical in what it teaches that anyone living anywhere who seeks to obey it should expect opposition.

Persecution, then, is basic to the Christian life and intimately connected in the Bible with the expectation of final reward. It is one aspect of the fundamental Christian principle presented in different ways: a grain of wheat must die before it bears fruit (John 12:24); one must hate one’s life in this world to keep it for

eternal life (v. 25); one must follow and serve the crucified, glorified Lord in order to receive the Father's honor (v. 26); and one must enter through the narrow gate and follow the hard road along the path to real life (Matt. 7:13–14).

The Neglect of the Topic in Protestant Christianity

Protestant theologians, unlike Roman Catholic theologians, generally have not given the connection between heaven and persecution and martyrdom much attention. Recently there has been a resurgence of interest in persecution, given the new wave of persecution against Christians worldwide. But this has not focused much on the connection between persecution and heaven.

Romanian Christian leader Josef Ton's published doctoral dissertation, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven*, deals with this topic. He gives two reasons Protestant theology has generally avoided this topic. The first reason has historical roots. Around the third century, martyrs were so highly esteemed that they were raised to the rank of saints. "Eventually, the death of these saints was considered to have some atoning value, as the death of Christ. They were said to have the same power to forgive sins and to mediate between individuals and God. The veneration of the martyrs, transformed into the adoration of the saints, began in earnest in the fourth century AD."[1] Ton shows that from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries pagan accretions were annexed to martyrology. Thus, even though the Reformers valued martyrdom, when faced with the difficult task of purging martyrdom from these accretions they chose not to give the subject much prominence.

The second reason mentioned by Ton is that the discussion of persecution and its rewards seems to assume the idea of earning rewards, which gives persecution meritorious value and contradicts the doctrines of grace so fundamental to Protestant theology.[2] Ton sets out to reflect biblically on this theology of rewards in his book.

A more recent dissertation by Gregory Charles Cochran helpfully argues for an emphasis on diokology rather than martyrology.[3] The term *diokology* comes from *diōkō*, the Greek verb meaning "to persecute." Though martyrs have a special place in heaven, especially in the book of Revelation, persecution in a more general sense is associated most often in the Bible with heavenly reward and the cost of discipleship. As we said above, Paul viewed persecution as the lot of every Christian (2 Tim. 3:12). Therefore the topic is important for all Christians. Martyrdom is the most prominent expression of persecution and, because it was a real possibility when Revelation was written, is highlighted

there as a powerful representation of the cost of discipleship. So Revelation 6:11 says martyrs are given white robes, which were a sign of honor and which Jewish apocalyptic literature used to describe the glory of the heavenly reward.[4]

Does Persecution Earn the Merit of Special Rewards?

There is a clear link between persecution and heavenly reward in the New Testament, as the eighth beatitude shows. Paul asserts, "We suffer with him *in order that* we may also be glorified with him," and "this light momentary affliction *is preparing for* us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (Rom. 8:17; 2 Cor. 4:17; cf. 2 Tim. 2:12). Yet the link here is that of a means to an end (instrumentation) and not of cause for an effect (causation). Our sufferings do not earn us the merit of an eternal reward; rather, they are necessary experiences that those destined for glory experience. Those who reject the path of suffering for righteousness forfeit the blessedness of heaven by shunning the way of Christ, a way of suffering.

So, when talking of rewards in heaven, we must be careful to distance ourselves from the idea that the rewards are earned as a kind of merit by the person who is persecuted. At first glance we may be inclined to interpret some passages in this way. Jesus speaks of "those who are *considered worthy* to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead" (Luke 20:35). Paul says that the "persecutions" his readers "are enduring . . . is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be *considered worthy* of the kingdom of God" (2 Thess. 1:4–5). On the other hand, Protestant theology explains, as A. W. Tozer puts it, that "the man who believes that he is worthy of heaven will certainly never enter that blessed place."[5] As the classic text goes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8–9).

We should see the word "worthy" in the two verses above as referring not to a worthiness earned through persecution but to the evidence that these are persons who will be *declared* worthy or *counted* worthy at the judgment.[6] The reward is something God graciously gives the persecuted and is not something earned. Even the twenty-four elders in Revelation "cast their crowns before the throne" as they "fall down before" God and exclaim, "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power" (Rev. 4:10–11). In heaven God's greatness and honor are incomparable, eliminating any human claim to honor, so that the symbols of honor—crowns—are surrendered at God's feet! The greatest achievements of the faithful were achievements of grace, eliciting joyous

thanksgiving to God for the privilege of participation in the work of his kingdom.

Yet in the Bible there is the language of reward for faithfulness.[7] A good balance is seen in the statement by English Reformer and martyr Hugh Latimer (1485–1555):

> Every man shall be rewarded for his good works in everlasting life, but not with everlasting life: For it is written, *Vita aeterna donum Dei*, "The everlasting life is a gift of God." Therefore we should not esteem our works so perfect as though we should merit heaven by them: yet God hath such pleasure in such works which we do with a faithful heart, that he promiseth to reward them in everlasting life.[8]

I would, of course, add (as Augustine emphasized[9]) that even our good works are performed through the strength of God's grace. The focus is on grace, not human achievement.

The Bible teaches that even the privilege of being persecuted is a gift from God. Paul says, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (Phil. 1:29). The word translated "granted" (*charizomai*) as used here means "to give or grant graciously and generously, with the implication of good will on the part of the giver."[10] Peter adds, "For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. . . . But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God" (1 Pet. 2:19–20). While suffering does not act as a *cause* of earning rewards, the way to heaven includes suffering as a *means* to that end. Charles Spurgeon said, "He that has long been on the road to Heaven finds that there was good reason why it was promised that his shoes should be iron and brass, for the road is rough."[11] The Bible faithfully warns us of this.

We approach this issue from the perspective that the primary purpose of biblical eschatology is neither to pander to our inquisitiveness about what will happen in the last days nor to inflame our greed for treasures in heaven but to encourage the faithful to persevere along the costly path of obedience. This function of the promise of reward in encouraging faithfulness is well described in Hebrews 10:34–35: "You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward." One

of the hardest things about persecution is, as we shall see later, the shame that comes with it. Jesus, however, tells those who are persecuted, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Matt. 5:12). Instead of being ashamed, they should rejoice. Those who suffer great shame and look like fools are encouraged to remain faithful, for this is the wisest path to take, given the prospect of eternal honor as the reward for faithfulness (see below). Paul asserts: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18).

We should mention here that there was a time in the history of the church when martyrdom was such a high honor that some believers sought it for its rewards and blessings. This trend is said to have been triggered with the events surrounding the martyrdom of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, who died around AD 107. He “admonished Roman believers not to hinder his martyrdom, which they apparently could have done.”[12] So, as Gerald Sittser explains, “Some rushed into martyrdom wanting the glory of it. They bore witness to themselves more than they bore witness to the gospel.” Because of “this obsession with martyrdom,” early Christian leaders had to “establish standards for martyrdom, so that only those who were called to it, against their natural wishes, were given the title ‘martyr.’”[13]

Strength through the Heavenly Vision

It would be true to say that persecution triggered in people a fresh awareness of heaven, which gave them the strength to encounter the worst with bright hope. Joseph Ton says, “In times of persecution and martyrdom, men and women are forced to reconsider issues of ultimate concern, particularly with respect to the nature of God and the eternal destiny of man.”[14]

In Philippians 1, Paul, writing from prison, mentions his hope of being released from prison (v. 19). Yet he knows he may be called to honor Christ in his body through martyrdom (v. 20). Because martyrdom would result in his going to heaven to be with Christ, he says martyrdom would be “far better” than release from prison (vv. 21–23). But, conceding that staying on would mean more opportunity to serve the people, he says release from prison is preferred (vv. 24–25). Later Paul describes the possibility of martyrdom as being “poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith” (2:17). This same expression is used in Paul’s last letter, written from prison when he was sure martyrdom awaited him: “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come” (2 Tim. 4:6). Then after

proclaiming he has faithfully carried out his work (v. 7), he speaks of his hope of receiving "the crown of righteousness" from Christ (v. 8).

Jesus is even more explicit when he tells the persecuted, "Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven" (Luke 6:23). In a similar vein Peter says, "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you" (1 Pet. 4:13–14). At the moment of death, Stephen had a vision of heaven and "saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). At this time of painful rejection by the legal system of his own people, this patriotic Jew has a glimpse of acceptance by the greatest of all Jews, now reigning in heaven. This would have given him the confidence to act with Christlike serenity, just as Jesus asked his followers to do in Luke 6:23. Once, when a martyr smiled in the flames, those who were putting him to death "asked him what he found to smile at there. 'I saw the glory of God,' he said, 'and was glad.'"[15]

There is a long list of texts in the New Testament that present the heavenly reward as a key motivator to faithfully embracing the cross that Christians encounter. It is a list stunning in its variety, comprehensiveness, and persuasive power. Included in this list are passages that present the alternative to the heavenly vision that those who shun the way of the cross will inherit: the way leading to punishment at the judgment.

