

“A biblically grounded and hope-filled tour through  
the Bible’s teaching on heaven.”

—STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

*Explorations in Biblical Theology*

# Life Everlasting

The Unfolding Story of Heaven



Dan C. Barber and Robert A. Peterson

*Robert A. Peterson, Series Editor*



“In place of today’s fascination with what happens after death defined by sentimental anecdotes or near-death personal testimonials, Dan Barber and Robert Peterson have presented a highly readable yet thoroughly biblical exposition of the Christ-purchased and -promised eternal hope for every believer. In so doing, they also address the implications for the believer in the present state, and then outline the intermediate and final state, as described in Scripture. I highly commend this book, while even now planning to use it in my own ministry.”

—**Harry L. Reeder, III**, Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

“One of the remedies for a cynical and self-gratification culture is to have a hopeful and glorious view of eternal life with God. Robert and Dan help us to gain a view of heaven that is both hopeful and biblical. Heaven is about God. Read this book about heaven and you will learn more about the God who loves you and wants you to be with him forever.”

—**Darrin Patrick**, Lead Pastor, The Journey (an Acts 29 church), St. Louis

“What makes this book so appealing and powerful is that it is grounded in a biblical view of heaven and the afterlife, rather than the personal speculations of those who claim to have gone there. The apostle Peter exhorts us to set our hope ‘fully on the grace that will be brought’ to us ‘at the revelation of Jesus Christ’ (1 Peter 1:13). This book will enable you to do precisely that. I highly recommend it.”

—**Sam Storms**, Senior Pastor, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City

“Dan Barber and Robert Peterson’s *Life Everlasting* is clear, timely, and important. It is biblical, too, both in content and in structure, as it refrains from speculation and highlights the Bible’s own key themes of heaven.”

—**Christopher Morgan**, Professor of Theology and Dean of the School of Christian Ministries, California Baptist University, Riverside

“What a delight to read Dan Barber and Robert Peterson’s wonderful book, *Life Everlasting!* In a day and age when discussion of heaven is either purely speculative or mere sentimentality, this book carefully unfolds the biblical teaching on heaven in all its depth, breadth, and wonder. Following the Bible’s own story line, and unfolding the story of heaven across the canon of Scripture, Barber and Peterson develop five beautiful pictures of our final state and what believers may look forward to in regard to life everlasting. Unpacking the Bible’s own teaching on what heaven is—namely, the Christian dwelling in the glorious presence of our triune God in a new creation, enjoying our eternal Sabbath rest, ruling and reigning with Christ as subjects of God’s kingdom, and enjoying the incredible presence of our holy, covenant God—this book leaves the reader with a breathtaking vision of our consummated state. Biblically faithful, theologically rich, and practically written for the church, this book is must reading if you want to think correctly about heaven. In addition, it will not only encourage you to greater love and adoration of our great Creator and Redeemer God, but also stir you anew to cry with the church in all ages, ‘So come, Lord Jesus.’”

—**Stephen J. Wellum**, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Editor, *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*

“Sooner or later every theologian, pastor, and parent gets the question: Will my dog be in heaven? There is likely no subject more inquired about than that of heaven. And there’s no shortage of answers and perspectives. Amid all the fog of careless speculation, we need a sure guide. This is the book. Peterson and Barber offer us a biblically grounded and hope-filled tour through the Bible’s teaching on heaven. Skip the books on the forty-two seconds spent in heaven and the light at the end of the tunnel. This is the book you need.”

—**Stephen J. Nichols**, Research Professor of Christianity and Culture, Lancaster Bible College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania

“Christians speak of going to heaven and of the blessings of heaven, but often have a very vague understanding of what the

Bible says about heaven and the final consummation of God's plan of salvation. Dan Barber and Robert Peterson's *Life Everlasting*, with clear and careful exegesis, presents what the Bible says about heaven. This is a valuable work for helping the believer to understand the future blessings that God has prepared for his people."

—**Van Lees**, Pastor, Covenant of Grace Church, St. Charles,  
Missouri



Life Everlasting

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# Life Everlasting

The Unfolding Story of Heaven

Dan C. Barber and  
Robert A. Peterson



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We dedicate this volume to our precious wives:  
April Barber and Mary Pat Peterson,  
for their love, prayers, and unwavering support.



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# Series Introduction

BELIEVERS TODAY need high-quality literature that attracts them to good theology and builds them up in their faith. Currently, readers may find several sets of lengthy—and rather technical—books on Reformed theology, as well as some that are helpful and semipopular. *Explorations in Biblical Theology* takes a more midrange approach, seeking to offer readers the substantial content of the more lengthy books, on the one hand, while striving for the readability of the semipopular books, on the other.

The series includes two types of books: (1) some treating biblical themes and (2) others treating the theology of specific biblical books. The volumes dealing with biblical themes seek to cover the whole range of Christian theology, from the doctrine of God to last things. Representative early offerings in the series focus on the empowering of the Holy Spirit, justification, the presence of God, and preservation and apostasy. Examples of works dealing with the theology of specific biblical books include volumes on the theology of the Psalms and Isaiah in the Old Testament, and books on the theology of Mark and James in the New Testament.

*Explorations in Biblical Theology* is written for college seniors, seminarians, pastors, and thoughtful lay readers. These volumes are intended to be accessible and not obscured by excessive references to Hebrew, Greek, or theological jargon.

Each book seeks to be solidly Reformed in orientation, because the writers love the Reformed faith. The various theological themes and biblical books are treated from the perspective of biblical theology. Writers either trace doctrines through the Bible or open up the theology of the specific book they treat.

## SERIES INTRODUCTION

Writers desire not merely to dispense the Bible's good information, but also to apply that information to real needs today.

Explorations in Biblical Theology is committed to being warm and winsome, with a focus on applying God's truth to life. Authors aim to treat those with whom they disagree as they themselves would want to be treated. The motives for the rejection of error are not to fight, hurt, or wound, but to protect, help, and heal. The authors of this series are godly, capable scholars with a commitment to Reformed theology and a burden to minister that theology clearly to God's people.

