

(Re)New(ed) Creation: The End of the Story¹

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When God set out on the long road of redemption His ultimate destination was the restoration of the creation to again be His kingdom. In Jesus Christ that goal was accomplished making certain that God would arrive at His goal. The Bible shows us the progressive march of God toward that end. It also progressively reveals what that final consummation will be like. In this chapter we look at where history is heading. God will renew His creation and restore it to submit to His gracious rule.

One might expect to find the goal of history narrated for us in the last book of the Bible—Revelation. While this does help us to understand the end we get glimpses of where the story of God’s redemption is headed throughout the entire Bible. Many parts of Scripture give us windows to that future. And this is what we should expect. From the beginning God’s mighty acts move toward a goal and often that goal becomes visible.

The Importance of the Future Hope

‘Now these three remain’, says Paul, ‘faith, hope, and love’ (I Corinthians 13:13). Paul put a high priority on these three aspects of Christian life. Faith is the means by which we appropriate the salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ. Love is the virtue that marks the life of the believing community. Hope is that confident expectation that God’s future kingdom will come. It is clear why faith and love are so important, but why hope?

Hope has foundational significance for the Christian community because it gives meaning and shape to life in the present. If you are entering university and hope to be a doctor, for example, it will shape what major you take, the time you will give to your studies— after all, you must have good grades to get into medical school—as well as many other things. This insight must be made on a much more cosmic scale. Lesslie Newbigin puts it like this: ‘Meaningful action in history is possible only when there is some vision of a future goal.’² What we believe to be the goal of history gives meaning to our lives today. For example, if one believes the end of history is annihilation, that there is no life beyond this one and that the world and all humanity will be destroyed, then that person will seek to get all the pleasure out of life in the present. Today as I write these words here in my apartment in Cheltenham, England, I hear the thundering sound of music next door where the lyrics bellow: ‘I want it all, I want it all, I want it all, and I want it now.’ After all, this life is all there is. The consumerist and hedonist way of life in Western culture is borne along by this view of the end of history. This present life is all there is so ‘he who dies with the most toys wins.’ If someone believes that the end of history will be a new world order accomplished by science, technology, capitalist economics, and democratic government, that person will give themselves to one or another of these things to work toward that goal. We will also see in a moment that this is also true for differing views of the end within the Christian camp. For example, if one believes that the earth will be destroyed and we will live in a spiritual heaven forever, there likely will be little interest in caring for the environment; evangelism is the only activity with lasting significance. However, if one believes that God will restore this earth then care for his creation will be part of our mission alongside evangelism. Our view of the future matters because it shapes our lives today.

It is for this reason that Paul highlights hope along with faith and love. Where we sink the anchor of our hope matters; our lives will be shaped by it. But often we don’t give explicit attention to the content of our hope. We carry an implicit and unexamined understanding about where all of history is headed. This vision is not always Biblical and it affects our mission in the world today. So what does the Bible teach about the end of history?³

¹ This is an unused draft written as the last chapter for Craig Bartholomew’s and my book *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*. The last chapter used is changed and considerably shorter.

² Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 114.

³ Hendrikus Berkhof helps us see the importance of the end for the meaning of history in *Christ the Meaning of History*. See also Anthony Hoekema’s chapter ‘The Meaning of History’ in *The Bible and the Future*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1979), 23-40.

The Unified Hope of the Christian Church

Discussion of issues of the end time at once stir up both acrimonious debate and unhealthy curiosity. Unhealthy curiosity occurs because often people are looking for certain timetables about the end times to correspond with certain events. Reading the signs of the times becomes a matter of fitting current events into a set pattern about how the end will come. Acrimonious debate arises because there are many timetables in competition. There are different beliefs about when Christ will return, about the millennium, about the rapture, about the final judgement, about the antichrist, about the tribulation, and so on. David Lawrence suggests that this is like arguing about the nature, strength, and frequency of the birth pangs rather than the baby itself.⁴ His reference is to Romans 8:22 that speaks of the end-times as labour pains. Our attention has been on all these details, on the labour pains, rather than on the goal of history, the new world to be born. Our attention in this chapter will be primarily on the new world to be born.