- At the start of this chapter we saw how Jesus' basic call to discipleship implies a call to endure persecution and the promise of eternal reward (Mark 8:34–38).

- When the Twelve are sent out on their preaching tour shortly after their selection, they are warned about rejection and persecution in the extended discourse recorded in Matthew 10. First, Jesus talks about the possibility of their message being rejected. He says it will be more bearable at the judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah than for the towns that reject his message (vv. 13–15). This is followed by a large section on persecution (vv. 16–28), and a key argument there is that we must "not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." Rather, we are to "fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (v. 28). Then there is a discussion aimed at encouraging them not to fear as they face various difficulties, such as rejection by their own family members (vv. 29–39). Here a key point in Jesus' argument includes heaven: "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven" (vv. 32–33).

- In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus warns of the prospect of being beaten in synagogues, standing before governors and kings, being brought to trial, opposition from family members who may even have them put to death, and of being hated by all for the sake of the name of Jesus (Mark 13:9–13). This section of the discourse concludes with the statement, “But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (v. 13). The salvation talked about here is the heavenly destiny of the faithful.

- Paul, in his discussion on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, says, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (v. 19). Among the reasons why Paul could be pitied is the fact that he is “in danger every hour” and “die[s] every day” (vv. 30–31). But he will not give up this path of the cross. In fact, in view of the coming resurrection, he is able to urge his readers at the end of this discussion: “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (v. 58).

- Second Corinthians 4:8–12 contains one of many lists of Paul’s sufferings: “We are afflicted in every way,” “perplexed,” “persecuted,” “struck down,” and “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus,” for “we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake,” so “death is at work in us.” But Paul does not lose heart (v. 16). He gives three reasons for his perseverance amidst such hardship. First, he says that through his ministry people are coming to Christ and receiving salvation for the glory of God (v. 15). Second, “though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day” (v. 16). Third, he mentions his hope of heaven: “knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence” (v. 14). A few verses later he says, “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (4:17–5:1).

- In his last letter Paul describes how he is “suffering” for the sake of the gospel, “bound with chains as a criminal” (2 Tim. 2:9). He says he “endure[s] everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (v. 10). He wants them also to experience the glory of heaven. Then he says, “The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us” (vv. 11–12).

- In Hebrews 10, after listing the persecutions the readers suffered (vv. 32–33), the writer says the

readers endured such persecution because of their hope of heaven: “And you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” (v. 34). Then he urges them to persevere, keeping the heavenly reward in mind: “Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised” (vv. 35–36).

- Hebrews 11:35 says, “Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.” This is followed by a stirring list of the sufferings of people of faith in the Old Testament era (vv. 36–38).

- Hebrews 13:13–14 urges: “Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.”

- In Revelation 2:10 the angel urges the persecuted church in Smyrna, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Again there is a promise: “The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death” (v. 11).

- The church of Philadelphia, which had kept God’s Word by exercising patient endurance (3:10), is urged, “Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown” (v. 11). This is followed by a promise related to the glories of heaven: “The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name” (v. 12).

The variety, comprehensiveness, and persuasive power of this list of texts, presenting the heavenly reward as a key motivator to embracing the cross, are stunning. Perhaps equally stunning is how rarely this emphasis figures in the proclamation of the church today. Perhaps this is a reaction to the pie-in-the-sky emphasis of an earlier generation that lulled people to acquiescence at times when they should have been acting to redress wrong.

But the biblical theology of persecution and heavenly reward does not lull us to inaction; rather, it drives us to a life of radical service for the kingdom.

Hebrews 10:34 mentions how the prospect of a heavenly reward helped even persecuted Christians to pursue a life of compassion for suffering people: “For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.” Similarly, Paul told the Colossian Christians of “the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven” (Col. 1:4–5). Commenting on this verse, John Piper says, “Hope is the great power to love people in the face of great danger.”[16]

In light of this neglect of such a major portion of God’s revelation, we should not be surprised that many Christians make choices that tend to avoid the way of the cross. What they think of the church is influenced by a consumerist attitude (“What is the program like in this church?”) rather than biblical commitment to the group of people called to be their body, which, of course, involves much discomfort and pain. We should not be surprised by the lack of a sharp moral edge among Christians, or by the church’s inability to motivate people to costly commitment and service. In place of a message of radical obedience motivated by the hope of glorious future reward in heaven, we seem to have chosen to entertain our flock with pleasing programs that meet their perceived wants in the present. We seem to be letting marketing approaches used in the society (“Give them what they want now”) silence the voice of Scripture calling people to radical commitment with the promise of heavenly reward.

Strength through Christ’s Presence

An important feature of the death of Stephen was his entering into what Paul described as the fellowship of Christ’s suffering (Phil. 3:10, e.g., NASB). At the point of death Stephen enjoyed an intimate relationship with Jesus by being filled with his Spirit, being given a glimpse of his glory and the glory of heaven (Acts 7:55–56), and acting as Jesus did when he died (vv. 59–60). The connection between sharing in Christ’s sufferings and the heavenly hope is presented in 1 Peter 4:13: “But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”

The doctrine of fellowship in Christ’s sufferings is a natural extension of the doctrine of our union with Christ. Christ is a suffering Savior, and if we are to be truly one with him, we too must suffer. There is a depth of union with Christ that comes to us only through suffering. But not only do we share in his sufferings; he also shares in our sufferings. The exalted Christ, sharing in the glory of God, is not deaf to our cries of pain as we suffer; he himself suffers with us when we

suffer. Paul came to understand this on the road to Damascus when he heard Jesus ask, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). He had been hitting the church, but Christ had been feeling the pain![17]

Matthew closes his Gospel with Jesus’ giving the disciples the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20). Soon they would find that fulfilling this mission brings with it many challenges and much suffering. So after giving the Great Commission, Jesus tells his disciples, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (v. 20). Strengthened by God’s presence, they would be able to withstand whatever troubles came their way. In Hebrews 13:5 the writer reminds his readers of the promise that God “will never leave you nor forsake you.” Then the writer proceeds to say, “So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’” (v. 6). The presence of Christ helps us endure hardship that comes from people. David Livingstone often spoke of how the promise of Christ to be with him always encouraged him to persevere in his work amidst so much opposition, loneliness, sickness, and pain. He once wrote in his diary,

> Felt much turmoil in view of having all my plans for the welfare of this great region and teeming population knocked on the head by savages tomorrow. But I read that Jesus came and said, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth, Go ye therefore, and teach all nations—and lo, I am with you alway, *even* unto the end of the world.” It was the word of a gentleman of the most sacred and strictest honour, and there is an end on’t.

Then after describing what he hopes to do, even though it may be the last time he will do it, he writes, “I feel quite calm now, thank God.”[18]

The primary pursuit in the lives of Christians is to be always deepening their tie with God. If that is intact, suffering becomes bearable. John and Betty Stam, who were missionaries in China, were martyred by the communists in the 1930s while still in their late twenties. John Stam once said, “Take away everything I have, but do not take away the sweetness of walking and talking with the king of glory!”[19]

This presence of Christ is mediated today through the Holy Spirit. Jesus gave him the name “Helper” (*paraklētos*), which would literally be translated “one who is called to someone’s side”; that is, as the lexicon puts it, “one who is called to someone’s aid.”[20] It is literally translated into Latin as *advocatus*,

which gives the English term *advocate*. Jesus says the Holy Spirit will play the part of a helping advocate when persecutors bring believers to trial: “And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit” (Mark 13:11).

The presence of Christ with us also serves as a foretaste of heaven. Paul describes his experience of the Holy Spirit as the firstfruits of the heavenly hope of final redemption: “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23; cf. 2 Cor. 5:2). One biblical response to suffering is to groan, but this is groaning as “in the pains of childbirth” (Rom. 8:22). That is, it is tinged with the hope of heavenly redemption. The groaner, like the woman in labor, knows the pain will soon be gone. But how can we be so sure about this hope? We have “the firstfruits of the Spirit”—the daily experience of Christ’s presence with us. As the familiar song by Fanny Crosby puts it, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh what a foretaste of glory divine!”