Robert A. Peterson  
Series Editor



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# Introduction

IT IS MY (DAN'S) FIRST MEMORY. My eyes fixed on her, watching her in her stillness. I was three years old but knew that something was very wrong with my four-day-old sister. I did not know her name. I never said a word to her, played with her, teased her, or fought with her. But I wish deeply that I had. I only stared as my mind filled with thoughts that remain with me so many years later. Who is she? What would she have been like? Maybe she would have been a gymnast, or an engineer. Would I have been good friends with her, would she have married a good man, with whom I would have become good friends? And would our daughters have played together, as cousins should? The thoughts bring tears again. I miss her so.

I was not able to articulate these thoughts then, of course. It would take years of soul-searching, much prayer and counsel to understand what I was feeling and thinking. Many new experiences brought back my pain and search for hope. At the age of eight I found myself with a similar image, looking at my grandmother lying still, knowing that something was very wrong about what I was seeing.

I (Robert) was confronted with death's stark reality in my first year of graduate-school teaching in St. Louis. A student and his wife asked me to perform the funeral for their two-year-old son, who had been born with many physical challenges. His death was no surprise, but it still shook us all. Jesus' words "I am the resurrection and the life" comforted us, but nothing immediately erased the pain of seeing that tiny body in a casket. Plainly, that was not the way the good Creator had designed the world. In Eden there was no death, no funerals, and no mourning. And those

things will have no place in the new heavens and new earth. But in the meantime, ever since the fall of our first parents, we all struggle with pain, disappointment, failure, and death.

This book is about heaven—final salvation. It is a book about our looking forward to our resurrection and joyous participation in the new heavens and new earth. But before we explore those bright prospects, we need to answer an important question: Why do we need another book about heaven? We have four answers:

- People Seek Information about Heaven in the Wrong Places
- Writers Speculate about the End Times and Heaven
- The Bible’s Teaching on Heaven Helps Us Now
- The Bible’s Story about Heaven Offers Hope for the Future

### **People Seek Information about Heaven in the Wrong Places**

The more we teach about heaven, the more we realize that people often get their conceptions of heaven from sources other than Scripture, such as Barbara Walters’ television special *Heaven: Where Is It? How Do We Get There?*<sup>1</sup> Even though many have never seen these productions, their concepts become ingrained in popular culture:

- The better you live on earth, the higher “heaven” you will ascend to.
- The best people will live free from their bodily constraints among the stars.
- The primary activities of souls in heaven will be to sing to God and warn people on earth.

There are many other sources of misinformation. One such source is people who claim to have firsthand knowledge of heaven.

1. *Heaven: Where Is It? How Do We Get There?* DVD, directed by George Paul (Orland Park, IL: Mpi Home Video, 2006), information available at [http://www.mpihomevideo.com/heaven\\_where\\_is\\_it\\_how\\_do\\_we\\_get\\_there/](http://www.mpihomevideo.com/heaven_where_is_it_how_do_we_get_there/).

Online bookseller Amazon.com on July 14, 2011, revealed at least thirty-five books telling of such firsthand knowledge. The qualifications of the writers fall into various categories.

Some people claim to have received revelatory dreams of heaven, such as Rebecca Ruter Springer in *My Dream of Heaven*. Others say that they have had visions of heaven that they wish to share. These include Patti Miller Dunham in *I Saw Heaven* and Marietta Davis in *Nine Days in Heaven*, by Dennis Prince.

Many claim to have gone to heaven and come back to tell their stories, whether through near-death experiences or returning after actual death. Included among near-death experiences is the case of David Taylor. Although he claims to have taken many trips to heaven and hell, his book *Heaven: My Trip to Heaven, Face to Face with Jesus* tells of a special trip. Taylor claims that while he was asleep in 2000, Jesus came into his room and took his soul out of his body on a glorious trip to the third heaven, where he saw Jesus face-to-face and was given special messages for the world by the spirits of deceased pastors.

One woman claims to have spent more than a month in heaven in *40 Days in Heaven: The True Testimony of Seneca Sodi's Visitation to Paradise, the Holy City and the Glory of God's Throne*, by Elwood Scott. She says that while in heaven she discussed theology with Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Daniel, and the apostle Paul.

Some claim to have actually died and to have returned to their bodies. Most famous is Pastor Don Piper's story—*90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death and Life*, which has sold 4 million copies. Another best seller is the story of four-year-old Colton Burpo's journey, recounted by his father, Todd, in *Heaven Is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back*.

Others are not as famous but are just as sure that they died and came back to life to share their experiences. Dannon Brinkley, in *Saved by the Light: The True Story of a Man Who Died Twice and the Profound Revelations He Received*, says that he was revived after dying on two occasions when struck by lightning. Brinkley claims to have been given 117 revelations of future events by thirteen angelic teachers.

We have read only a few of these books. We do not intend to read them all because they are seeking information about God and heaven in the wrong places. We do not question the sincerity of some of the writers of these books. And we do not claim the ability to evaluate accurately what happened in every case. But we are sure of this: the Word of God is our only reliable source of information about God and the afterlife.

Among the truths taught by the Reformers of the sixteenth century was *sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”). This does not mean that we reject all other sources of truth; we all appeal at times to experience, reason, and tradition. But *sola Scriptura* means that the Bible trumps all other sources. Scripture sits in judgment on every other authority in matters of what we believe and how we live.

It is obvious that the thirty-five books about heaven referred to above do not practice *sola Scriptura*. Almost all of them do not regard the Bible as the supreme court that rules over all other religious authorities. Instead, they too easily regard their experiences as the source of ultimate truth. This is especially disappointing in the case of Don Piper’s *90 Minutes in Heaven*.<sup>2</sup> Mr. Piper is a Baptist minister and a sincere Christian. We do not doubt that he had an amazing experience. But we are sad that he (unintentionally?) puts his experience above Scripture:

Now I can speak authoritatively about heaven from firsthand knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Without the slightest doubt, I know that heaven *is* real. It’s more real than anything I’ve ever experienced in my life.<sup>4</sup>

We have never had a dream or vision of heaven, we have not journeyed there, and Jesus has not appeared to us. But, forgiven sinners that we are, we will speak authoritatively about heaven

2. Don Piper, *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death and Life*, with Cecil Murphy (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2004).

