
Rethinking Heaven

IF JESUS'S FIRST followers spoke about the good news of what *had* just happened, what did they think *would* happen in the future as a result? Here we face a major problem. For many generations in the modern church, followers of Jesus in many parts of the world have thought that the future event, the good news about what *was still to happen*, consisted of two things.

First, Jesus was going to take us to be with him in heaven. There are different ways people have imagined this happening, but the message is still the same. Somehow, the good news in the past (what Jesus did two thousand years ago) points forward to one particular piece of good news about the future (he will take us to heaven). This completes the new relationship with God that is for many the sole focus of the good news. *And this is seriously misleading.*

Second, Jesus would come back again. There are also different ways this has been expressed. Various Bible passages, some of them complex, speak about this future event, often in dramatic first-century picture language that is difficult to decode today.

There is no doubt that the first Christians did indeed speak of Jesus returning. But what exactly that meant and how we should grasp it today have often posed a problem. Many Western Christians in our own day have quietly abandoned the belief altogether, preferring to see such language as a bit of ancient mythology we can do without today.

Part of the reason is that some other Christians, especially within the split-level world I spoke of, have put these two expectations together and made something quite different out of them. For such people, the overarching point is to get to heaven. Whether they get there immediately after they die or whether Jesus comes back to take them to heaven with him, that's what they think it's all about. Elaborate theories about the second coming have been developed in which the whole point is that Jesus will come back, not to stay on this earth to transform and renew it, but to take his people away.

But this misses the whole point.

Once we understand the original good news, the news about something that *happened* in the events concerning Jesus, we also understand that the good news about the future cannot be about leaving earth and going to heaven. It must have something to do with heaven and earth coming together. Something to do with creation itself being renewed and restored.

This is a major theme of the Bible, and as I hinted earlier, it is screened right out in much modern Christian understanding. (I have written about this at considerably more length in *Surprised by Hope* [2008].) This, too, is a result of the split-level philosophy: Why bother about earth down here if what matters is going to heaven up there?

Let us say it again: the final vision of the Christian gospel—the goal it holds out before us—is *not* going to heaven when you die. The Bible says remarkably little about what happens to people, even to God's people, after they die—at least, *immediately*

after they die. Eventually—ah, that's another story. The Bible, especially the New Testament, is very interested in what happens eventually. That is because the Bible, and the good news at its heart, are about *the rescue and renewal of the whole creation*. And if God will, in the end, transform the whole created order, flooding it with his presence and glory—and that is what we are promised—then what matters for us is not where we will be in the meantime but how we will get to share in that new world.

The last scene in the Bible (the book of Revelation, chapters 21 and 22) is not about saved souls going up to heaven. It is about the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, creating the new heaven and new earth, which are *one and the same place*. That is why Jesus taught his followers to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth as in heaven*.” So if the good news about the *past* has to do with something Jesus did back then, the good news about the *future* has to do with something Jesus is going to do when he returns. He will transform the whole world and fill it with his justice, his joy, and his love. That is indeed good news.

So, like someone in Rome celebrating the victory of Octavian and looking forward to his enthronement when he returned to the capital, Jesus's followers also discovered good news about their present lives. They could begin, right then, to live in the light of this double good news about Jesus's initial achievement and future reign.

Like everything else in early Christian belief, this is rooted in the much older scriptures of Israel. Think of the vision of the prophet Isaiah, a vision of creation put right at last, of violence abolished and the world at peace. This is a vision—poetic, no doubt, but a signpost to a reality even greater, out beyond the reach of mere words—of what will happen when God puts everything right. The way he will do it is by setting the coming king (“a shoot from the stock of Jesse” or “the root of Jesse,” Jesse being the father of King David) in charge of it all:

*A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of YHWH shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of YHWH.
His delight shall be in the fear of YHWH.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of YHWH
As the waters cover the sea.*

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall enquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. (Isa. 11:1-10)