While there are many references in the Bible to experiencing the kingdom of God (or heaven) as a future hope, the kingdom is also described as a present reality. Jesus said his casting out demons was a sign that the kingdom of God had come upon people (Matt. 12:28). The Beatitudes say, of those who are “poor in spirit” and are “persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:3, 10). Paul said of Christians, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col. 1:13). As E. Stanley Jones says, “Jesus Christ means to me eternal life. I don’t get it hereafter, I have it now in Him. I am sure of heaven, for I am sure of Him. To be in Him is to be in heaven wherever you are.”[21]

The theology of groaning expounded in Romans 8 is a good antidote to quitting when the cost of obedience to God gets great. When we suffer for the gospel, we experience pain and feel bad about the way we are treated. Because of this we will be tempted to quit the way of the cross. But our theology tells us we should not be surprised about being frustrated and feeling bad, for that is a normal part of life in a fallen world (Rom. 8:20). So, instead of escaping the pain by quitting, we have biblical permission to give expression to our pain in groaning (vv. 22–23).

Romans 8 gives three reasons for persevering in obedience while enduring the pain that accompanies such obedience. First, we have the firstfruits of the Spirit; that is, we experience the presence and provision of Christ (v. 23). Later, Paul

waxes eloquent on how nothing, even persecution or other trials, can separate us from the love of Christ (vv. 35, 38–39). In verse 26 Paul says the nearness of the Spirit is so intense that he joins our groaning by groaning with us. Second, we suffer in hope, knowing that the pain is short-lived and will end permanently when we arrive at our eternal heavenly reward (vv. 18–19, 20–24). In fact, "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (v. 18). Third—and this is outside the scope of this chapter—"We know that for those who love God all things work together for good" (v. 28), so that "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (v. 37).

A Biblical Foursome

In the middle of the section in the Olivet Discourse where Jesus predicts persecution for the faithful is an interjection: "And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations" (Mark 13:10). Matthew's version adds, "and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). The progression of history toward its heavenly destiny is closely connected with the progression of the proclamation of the gospel to the ends of the world. And the proclamation of the gospel is closely connected with persecution. The commonest trigger of persecution, in the Bible and in church history, has been evangelism. Sometimes persecution triggers evangelism, as in the case of the witness of the people who were scattered after the death of Stephen (Acts 8:1–4; 11:19). We have already spoken of the close connection between persecution, the presence of Christ, and the hope of heaven.

So we see a foursome of inseparably connected features of Christian truth: (1) *Evangelism* triggers (2) *persecution*. (3) The *presence of Christ* helps us bear the persecution and gives a foretaste of heaven. (4) The *heavenly vision* helps us be faithful amidst persecution. And evangelism plays a role in bringing the historical progression of the heavenly vision to its climax.

My father, giving a report on persecution in Sri Lanka at a workshop of an international conference on evangelism, said the question to ask regarding Sri Lanka was not, "Why are we being persecuted?" but "Why are we not being persecuted?"[22] That was in the 1960s, when the church was experiencing what may be called "post-colonial blues." Embarrassment over the association of Christianity with the British (from whom Sri Lanka got independence in 1948), plus the influence of debilitating liberal theologies, resulted in a largely nominal church that did almost no evangelism among those of other faiths. Thankfully, that scenario changed and evangelistic fervor became a feature of a large

segment of the church from the early 1990s. But with that came wave after wave of persecution that is a reality even to the present. When Christians take evangelism seriously, they will call people to a salvation that includes radical conversion. That inevitably invites opposition.

Gracious Martyrs versus Suicide Bombers

Courage in the face of persecution for a cause and for the anticipation of a heavenly reward is sometimes found outside the Christian tradition. What has characterized the Christian response to persecution has been its perpetuation of the tradition of gracious suffering, exemplified by the first martyr, Stephen. This, as we have argued, comes out of a confidence born from an experience of Christ's love and a vision of the glory of heaven. The comparison of Christian and non-Christian martyrdom has become crucial today because of the prominence given to "suicide bombers" in recent times. During the recently concluded civil war in Sri Lanka, this was developed into an art; many prominent people were assassinated by militants willing to sacrifice their lives for their cause.

The Muslim martyrs are especially significant to this chapter because the promise of special blessings for martyrs in paradise remains one of the primary motivations for dying for the cause. There are *fatwas*, or legal opinions, given by jurists or religious leaders that are appealed to and promise paradise for those who sacrifice their lives as martyrs. Frequently cited in these is a verse from the Qur'an: "Allah has bought from the believers their lives and their wealth in return for Paradise; they fight in the way of Allah, kill and are killed. . . . Rejoice then at the bargain you have made with Him; for that is the great triumph. (9:110)."[23] Recent radical Islamic leaders have, in their pronouncements, promised heaven as one of the rewards of dying for the cause.[24]

While both Christian martyrs and suicide bombers claim to die for the cause of God and are encouraged by a heavenly vision, there are huge differences between the two. Christian martyrs die involuntarily as they are killed by the opponents of Christianity, whereas suicide bombers trigger the bombs themselves. Their aim is to destroy as many enemy targets and people as possible even as they die. Jesus, on the other hand, commands his followers, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44; cf. Luke 6:27, 35). Paul explains further: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink" (Rom. 12:20). The last words to come from the mouth of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, are, "Lord, do not hold this sin

against them" (Acts 7:60). In fact, Paul says, "If I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3).

Graciousness, then, distinguishes Christian martyrdom. James, who was the brother of Jesus and died for his faith around AD 62, is reported to have said, "I beg you Lord God our Father, forgive them, for they are unaware of what they are doing."[25] In 1913 five tribe members in Toradya in Southern Celebes, Indonesia, killed a missionary but permitted him to pray first. He prayed aloud that they would be saved. Three of the murderers were converted in prison and returned to Toradya, where they founded a church that became one of the largest churches in Indonesia.[26]

Sadly, in the heat of conflict suicide bombers could be regarded as heroes by others. Suicide bombings have been known to encourage others to join the militant movements they represent. Gracious Christian martyrdom also serves to attract people to the gospel of Christ. In the post–New Testament period, witness became so closely linked with persecution that the biblical word for witness, *marturia*, gave rise to the word used for one who dies for his faith—*martyr*. The second-century theologian and apologist Justin Martyr "became a Christian after he had watched the brutal execution of several Christians in Rome." Gerald Sittser explains: "He was moved by their courage and serenity, and he was intrigued by a faith that could engender such uncompromising conviction."[27] Justin said, "The more we are persecuted and martyred, the more do others in ever increasing numbers become believers."[28]

The Cry for Justice

While most martyrs are radiant in death, all feel the sting of the injustice carried out against them. The Bible is alert to the injustice of martyrdom. And the faithful, endowed with God's attitude of repulsion toward injustice, are also troubled by the apparent dishonor to God in the triumph of the wicked. The Bible often records the righteous' crying out for justice via punishment upon the wicked who persecute and hurt them (1 Sam. 24:12; Ps. 79:10; Isa. 6:11; Jer. 18:21; cf. Luke 18:7). Usually these cries and prayers are those of people who are still living on earth. Revelation, however, records martyrs in heaven doing so (6:9–10) during the intermediate state, before the final triumph of Christ. Paul's injunction to show kindness to enemies is given in the background of God's enacting vengeance upon the wicked (Rom. 12:19–20). The answer the martyrs receive to their cry in Revelation 6 is to wait a little longer until the number of

the martyrs is complete (v. 11). Following this, the tables are turned and the wicked rulers cry out in despair, in terror under the hand of God's judgment (vv. 12–17).

It is from the background of commitment to the justice of God that we should interpret the praise to God for the fall of Babylon, the great prostitute, who wreaked havoc in the world. The description ends with the words, "And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth" (18:24). Revelation gives the response to this: "After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, 'Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants' " (19:1–2). This is followed by more praise and three more exclamations of "Hallelujah!" (vv. 3, 4, 6).

If heaven is alert to the issue of the injustice of persecution, it is inevitable that the persecuted on earth also would be alert to it. The book of Acts shows that Paul appealed to justice in the face of persecution and did all he could to ensure he was treated justly. He even protested, when he could, about unjust treatment (see 16:37). Clearly he was alert to the fact that condoning injustice and letting it pass unchallenged is damaging to the cause of the gospel.

Similarly, today the church must do all it can to highlight and contend against persecution and work toward achieving justice for the persecuted. It must also work to ensure recognition for Christians as a legitimate unit of society, with the legal right to practice and proclaim their faith. Some believe that gaining such legal recognition was one of Luke's main aims behind the writing of the Acts of the Apostles.[29] Yet even when the persecuted do not get justice on earth, the assurance that justice will prevail in the end helps keep them from being bitter over the injustices they face.