3. *Ibid.*, 129.

4. *Ibid.*, 194 (italics in original).

in this book. As surely as Holy Scripture is the Word of God, it alone gives us reliable information on heaven (and all other matters spiritual). Furthermore, without a doubt, we know that heaven is real. Why? Because the Bible clearly and abundantly tells us so.

In fact, Jesus' words in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus are especially needed in light of these books' claims. The rich man, suffering in hell, cries out to father Abraham to send someone back from the dead to warn the rich man's five unrepentant brothers (Luke 16:27–28). Abraham, speaking for God, tells the rich man that his brothers should listen to "Moses and the Prophets" (v. 29). The rich man protests, "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent" (v. 30). Jesus' last words in the parable ring in his hearers' ears and in ours: "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (v. 31). Our Lord and Savior's words should give pause to those who put greater stock in their experiences than in Scripture.

## **Writers Speculate about the End Times and Heaven**

Repeatedly, teachers have made confident predictions of the date of Christ's return, the end of the world, and the coming of God's eternal kingdom. Although each prediction has proved false, this often does not deter the "prophets" from making additional sure predictions. Here are four examples.

### *1843–44: William Miller*

William Miller, a converted deist, concluded from his study of the Bible that the second advent of Christ would occur between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. He became a leader of what would become known as *Adventism*. Many people (estimates range from fifty thousand to a hundred thousand) accepted Miller's calculations and anticipated the

coming of Christ. When Miller's prophecy failed, his followers set a second date: October 22, 1844. When that date, too, passed without the coming of the great Day of Atonement, it became known instead as "the Great Disappointment" and led many to abandon the Christian faith.<sup>5</sup>

### *1874, 1925, and 1975: Jehovah's Witnesses*

The Watchtower Society, the so-called Jehovah's Witnesses, claims to be God's only true prophet on earth today. According to the official *Watchtower* magazine, the prophet whom Jehovah promised to raise up in Deuteronomy 18:15–22 is "not an individual" but an organization. In fact, the Watchtower Society is God's "prophetlike organization."<sup>6</sup>

"However," as Ron Rhodes explains, "the Watchtower Society now admits that it was wrong in its prediction for 1874 (the second coming of Christ), 1925 (the coming of select Old Testament saints to earth), 1975 (the end of human history), and other times."<sup>7</sup>

The irony is that the very biblical passage that the Watchtower Society cites in claiming to be God's only true prophet today condemns the Watchtower Society:

And if you say in your heart, "How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?"—when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. (Deut. 18:21–22)

5. Craig D. Atwood, Frank S. Mead, and Samuel S. Hill, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, 13th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 231.

6. Ron Rhodes, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with the Jehovah's Witnesses* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1993), 339. The claim was made in *Watchtower* (October 1, 1982): 27; *Watchtower* (October 1, 1964): 601.

7. Rhodes, *Reasoning from the Scriptures*, 340. Rhodes details these three Watchtower Society predictions on pages 343–51. The Watchtower Society accepts "responsibility for some of the disappointment a number felt concerning 1975" in *1980 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1980), 30–31. For more concerning Jehovah's Witnesses' false predictions of Christ's return, see Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Jehovah's Witnesses*, Zondervan Guide to Cults and Religious Movements (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 60–67.



*September 11–13, 1988: Edward C. Whisenant*

Edward Whisenant, a former NASA engineer and Bible student, penned *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Is in 1988*, claiming that the event would occur sometime from September 11 to 13. Ministers across America were sent three hundred thousand free copies, and bookstores sold another 4.5 million. Many individual Christians and even whole churches were caught up in the frenzy. As the days approached, the Trinity Broadcasting Network interrupted regular programming to give instructions on preparing for the rapture.<sup>8</sup> When the prophecy failed, Whisenant recalculated and wrote *89 Reasons Why the Rapture Is in 1989*. But this book did not sell nearly as well as its predecessor.

*May 21 and October 21, 2011: Harold Camping*

Harold Camping's third and fourth predictions of the end of the world and of the inauguration of the new creation failed in 2011. Though it was obvious that his teaching was misguided, that did not stop Camping. Instead, he reinterpreted May 21 as a spiritual return, a great judgment so that salvation would no longer be possible. When that prediction failed, he then predicted that the last day would occur on October 21, 2011, when the whole world would be judged and this age would come to an end. Again the prediction came to naught. Thus, Camping has twice more been shown to be a false prophet. But we would not be surprised if he checks his figures and tries a fifth time.

*We Will Not Speculate*

We refuse to set dates for the second coming and subsequent events because Scripture clearly prohibits us from doing so (Matt. 24:36–44; 25:13; Acts 1:7). And these prohibitions point to another reason why another book on heaven is needed—because there are so many harmful voices shouting out, vying for people's assent to their views. *We need to recover a biblical perspective on heaven.*

8. Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar\\_C.\\_Whisenant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_C._Whisenant).

And that involves heeding the important distinction made in Deuteronomy 29:29: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever.” There are things revealed to us about heaven, and these are appropriate to discuss, and there are things that are not revealed about heaven, and these are not worthy of discussion.

We are confident, in the words of the apostle Peter, that God has told us in Scripture everything necessary for “life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). He has not told us everything there is to know about heaven, nor is he in the business of revealing to individuals today previously unknown things about heaven. His written revelation is complete, and everything we need to know about heaven is made known in two critical areas. First, God has told us all we need to know in order to go to heaven. Second, God has told us all we need to know to live a God-honoring life in the meantime.

### **The Bible’s Teaching on Heaven Helps Us Now**

Our first two reasons for writing this book are admittedly negative—to stop people from looking for information about heaven in the wrong places and to discourage speculation. Now we share two positive reasons to read the book. Both of them deal with encouragements to be found in the Bible’s story about heaven. God tells us about heaven to affect us deeply now and to increase our joy and anticipation of Christ’s future return.

