

## WEEK 1 – THE HOPE OF NEW CREATION – 1. *setting the scene*

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What happens when we die? What do we hope for after death? What does it mean to be *saved*? Is the source of our hope simply the belief that after we die we will all go to heaven – that is, our salvation will be *away from* this world. Or may we genuinely have hope for our present world?

### The nature of hope

- *What is the best funeral you have ever been to: why? Conversely, what is the worst funeral you have ever been to. Why?*
- *Take a moment to talk to your neighbour about (1) your own belief about death and (2) what the dead are up to right now!*

### Current belief in death

There are three main candidates for what most people believe happens when someone dies, and none of them correspond with what traditional, orthodox Christianity professes.

1. *Complete annihilation.* There is absolutely nothing after death.
2. *Reincarnation.* Popular in New Age and Hindu circles.
3. *Absorption into the wider world* – into the wind and trees.

### The nature of paradise

Traditionally, most would assume that Christianity teaches about a heaven above – to which the saved/blessed go – and a hell below, for the wicked and impenitent.

For the Christian, death is important. It is an enemy – but it is a defeated, beaten enemy. Let us take a look at John Donne's famous poem, 'Death be not proud'. Donne sees life after death in two stages: first, a short sleep, then an eternal waking. *And death shall be no more.* Donne here has grasped what is central to Christian belief – that in the end death will not simply be redefined, but defeated. God does not intend for death to have its way with us.

If the promised final future is simply that immortal souls will have left behind mortal bodies – then death still rules. If we spend eternity in heaven as disembodied souls, then death is not defeated, it still rules. That view of heaven is just death redescribed – death seen from another angle.

### Hope - what the whole world's waiting for

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The early Christians did not believe in either 'progress' (evolutionary optimists) nor that the world was a terrible place and had to be escaped (dualists). God was going to do for the whole cosmos what he had done for Jesus at Easter.

### Fundamental structures of hope

- First, the *goodness of creation*. Creation was from the beginning an act of love, of affirming the goodness of the other. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good; but it was not itself divine. It was designed to *reflect* God.
- Second, then, the *nature of evil*. Evil consists, not in being created, but in the rebellious idolatry by which humans worship and honour elements of the natural world rather than the God who made them.
- Third, the *plan of redemption*. God's sending of his son, Jesus, is the centre and fulfilment of the long-term plan of the good and wise creator.

Redemption is not simply making creation a bit better, as the optimistic evolutionist would try to suggest. Nor is it rescuing spirits and souls from an evil material world, as the Gnostic would want to say.

It is the remaking of creation, having dealt with the evil which is defacing and distorting it. And it is accomplished by the same God, now known in Jesus Christ, through whom it was made in the first place.

## The Biblical teaching

In fact, there is very little in the Bible about 'going to heaven when you die.' Many people presume that when the Bible speaks of 'heaven' it refers to the place where the saved will go after death.

- Read *Revelation* chapters 4 and 5. What is this a vision of? The present heavenly reality of our life.

## The marriage of heaven and earth

It is not until you get to Revelation 21 and 22 that we are presented with the 'end of the world': what do we find? Not ransomed souls making their way to a disembodied heaven – but the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, uniting the two in a new and lasting embrace in a great wedding banquet.

### *A New Heaven and a New Earth (Rev 21)*

<sup>1</sup>Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and earth had ceased to exist, and the sea existed no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city – the new Jerusalem – descending out of heaven from God, made ready like a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: "Look! The residence of God is among human beings. He will live among them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them. <sup>4</sup>He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will not exist any more – or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the former things have ceased to exist."

<sup>5</sup>And the one seated on the throne said: "Look! I am making all things new!" ...

### *The New Jerusalem Descends*

<sup>9</sup>Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven final plagues came and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb!" <sup>10</sup>So he took me away in the Spirit to a huge, majestic mountain and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God.

<sup>22</sup>Now I saw no temple in the city, because the Lord God – the All-Powerful – and the Lamb are its temple. <sup>23</sup>The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, because the glory of God lights it up, and its lamp is the Lamb. <sup>24</sup>The nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their grandeur into it.

- There are no 'naked souls' here going off to heaven
- Heaven (& the Church) comes to earth - As in Philippians 3, it is not we who go to heaven; it is heaven that comes to earth; indeed, it is the church itself, the heavenly Jerusalem, that comes down to earth.
- No Gnosticism; no separation, for God's kingdom will come
- God's design – to sum up everything in Christ (Eph 1:10)
- The final fulfillment of Genesis 1 and the original creation
- Death will be defeated forever

Heaven and earth, it seems, are not after all poles apart, needing to be separated for ever when all the children of heaven have been rescued from this wicked earth. But they are different: radically different, yet they are made for each other.

Many other New Testament passages speak of this reality, for example: 1 Corinthians 15; Romans 8; Phil 3; Hebrews 11 and 12; 2 Peter; Ephesians 1:15-23; Colossians 1:15-20