The Shame of Persecution and Anticipating the Honor of Heaven

The above description serves as a warning against romanticizing persecution and presenting it in a sanitized form, which neglects the pain and focuses primarily on the heroism of the persecuted. Persecution is terrible to go through, and this is why it makes the persecuted long so fervently for heaven. Even as I write, I have friends and students in Sri Lanka who live with great fear and uncertainty and have children especially terrified at what is happening around them. Glimpses of this pain are found in Paul's lists of his sufferings, which are presented as real

and painful suffering. See, for example, 2 Corinthians 11:23–27:

> Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

Paul would have had such persecutions in mind when he talked about the frustrations that affected him so deeply: "We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23). Elsewhere he says, "For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling" (2 Cor. 5:2). Heaven is presented as a place where these sufferings do not exist anymore: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4; cf. 7:14–17). So heaven is a place of great relief to suffering people, and sufferers longingly live with the hope of an end in heaven to their suffering.

The longing for escape from suffering in heaven is reflected in the prayers of many martyrs in history. Simeon, a bishop of Seleucia martyred in the fourth century, said,

> Lord, grant me this crown for which I have longed; for I have loved you with all my heart and with all my soul. I long to see you, to be filled with joy, and to find rest. Then I will no longer have to witness the suffering of my congregation, the destruction of your churches, the overthrow of your altars, the persecution of your priests, the abuse of the defenseless, the departure from truth, and the large flock I watched over diminished by this time of trial.[30]

Perhaps the hardest aspect of persecution is the shame that comes with it. This is particularly true in our more communally oriented, so-called shame-and-honor

cultures, where doing things that go against community values (such as embracing another religion) is considered a shameful act and an attack on the honor of the whole community. The North African senator and martyr Dativus prayed before his death: “Lord Christ, let me not be put to shame. Christ, I beseech you, let me not be put to shame. Christ come to my aid, have pity on me, let me not be put to shame. Christ, I beseech you, give me the strength to suffer what I must for you.”[31]

The humiliation of persecution is most painful because it makes the persecuted look like failures and fools and their faith look powerless. But the Bible is keen to remind the faithful that taking on hardship for Christ is a wise investment, the benefits of which are of eternal duration. On the other hand, the rich farmer who had much honor on earth is called a “fool” because “the one who lays up treasure for himself . . . is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:20–21). Being called a “fool,” of course, is the ultimate expression of shame, and in this case it extends to eternity.

The awareness of the shame factor that comes with discipleship is often seen in the Bible. Peter and John “left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:41). What the world saw as shame had become a badge of honor. But the greatest honor for those who experience the cost of discipleship is in the future, especially in heaven. After describing how the grain of wheat, which falls into the ground and dies, bears fruit, Jesus promises that the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternity. Then he says that those who serve him will need to follow him (to death). Then he states, “If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” (John 12:24–26). In Romans 5 Paul talks about rejoicing in the hope of glory and then proceeds to talk about suffering and how God uses it to refine us. The final character that emerges from suffering is hope. “And hope,” says Paul, “does not put us to shame” (Rom. 5:5).

Jesus warns believers: “For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38; cf. 2 Tim. 2:12). In the millennium those who were martyred and persecuted “came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Rev. 20:4). The honor of reigning is the complete opposite of the shame of being hounded by those who reigned while they lived on earth. To this we can add the many passages that talk about the shameful judgment that awaits those who reject Christ and his people (e.g., Matt. 11:20–24; 12:41–42; Revelation 17–19). Luke

12:20 clearly presents the judgment of the unjust in terms depicting shame. There Jesus called the rich man, who was not rich toward God, a "fool."

I live in a culture where corruption is rampant and where those who refuse to bow down to it and instead stick to biblical principles often have to struggle with the shame that accompanies failure to obtain some of life's necessities. They have to work much harder than others if they are to succeed, and even after that they are not guaranteed success. In this environment the prospect of shame for the unrighteous and honor for the righteous at the judgment could be a strong factor in encouraging faithfulness to biblical principles. The doctrine of judgment was a major motivating factor for resisting corruption and pursuing righteousness in the Old Testament (see Deut. 27:25; Ezek. 22:12–13; Amos 2:6–16). It could be so today too.

Hebrews 6:1–2 includes "the resurrection of the dead" and "eternal judgment" in a list of the "elementary doctrine" that provides the "foundation" for deeper teaching. The wise Christian leader today would teach these topics as basic to Christianity. We have seen that a major value of this teaching is that it encourages perseverance among those who are experiencing persecution, shame, and other forms of hardship because of evangelism and other forms of obedience to Christ. It reminds them that shame and loss resulting from obedience cannot be compared with the honor and blessing of heavenly reward for obedience. The prospect of heaven is, then, a great motivation to faithfulness in taking up the cross and following Christ.

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[1] Josef Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Romanian Missionary Society, 2000), *xiii–xiv*.

[2] Ibid., 14.

[3] Gregory Charles Cochran, *New Testament Persecution and the Inception of Diokology through the Application of the Regnal Righteousness Dynamic*, PhD Dissertation (Louisville, KY: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010).

[4] Grant Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 288.

[5] A. W. Tozer, *Man: The Dwelling Place of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1966), 15.

[6] See Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 118.

[7] For a contrary view that denies a doctrine of continuing rewards in heaven, see Craig Blomberg, "Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven?" *JETS* 35 (1992): 159–72.

[8] Hugh Latimer, "The Second Sermon of Master Hugh Latimer on the Beatitudes," in *The Sermons of the Right Reverend Father in God, and Constant Martyr of Jesus Christ, Hugh Latimer, Sometime Bishop of*

Worcester (London: Paternoster-Row, 1824), 156; cited in Cochran, *New Testament Persecution*, 203.

[9] P. F. Jensen, "Merit," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 422.

[10] L&N, s.v. *charizomai*.

[11] Elliot Ritzema and Elizabeth Vince, eds., *300 Quotations for Preachers from the Modern Church*, Pastorum Series (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2013).

[12] Thomas Schirrmacher, "Theses on a Theology of Martyrdom," in *Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom: Theological Reflections*, ed. Christof Sauer and Richard Howell (Bonn, Germany: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2010), 303.

[13] Gerald Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 319n38.

[14] Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards*, 57.

[15] William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, 3rd ed., New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2003), 49.

[16] John Piper, *Risk Is Right* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 23.

[17] This paragraph depends heavily on Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 264–69.

[18] William Blaikie, *David Livingstone*: *The Authorized Biography* (repr. Dunbar, Scotland: Labarum, n.d.), 181.

[19] Cited in Sherwood Elliot Wirt and Kersten Beckstrom, *Living Quotations for Christians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 266.

[20] BDAG, s.v. *paraklētos*.

[21] E. Stanley Jones, *The Word Became Flesh* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1963), 382.

[22] Benjamin E. Fernando. I believe this was at the World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin, 1966.

[23] David Cook, "The Implications of 'Martyrdom Operations' for Contemporary Islam," *JRE* 32/1 (2004): 132.

[24] Ibid., 141.

[25] Dwayne W. H. Arnold, ed., *Prayers of the Martyrs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 71.

[26] Schirrmacher, "Theses on a Theology of Martyrdom," 307.

[27] Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well*, 33.

[28] Ibid.

[29] John W. Mauck, *Paul on Trial: The Book of Acts as a Defense of Christianity* (Nashville: Nelson, 2001).

[30] *Prayers of the Martyrs*, 31.

[31] Ibid., 93.

11

THE HOPE OF HEAVEN

DAVID B. CALHOUN



The hope laid up for you in heaven.
—Colossians 1:5

My seven-year-old grandson, Ian, asked me a question, “Granddaddy, what is hope?” I answered with some difficulty, “Well, hope is wanting something good to happen. It is expecting it to happen but not being sure it will happen.” Ian thought for a moment, then said softly to himself, “That’s not hope.” Ian was right. That’s not hope. What, then, is hope?

Definition of Hope

The *Oxford Dictionary of the English Language* gives two meanings of the word. First, hope is to “entertain expectation of something desired.” We can call this common or natural hope. Second, hope is “to trust, have confidence.” This meaning, the dictionary states, is obsolete except as a “biblical archaism.” Christians use *hope* to mean “to trust, have confidence,” as the Bible generally does. We can call this biblical or theological hope.

Jerome Groopman, professor at Harvard Medical School, in *The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness* writes that for his patients hope has proved as important as any medication he might prescribe or procedure he might perform. “Hope, I have come to believe,” writes the doctor, “is as vital to our lives as the very oxygen that we breathe.”[1] Acknowledging that there is no uniform definition of hope, Groopman proposes one that seemed to capture what

his patients had taught him: “Hope is the elevating feeling we experience when we see—in the mind’s eye—a path to a better future.”[2] This kind of common or natural hope can be a good thing, but it will ultimately disappoint. In the movie *Candles on Bay Street*, a young mother tells her little son that she is dying of cancer. Devastated by such news, he says through sobs, “But can we keep on hoping?” “Yes,” she answers, “we can keep on hoping”—but soon she dies.