We have all heard the common criticism that some Christians are too heavenly minded to be of much earthly good. We beg to differ. We do not know a single person who fits that description. Indeed, most of us are far too earthly minded to be of much heavenly good! One reason to study God’s message about heaven is that he wants to use that message to change our lives for good now. Do you honestly know of anyone who fits Izaak Walton’s description of his contemporary Richard Sibbes?

Of that blessed man,  
Let this just praise be given:

That heaven was in him  
Before he was in heaven.<sup>9</sup>

Consider: Why did God tell us about our final salvation ahead of time? He wants to whet our appetites for heaven now, even in the midst of struggles: “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). He desires that our hope of heaven transform our present earthly existence. For this reason Scripture exhorts us in the midst of this life to lift up our eyes to the next one: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Col. 3:1–2).

Too often, however, our vision rises no higher than the things of this earth. Sadly, we sometimes spiritually resemble the pathetic figure described by John Stott in one of his famous Inter-Varsity Mission Convention messages at Urbana, Illinois, in 1976:

Lift up your eyes! You are certainly a creature of time, but you are also a child of eternity. You are a citizen of heaven, and an alien and exile on earth, a pilgrim travelling to the celestial city. I read some years ago of a young man who found a five-dollar bill on the street and who “from that time on never lifted his eyes when walking. In the course of years he accumulated 29,516 buttons, 54,172 pins, 12 cents, a bent back and a miserly disposition.” But think what he lost. He couldn’t see the radiance of the sunlight, and sheen of the stars, the smile on the face of his friends, or the blossoms of springtime, for his eyes were in the gutter. There are too many Christians like that. We have important duties on earth, but we must never allow them to preoccupy us in such a way that we forget who we are or where we are going.<sup>10</sup>

9. Quoted in K. Scott Oliphint and Sinclair B. Ferguson, *If I Should Die before I Wake: Help for Those Who Hope for Heaven* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 99.

10. Quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *A Brief History of Heaven* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 174–75.

We want to take Stott's wise words to heart and pray that this book would both inform and transform.

## The Bible's Story about Heaven Offers Hope for the Future

### *Scripture Speaks about Heaven in Three Ways*

One of the difficulties in discussing heaven is the word *heaven* itself. The Bible speaks about heaven in three different ways.

*The Sky.* "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Genesis then enlarges on these two spheres, the *heavens* in verses 6–8 and the *earth* in verses 9–10. Moses writes, "And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. And God called the expanse Heaven" (1:7–8). That is, God called the sky, in which is set the "waters above" (clouds that produce rain), *heaven*.

*The Abode of the Stars.* But biblical authors also call the abode of the stars—what we would call outer space—*heaven*. When God declares his covenant promise to Abraham for the third time, he says, "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the *stars of heaven* and as the sand that is on the seashore" (Gen. 22:17). Both of these meanings of the word *heaven*—the sky and the abode of the stars—are phenomenological expressions. They express phenomena as human beings perceive them. We are familiar with this. Does the sun really set or rise? No, we use *sunset* and *sunrise* to refer to the phenomena resulting from the earth's rotation on its axis as it appears to us. The majority of the references to *heaven* in the Bible relate to the sky or the stars. Note that they both refer to the space above the earth on which humankind dwells.

*The Unseen Spiritual Realm Where God Dwells.* But there is a third meaning, the one that we typically associate with the word *heaven* today—the unseen spiritual realm where God dwells. Paul explains, "For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or

rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him” (Col. 1:16). Notice that Paul contrasts “in heaven” with “on earth” and contrasts “visible” with “invisible.” The things on earth are visible; the things in heaven are invisible. Paul here gives us the key characteristic of this third meaning of *heaven* as the dwelling place of God. It is the invisible realm. It is not located above or below or in any other direction in the sense that you can travel to it. So when Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:2 that he was “caught up to the third heaven,” he does not mean that he was floating in the sky but that he had a personal encounter with the invisible dwelling place of God.

Scripture tells us about this third sense of *heaven* to increase our hope for the future. I (Robert) remember God’s gracious dealings with Sammy. He lived in a nursing home near Hope Presbyterian Church in Collinsville, Illinois, where I served as interim pastor. Some of my students ministered in the church and on numerous occasions shared the gospel with Sammy. He confided in the students that he did not trust Christ for salvation. Then one Sunday morning when it came time for praise and prayer, Sammy rose to speak. Every eye was trained on him, for this was unusual. He shared publicly that he had come to believe in Jesus because of the love and witness of the students. I will not soon forget his next words: “I know now where I am going, and if I die next week, I know I will be in heaven.” Well, he did die the next week, and a spirit of awe and of gratefulness to God for his amazing grace fell upon the congregation. Sammy had wasted most of his life, but for a week he enjoyed a living hope in salvation (1 Peter 1:3). Do we?

### *Scripture Distinguishes between the Present, Intermediate, and Final States*

Another question that sometimes perplexes people is *when* is heaven? Is it now, when we die, or when Christ returns? The Bible’s answer is yes; it is all three.

*The Present State.* We refer to life in the body now as the present state to distinguish it from the intermediate state, which

consists of life after death and before the resurrection of the dead, and from the final state, which refers to life after the resurrection. Is there a sense in which heaven as the presence of God refers to the present state? The answer is yes, as long as we acknowledge that heaven is not only present, but also future. John contrasts the present states of the saved and lost: “Whoever believes in him [the Son of God] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:18). Later in the same chapter, John makes the same stark contrast: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (v. 36). Our purpose at present is not to speak of unbelievers’ fate. It is rather to show that there is a sense that Christians enjoy heaven and eternal life—knowing the Father and the Son (17:3)—now.

*The Intermediate State.* When most people refer to heaven, they speak of the intermediate state—that which follows death and precedes resurrection. Jesus promises the repentant thief on the cross, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Paul wanted to remain alive to keep serving his beloved Philippians but admitted, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil. 1:23). And in what might be the most familiar passage on the intermediate state, the apostle expresses his hope: “we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). People are not mistaken when they say the Bible teaches that believers’ spirits survive death and immediately enjoy Christ’s presence in heaven. But they make a big mistake if they regard this as exhausting our Christian hope.