Or think, in a similar vein, of the glorious vision of some of the Psalms:

*Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy,
before the LORD, for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth. (Ps. 96:11-13)*

This is the hope we also find in many passages in the New Testament. In the letter to the Ephesians, for instance, Paul declares that God's ultimate plan was "to sum up the whole cosmos in the king [i.e., in Jesus, the Davidic Messiah]—yes, everything in heaven and on earth" (Eph. 1:10). That single verse points to the longer expositions of the same point in 1 Corinthians 15 and above all Romans 8, both of which we glanced at in chapter 2. The same point emerges in the remarkable poem in the letter to the Colossians, chapter 1, which celebrates the creation of the entire world and everything in it "in him . . . through him and for him" (1:16), and goes on to declare that "in him" (that is, again, in Jesus the Messiah) everything on the earth and in the heavens would be reconciled to God. The New Testament is not interested in an ultimate hope that leaves earth out of consideration. That is why popular talk about heaven is so misleading. What matters is new heaven and new earth.

From long experience of talking with people about these things, I know that at least two people in my audience will be putting their hands up with questions right now. Both have Bible verses that seem to contradict what I just said.

The first person quotes John 18:36: "My kingdom is not of this

world.” That, however, is the King James translation, and it doesn’t catch the flavor of the original. It sounds to us as though Jesus is talking about a nonworldly kingdom, which modern Western Christians automatically assume means a heavenly one, one to which God’s people go when they die, away from this world altogether. But the original points in a different direction. What Jesus said was, “My kingdom isn’t the sort that grows in this world.” It isn’t worldly in its *origin* or in its *character*. It is not *from* this world; it doesn’t originate here, but it certainly is *for* this world. Jesus is launching, as we saw earlier, *a different kind of kingdom*, based on *a different kind of power*. But there’s no point launching this kingdom in heaven, away from earth. Heaven works like that already. What matters is getting this sort of kingdom launched on earth. That’s what the good news is all about.

The second person quotes Philippians 3:20: “We are citizens of heaven.” This time the speaker is using the New English Bible, and my own translation agrees with it. That is what the verse says and means. But once again we misunderstand what is going on. The logic of citizenship in the ancient world, certainly the Roman citizenship of which many in Philippi would be proud possessors, didn’t work the way we imagine. We hear, “We are citizens of heaven,” and we think, “Yes, heaven is where we really belong, and that’s where we will go when we die.” But that isn’t what Paul says, and it isn’t how citizenship worked in his world. The whole reason for having colonies like Philippi in the first place was that there were too many old soldiers who had fought in the civil wars. Rome was overcrowded and needed to import food. The last thing Rome wanted was thousands more hungry mouths coming home—especially when the mouths belonged to trained killers, used to getting things done through violence. The point about Philippi being a colony of Rome was not that the citizens would go back to Rome one day, but that (so it was hoped) they would bring the benefits of Roman civilization to Philippi.

That, after all, is how Paul expands the image. “We are citizens of heaven, you see,” he writes, “and we’re eagerly waiting for the savior, the Lord, King Jesus, who is going to come from there” (Phil. 3:20). It isn’t that *we* are going off to the capital city to join the king; *he* is going to come *from* there to transform our lives here. “He’s going to do this by the power which makes him able to bring everything into line under his authority,” Paul concludes (3:21). Jesus will come *from* heaven to transform the whole of creation—and to transform us at the same time. “Our present body is a shabby old thing, but he’s going to transform it so that it’s just like his glorious body” (3:21). That is the hope. Not that we leave this world but that Jesus returns and transforms it, and us with it.

Once we grasp this picture, many things come into focus, helping us see how the good news of what *happened* back in the first century is organically related to the good news of what *will happen* when Jesus returns. The Gospel stories of Jesus’s resurrection, especially the account in John’s Gospel, are not told in order to say, “There, that proves there really is a life after death” or “There, that proves Jesus was divine.” There *is* a life beyond the grave, and Jesus really *does* embody the personal presence of the living God, but that isn’t the main point. The main point is that *the new creation has begun*, and this beginning points to the ultimate conclusion, the consummation of it all.