Words from Writers and Poets

John Ruskin in his *Stones of Venice* describes the facades on that city’s Ducal Palace to illustrate the change the Renaissance brought to the word *hope*—a change that in time rendered the definition of *hope* as “trust and confidence” obsolete and archaic. In the fourteenth century, *hope* was personified as “praying, while above her a hand is seen emerging from sunbeams—the hand of God (according to that of Revelation, ‘The Lord God giveth them light’); and the inscription above is ‘*Spes optima in Deo*.’ This design is rudely and with imperfect chiseling imitated by the fifteenth-century workman. Hope is still praying but she is praying to the sun only: *The hand of God is gone*.”[3]

When “the hand of God is gone,” the stronger meaning of *hope*—“to have trust, confidence”—is gone. Hope without God cannot reach beyond the sun. It can only say what I said when I tried to tell Ian about hope: “Well, hope is wanting something good to happen. It is expecting it to happen but not being sure it will happen.”

In *A Diary of a Country Priest*, a doctor tells the priest that once or twice he has killed “a man’s hope with one blow, one word.” He goes on, “I know what you’ll answer: your theologians have made a virtue of trust in the future, your trust has folded hands. All very well for ‘trust’—nobody’s ever seen that angel very closely.”[4]

Many modern people, like the doctor, think of hope—in the strong sense of confident trust—as a pious delusion with “folded hands.” In a letter to the *New York Times Book Review*, someone wrote: “Faith is, by definition, make believe. . . . People recognize it as magical thinking.”[5]

Not long before he died of cancer in 1991, Howard Nemerov, professor at Washington University in St. Louis and poet laureate of the United States, wrote this short poem of two sentences:

> What rational being, after seventy years,
> When Scripture says he’s running out of rope,

Would want more of the only world he knows?
No rational being, he while he endures
Holds on to the inveterate infantile hope
That the road ends but as the runway does.[6]

Nemerov says people can't seem to give up the childish hope that at the end of this life, there is something more—and perhaps better.

Other poets and writers have tried to hold on to hope as trust and confidence but have found it difficult to see "that angel very closely." Robert Louis Stevenson writes:

With the half of a broken hope for a pillow at night
That somehow the right is the right
And the smooth shall bloom from the rough:
Lord, if that were enough?[7]

Stevenson hopes for the best, but he can't be sure things are going to work out well—that "the right is the right" and "the smooth shall bloom from the rough." His little poem ends not with an affirmation but with a question.

To Emily Dickinson,

Hope is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all.[8]

Dickinson's hope is like a bird that keeps on singing, but it sings a song without words.

Songs in the Night

Real hope is more than a tune without words. Elihu was wrong about Job but right about God when he said it is God "who gives songs in the night" (Job 35:10).

Dante opens his *Divine Comedy* with these words: "Midway along the journey of our life I awoke to find myself in a dark wood."[9] When I was fifty years old, I suddenly found myself in a dark wood. A little lump in my neck turned out to be a relatively rare form of non-Hodgkins lymphoma, almost always fatal within

five years. The nights were my worst times. If I died, would my wife and children be all right? What about the goals of my life and ministry that were far from being reached? When radiation burned my vocal cords and I could no longer teach my classes, I felt useless. I was often sick with the brutal regimes of chemotherapy. More than once I asked, "Where is God, my maker?" And more and more God gave me "songs in the night." "There is great beauty in this expression," writes Albert Barnes. "It has been verified in thousands of instances where the afflicted have looked up though tears to God, and their mourning has been turned into joy."[10] Here are a few "songs in the night" God's people treasure, songs I sang in my heart "in the valley of the shadow of death."

After their sin, Adam and Eve "hid themselves from the presence of the LORD," but God found them and gave them a song (Gen. 3:8, 15).

> Sin's bond severed, we're delivered;
> Christ has bruised the serpent's head;
> Death no longer is the stronger;
> Hell itself is captive led.
> Christ has risen from death's prison;
> O'er the tomb he light has shed.[11]

"The wickedness of man was great in the earth," and God sent a flood but then gave a rainbow (Gen. 6:5; 9:12–16).

> O Joy that seekest me through pain,
> I cannot close my heart to thee:
> I trace the rainbow through the rain
> And feel the promise is not vain,
> That morn shall tearless be.[12]

There is a "valley of the shadow of death," but God walks with us through it (Ps. 23:4).

> Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale,
> Yet will I fear none ill,
> For thou art with me;
> And thy rod and staff me comfort still.[13]

The psalmist prayed, “O LORD. . . . I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping” (Ps. 6:4–6), but there is coming a day when God “will wipe away every tear” and “night will be no more” (Rev. 21:4; 22:5).

> God shall wipe away all tears;
> There’s no death, no pain, nor fears;
> And they count not time by years,
> For there is no night there.[14]

In heaven there will be no songs in the night because there will be no night; there will be songs of gladness and joy, when “the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isa. 35:10; 51:11).

Pictures of Hope

The word *hope* appears 151 times in the ESV as the translation of a number of Hebrew and Greek words.[15] *Hope* in the weaker sense, as the expectation of something desired, appears in the Bible from time to time, as when Paul writes to Timothy, “I hope to come to you soon” (1 Tim. 3:14). But in most of the Bible references *hope* has the stronger meaning of trust and confidence.

Robert A. Webb gave the Thomas Smyth Lectures at Columbia Theological Seminary in 1914 on “The Christian’s Hope.” He began with these words: “Everywhere hope looks out of the windows of the Christian Scriptures.”[16]

The psalmist prayed, “Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live, and let me not be put to shame in my hope” (Ps. 119:116). The apostle rejoiced “in the hope of the glory of God,” confident this hope does “not put us to shame” (Rom. 5:2, 5). Paul told the Christians in Colossae that their hope was laid up for them “in heaven” (Col. 1:5). These two words, *hope* and *heaven*, belong together. We now “hope for what we do not see,” but in that day we will see and hope will become heaven (Rom. 8:25).

Biblical hope refers to the Christian’s assurance and confidence that springs from God’s covenant promise repeated throughout the Bible—“I will make my dwelling among you. . . . And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Lev. 26:11–12; cf. Ezek. 37:26–27; Hos. 2:23; 1 Pet. 2:10).

Throughout the Old Testament God's people turned from the woes and uncertainties of their lives to the faithfulness of God and certainty of his promise.

Abraham "in hope . . . believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told" by God (Rom. 4:18). Abraham did not believe in hope, but in hope he believed in God's promise, although the fulfillment of that promise seemed humanly impossible.

Jeremiah calls God the "hope of Israel, its savior in time of trouble," and prays, "You, O LORD, are in the midst of us, and we are called by your name; do not leave us" (Jer. 14:8–9).

God says to Hosea, "I will . . . make the Valley of Achor a door of hope" (Hos. 2:15). Achor, where Achan was cursed for his disobedience, is a place of trouble. But even there God opens a door of hope. "If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself" (2 Tim. 2:12–13).

In one of the last books of the Old Testament, Zechariah tells the people to "rejoice greatly" because their king is coming to them. The prophet says, "Because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free. . . . Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double" (Zech. 9:11–12). To be prisoners is a distressing thing, but to be "prisoners of hope" is a liberating truth. God's people are held by hope. Thank God—we can't get away from it. It is always there, shouting aloud, "Your king is coming to you."

The Old Testament saints of Hebrews 11 "died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar," desiring "a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city" (vv. 13–15).

In these passages and many others *hope* is "something greater even than confident expectation"; it is "something more closely related to the character of God."[17] Biblical hope is not a wish tinged with doubt, not merely an expectation of something yet to come. It is grounded in nothing so uncertain as circumstances, still less in our feelings, but in the absolute reliability of God's character. When God desired to show to Abraham "the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath," that is, he swore by himself, giving his words unique authority, because "it is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:17–18).

God's people "have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" and "rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2). In the New Testament,

Christian hope still rests upon the covenant promise of God but now more explicitly upon Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection.

In Thessalonians "the hope of salvation" is called a "helmet" that protects the Christian's head—our thinking—by assuring us that "God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ who died for us" (1 Thess. 5:8–9).

Hope is "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul," providing security and stability in the storms of life. Anchored in the promise of God, it "enters into the inner place behind the curtain"—that is, the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle and temple—"where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf." The risen Christ in heaven is our eternal High Priest, so we have the strongest "encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us" (Heb. 6:18–20). Just before he died, Jaroslav Pelikan said, "If Christ is raised, nothing else matters. If Christ is not raised, nothing matters."[18]

Much of the Bible sets forth in history, poetry, prophecy, and letters the reality of the Christian's hope: from the promise of Genesis 3:15—"He [Christ] shall bruise your [Satan's] head"—to almost the last words of the Bible, where the promise is turned into a prayer—"Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20). Much of the rest of the Bible is about keeping that hope alive—when the garden of Eden is closed (Gen. 3:24), food runs out in the wilderness (Ex. 16:3), children and possessions are lost (Job 1–2), and enemies are coming (Hab. 1:6); when "our outer self is wasting away" (2 Cor. 4:16), "the mystery of lawlessness" is at work (1 Thess. 2:7), and "the nations rage" (Rev. 11:18).