*The Final State.* It is not wrong to speak of heaven in regard to the present and intermediate states. But neither of these is the greatest hope of believers. That distinction belongs to the final state. The final state involves our resurrection from the dead and being equipped with bodies that are immortal, imperishable, powerful, glorious, and spiritual (ruled by the Holy Spirit) (1 Cor. 15:42–49, 51–56; Phil. 3:20–21). It involves God’s renewal of heaven

and earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:22–23; Rom. 8:18–23; 2 Peter 3:7, 10–13; Rev. 21–22). This grand prospect is our chief hope according to the biblical story. So when we refer to *heaven* in this book, we speak of heaven in the final state. Though we do address a few questions regarding the intermediate state (see Frequently Asked Questions about Heaven near the end of this book), we will not focus on it. Rather, our focus will be on the resurrection, as was Paul’s when he wrote to encourage the Thessalonians, “The dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive . . . will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:16–17).

### *A Road Map to This Book*

We will treat five major biblical pictures or themes that portray heaven’s final state. Why did we choose these themes from among the many in Scripture? Because we find them compelling and encompassing of some of the others. We will trace each picture from Genesis to Revelation and will devote ten chapters to this task. We will allot two chapters apiece to each of the pictures: creation, rest, kingdom, presence, and glory. The first chapter devoted to each picture will describe it in terms of creation, fall, and redemption. And the following chapter will describe that same picture in terms of the restoration.

#### **Part 1: Creation**

1. Creation Marred
2. Creation Renewed

#### **Part 2: Rest**

3. Disturbed Rest
4. Perfect Rest

#### **Part 3: Kingdom**

5. The Kingdom at War
6. The Kingdom at Peace

**Part 4: Presence**

7. Banished from God's Presence
8. Blessed with God's Presence

**Part 5: Glory**

9. Exchange of Glory
10. Brilliance in Glory

The odd-numbered chapters will each contain three parts. Each odd-numbered chapter will begin with a discussion of *creation*: we will view that picture as original and undefiled. Second, we will explore how that picture was marred in the *fall* by the sin of Adam and Eve and ruined for us all in the process. Third, we will examine the process of *redemption* that began directly after the fall and that culminates in Christ's death and resurrection. These three stages in the odd-numbered chapters lay a foundation for us to examine heaven as *restoration* in the corresponding even-numbered chapters. These chapters will be devoted to studying the renewal of believers and of heaven and earth. Each even-numbered chapter will conclude with implications for life here on this present earth, since God intends his revelation concerning heaven to produce *transformation* in us: "So then let us not sleep [that is, live as though heaven were not a present and a future reality], as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober" (1 Thess. 5:6).

We have both been impacted by the Word of God's message about heaven and long for you to have the same experience. Listen to the apostle John's words:

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. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. (1 John 3:2–3)





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# Creation

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# Creation Marred

IT WAS THE DAWN OF A NEW ERA. In 1961, Yuri Gagarin became the first man to orbit the earth in outer space. The globe was abuzz with space talk: interstellar travel, lodging, tourist flights, even space warfare. But what impacted Yuri the most? He was taken aback by the sheer beauty of the world. In a signed Russian document after his historic flight, he pleaded, "Orbiting earth in the spaceship, I saw how beautiful our planet is. People, let us preserve and increase this beauty, not destroy it!"<sup>1</sup>

What it must be like to see the planet from space! We have seen hundreds of pictures of the earth from space. But we have never seen it directly. The first civilian to do so was Russian Konstantin Petrovich Feoktistov, the first non-Communist cosmonaut to orbit the earth. Noting that an artist or poet would be better suited to offer a description, he nevertheless tried to describe the ineffable:

From the height of four hundred kilometers our earth is really very beautiful. The air crown around the earth is wonderful. There is an amazing gamut of colors in the outer space landscape. Against the background of the dark, completely dark sky, the . . . constellations shine brightly, like diamonds. And the sun? If all the people on the earth could see it rise and set the way we did, how they would love the heavenly body! The sun

1. L. A. Lebedev, Boris Lyk'yanov, and A. Romanov, *Sons of the Blue Planet*, trans. Prema Pande, 3rd ed. (New Delhi: Amerind Publishing, 1981), 13.

would appear from behind the horizon very suddenly, at first as a bright reddish line. . . . It would grow in front of our eyes instantaneously. At first we saw a greatly stretched oval figure and then the sun became a huge, round disk and it would dazzle the eyes in such a way that it was impossible to look at it.<sup>2</sup>

Now imagine God's perspective. The universe is his good creation. He has created it in every color, shape, and size. The world, his creation, must appear very beautiful to him, its Maker. But the universe has been blighted by sin, the beautiful canvas smeared with all manner of evil. And this is why renewal is central to the biblical story. Renewed creation is anticipated from Genesis 3 onward. Something went very wrong, and it needs to be rectified for creation to be restored and humankind to live as God intends. The Bible tells the grand story of this new creation in four movements:

- Creation: Heaven and Earth Made
- Fall: Heaven and Earth Marred
- Redemption: Heaven and Earth Waiting
- Restoration: Heaven and Earth Repaired

We will examine the first three movements in this chapter and the restoration of heaven and earth in the next one.

## **Creation: Heaven and Earth Made**

Debates today on Genesis 1–3 center on the historicity of Adam and Eve and the interpretation of the seven creation days.<sup>3</sup> But three thousand years ago, the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai had different concerns. Egypt was a culture

2. L. A. Lebedev, Boris Lyk'yanov, and A. Romanov, *Sons of the Blue Planet*, trans. Prema Pande (New Delhi: Amerind Publishing, 1973), 85–86.

3. On the historicity of Adam and Eve, see C. John Collins, *Did Adam and Eve Really Exist? Who They Were and Why You Should Care* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011). For a synopsis of the creation-days debate, see Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 92–103.

with a radically different worldview from Israel, including its many deities. And Israel had been enslaved there four hundred years (Gen. 15:13).

