

## **A. Our resurrection hope: heaven on earth (part 1)**

### **Is there life after death?**

The concept of resurrection life is central to the Christian faith.

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. (1 Corinthians 15:12-14)

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. ( 1 Corinthians 15:19)

Published first in 1678 *The Pilgrim's Progress From This World to That Which is to Come* is a remarkable allegory of the Christian life.

John Bunyan's allegory is based around a journey which 'Christian' makes from his hometown, the 'City of Destruction' to the 'Celestial City'.

At the very end of his journey, Christian struggles to cross the River of Death in order to be welcomed into the Celestial City, the heavenly Jerusalem, that stands atop Mount Zion.

### **Is our ultimate destination a city?**

Bunyan's Celestial City undoubtedly finds its origin in the Bible.

For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come (Hebrews 13:14).

The concept of a future city is first introduced in connection with Abraham, in Hebrews 11.

In faith Abraham looked forward to 'the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God' (Hebrews 11:10 ESV) .

The author of Hebrews is convinced that resurrection life for Christians involves a city.

In Hebrews 12:22, he refers to it as 'the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem'.

At the start of Revelation 21 John speaks of seeing 'the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God' (Revelation 21:1-2).

For John, this exceptional city is the goal towards which everything in creation is moving.

Aspects of John's visions in Revelation are meant to be understood in a symbolic manner.

Nonetheless, John's vision of the New Jerusalem seems to be about the future existence of a real city on a real earth.

- The holy city is a utopia, a paradise.
- The New Jerusalem provides a perfect environment for its inhabitants.

### **How does this future city fit into the biblical story?**

If the conclusion to the biblical story in Revelation involves a city, the opening chapters of Genesis anticipate the building of this city.

Why did God create the earth?

The earth was made to become God's temple or palace.

Human beings are commissioned to transform the earth into God's dwelling place.

**Firstly**, God delegates to people authority to rule on his behalf; they are to rule on the earth as God's vicegerents.

**Secondly**, they are given a holy or priestly status which enables them to be in God's presence.

**Thirdly**, they are instructed to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth; the ever growing population will form a city.

Everything points to Eden being the green-field site where the New Jerusalem will be constructed.

The tree of life, which is found in the Garden of Eden, reappears in John's vision of the New Jerusalem.

The disobedience of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 threatens the completion of God's creation project.

They are punished by being expelled from Eden.

Beyond Genesis 3 the biblical story recounts how God sets about fulfilling his creation plan.

The whole of creation needs to be restored to the equilibrium and harmony that existed prior to Adam and Eve's betrayal of God.

This is done in the face of opposition to God's presence and rule on the earth.

Cain, who kills his brother Abel, is a city builder.

The building of Babel reflects the ability and desire of people to build a city.

Babel is a God-less city.

In the Bible, the Hebrew word '*babel*' is translated as Babylon.

Babylon becomes the symbol of human opposition to God.

In the time of David and Solomon, Jerusalem becomes the earthly city of God.

Over time, Jerusalem becomes more and more corrupt.

Beyond punishment, Isaiah speaks of a new Jerusalem.

See, I will create new heavens and a new earth.  
The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight

in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. (Isaiah 65:17-19)

Isaiah's vision has much in common with that of the apostle John in Revelation 20-21.

Isaiah reveals that the eventual creation of this remarkable city will come about because of the vicarious suffering of a future Davidic king.

The creation of the eternal city of God will occur after Christ's return, when evil will be banished and creation redeemed from its bondage to the evil one.

John's vision of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 20-21 alludes back to the garden of Eden, suggesting that the new earth will have something in common with this present earth.

In his redemptive activity, God does not destroy the works of his hands, but cleanses them from sin and perfects them, so that they may finally reach the goal for which he created them. . . . This principle means that the new earth to which we look forward will not be totally different from the present one, but will be a renewal and glorification of the earth on which we now live. (Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, p. 73)

Isaiah 65:21-22 states:

They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.  
They shall not build and another inhabit;  
they shall not plant and another eat;  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.  
(Isaiah 65:21-22 ESV)

### **What form will the resurrection body take?**

Paul observes that the resurrected body will differ from the one placed in the grave.

What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable.  
<sup>43</sup> It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. <sup>44</sup> It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

**Firstly**, Paul is not drawing a distinction between a physical body and a non-physical body.

Gordon Fee observes, 'The transformed body, therefore, is not composed of 'spirit'; it is a body adapted to the eschatological existence that is under the ultimate domination of the Spirit.'

**Secondly**, Paul states that our present physical constitution is unsuited to our eternal inheritance.

**Thirdly**, Paul indicates that our resurrection body will be glorious.

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:20-21 NIV).

The resurrection body will not be an exact replica of our present body.

We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, <sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. <sup>53</sup> For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. (1 Corinthians 15:51-53)

Jesus is the first to be resurrected; he is 'the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep' (1 Cor. 15:20).

Paul then associates the resurrection of others with Christ's second coming (1 Cor. 15:23).

After this, heaven and earth will come together to form the New Jerusalem, the city where God will dwell with his people on a renewed earth.

Are we to spend eternity somewhere off in space, wearing white robes, plucking harps, singing songs, and flitting from cloud to cloud while doing so? On the contrary, the Bible assures us that God will create a new earth on which we shall live to God's praise in glorified, resurrected bodies. On that new earth, therefore, we hope to spend eternity, enjoying its beauties, exploring its resources, and using its treasures to the glory of God. Since God will make the new earth his dwelling place, and since where God dwells there heaven is, we shall then continue to be in heaven while we are on the new earth. For heaven and earth will then no longer be separated, as they are now, but will be one (see Rev. 21:1-3). (A.A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, p. 274)

## **Further Reading:**

A.A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007).

D.C. Barber and R.A. Peterson, *Life Everlasting: The Unfolding Story of Heaven* (Phillipsburg: P&R Pub., 2012).

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E. Fitzpatrick, *Home: How Heaven and the New Earth Satisfy Our Deepest Longings* (Bloomington: Bethany, 2016).

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D.W.H. Thomas, *Heaven on Earth: What the Bible Teaches About Life to Come* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2018).

T.D. Alexander, *The City of God and the Goal of Creation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).