Suffering and Hope

The certainty of our hope is as strong as the covenant promise of God and the resurrection of Christ, but our grasping of that hope in times of trouble is often difficult.

Believers ask the questions David asks: "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Ps. 13:1). Jeremiah asks, "Why should you be like a stranger in the land, like a traveler who turns aside to tarry for a night? Why should you be like a man confused, like a mighty warrior who cannot save?" (Jer. 14:8–9). Habakkuk asks: "O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?" (Hab. 1:2). "The souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne" cry out, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:9–10).

Seventeenth-century English poet George Herbert wrote about his disappointment and frustration in “Hope”:

> I gave to Hope a watch of mine: but he
> An anchor gave to me.
> Then an old prayer-book I did present:
> And he an optic sent.
> With that I gave a vial full of tears:
> But he a few green ears:
> Ah Loiterer! I’ll no more, no more I’ll bring:
> I did expect a ring.

The watch suggests the giver’s notion that the time for fulfillment of his hope is nearly due. The anchor given in return shows he will need to hold on for some time yet. The old prayer book tells of prayers long used and nearly worn out. The optic, or telescope, shows their fulfillment can be seen only from afar. Tears receive in return only a few green ears, which will need time to ripen for harvest. Then the poet’s patience gives out. He will no longer bring his hopes to such a “loiterer.” Furthermore, he expected a ring. This may be an allusion to the rings John Donne sent, shortly before his death, to Herbert and a few other friends. Engraved on the rings was a picture of “Christ crucified on an anchor, which is the emblem of hope.” In another poem Herbert acknowledges receiving the ring from Donne and writes, “When wind and waves rise highest, I am sure, this Anchor keeps my faith . . . secure.”[19]

Garret Keizer, a minister in the Episcopal church, writes:

> More and more I see God as the Almighty Listener. More and more I see how preoccupied we are with the “answers” to our prayers, never acknowledging the utterly omnipotent and compassionate act of God’s hearing them. In contrast with the half-open ears of even our dearest friends, we have a listening as large as the universe, a listening so profound we can almost hear it—and it unsettles us, like the breathless silence of someone on the phone who does not even mutter an “uh-huh” to our confessions until we feel compelled to ask, “Are you still there?”[20]

Yes, God is still there, and he is not a “loiterer.” “Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, ‘Yet a little while and the coming one will come and will not delay’” (Heb. 10:35–37).

Romans 8:18–25 and 2 Corinthians 4:16–18

Suffering comes to all who are members of God's family. "Not all are martyrs; not all are captives; not all are driven into exile for Christ's sake. . . . And yet even those whose path has been most sheltered in the goodness of God will be called to encounter suffering."[21]

In the midst of the horrors depicted in Revelation 13 are the words: "Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints" (v. 10). There are words like that throughout the Bible. Paul writes that it is "through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures" that we have hope. Not only do we have hope but we "abound in hope" "by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:4, 13). The Holy Spirit, writes C. D. F. Moule, is "the present tense of hope."[22]

In Romans 8 Paul encourages Christians to endure "the sufferings of this present time," because we know they "are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (v. 18). We do not yet see that glory, but "we wait for it with patience" (v. 25).

Nowhere more fully than in the opening chapters of 2 Corinthians does Paul describe the trials and distresses of his life as ambassador of Christ in which he "despaired of life itself" (1:8). A little further on he writes that he was afflicted in every way, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. Startlingly Paul then calls his—and our—suffering "light" and "momentary." How can he possibly describe great trouble this way? He does it by comparing it with something else. Fifty pounds seems so heavy until compared with a ton. A year, ten years, fifty years is a long time until compared with eternity. Troubles are sure to come, but so will the eternal glory that "far outweighs them all." John Calvin writes that heaven "makes light what before seemed to be heavy, and brief and momentary what seemed to last forever."[23] Furthermore, "this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison." It is not merely that troubles are followed by glory; our affliction is adding to the coming glory to be ours. That is why slaves could sing, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen," and then add words that at first don't seem to fit: "Glory, hallelujah!" Like the slaves, in our sickness and suffering "we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:8–9, 16–18).

Timothy Keller writes: "The doctrine of the resurrection can instill us with a powerful hope. It promises that we will get the life we most longed for, but it will be an infinitely more glorious world than if there had never been the need

for bravery, endurance, sacrifice, or salvation."[24] Missionary John Nevius wrote from China to his father-in-law on September 1, 1869: "My thoughts often fly homeward, and my heart yearns after those loved scenes which no one prizes more highly than I do; but I feel thankful for the privilege of being here, employed as I am, and I believe that the 'rest that remaineth' will be all the sweeter after toil, and perhaps suffering, for Christ."[25]

James 1:2 and 1 Peter 1:3–9

James tells us to "count it all joy" when we meet "trials of various kinds," because these trials are a testing of our faith that "produces steadfastness" (James 1:2). Not only will trouble in this world bring greater glory in the world to come, but trials bring blessings in this life. Therefore, we not only endure suffering but rejoice in it. The suffering may continue, but also should the joy.

"Suffering and hope belong together in 1 Peter," writes Christiaan Beker. "Hope is not simply otherworldly hope, suffering is not simply passive endurance. Rather, hope in the imminent coming of God's definitive victory and glory motivates these Christians to devise strategies of hope amidst their daily experience of suffering."[26]

After his greetings, Peter writes:

> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet. 1:3–9)

The source of our "living hope" is the mercy of God. The substance of our hope is the living Christ. The aim of our hope is the completion of God's saving work "to be revealed in the last time." This hope is not "the expectation of

something desired." It is certain—"imperishable, undefiled, and unfading." As we wait for it, various trials will come to us in the "little while" of our earthly lives. These trials come from God. They come for a good purpose—to test the genuineness of our faith. And they come only if necessary (we can be sure that no unnecessary trial will ever come to us). Abraham Kuyper writes:

> A year of your life can never be understood by itself. Every year of your life must be viewed in connection with your whole life here, and with your whole life in the hereafter, because it stands so, and not otherwise, before God, and is so, and not otherwise to be explained. . . . But if this year [the child of God] must go through a period when God puts him in the smelting furnace, or makes finer cuttings on the diamond of his soul, then, though tears make his eyes glisten, he will nobly bear up in the exaltation of faith; for then it is certain that he is in need of this, that it can not be otherwise, and that, if it did go otherwise, his life would be a failure forever.[27]

The Future of Hope

"Hope stands up to its knees in the past and keeps its eyes on the future," writes Frederick Buechner.[28] Gerhard Tersteegen describes in a hymn the backward and forward look of hope:

> There is a balm for every pain,
> A medicine for all sorrow;
> The eye turned backward to the Cross,
> And forward to the morrow.
>
> The morrow of the glory and the psalm,
> When He shall come;
> The morrow of the harping and the palm,
> The welcome home.
>
> Meantime in His beloved hands our ways,
> And on His heart the wandering heart at rest;
> And comfort for the weary one who lays
> His head upon His Breast.[29]

There is a past tense of hope—our eyes turned back to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. There is a future tense of hope—our eyes turned forward to heaven and the resurrection of the body and final judgment. There is also a present tense of hope—"meantime" our eyes turn upward to the Lord who reigns

in heaven and inward to the same Lord who dwells in us by the Holy Spirit.

C. F. D. Moule pictures hope as "faith on tiptoe."[30] Frederick Buechner calls hope the "outermost edge of faith."[31] Young John Calvin compared faith and hope:

> Hope is . . . the expectation of the things that faith has believed to be truly promised by God. Thus Faith believes God to be truthful: Hope expects that he will show his veracity at the opportune time. Faith believes God to be our Father: Hope expects that he will always act as such toward us. Faith believes the eternal life to be given to us: Hope expects that it shall at some time be revealed.[32]

Faith believes what God has said and rejoices in what he has done. Hope stretches to see what God will do for those who love him and will do about this broken creation. In their first Communion, Christians of the early church were given, in addition to bread and wine, a cup of milk and honey as a foretaste of the heavenly food of which the blessed partake in the kingdom of God.[33]

Hope looks to the future, but we do not yet experience "the hope of heaven" and "the redemption of our bodies." As Paul writes, "Hope that is seen is not *hope*. For who *hopes* for what he sees? But if we *hope* for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Rom. 8:25). Our hope is not uncertain, but its fulfillment is future. "The work of grace and the life of faith will yet be crowned with final glory, and it is in respect of that great hope that we were saved."[34] We wait for it. We wait eagerly but also patiently.