So when Yahweh brings Moses to the king of Egypt and delivers his people, the question arises: Who is this God whom Israel worships who just plundered the most powerful empire at the time? The first chapters of Genesis serve, in large part, to answer that question. And their answer is that the God of Israel, its Redeemer, is also the Creator of the world—everything and everyone in it.<sup>4</sup>

### *The World Is Created*

Jay Leno has a well-known bit on his show called “Jaywalking,” when he asks the public a series of simple questions that anyone should be able to answer. One segment asked people to complete famous phrases:

- “Ask not what your country can do for you but . . .” (John F. Kennedy)
- “One small step for man . . .” (Neil Armstrong)
- “In the beginning . . .” (the Bible)

Interestingly, most people could not finish the quotations, except for Genesis 1:1. That’s how well known the Bible’s claim that God created heaven and earth is today. But in Moses’ day, such a claim was not so easily understood by the average Israelite. Remember that when Genesis was written, Israel was a wandering people. They were not yet a nation like Egypt and lacked their own land. In Genesis 1–11 God sets the record straight, beginning with creation.

*The Redeemer Is the Creator.* The Egyptians, like the ancient Greeks and many other cultures, believed in a pantheon of deities, each with its own realm. Anubis watched over the dead as they

4. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), xlv.

were embalmed and delivered them up safely to Osiris, judge of the underworld. Osiris was married to Isis, goddess of motherhood and fertility. Ra (or Amun-Ra) was the sun god and co-creator of the universe along with Atum, Ptah, and others. Nut, depicted as a cow, was the goddess of the sky and the heavens and kept the stars in their course.

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Against the backdrop of the Redeemer’s delivering the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, these words are pregnant with meaning. When Moses writes that God created “the heavens and the earth,” he means that God—this one God, Yahweh—created everything. It was not a collective of individual deities but a single God, one who also defeated the gods of Egypt through ten public displays (the plagues) of his awesome power over creation and all that is in it. The God of Israel is the God of the universe.

*The Creation Reflects the Creator.* Every creation bears the imprint of its creator. Picasso’s works bear his surname, usually in the lower left-hand corner. Leonardo da Vinci not only signed his works, like the famous Vitruvian Man, but wrote most of his work with inverted writing; you can read it only if you look at its reflection in a mirror. E. E. Cummings wrote much of his poetry in all lowercase with little if any punctuation.

All creations in some way reflect their maker, including the work of the Great Artist, as both Testaments affirm:

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. (Ps. 19:1)

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. (Rom. 1:20)

By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. (Heb. 11:3)

These passages reveal that the Creator displays his unique signature on his creation. The invisible God created from nothing all things seen and unseen. And the fact that he is Creator, as Paul says, is obvious in his creation—not just in people, who are made in his image, but in everything.<sup>5</sup> And everything, though it does not speak with words, shouts “Glory to God!” because it was made to glorify him.

### *The Worshipers in the Garden*

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).

*Unique Bodies.* When we read the creation account, we cannot help but notice the last statement of each day: “And it was so.” But for the days on which God creates some sort of organism, another phrase directly precedes: “bearing fruit . . . each according to its kind” (Gen. 1:11–12, 21, 25). Humankind was created male and female and likewise told to “be fruitful and multiply” (v. 28)—the same command given to the creatures of the sea (v. 22), along with a similar pronouncement of blessing.

Reproduction, however, is a curious thing. No two plants or no two fish are the same. They are similar in general appearance, structure, and composite molecules, but are individually unique. Similarly, human beings do not reproduce clones but unique individuals. With each new day, each reproductive cycle, the diversity and majesty of creation increases.

There is the most profuse diversity and yet, in that diversity, there is also a superlative kind of unity. The foundation of both diversity and unity is in God. . . . Here is a unity that does not destroy but rather maintains diversity, and a diversity

5. This concept is not some form of pantheism, in which “everything is god.” True, God is ever-present (Ps. 139:7–12). But trees are not God. It is a grave mistake to confuse “the glory of the immortal God” with “images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom. 1:23). That kind of confusion leads to idolatry (v. 25).

that does not come at the expense of unity, but rather unfolds it in its riches.<sup>6</sup>

The doctrine of creation teaches us that we each individually matter to God, that he loves us uniquely and specially in the way a father loves his sons and daughters.

*The Image of God.* We note that humanity alone is created in God's image. Of what does this image consist? It is not simply "the breath of life" (Gen. 2:7), since animals also have that (7:15, 22). The image includes humankind's task to rule over the earth and to care for it on behalf of the Creator.

The image of God is not solely spiritual in nature, since man and woman are not just spiritual beings. We are a unity of body and soul, whole persons. You are you because of your body, not just your mental and emotional faculties. In Eden, body and spirit operate as one to the glory of God.

Both male and female are created in God's image. Neither is better than the other. Genesis 1 radically unites all human creatures in equal dignity and honor: "It is . . . significant that whereas in the rest of the Ancient Near East the image of God was limited to the king, in Israel it was regarded as characteristic of mankind generally, without distinction between king and commoner, man and woman, or Israelite and non-Israelite."<sup>7</sup>

*True Beauty.* Certainly creation was a sight to behold. Eden is referred to as a *paradise*, a word for "park" or "garden," precisely because of its beautiful landscape. Moses describes it as being bounded on one side by the river Pishon, "the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there" (Gen. 2:11–12). This is a beauty that permeates God's good creation.

This beauty extends to the bodies of Adam and Eve, who were created naked. "The body has been consistently depreciated in Christian theology, under the influence of Platonic, Aristote-

6. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2:435–36.

7. David J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 94.



lian, and Stoic conceptions of man as primarily *nous*, ‘mind’ or ‘reason.’ . . . In biblical thought a far higher value is set upon the body.”<sup>8</sup> The human body, male and female, is a thing of exquisite beauty, a good creation by God, and it should be treated as such.

*The Creation of the Family.* God declares something “good” many times in Genesis 1, and he tells us what is “not good” in Genesis 2: “It is not good that the man should be alone” (v. 18). Next follows the so-called parade of animals before Adam, when he names each one. When no suitable helper is found among the animals, God forms one out of Adam’s rib. We can almost imagine Adam’s thought process:

“No, this one isn’t like me . . . I will call it ‘Bull.’”

“This one isn’t like me, either . . . I will call it ‘Horse.’”