This means that the early Christians were able to retrieve, and to use with a new sharp focus, all those ancient biblical promises about Israel’s God coming back to his people to overthrow their masters, set them free, and come to live in their midst. For the early Christians, the new exodus *had* happened in Jesus, ahead of time, as it were. The new exodus *would* therefore happen when death itself was defeated and God was “all in all.”

We need to be very clear about this, because so many pressures are pushing the other way. *God made this world of space, time, and matter; he loves it, and he is going to renew it.* The new creation will

be what we would call *physical*, though that word doesn't say half enough. *Physical* for us means, mostly, stuff that we can touch and see, but also stuff that we can chop down or cut up, or burn or smash—stuff that, left to itself, will mostly rot and decay all by itself. God's new world, it seems, will be of a completely different kind. The only language we have for it is picture language, but if Paul means what he says—that “creation itself would be freed from its slavery to decay, to enjoy the freedom that comes when God's children are glorified” (Rom. 8:21)—then we must imagine the future world as a more solid, more permanent, more altogether glorious place than this present one. Imagine the most beautiful sunset you have ever seen, set in the most beautiful scenery. Imagine the most stunning birdsong you have ever heard. Imagine the most delicate flower, the most spectacular mountain. These are all just long-range signposts pointing to the unimaginable beauty of the new creation.

And part of the good news is that we will be there ourselves, with bodies to match. So many preachers, asked to talk about the good news, speak of a heaven that, as some cynics have said, will involve us simply lying around all day listening to people playing harps. Well, in God's new creation it is clear that all we do will be bathed in worship. If God is personally present, as we are promised, then of course we will respond appropriately. But we will be *more truly human*—more fully ourselves, in every sense. God made humans to reflect his glory, his love, his wisdom into the world, and in the new creation God will not revoke this vocation. He will gloriously fulfill it. We will become *more human*, not less. If, in the present, we have been given tasks to do, vocations to pursue, the ability to delight in music and love and light and laughter, then it would be strange if, in the new creation, none of this mattered anymore.

But speculating about the precise details of the resurrection life within the new creation is not the point at the moment.

The point is that the meaning of the good news changes radically depending on whether you think it means, “Here's how you leave this universe and go somewhere else called heaven,” or whether you think it means, “Here's how God is remaking the entire creation and offering you a new bodily life within that.” If we are promised new heaven and new earth, a whole new universe in which God's space and our space are brought together once and for all—and that's what the New Testament writers say again and again—then the good news is news about, and news *for*, the whole of creation, not just a few humans who get the magic password that lets them off the hook and into heaven after all.

Saving the World

But how does the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the good news that this was for our sins and in accordance with the scriptures turn out to be the good news of the new creation? How are these things joined together? The answer is simple—and revolutionary. *God wants to put humans right to put the world right.* And the good news is that this, too, has been accomplished through Jesus.

Here again popular Christian traditions and popular Christian preaching have shrunk the underlying message of the New Testament. We all imagined the point to be simply that humans needed rescuing and God did this through Jesus. We imagined the problem to be that we were out of touch with God and we needed to reestablish a relationship with him. Well, that is all true, but it's not the whole truth. We forgot what humans (so to speak) were there for in the first place. God made humans so that he could look after his world *through* this particular creature. His intention was to bring his creation forward from its beginnings

to be the glorious place he always intended and to do so through this human family.

That is one part of what it means to be in the image of God. God is not an object in the world, but he wanted from the first to be present and active in his world, so he created humans to be the means and mode of that presence and that activity. That is why human rebellion against the Creator's intentions was so disastrous—not just for the humans but for the whole of creation.