Heaven

What does hope see when it stands on tiptoe and looks into the future? It sees survival after death, and for Christians a blessed life thereafter in heaven. Jesus told the disciples there are "many rooms" in his Father's heavenly house (John 14:2). And he promised believers a reward in those "eternal dwellings" (Luke 16:9). He told the dying thief he would be with him "in Paradise" that very day (23:43). Paul had a "desire to depart and be with Christ," which, he wrote, "is far better" (Phil. 1:23). Hebrews describes God's people as "strangers and exiles on the earth" who are seeking a homeland, "a better country, that is, a heavenly one." And that God "has prepared for them a city" (Heb. 11:13, 16).

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin writes a section called the Christian's "Meditation on the Future Life." "When we think of our crown," he

tells us, “we are to raise our eyes to heaven.”[35]

Heaven is beyond our understanding but not our comprehension. It will be amazing, astounding, and overwhelming, but it will not be strange. Going to heaven will not be like going to a foreign country, where we don’t know the language, the customs, or the people. It will be like coming home after a long (or perhaps not so long) journey in a distant land. I received a letter from a friend in India with the message that Sinkhokam Tombing, eighty years old, “left for his heavenly Home today at around 10 p.m. (Indian Standard Time).”

Two great Christian writers imagine what it is like to go home to heaven. At the end of part 2 of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan describes the homegoing of Mr. Valiant-for-Truth. When he was summoned to cross the river of death, he called for his friends and said:

> I am going to my Father’s, and tho’ with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My Sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my Pilgrimage, and my Courage and Skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me, that I have fought His battles, who will now be my Rewarder. When the day when he must go hence was come, many accompany’d him to the Riverside, into which as he went, he said, “Death, where is thy sting?” And as he went down deeper, he said, “Grave, where is thy victory?” So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.[36]

On the last page of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, C. S. Lewis writes in *The Last Battle* about what happens when Peter, Susan, and Lucy are killed in a train wreck:

> The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.[37]

The Intermediate State

It is not only the Westminster Confession of Faith but also Scripture that teaches "the bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep . . . immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies." In the beautiful language of the Larger Catechism we read that our bodies "continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united to their souls."[38]

A little cemetery on Elbow Cay, one of the northeasternmost islands in the Bahamas, is near a sandy beach, right by the ocean. It is a beautiful place, a quiet place, a place to watch the morning sun rise over the sea. Its name is "Asleep in Jesus Cemetery." One of the graves has a little wooden cross with the name "Mary Thompson," the dates "1920–1999," and words that, I think, must have often been on her lips: "I am fine."

Mary Thompson and all the saints in heaven eagerly look forward to what is yet to come. For Old Testament saints there was an "already" and a "not yet." For New Testament believers there is more "already" but still much "not yet." We do not yet see clearly the face of God; we do not yet know completely what we will know someday. "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12). For souls in heaven there is much more "already," but there is still a remaining "not yet." When we die and go to heaven, we are gloriously free from sin and the trials and troubles of this world, but we are not completely free from the effects of the curse until our bodies are raised from the dead. Calvin says the life of believers in heaven is only a "stage," not to be thought of as equivalent to complete blessedness, which involves the resurrection of the body.[39]

A preacher in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* says, "When someone dies the body is just a suit of old clothes the spirit doesn't want anymore."[40] But he did not get that from the Bible. The body is our earthly home, an important part of who we are, and death is unnatural. "Even more—death is evil, sin's offspring, Christ's enemy, Satan's servant; and every Christian heart must stand aghast before it."[41] We dread death, but we do not fear it. We are not yet delivered from Satan, sin, afflictions, or death, but we are already "being delivered" from *bondage* to Satan, *dominion* of sin, the *evil* of afflictions, the *sting* of death, and the *victory* of the grave.[42]

At death the soul goes directly to heaven to be with the Lord and experiences completed salvation, finished sanctification, entire holiness. The bliss of the intermediate state is infinitely more to be desired than anything that can come to us on earth; it is less desirable only than the completed redemption yet to come. "The salvation is complete, but it is as yet only an incomplete man that is saved." B. B. Warfield describes the Christian now in heaven "as the storm-tossed mariner" who "desires the haven which its vessel has long sought to win through the tossing waves and adverse winds—gate only though it be of the country which he calls home, and long though he may need to wait until all his goods are landed."[43]

The New Heaven and the New Earth

"The hope of heaven" brings us great encouragement and comfort, but Christian hope looks forward to even more than heaven. It looks beyond heaven to the new heaven and the new earth. The God who will say to you and me one day, "Today you will be with me in Paradise," will also say someday, "Behold I am making all things new." The Christian hope in the complete triumph of God over the poisonous reality of death goes beyond our personal and individual salvation to the ultimate goal of God, who will make all things new.

Revelation 21 and 22 open a window through which we can catch a glimpse of the new heaven and the new earth. In *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush*, Ian Maclaren describes a sunset in the glen of Drumtochty when an elder of the Scottish Free Church, Jamie Soutar, and Mr. Hopps, an English visitor, were walking in the gloaming. Mr. Hopps was so inspired by the sunset that "he tried to drive Jamie into extravagance. 'No bad! I call it *glorious*, and if it hisn't, then I'd like to know what his.' 'Man,' replied Soutar austerely, 'Ye'ill surely keep ae word for the twenty-first o' Reevelation.' "[44]

When the Bible writers speak of the blessedness of heaven, they speak sparingly of the state of the separate soul; but when they describe the resurrection, they seem to be enraptured. In the eighth chapter of Romans, the "Magna Carta" of Christian hope, Paul points to the resurrection of the body and deliverance of the whole creation from the bondage of corruption into glorious liberty, when he writes:

> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free

> from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:19–23)

No part of the universe is untouched by the longing with which everything in this world hopes for resurrection and restoration.

In Helen Waddell's *Peter Abelard*, the theologian stops his horse to read the Good Friday office in the woods.

> Leaning with one arm flung across the mare, he began to read. "Come, and let us return unto the Lord: for he hath torn and he will heal us; he hath smitten and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us: in the third day he will raise us up, and we shall live in his sight. Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord: his going forth is prepared as the morning; and he shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth."[45]

With our arms around all of groaning creation, we long for the time when we together will "obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21).

The vision of Revelation 21 and 22 sets forth the culmination of the promise, the realization of our long-hoped-for hope. When Boswell objected to the words of the Anglican burial service—"in the *sure* and *certain* hope of a blessed resurrection"—Dr. Johnson was scarcely justified in replying: "It is sure and certain *hope*, sir; not *belief*."[46] "The sure and certain hope of the resurrection" is hope that *is* belief and belief that is hope. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1).

In Revelation 21 we hear "a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God'" (v. 3). The covenant promise of God, the foundation of Christian hope, is loudly and triumphantly repeated three times for emphasis. He is our God, who keeps his promise to his covenant people.

We see "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,

prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (v. 2). Timothy Keller writes, "The Bible teaches that the future is not an immaterial 'paradise' but a new heaven and a new earth. In Revelation 21, we do not see human beings being taken out of this world into heaven, but rather heaven coming down and cleansing, renewing, and perfecting this material world."[47] And we see the church of God cleansed, renewed, and perfected "as a bride adorned for her husband."

There is something else we see in Revelation 21, or rather some things we don't see—death, mourning and crying, pain—"for the former things have passed away" (v. 4). The defeat of death had already taken place at the death and resurrection of Christ, and now "death shall be no more." "Death, thou shalt die," wrote John Donne.[48]

God himself, who is our God, "will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (v. 4). Just before he died, John Ames, the Congregational minister in *Gilead*, concluded a journal written for his young son: "Augustine says the Lord loves each of us as an only child, and that has to be true. 'He will wipe the tears from all faces.' It takes nothing from the loveliness of the verse to say that is exactly what will be required."[49] Tears introduced by humanity's fall will be wiped away by the one who wept in the face of death at the tomb of Lazarus, whose soul was "very sorrowful" in Gethsemane, and who cried out on the cross.