There have been many views of the end, but there are four elements of this end-time hope that are clear from the Biblical story. First, it is clear from Scripture that Jesus Christ will return again. Anthony Hoekema says 'Every book of the New Testament points us to the return of Christ and urges us to live in such a way as to be always ready for that return.'⁵ Jesus promises numerous times throughout his earthly mission to return to finish the work he has begun (Matthew 16:27; Luke 21:28). When Jesus ascends, the disciples remain looking up into heaven. Two men dressed in white appear and say 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11). Debate often ensues whether this will be before or after a literal thousand year reign or millennium (if there is one), whether it will be before, after, or in the middle of a final tribulation (whatever it may look like). Whenever it occurs the fundamental truth of the return of Jesus Christ to finish the redemptive work is central to the Biblical story. He will come to destroy sin and renew the creation.

Second, there will be a bodily resurrection of the dead to life or death. Daniel is the first book to explicitly articulate this: 'Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt' (Daniel 12:2). The early church believed that Jesus was the firstfruits of this resurrection and that their resurrection would follow in turn (I Corinthians 15:20-24). In fact, so important was the resurrection to Paul that he said that if there is no resurrection from the dead our faith is futile, the dead are lost, and we are to be pitied more than all other people (I Corinthians 15:17-19).

Third, all human beings will stand before God in a final judgement. The Bible speaks often about this judgement.⁶ Every person will stand before God; their deeds, words, and thoughts will be judged in light of God's will. One text is especially vivid. In a parable Jesus speaks of the judgement in terms of a shepherd separating sheep from goats. To those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, invited in the stranger, clothed the naked, took care of the sick, and visited the prisoner, the Shepherd-King will say 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world' (Matthew 25:34-35). To those who lived their lives for themselves rather than others, who didn't do what the righteous had done he says: 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels' (Matthew 25:41). Again debate ensues about the nature of the final judgement—when it will happen, according to what criteria, what will happen to the unrighteous, and so on. But again the final judgement is one of the firm elements of a Biblical understanding of the end.

Fourth, the kingdom will finally come in fullness. Paul pictures this: 'Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power. For he must remain until

⁴ David Lawrence, *Heaven . . . It's Not the End of the World*, Queensway, UK: 1995. Questions about the end-times, signs of the times, the antichrist, the millennium, the great tribulation, the rapture 'often appear to be of more interest than the new creation which is to be born!'. This is like being more concerned about the 'nature, strength, and frequency of labour pains rather than about what is going to be born (Romans 8:22)', 9-10.

⁵ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 109.

⁶ Hoekema summarizes the Bible's teaching by examining the necessity, purpose, time, circumstances (Who will judge? Who will be judged? What will be judged?), standard, and significance of the final judgement, *The Bible and the Future*, 253-264.

he has put all his enemies under his feet' (I Corinthians 15:24-25). The righteous will enter into the kingdom that finally has been restored (Matthew 25:34-35).

Salvation: Escape from Creation to Heaven or Restoration of Creation on New Earth?

All these elements of the end are firmly embedded in a Biblical hope. But the real question is what is the goal to which the Biblical story is moving? All these elements of Biblical hope—return of Christ, restoration of the kingdom, resurrection, and final judgement—can be placed in one of two very different contexts. Is the goal of history spiritual existence in heaven or bodily life on a new earth? A popular notion is that the goal of redemptive history is that individual Christians will live in heaven forever. N.T. Wright expresses it this way: 'Very often people have come to the New Testament with the presumption that 'going to heaven when you die' is the implicit point of it all. . . . They acquire that viewpoint from somewhere, but not from the New Testament.'⁷ Probably the biggest contribution to this view of the future comes from many of our beloved hymns. Hoekema comments:

One gets the impression from certain hymns that glorified believers will spend eternity in some ethereal heaven somewhere off in space, far away from earth. The following lines from the hymn "My Jesus I Love Thee" seem to convey that impression: "In mansions of glory and endless delight / I'll ever adore thee in heaven so bright." But does such a conception do justice to biblical eschatology? Are we to spend eternity somewhere off in space, wearing white robes, plucking harps, singing songs, 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.⁸

Is going to heaven when you die the goal of God's redemptive work? If so, it colours the all the elements of Biblical hope. Or is the goal of the story of God's redeeming work a renewed creation? Then the return of Christ, the restoration of God's kingdom, the resurrection, and judgement take on a different meaning. I believe that the Bible supports the latter: God will renew the whole creation.⁹

Before looking at that Biblical vision let us examine a bit further the notion of heaven that captures the popular imagination. In this view salvation is ultimately escape from the earth into heaven. The goal of history, then, is a spiritualized place called heaven where the souls of human beings dwell forever. This hope can be described in five terms. It is *spiritualistic*: the kingdom is an etherealized heaven. It is also *vertical*: heaven is considered to be 'up there' apart from this creation. It is a place that is completely other than this world. It is *annihilistic*: the earth is temporary and will ultimately be destroyed. Since the kingdom, as the goal of history, is another place this earth can be discarded when the end comes. It is *individualistic*: salvation is considered to be the flight of the individual soul to God. The relational and creational context of the human person is ignored. Further, the only meaning of history is whether or not each individual accepts Christ and lives individual moral lives in preparation for heaven. It is *future*: this kingdom will ultimately come in the future. Since the kingdom is 'up there' outside of history, it cannot really in any way be present in history today. That kingdom will come when the earth is destroyed and individuals are redeemed in the future.

⁷ Wright, N.T., *New Heavens, New Earth, Called to One Hope: Perspectives on Life to Come*, ed. John Colwell, Carlisle, UK: Paternoster (2000), p.33. Wright says 'from somewhere' and knows well where that somewhere is! This view of the end is the result of the combination of Biblical teaching with pagan Greek philosophy in the early centuries of the church. It is especially Augustine's early work harmonizing Scripture with neo-Platonic philosophy.

⁸ Hoekema, 274.

⁹ This is not to deny either that there is a heaven nor that when we die we go to heaven until the resurrection of the body. For a simple yet helpful elaboration of this see Lawrence, *Heaven: It's Not the End of the World*. On the Biblical notion of heaven see pp. 48-59. On the 'intermediate state' between death and resurrection see 60-74.

The Kingdom of God as Restoration of Creation

In contrast to this ‘the whole Bible leads us to expect a glorious renewal of life on earth, so that the age to come will be an endlessly thrilling adventure of living with God on the new earth. With his presence pervading every act, we shall be more fully human than we have ever been, liberated from sin, death, and all that hurts or harms.’¹⁰ To set in counterpoint to the elements noted above what the Bible teaches we might summarize it as following. The Bible does not teach a final spiritualized kingdom but a kingdom where the creation is restored. We will live in resurrected bodies on a new earth. It is not ‘up there’ but lies at the end of history and is ‘down here.’ The creation will not be destroyed but will finally be renewed; it is only sin and its effects that will be destroyed. This is not an individualistic hope but is cosmic. Human life in all its relational and creational context will be renewed. And it is not only future; we have begun to taste of that kingdom that we will enjoy in full when Christ returns.

An illustration may be helpful. Imagine a child who is healthy in every way contracts some disease that begins to have a devastating effect on her body. The doctor diagnoses the disease and seeks to prescribe a remedy that will remove the disease and its debilitating effects from her body. The doctor that destroys the patient and proclaims victory over the disease would be a poor doctor indeed! We can speak here of the healing of the creation. God’s redemptive remedy has the goal of destroying sin and its effects so that the creation can be healthy again, the way it was supposed to be. Salvation is the healing *of* the creation not an escape *out of* the creation.