Those who know the story of Genesis will know that when the first humans rebelled, they were told that the earth would henceforth be harder for them to work. It would produce sharp, unpleasant weeds—thorns and thistles. We have been inclined, I think, to see this as a problem simply for the humans: life is going to be tough. And so it is. But this is also a problem for the earth itself. Creation was supposed to be brought to flourishing harmony, to a fruitful fulfillment, through the work of humans. So creation itself is frustrated, all because the humans got it wrong. The problem is not “Oh dear, humans sinned, so they will now go to hell.” The problem is “Humans sinned, so the whole creation will fail to attain its proper goal.” Perhaps that failure, if not dealt with, is part of what we should mean by hell.

The good news, therefore, is that when humans are put right, the project can get back on track. Not all at once, of course, just as we humans are not put right completely and forever at a stroke. But this is the goal.

All this brings us back to our earlier themes of coronation, covenant, and creation. In the New Testament, Jesus announces that God is becoming king. He is enthroned—that's how the Gospel writers see it—as, on the cross, he completes his work of covenant renewal, the forgiveness of sins. And all this is so that humans thus rescued from their sins can resume their proper work as image bearers. Unless the good news contains this as a major strand, it is selling itself short. To say “Jesus died for your sins” ought to lead

at once to “so you can freely pick up your role as a truly human being and discover your particular vocation within God's purposes for his world.”

There are, sadly, some people for whom the good news, as they have been taught it, leaves them with a vacuum. Now that I've believed this good news, they think—now that I know I will go to heaven one day—what is there to do in the meantime? Those who find themselves thinking that ought to go back to whoever taught them the good news and, metaphorically speaking, demand their money back. You've only been given one part of the gospel. The good news is bigger, better, fuller than you ever imagined.

Resurrection as the Beginning of a New World

How do we know all this? How *can* we know all this? How is all this not simply a pious dream, a fantasy, a utopia that we all enjoy but know is a mirage? The answer is simple. *Jesus was raised from the dead*. This is, of course, the second half of the classic summary of the gospel. Following “The Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,” we find “and he was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.” The good news about the *future* is utterly dependent on the good news about the *past*. Christian life is shaped by both.

The resurrection of Jesus is *the launching of God's new world*. You can tell because of the way the story is told, particularly in John's Gospel. John tells the story in such a way as to echo themes both in the Genesis creation story and in his own prologue, which itself echoes that story.

But the point goes far beyond simple biblical allusions. The resurrection is presented, together with Jesus's crucifixion, as the climax of the entire biblical narrative.

God made the world as a *project*: the garden of Eden was the start of something, not a small world in which Adam and Eve might live a languid life like figures in a private tableau. Their failure meant that the project was aborted, or at least radically corrupted and put on hold. But with Jesus—precisely with Jesus as the true king, the Messiah—the project has now been restarted. This is partly because, as some early Christians discerned, the Psalms spoke of the “son of man” who would inherit the role marked out for Adam and Eve in Genesis 1, looking after the garden and the animals on God’s behalf. That is true, but it’s not the whole truth.

The whole truth is that *Jesus himself, in his risen physical body, is the beginning of God’s new creation*. He not only presides over that new creation; he *is* that new creation, in person. Everything about the larger Christian hope follows from this. “He is the start of it all,” writes Paul, “firstborn from realms of the dead; so in all things he might be chief” (Col. 1:18). This is where the good news provides the launching pad, not for people to go to heaven but for people to discover that *God’s new world has begun, and we can be part of it*. Welcome to the full meaning of the good news.