“This one certainly isn’t like me . . . I will call it ‘Dog.’”

“This at last is bone of my bones . . . ; she shall be called ‘Woman.’” (Gen. 2:23)

The parade functions to help Adam understand who exactly his helper is supposed to be—Eve. And so our first parents become “one flesh” (v. 24), uniting to accomplish the work set before them in the garden.

### *The Work to Be Done*

Adam and Eve are to “work it [or serve it] and keep it” (Gen. 2:15)—language of the worship of God to the Israelite ear. They were to worship God by the caretaking of creation and creatively expressing whatever their hearts desired, resulting in the ongoing praise of his glory. There were no express limitations for their task, save one: do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (v. 17). Imagine the creative possibilities! Sandra Richter summarizes: “In essence, Adam and Eve are free to do anything except decide for themselves what is good and evil.”<sup>9</sup>

8. *Ibid.*, 86.

9. Richter, *The Epic of Eden*, 104.

This was the good creation of God, the crown of his glory made manifest as the *world* filled with his *worshippers* doing his *work*. Richter articulates it well:

This was Adam and Eve's perfect world. Not just fruit and fig leaves, but an entire race of people stretching their cognitive and creative powers to the limit to build a society of balance and justice and joy. Here the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve would learn life at the feet of the Father, build their city in the shadow of the almighty, create and design and expand within the protective confines of his kingdom. The blessing of this gift? A civilization without greed, malice or envy; progress without pollution, expansion without extinction. Can you imagine it?<sup>10</sup>

### **Fall: Heaven and Earth Marred**

Unfortunately, the perfection enjoyed by Adam and Eve did not last. When the devil tempted them, they did indeed decide to choose for themselves what was right and wrong, and in so doing irreparably damaged the peace and beauty of God's good creation. The blessings of creation are now tainted by the curses of the fall.

#### *The World Is Cursed*

It is said often, but believed too little: sin affects everything. It never "affects only me." And the classic example of this truth is the first pronouncement of curse for Adam's sin: "cursed is the ground because of you" (Gen. 3:17). The ground as created was to bring forth plentiful vegetation for the food of humans and animals alike. Now, because of Adam's sin, the ground is subjected to an alien unfruitfulness. The animals have done nothing wrong, yet their food source is damaged because of Adam. And the earth's vegetation is also damaged. As Paul explains, "the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly" (Rom. 8:20). All

10. Ibid.

that was good and beautiful—the harmony of human beings, beasts, and ground—is disrupted by the pollution of Adam’s sin.

### *The Worshipers Are Cursed*

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 is not just limited to the actual moment of birth. Nor is it limited to the gestational period, though that is also painful. The pain of childbearing extends to miscarriage, to birth defects, to diseases, even to the untimely death of children. None of these was part of Eden before the fall; they follow the sin of our first parents.

The second reversal strikes the marriage relationship itself. Eve’s desire is changed from one of helping her husband to helping herself (Gen. 3:16),<sup>11</sup> just as she “helped herself” to the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. She saw that the tree was good for food, that it was beautiful, and that it was desirable to make her wise, so she ate. She did not help Adam to keep God’s command; she helped him to violate it along with her. For both husband and wife, the curse introduces opposition and self-centeredness into the marriage covenant where there once was mutuality and self-sacrifice. Both Adam and Eve are responsible for the results of sin on the marriage relationship, which God had intended to reflect his very image.

### *The Work Is Cursed*

Completing the reversal, the curse now spreads to the work. 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

11. 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?” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, 3 (1975): 376–83; Robert I. Vasholz, “‘He (?) Will Rule Over You’: A Thought on Genesis 3:16,” *Presbyterion* 20 (1994): 51–52.

and thistles” (Gen. 3:18), with the result that Adam (and Eve) would live only “by the sweat of” their faces (v. 19). The work that was previously enjoyable is now laborious. It is slow because the fruitfulness of the ground and of our labor has been hindered by sin. Now we must exert more effort while we accomplish less.

In short, the creational blessing “be fruitful and multiply” has degenerated into blighted productivity and painful accomplishment. Samuel Medley captures our lament:

Weary of earth, myself, and sin,  
Dear Jesus, set me free.<sup>12</sup>

### Redemption: Heaven and Earth Waiting

Since that dreadful day, every human being has longed for a return to perfection. But how can something that is polluted become pure again? No matter how many times you distill water, pass it through carbon filters, diamond filters, and chemical filters, it still contains trace amounts of pollutants. It is never truly pure again. Purity must be introduced from an outside source. And that source is the incarnation. “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Heb. 2:14–15). The solution to the pollution of human sin is the human embodiment of the only remaining perfection, God himself.

### *The World Groans*

Tsunamis in Japan, Thailand, and Indonesia. Earthquakes in Haiti and Chile. Fierce tornadoes in Alabama and Missouri. We call them *natural disasters*. But in point of fact, there is nothing natural about their destructive effects on humankind. Those

12. Samuel Medley, “Weary of Earth, Myself, and Sin,” in William Gadsby, *A Selection of Hymns for Public Worship: In Four Parts*, 10th ed. (London: Paternoster, 1844), no. 386.

effects are unnatural, a result of the brokenness of this world.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Paul 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. . . . For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. (Rom. 8:19–20, 22)

With the first advent of Jesus Christ, the decisive blow against the devil has been struck. But the weeds have not yet been pulled from among the wheat (Matt. 13:24–30), and the world has not yet been purified of the corruption of the works of the devil. So it waits. It eagerly longs for justice. It awaits the final day when it, along with humankind, will be made right forever.

The Gospels give us a glimpse of this restoration in one of Jesus' miracles. In Mark 4, Jesus is asleep on a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee and a great storm arises, striking fear into his disciples, seasoned seafarers. Jesus commands the storm, "Peace! Be still!" (v. 39). And the storm obeys: "And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm." Certainly the main point of the narrative is the disciples' weak faith in their moment of struggle.