This hope can be summarized in a twofold manner. The final redemption will be *restorative* and *comprehensive*. That is, *all* of human life and *all* of creation will be *restored* to serve the Lord again. This is the goal of the Biblical story. Let’s briefly summarize the Bible’s teaching that leads us to expect the restoration of the whole creation.¹¹

1. God created the world ‘very good.’

When God completed his work of creation he evaluated the world he had made: ‘very good’ (Genesis 1:31). The creation was the way God intended it to be. There was nothing imperfect or partial about it. There is no hint that this is second best but the way God intended it to be in the beginning. It is this good creation that he will restore.

2. Human beings were created to enjoy fellowship with God in the context of creational life.

Human beings were created as the crown of this creation. God took delight in his creation and created humankind to be like him so they too could enjoy its rich variety. That enjoyment would come as they cared for the creation and developed its vast potential to more and more reveal his glory. This social and cultural development was also a good part of the creation. As God’s image they also were able to recognize God’s handiwork and praise him. So human beings were made in the beginning to delight in God’s presence in the context of their task in the creation.¹² Human beings were made to live in community, and so walking with God in carrying out this task was a communal affair. It is important to pause and emphasise that this is the way God intended it in the beginning. It is this creation he describes as very good.

3. The problem in the world to be solved is sin not materiality.

The problem does not come until human beings refuse to live under the authority of God’s word. It is when they rebel against God and seek autonomy that the floodgates open and all kinds of evil rushes in washing away the original perfection of the creation. The problem is not the materiality of the creation from which we need to be released. The problem is sin that has brought ruinous consequences. When God sets out on the long road of redemption, his goal is to remove sin and its effects so that the good creation can again be his kingdom.

¹⁰ Lawrence, 17f.

¹¹ In the first two chapters of *Heaven: It’s Not the End of the World*, David Lawrence offers a helpful Biblical narrative of the restorative goal of creation. The whole book is written simply and clearly answering many issues associated with this understanding of the kingdom that cannot be treated in a short chapter like this.

¹² Lawrence puts it nicely: ‘It is clear that here at the beginning humans and the created order *belonged together*, and therefore we could only fulfill our potential and reach our destiny if we functioned as part of the rest of creation.’ 19-20.

4. If God destroys the creation Satan will have won a tremendous victory.¹³

In the temptation in the garden Satan sought to thwart God's plan. Sin and its consequences now touch all of creation. If the presence of sin in the creation leads God to destroy his creation saving only some human souls, Satan will have gained a tremendous victory. Satan's work will have been quite successful. J. A. Seiss puts it this way: ' . . . if redemption does not go as far as the consequences of sin, it is a misnomer, and fails to be redemption. . . . The salvation of any number of individuals . . . is not the redemption of what fell but the gathering up of a few splinters. . . . Satan's mischief goes further than Christ's restoration.'¹⁴ The story of the Bible moves toward that time when God's restorative work will go as far as Satan's mischief.

5. The Old Testament views future salvation as restoration of life in creation.

In the Old Testament God's work of redemption finds its focus in Israel. God chooses this people to embody the promise of God's final purpose of redemption. As Lawrence puts it: 'These people would become his special, distinctive nation and would begin to demonstrate to onlooking nations just how God wanted life on earth to "work."¹⁵ Two aspects of Old Testament teaching highlight the this-worldly nature of the salvation they were to demonstrate. First, their life is always tied to the land. It is part of the Abrahamic promise to give Israel a land where she can live out her obedience to God.¹⁶ Second, the law that God gives to govern Israel shapes every part of the Israelites' lives—social, political, economic, environmental, familial, personal, and more.¹⁷ Their obedience was to be comprehensive. They were to embody the way life was meant to be in the beginning and the way it would be in the end.