Revelation 22:3 sums up the glory of the new heaven and the new earth with the words, "No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him." "The biblical vision of hope," writes Christiaan Beker, "is the longing for that benign and just sovereignty of God which will right all wrongs and which will finally make our tears cease and give our restless heart its final rest in the merciful arms of God."[50]

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Mr. Beaver speaks of that time to come, when he recites a famous rhyme of Narnia:

> Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes into sight,
> At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
> When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death
> And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.[51]

The words of Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* look forward to that day when "wrong will be right":

> I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage. In the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice. It will comfort all resentments. It will atone for all the crimes, for all the blood that has been shed, that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify everything that happens.[52]

In his great sorrow Job asks, "Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who longs for death, but it comes not?" (Job 3:20–21). Garret Keizer writes about the question his friend Pete, an old man living in a nursing home in Vermont on the Canadian border, constantly asks him: "Why does a person keep living? Why do you just go on and on? What is the point?" Keizer tries to answer Pete's question, but he knows, even as he tells Pete about "God's unseen purposes" and "the value of each person's unique struggle in God's plan, this is a question he has every right to ask and no one but God could answer."[53] And God will answer. Pete now has his answer. So does Job.

When we read the last chapter of a good book, we are disappointed that the book is finished. But the last chapter of the Bible will take us an eternity to read. At the end of *The City of God*, Augustine declares epochs of history could be reckoned as days of the week. He writes:

> However, it would be a long task to go on to discuss each of those epochs in detail. The important thing is that the seventh [day] will be our Sabbath whose end will not be an evening, but the Lord's Day, an eighth day, as it were, which is to last forever, a day consecrated by the resurrection of Christ, foreshadowing the eternal rest not only of the spirit but of the body also. There we shall be still and see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise. Behold what will be, in the end, without end! For what is our end but to reach that kingdom which has no end?[54]

The first professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, Thomas Goulding, told his students, "Let every sermon preached contain so much of the plan of salvation that should a person come in who never heard the gospel before, and who should depart never to hear it again, he should learn enough to know what he must do to be saved."[55] May I follow Dr. Goulding's advice about preaching

as I complete this chapter in this book about heaven? What is probably the best-known verse in the Bible sums up the Bible's message: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The way to God and eternal life is Jesus, who is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (14:6). The nearly last words in the Bible repeat again God's invitation: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price" (Rev. 22:17). Come to Jesus, just as you are. Then you, too, can sing with hope that is both trust and confidence, "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine!"[56]

The Bible's final words, followed only by the benediction, are "Come, Lord Jesus" (v. 20). Matthew Henry writes in the conclusion to his *Commentary on the Bible*:

> Thus beats the pulse of the church, thus breathes that gracious Spirit, which actuates and informs the mystical body of Christ; and we should never be satisfied till we find such a spirit breathing in us, and causing us to look for the blessed hope and glorious appearance of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ. This is the language of the church of the first-born, and we should join with them, often putting ourselves in mind of the promise. What comes from heaven in a promise should be sent back to heaven in a prayer. "Come, Lord Jesus"; put an end to this state of sin, sorrow and temptation; gather thy people out of this present evil world, and take them up to heaven, that state of perfect purity, peace and joy, and so finish thy great design, and fulfil all that word in which thou hast caused thy people to hope.[57]

Somebody say, "Amen!"

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[1] Jerome Groopman, *The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness* (New York: Random House, 2004), *xiv*.

[2] Ibid., 208.

[3] John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 1 (London: J. M. Dent, 1935), 30–31, emphasis original.

[4] Georges Bernanos, *The Diary of a Country Priest* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1983), 271.

[5] *New York Times Book Review*, January 13, 2013, 6.

[6] Howard Nemerov, *Trying Conclusions: New and Selected Poems, 1961–1991* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 159.

[7] Robert Louis Stevenson, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1998), 228.

[8] *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Little, Brown), 253.

[9] Mark Musa, ed., *The Portable Dante* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 3.

[10] Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Book of Job*, vol. 2 (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1867), 176.

[11] Venantius H. C. Fortunatus, "Praise the Savior Now and Ever," c. 530–609.

[12] George Matheson, "O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go," 1882. This hymn was written on a summer evening. During his studies at the University of Glasgow, Matheson's poor eyesight failed, and he became totally blind. Despite this handicap, he graduated from the university and, assisted by a devoted sister, completed ministerial studies and became a pastor. Seventeen years later, while serving the church at Innellan, Matheson wrote his famous hymn. He tells the story in his own words: "It was composed with extreme rapidity; it seemed to me that its construction occupied only a few minutes, and I felt myself rather in the position of one who was being dictated to than an original artist. I was suffering from extreme mental distress, and the hymn was the fruit of pain." George Matheson originally wrote, "I *climb* the rainbow *in* the rain." A committee choosing hymns for a church hymnbook suggested to Matheson to change the words to, "I trace the rainbow through the rain." With regret he agreed to cut out his powerful image and substitute the tame line we find in our hymnbooks. For a full account of this story see the sermon "I Climb the Rainbow in the Rain," by James Black, *Days of My Autumn* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1950).

[13] "The Lord's My Shepherd, I'll Not Want," *Scottish Psalter*, 1650.

[14] John R. Clements, "No Night There," 1868–1946.

[15] Allan Barr writes: "Hope is conspicuous in many passages of the New Testament where the word itself does not occur. It is a sufficient indication of this fact that the word 'hope' does not occur anywhere in the book of *Revelation*. For a complete investigation of the idea one would, therefore, have to examine not only the passages specially concerned with 'hope' but every exhortation, every prayer and in fact every future tense in every book of the New Testament." And also in every book in the OT! Allan Barr, "'Hope' in the New Testament," *SJT* 3 (March 1950): 68.

[16] R. A. Webb, *The Christian's Hope*, 12. See David B. Calhoun, *Our Southern Zion: Old Columbia Seminary (1828–1927)* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2012), 360.

[17] C. F. D. Moule, *The Meaning of Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 2.

[18] Words of Jaroslav Pelikan just before his death, quoted in Walter Wangerin Jr., *Letters from the Land of Cancer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 158.

[19] *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1941), 121, 439, 520, 599–600.

[20] Garret Keizer, *A Dresser of Sycamore Trees: The Finding of a Ministry* (Boston: Godine, 1991), 59.

[21] Marcus L. Loane, *The Hope of Glory* (Waco, TX: Word, 1969), 77.

[22] Moule, *The Meaning of Hope*, 35.

[23] John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 10.64.

[24] Timothy J. Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 33.

[25] Helen S. Coan Nevius, *The Life of John Livingston Nevius: For Forty Years a Missionary in China* (New York: Revell, 1895), 280–81.

[26] J. Christiaan Beker, *Suffering and Hope: The Biblical Vision and the Human Predicament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 50.

[27] Abraham Kuyper, *To Be Near unto God* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 371, 373.

[28] Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember: Uncollected Pieces* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984), 11.

[29] *The Christian Book of Mystical Verse* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1991), 116.

[30] Moule, *The Meaning of Hope*, 11.

[31] Buechner, *A Room Called Remember*, 11.

[32] John Calvin, *Instruction in Faith (1537)*, trans. Paul T. Fuhrmann (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1949), 55–56.

[33] *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 12 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 527.

[34] Loane, *The Hope of Glory*, 94.

[35] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:712 (3.9.1). Calvin follows chap. 9 with chap. 10, "Uses of This Present Life." People whose hearts are set on heaven make (or should make) good and useful inhabitants of earth.

[36] John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 376.

[37] C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 183–84.

[38] Westminster Confession of Faith 32.1; Larger Catechism Q. 86.

[39] John Calvin, *Treatises against the Anabaptists and against the Libertines*, trans. and ed. Benjamin Wirt Farley (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982), 146–47.

[40] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2004), 13.

[41] Benjamin B. Warfield, "The Christian's Attitude toward Death," in *Princeton Sermons* (New York: Revell, 1893), 325.

[42] Westminster Confession of Faith 20.1.

[43] *Princeton Sermons*, 326, 328, 334.

[44] Ian Maclaren, *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1895), 185.

[45] Helen Waddell, *Peter Abelard* (New York: Penguin, 1976), 118–19.

[46] Moule, *The Meaning of Hope*, 10.

[47] Keller, *Reason for God*, 31–32.

[48] John Donne, *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1950).

[49] Robinson, *Gilead*, 245–46.

[50] Beker, *Suffering and Hope*, 11.

[51] C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: Fontana Lions, 1980), 75.

[52] Quoted by Timothy Keller, in "Truth, Tears, Anger, and Grace," *Sermons That Shaped America: Reformed Preaching from 1630 to* 2007, ed. William S. Barker and Samuel T. Logan Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 403.

[53] Keizer, *A Dresser of Sycamore Trees*, 159.

[54] Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Betteson (New York: Penguin, 1972), 1091.

[55] William Childs Robinson, *Christ—The Bread of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950), preface.

[56] Fanny J. Crosby, "Blessed Assurance," 1873.

[57] Quoted by Derek W. H. Thomas, "The Eschatology of the Westminster Confession and Assembly," in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2004), 2:379.

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