I hope it is now clear why the resurrection of Jesus is so central and vital—as Paul insists again and again, especially in 1 Corinthians 15:17. “If the Messiah wasn’t raised,” he writes, “your faith is pointless, and you are still in your sins.” If the Messiah is not raised, the covenant is not renewed, creation is not renewed, and . . . he is not even the Messiah in the first place. The resurrection is the sign that the verdict of the courts has been reversed. The Jewish court tried Jesus for blasphemy and found him guilty; the resurrection declared that he really was God’s son. Pilate’s court tried him for being a would-be rebel leader, and though Pilate didn’t really find Jesus guilty, he handed him over on that charge. The resurrection declared that Jesus was not the ordinary sort of political king, a rebel leader, that some had supposed. He was the leader of a far larger, more radical revolution than anyone had

ever supposed. He was inaugurating a whole new world, a new creation, a new way of being human. He was forging a way into a new cosmos, a new era, a form of existence hinted at all along but never before unveiled. Here it is, he was saying. This is the new creation you’ve been waiting for. It is open for business. Come and join in.

All this shows, if further proof were needed, that the cross and resurrection are closely bound together in the full meaning of the gospel. It is inconceivable that the new creation could begin if sin, evil, corruption, decay, and death still had the power to thwart it. God would not begin for a second time something that could be radically derailed by human pride, rebellion, idolatry, or sin. God would not launch this new, immortal creation in a world where death still held everything in its icy grip. The resurrection makes sense because the victory was won on the cross. The two events go together at every level. And they form the foundation for the eventual new creation.

The resurrection thus completes Jesus’s coronation as Messiah, the true king and lord. It also completes the narrative of the *covenant*. It announces that the project God began with the calling of Abraham has reached its fruition. This could be a long story, but we will here make it a short one. The story of Israel, at so many points, had seemed to go down into the valley of the shadow of death, only to have God rescue it and bring it out again. That was what happened with the exodus. It happened again and again in the dark years under the judges. It happened on a grand scale in the exile in Babylon. And it was during that period that the prophet Ezekiel spoke of return from exile in terms of bodily resurrection. In his vision of the “valley of the dry bones,” he had seen long-dead bones come together into skeletons, acquire flesh and sinews, and finally breathe (see Ezek. 37). This, he declared, showed the restoration of God’s people after their exile. God would do a new thing.

The early church went back to that picture in Ezekiel again and again when reflecting on the promise of future resurrection that still stood before the church. But Jesus's resurrection declares that *with this event, the exile is truly over*. Sins have been forgiven; the dark powers that stand behind all enslaving political authorities have been defeated; God's people are rescued from their long, sad sojourn under the rule of the pagans. Now they will live instead under the rule of the Messiah—the Messiah who has brought about the return from death of God's people. *The people of God die and are raised in the Messiah*: that is the meaning Paul, the first to write about the gospel, makes clear in passage after passage. If Jesus is crowned as king, then he represents his people, and in him the covenant is at last fulfilled. God has done what he promised.

If this is so, then, as we have said, the resurrection of Jesus means the launching of the new creation. Imagine that picture of exile and restoration being transposed onto the screen of the whole world, the whole of cosmic history. The Bible invites us to see the present period of history, from Easter right through to Jesus's second coming to put everything right at last, as held together by and gaining its meaning from these two events. The new creation *has already happened*; that is the good news about the past. The new creation *will happen completely*; that is the good news about the future. That is the larger hope, within which all Christian thinking about the future ought to be framed.

In other words, our hope is not simply that we will go to heaven and there rejoin our loved ones, and of course be with Jesus. All this we are promised; but if we grab at this and forget the larger picture, we will be like a child who is so engrossed with the first sand castle on the beach that he never even notices the glorious and inviting sea. Our personal hopes for what happens after death are fully taken into account within the much, much larger reality we are promised: the new heaven and the new earth, in which God's justice and joy and peace and love will grow like flowers

on every roadside and come like showers on every spring morning. When we long for that new creation, we get our personal hopes thrown in. When we reverse the focus, putting our personal hopes at the center, we introduce a distortion into the entire gospel that, like the other distortions we have noted, can produce long-term damaging results. The good news, in other words, is not all about me. It is all about God and God's creation—God's new creation, which results from the covenant renewal that has been effected through the coronation of Jesus as Israel's Messiah and the world's rightful lord.