When this community fails in their task, the Old Testament prophets look forward to the day when Israel will return to the land and her life will be restored to live according to God's purpose. Then she would draw all nations to that light. God's kingdom would encompass the whole earth (Isaiah 65:17-25; cf. Acts 3:21). 'If . . . you were to ask an Old Testament Israelite what the future held, he would have expressed himself in purely physical terms. . . . His hope for the future . . . would be that God would restore the nation of Israel to their land, that the land itself would become unusually fruitful, that under the rulership of God's anointed king life on earth would become just and peaceful, and that even the animals in the land would live in harmony with one another. From the beginning to the end, then, we are beginning to see that the Old Testament views the destiny of humanity as being inextricably linked with life *on the earth*.'¹⁸

6. Jesus affirms the Old Testament view of salvation in his kingdom mission.

Jesus' announcement of the arrival of God's kingdom must be placed in this context. In the coming kingdom of God the majority of Jews expected the restoration of all things and their participation in it through their resurrection. Did Jesus adjust that hope? Did he change the Jewish hope in a restored earth into a hope for a spiritualized heaven? The gospels give a clear answer—no. Especially his deeds show that salvation is the healing of a broken world; especially in Luke we see that Jesus is concerned to show that salvation is as wide as creation. Jesus

¹³ Hoekema comments: 'If God would have to annihilate the present cosmos, Satan would have won a great victory. For then Satan would have succeeded in so devastatingly corrupting the present cosmos and the present earth that God could do nothing with it but to blot it totally out of existence. But Satan did not win such a victory. On the contrary, Satan has been decisively defeated.' 281.

¹⁴ J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, n.d.), 483.

¹⁵ Lawrence, 22.

¹⁶ When Jesus says that meek shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5) he broadens Israel's hope to be more than simply the land of Israel but the whole earth. He refers to Psalm 37:11: 'But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace.' Israel expected her return to the land to be end of history. Here Jesus broadens the promise to include the whole earth. Berkouwer writes: 'In Jesus' promise this passage assumes eschatological import: the land that the meek shall possess is no longer Canaan, but the new earth . . .' (*The Return of Christ*, 213.) See Lawrence, *Heaven*, 35-36; Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 281-282. Life on the land pictures the coming kingdom.

¹⁷ See Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Christian Faith*, 502. Here he points to 'the extensive legislation in the Torah' to show how salvation is the restoration of the full scope of human cultural, economic, and social life.

¹⁸ Lawrence, 27.

also promises to return again to complete his kingdom by his work of salvation and judgement. He describes that time as 'the renewal of all things' (Matthew 19:28). The gospels present Jesus as working very much within the parameters of the Jewish expectation of a new creation. His conflict with the Jews is on how it will come and Israel's place in it.

Some have suggested that Jesus is preparing a place in heaven for us and will return to take his people back there. They point to John 14:2-3: 'In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.' However, this reading does not fit the context. David Lawrence has offered a paraphrase of this text that fits much better Jesus' words to his disciples:

In my Father's presence [i.e. house] there is room for all. As I go to the Father via the cross I prepare the means for you to enter his presence wherever you may find yourselves. Having opened the way for you to enjoy the same intimacy with the Father that you have seen me enjoy, I will return to you in the form of the Spirit, so that even whilst you live on earth you will share with me in the heavenly places.¹⁹

The metaphor of preparing a place in the Father's house is not of heaven but living in the presence of God with Jesus. It is here the disciples are to dwell (John 15:1-17).

7. Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead is a preview of life in the age to come.

When Jesus rose from the dead he stepped into the age to come. His resurrection is the first stage and the pattern for our resurrection. The pattern was not the escape of his soul to heaven; rather he was restored bodily from the dead. It is true that he went to heaven to be with the Father before his resurrection (Luke 23:43). That is also where we will be before our resurrection. However, that is temporary. Jesus rises bodily from the dead. He is able to eat, to talk, to be touched, and to be recognized by his disciples. Jesus' resurrection shows us that our ultimate future is not immateriality but bodily life. His resurrection gives us a preview of what our resurrection life will be like.