But there is also here a description of what creation looks like under the perfect, righteous rule of the Creator. When Jesus speaks, "Peace!" he is in effect saying, "Silence!" There is no indication in the passage that the storm subsides by natural causes—quite the opposite, in fact. The experienced fishermen marvel and are filled with "great fear" (Mark 4:41), seeing that the winds and sea instantly obey Jesus' command. The picture is that of a command issued by one in authority. The sea is in a state of chaos, disturbing the peace of the boat and its passengers. The Creator-King commands; peace is restored. Similarly, creation

13. In the Bible, *disasters* may at times be the result of individual or collective sin, but we know that only because God's Word reveals it to us (e.g., Ex. 2–12; Num. 16:30). Thus, there is no way to know whether any event today is directly related to any particular sin(s) or is part of the general brokenness of creation. In fact, Jesus instructs us not to assume that a tragedy is necessarily the direct result of sin (Luke 13:1–5; John 9:1–7).

eagerly awaits the last day when the Creator will once again issue his command, this time to all of heaven and earth, rebuke all that rages, and cause all chaos to cease.

### *The Worshipers Struggle*

The description of the current state of affairs in creation continues in Romans 8:23, shifting to human brokenness: “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.”

We all know that our bodies are weak and frail. And all of life centers on the harsh reality of our mortality. We scramble for everything we can get: the best opportunities for our kids for elementary school so that they can get into a good high school, attend a better college, land that perfect job, marry an equally well-off spouse, and save enough to retire comfortably and put their children and their children’s children on the same path before they die. Did we leave anything out? It is like a rat race, all driven by the ticking clock, because we know that we will not be on this earth forever.

And so we struggle. We struggle to be faithful in every area to which God has called us. More deeply, we struggle, as Paul says, not “against flesh and blood, but 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). These things are a result of the brokenness of the world introduced by sin and under the influence of Satan. We struggle against our own sinful tendencies (e.g., Rom. 6:12–19; Col. 3:5–17). We struggle against a world that is hostile to the things of God (e.g., Ps. 34:21; John 16:33). And we struggle against the schemes that Satan himself has set up in opposition to the risen Savior (e.g., 2 Cor. 10:3–6; Rev. 12–14).

Yet even in our struggles, we see much of what is to come. The power of sin has been broken. And we have put on the new self, which even now “is being renewed in knowledge after the

image of its creator” (Col. 3:10). This is just one way that the Bible describes the ongoing process of becoming more like Jesus Christ. To grow in holiness is to be increasingly transformed into the kind of people we were created to be until at last, either by death or by Christ’s appearing, we burst into the full brilliance of our heavenly perfection. And so, Paul says, we “toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within” us (Col. 1:29).

### *The Work Progresses*

Is the work of Christ progressing? In terms of the overall mission of God, we must answer yes, since more people worship Christ than ever before.

*The Works of Common Grace.* Christians use the term *common grace* to refer to the grace that God as Creator gives to all people, regardless of their acknowledgment of him. For example, Jesus teaches us that the Father “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45). People have not ceased to be human because of the fall; they still bear the image of God (James 3:9). And by the manifold grace of God that extends to everyone, people everywhere are engaged in making culture: building buildings, establishing customs, preserving justice, and providing for those in need. It is important to remember that God’s call to “fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion” (Gen. 1:28) and to “work it and keep it” (2:15) is not something exclusively done by Christians. True, we should be doing it. And it is a great tragedy that non-Christians, even atheists, by means of God’s common grace sometimes fulfill the task of creation-caretaking and culture-making better than God’s children do. But as we will see, this work of common grace is an integral part of the renewed creation, even as it is now.

*The Works of Special Grace.* In even greater degree, God’s work of special grace is abounding in Christ and in his church. Special grace is the work of God that draws people to himself by faith in Jesus Christ (e.g., John 6:44, 65). And most typically associated with the work of God’s special grace is the conversion

of the lost. The gospel is going forth into more new places and back into places such as the Middle East, where Christianity was once the stalwart religion. Most estimates today place the number of Christians worldwide, including nominal ones, at around 2 billion. And that is just a snapshot at this point in time; historically, who knows how many have become heirs of eternal life?

Also included in the work of God's special grace is the performance of miracles. When Jesus begins his public ministry, he starts by reading in the synagogue from the Isaiah scroll: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19, quoting Isa. 61:1–2). This new turn in redemptive history (Luke 11:20) is marked by the advent of Jesus Christ, who has brought the kingdom of heaven with him. Luke links Jesus' performing miracles with the Holy Spirit's special work.

Consider the healing of the man with leprosy whom Jesus encounters: "And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, 'Lord, if you will, you can make me clean.' And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I will; be clean.' And immediately the leprosy left him" (Luke 5:12–13).

This is no sleight of hand. Luke goes out of his way to describe the man as being full of leprosy. Nor was it a "natural" cure; no cure was that immediate. What occurs is the reconstitution of this man to full health, and this is a picture of the renewal that is to come in the new creation. Graham Twelftree explains:

The biblical theology of [miracles] is dominated by Jesus. . . . His ministry is best understood in the light of [Old Testament] conceptions of God's continuous creativity, in which some events reveal his nature and saving power more clearly than others. . . . [They] carry the signature of the one who



performed them; God himself is revealed and is eschatologically at work in Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the incarnation of Jesus also brought the power of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' miracles provide pictures of the renewal that is to come to creation and humanity. In them God gives a foretaste of the future now. And what a future it will be for the citizens of heaven!

In the meantime, believers who make up the church, the creation itself, and even the Holy Spirit groan for final redemption:

The whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves . . . groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. . . . The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. (Rom. 8:22–23, 26)

We rejoice that God's work in Christ is progressing through the life and mission of the church. This is the special locus of God's presence in the world and is for the sake of the world. The church joins in the groaning of the creation and the Spirit most especially when it recognizes its role in God's mission and in this way actively waits for the coming kingdom. This longed-for final redemption is the focus of the next chapter.

14. G. H. Twelftree, "Signs and Wonders," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 886.

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DAN C. BARBER (M.Div., Covenant Theological Seminary) is pursuing doctoral studies. ROBERT A. PETERSON (Ph.D., Drew University) is Professor of Systematic Theology at Covenant Theological Seminary.

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