8. Paul pictures salvation in terms of the restoration of creation.

Before his conversion Paul was a Jewish rabbi who understood that the age to come would mean the resurrection of the body in the context of a restored creation. This view does not change and comes through at many points in his letters. The non-human creation shares in the destiny of humanity. At the present it is in bondage to the curse that is the result of human rebellion. However, it will one day share in the liberation and freedom of God's people (Romans 8:19-22). God will reconcile to himself all of creation in Jesus Christ whether it be the invisible or visible creation (Colossians 1:19-20). We will share in the resurrection of the body because Jesus has been raised from the dead (I Corinthians 15:20-28). Some might point here to Paul's statement that we will have a spiritual body as evidence that salvation will be a step up to non-material existence (I Corinthians 15:44). However, 'spiritual' here does not mean 'ethereal' but 'ruled and directed by the Holy Spirit.' Paul uses the same word to describe the spiritual person who is able to discern God's will (I Corinthians 2:15). Throughout his letters Paul employs many images of salvation that point to restoration: redemption, renewal, reconciliation, regeneration, and so on.

9. The goal of redemptive history is a resurrected body on a new earth.

We have noted that Paul speaks of a resurrection body like Jesus had. In addition, according to a number of places in Scripture the final goal of history is not a spiritual heaven but a new heaven and a new earth (Isaiah 65:17; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). Perhaps the word used to describe 'new' here is important. Hoekema says that 'both in II Peter 3:13 and in Revelation 21:1 the Greek word used to designate the newness of the new cosmos is not *neos* but *kainos*. The word *neos* means new in time or origin, whereas the word *kainos* means new in nature or in quality.'²⁰ In other

¹⁹ Lawrence, 33. See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel*, 177-182.

²⁰ Hoekema, 280. H. Haarbeck, H.-G. Link, and C. Brown also believe that the different Greek words are

words, a new heaven and new earth means a world that is *renewed* and not *brand new*.

Important also is the fact that it is a new earth *and a new heaven*. Heaven is the unseen part of God's world. It is pictured as his dwelling place but also as the realm of spiritual powers and angels. By these powers heaven impacts our world today. The book of Revelation and Ephesians speak of a battle that takes place in the heavenly places. This is because there are evil angelic powers that seek to bring harm to the creation. To speak of a new heaven is to speak of the cleansing of heaven of all these evil powers. Then there will be no possibility of a reentry of evil into the world.²¹

The Bible teaches a restoration of creation. However, there are some that believe that Bible speaks of a destruction and annihilation of the present world and the creation of a brand new one. They appeal to texts such as Matthew 24:29, 2 Peter 3:10-13, and Revelation 21:1. We have already seen in the preceding section many things that argue against such an understanding. New means renewed, destruction would mean a Satanic victory, Romans 8:19ff. speaks of the liberation of the present creation.²² Yet the words of 2 Peter seem to cast doubt on this conclusion:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? . . . That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness (2 Peter 3:10-12).

The question is whether the fire of judgement will *annihilate* or *purify* the world. Fire can do both. In Scripture the fire of judgement destroys that which is evil but purifies what is good. Malachi speaks of the refiner's fire that destroys impurities but purifies metal. In a similar way Paul speaks of fire of judgement that tests the quality of human work. It will either burn it up in destruction or purify it (I Corinthians 3:13-15). It is like that with the creation; the creation will be purified but the evil that pollutes it will be destroyed. The language of 2 Peter can mean both things.²³

Restoration means continuity between the world we know and the world to come. Our creational life will be restored.²⁴ The Bible also seems to point to some discontinuity. In his resurrected body Jesus appears to have the ability to pass through locked doors and cover distances very quickly. In his word to the Sadducees he may be pointing to the transcendence of sexual relations in our world today to relational fulfillment beyond that the exclusive marital relationship (Matthew 22:30; Luke 20:34-36). There will be discontinuity between our present life and the one to come. We do not see as clearly as we would like (I Corinthians 13:12) but we know that eye has not seen and ear has not heard what God has prepared for those who love Him (I Corinthians 2:9). However this may be, we do know that our lives will be lived in resurrected bodies on a restored creation.

significant: 'In secular usage *kainos* denotes that which is qualitatively new as compared with what has existed until now, that which is better than the old whereas *neos* is used temporally for that which has not yet been, that which has just made its appearance.' I am not sure the language can bear the weight of such a fine distinction. The authors do go on to say that 'the longer these words were used, the less strictly was the conceptual differentiation maintained.' (Colin Brown ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1976), 670. In any case, it is true that new here points to *renewed* rather than *brand new*.

21 Lawrence, 56-57.

22 See Hoekema, 279-281.

23 See Al Wolters, Worldview and Textual Criticism in 2 Peter 3:10, *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol.49, 1987, 405-413.

24 Berkhof recognizes that there is both continuity and discontinuity between our present life and the life to come but says that continuity must have the first and last word: 'A much-discussed problem is that of the continuity and discontinuity between our earthly life and the life that awaits us. . . . On account of God's faithfulness also in and beyond death, the continuity must have the first and last word in our faith and in our thinking.' *The Christian Faith*, 486.

The Kingdom of God as Comprehensive

Not only will the creation be restored; the *whole* of human life in the context of the *whole* creation will be restored. Too often our view of the future has emphasized solely the salvation of the individual person apart from the full creational and relational context in which human beings live their lives.²⁵ Often the whole of Biblical story seems to revolve around me.²⁶ Yet the Bible is quite clear that goal of creation is a restored creation in which we can find a place. Redemption is cosmic in its scope. God restores the whole life of humankind as part of the whole creation.

The prophets depict the restoration of God's kingdom in cosmic terms. It is especially the language of a new heaven and new earth that makes this clear. God says 'Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth' (Isaiah 65:17; cf. 2 Peter 3:13, Revelation 21:3). When Peter proclaims the good news in Jerusalem he says 'He [Jesus] must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to *restore everything*, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets' (Acts 3:21). Paul's words are clear on the scope of God's redemptive work: 'For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to *reconcile to himself all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross' (Colossians 1:19-20).

This comprehensive scope of God's redemptive work means, for example, that the non-human creation that forms the context for human life will be restored. The prophets picture the harmony and bounty of creation in the kingdom of God (Isaiah 65:17-25; Joel 2:18-27). Paul speaks of the non-human creation sharing in the misery of humankind's fall into sin but looking forward to the coming renewal: 'The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God' (Romans 8:19-21).

A comprehensive creation also means that human cultural development and work will continue. The cultural achievements of history will be purified and will reappear on the new earth (Revelation 21:24-26).²⁷ There will be the opportunity to continue to work and develop the creation apart from the curse of sin's burdening effects.²⁸

Does it Matter?

This chapter has used considerable space to show that in the Bible the coming kingdom of God is the restoration of all of human life in the context of the creation. Is it that important? David Lawrence believes it is: 'The question of the earth and its future becomes vital, not only to our future hope and expectation but also to the way we live as God's people *now*.'²⁹ G. C. Berkouwer agrees: 'When the expectation of a new earth is denied, the meaning of life on this earth breaks down. Only with an eye to God's future can one understand the richness of life in the present.'³⁰ Berkouwer's concern is that a 'spiritualized' misunderstanding of the final kingdom will have detrimental effects on life today. David Lawrence puts it this way: 'Seeing God's ultimate plan for us as being 'heavenly' and 'spiritual' has

25 It has been rightly noted that this narrowing of salvation in the West is the result of the powerful force of the Enlightenment worldview. The gospel narrowed its scope under its onslaught. 'The early Christian belief [i.e. Biblical] that the Fall and Redemption pertained not just to man, but to the entire cosmos, a doctrine already fading after the Reformation, now [under the power of secularism] disappeared altogether: the process, if it had any meaning at all, pertained solely to the personal relation between God and man' (Tarnas, 306f.). A. Koeberle writes that 'this cosmic aspect of redemption was increasingly lost to Western Christendom since the Age of Enlightenment, and to this day we have been unable to restore it to its strength and clarity' (Quoted in Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, 103).

26 In *The Return of Christ* (E.T. 1972, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) Berkouwer speaks of a 'soteriological self-centredness', 211. Newbigin criticizes believers who privatize 'this mighty work of grace and talk as if the whole cosmic drama of salvation culminates in the words 'For me; for me' . . . *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 179.

27 According to Berkouwer these verses indicate that 'the cultural treasures of history' will be brought into the New Jerusalem. *Christian Faith*, p. 520, 539. See also *Christ the Meaning of History*, 188-192 where he quotes Abraham Kuyper who believes the same thing.

28 See Lawrence, 110-113.

29 Lawrence, 17.

30 Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, 230.

led us to imagine that spiritual things are God's chief concern. If a spiritual heaven is God's greatest good for us, then the earth and our physical existence on it must be somehow "second best".³¹ If our hope is a 'spiritualized' kingdom of God the meaning of life on this earth breaks down and our physical existence is considered second best.

This problem can be seen when we consider the mission of the church. In the last chapter we saw that mission is the meaning of this time period between the first coming of Jesus and his return. Anthony Hoekema says that 'the missionary activity of the church is the characteristic activity of this age between Christ's first and second coming.'³² Oscar Cullman agrees: 'The missionary proclamation of the Church, its preaching of the gospel, gives to the period between Christ's resurrection and Parousia its meaning for redemptive history; and it has this meaning through its connection with Christ's present Lordship.'³³ If this is our place in the story what is mission? We have said that it is to be, speak, and do the good news. If redemption is the restoration of the whole of our creational life, then our mission is to embody the good news that every part of creational life, including the public life of our culture, is being restored. It will mean being good news in our care for the environment, international relations, economic justice, business, media, scholarship, family, and law. If, on the other hand, redemption is an otherworldly salvation then mission is reduced to verbal evangelism that tries to get people ready for heaven. Most of life then falls outside the mission of the church and is considered to be of secondary importance. Our witness in all of creational life breaks down.

Christ has created the world including its cultural and social development. Sin has messed it up. God has redeemed it and is redeeming it and will redeem it in Christ. Our place in this story is to show and tell the good news of that redemptive work.

The End of the Story

The last chapters of Revelation tell us the end of the story. Since the book of Revelation is the last book of the Bible we often consider the book to only show us the future. However, that is not its main concern. In this book the curtains of history are pulled back and we are invited to see the heavenly battle that is taking place during this period. Writing to a small suffering Christian church John describes the opposition of the Roman empire to the gospel. But behind that opposition is the true opposition to Christ and the church—Satan and his hosts. But the message of Revelation is that God wins! It may not seem like it but he does! In Revelation 4 and 5 we are told that Jesus takes the reins of history by virtue of his death. He opens the seals and unrolls the scroll of history moving it toward that final victory. The spiritual battle that takes place outside the realm of our perception is narrated in vivid images. But the message is clear: God is moving history toward His goal. He will be victorious and his kingdom will come.

That goal is described in the last chapters. It is especially Revelation 21:1-5 which depicts the coming climactic moment. John sees a new heaven and a new earth cleansed of sin and evil. The old heaven and earth dominated by the order of sin and death passes away giving place to a new dominion. The Holy City, the new Jerusalem, descends from heaven; there is no sign of people flying upward but a whole new order coming to earth. There is a loud voice from God's throne which proclaims:

Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (Revelation 21:3-4).

Heaven, which has been separated from His good creation because of sin, now is joined in harmonious unity with earth. God comes to dwell on the new earth with humankind. Sin and all its effects are removed. There is no more death or sickness or pain; all the effects of sin are removed. The old order of things dominated by sin and evil has given way to God's renewal.

31 Lawrence, 17.

32 Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 33.

33 Oscar Cullman, *Christ and Time*, 157.

There is shalom and harmony. The relationship between God and humankind is healed. God's presence is closer than ever before. The relationship among human beings is healed. Love reigns. Human life in all its aspects is purified. The non-human creation shares in this liberation of God's people.

And so God's people live with this hope of healed and renewed creation. Their prayer until that day is 'Come, Lord Jesus' (Revelation 22:20).

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