



THEOLOGY IN COMMUNITY

HEAVEN

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HEAVEN

Christopher W. Morgan and
Robert A. Peterson, editors

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Heaven

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HEAVEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

RAYMOND C. ORTLUND JR.



The word *heaven* appears in the Bible as early as its opening chapter: “And God called the expanse Heaven” (Gen. 1:8). The “expanse” is the canopy of sky above. Not surprisingly, this Hebrew word for heaven is illustrated by its Arabic cognate, which means “to be high, lofty, raised.”¹ But the rest of the Bible goes on to show that “heaven” is higher than it first appears.

We need not wait until Revelation 21–22 to start seeing the heights of heaven. The whole Bible is the story of heaven above coming down to earth, deity coming down to humanity, grace coming down to the undeserving, to lift them up. To appreciate more fully how the biblical drama unfolds, one must read the Bible in two directions: from the beginning to the end, which is obvious, but also from the end to the beginning, which is less obvious but more illuminating. The eschatology illuminates the protology. This study of heaven and the Old Testament is premised in the validity of this two-directional reading of the Bible, centered in Jesus and his gospel.

Heaven appears in the Old Testament story in three ways: first, by episodic references; second, by developed narratives; and, third, by symbolic suggestions clarified in the New Testament.

Episodic References

Brief though they are, episodic references to heaven in the Old Testament should not be overlooked. The Bible instructs us not only by its explicit

¹ Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (New York: Frederic Ungar, 1956), I.4, p. 1433.

teachings but also by its embedded assumptions and givens. Indeed, its assumptions are some of its most revealing teachings.

What then do we learn from the Old Testament's offhand comments about heaven? Here is a representative sample. Heaven intervenes in human affairs with judgments from above that for this reason cannot be evaded (Gen. 19:24). The one who chose Israel could have made any nation his own, for all things belong to him, including heaven and "the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it" (Deut. 10:14; cf. 1 Kings 8:27; Neh. 9:6). "The heaven of heavens" is not an additional heaven but the totality of heaven, even as "all that is in it" clarifies the full extent of "the earth." The point is that the God who chose Israel is no local deity but far transcends all created reality. He was not stuck with Israel, therefore; he freely chose them (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26–29). Heaven is set apart as God's "holy habitation" (Deut. 26:15; cf. 1 Kings 8:30, 39, 43, 49; 2 Chron. 30:27). He dwells on high, not in the sense that he is uninvolved below but in the sense that he is above all earthly change, unlike the Baals, who died and rose and died and rose within the cycle of the annual seasons.

The holy habitation of God in heaven means he is not limited, nor can he be manipulated, but he makes the ultimate claim on man dwelling below. Elijah's life on earth ended when the Lord took him "up to heaven" (2 Kings 2:1, 11). Old Testament believers usually categorized the afterlife as a descent into Sheol (e.g., Gen. 37:35). But the death of the controversial prophet Elijah was attested by God with his dramatic seal of approval, an ascent into heaven above. The Lord's throne is in heaven (Ps. 11:4; cf. Ps. 2:4) and therefore unthreatened by earthly powers and final in its judgments. And not only is heaven his throne, but the earth is his footstool (Isa. 66:1). All created reality lies at his feet. This means that rather than to man-made temples or cathedrals, this high God comes down to the humble and contrite that tremble at his word (v. 2). Finally, as the prophetic faith clung to his sovereignty during hard times, the later literature of the Old Testament often refers to "the God of heaven" (e.g., 2 Chron. 36:23; Ezra 1:2). Indeed, the biblical interpretation of historical events is summarized in this simple but trenchant conviction: "Heaven rules" (Dan. 4:26).

If this sprinkling of Old Testament comments was all we knew about heaven, we would still have enough for a decisive answer to Dostoevsky's chilling but valid principle, namely, that if there is no higher world and thus no moral reckoning beyond this world, no afterlife and no final re-

ward or punishment, then everything is permissible.² But the Old Testament tells us more.

Developed Narratives

Genesis 28

Six Old Testament passages enlarge our understanding of heaven. The first time the veil is drawn back and we are allowed a more sustained look into heaven, its vision is one of surprising grace. In Genesis 28, Jacob is not seeking God. He is running from his troubled past with Esau and toward a troubled future with Laban. But God interrupts him on the way. The striking thing is that the Lord does not reproach Jacob or even mention his embarrassing failures. His only message is one of gracious promise:

Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (vv. 10–17)

The text is marked by four uses of "behold" (vv. 12, 13, 15). This Hebrew particle—*hinneh*—attracts special attention to what follows.³ Three things thus compel our attention in the passage: "There, a ladder! Oh, angels! And look, the Lord Himself!"⁴ Then the fourth "behold" interprets the theological significance of the first three: "Behold, I am with you" (v. 15).

The three focal points of the text deserve brief comment. First, the

²Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), 103.

³"In this way [this] content acquires a particular prominence within a larger context." C. H. J. van der Merwe, J. A. Naudé, and J. H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 329.

⁴Jan Fokkelmann, quoted in Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 488.

ladder: “And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven” (v. 12). The unique Hebrew *sulam* might mean “ladder,” as in the ESV text. But since angels are ascending and descending on this structure, the ESV marginal reading, “a flight of steps,” seems more likely.⁵ The appearance is that of an ancient ziggurat, built as a human attempt to reach up to God. One thinks, naturally, of Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel. But the pagan concept is corrected here, for this structure provided by God stretches down earthward and up heavenward, taking the Hebrew wording literally. The point is the divine removal of every obstacle and divine provision of complete access, even as we see in God incarnate, Jesus himself (John 1:51).

Second, the angels: “And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!” (Gen. 28:12). All his life Jacob has felt that he has to survive by his wits, and it has not gone well for him. He has never realized how involved God really is on his behalf. Now he sees the messengers of God running errands for their Lord, accomplishing a myriad of his gracious purposes on earth and returning to heaven for more orders. Jacob is not abandoned to himself. His future does not depend on his own devices. He has an ally in God, a God highly active on his behalf through “ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation” (Heb. 1:14).

Third, the Lord: “And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, ‘I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac’” (Gen. 28:13). How Jacob’s past is forgiven and his future redefined is not at all dependent on who he is and what he can do but entirely on who the Lord is and what he can do. All of Jacob’s hopes find their fulfillment in this one great reality: “I am the LORD.” Commenting on a similarly absolute claim of God in Genesis 17:1, Marcus Dods paraphrases the force of this wonderful message of all-sufficient divine grace:

I am the Almighty God, able to fulfill your highest hopes and accomplish for you the brightest ideal that ever my words set before you. There is no need of paring down the promise until it squares with human probabilities, no need of relinquishing one hope it has begotten, no need of adopting some interpretation of it which may make it seem easier to fulfill, and no need of striving to fulfill it in any second-rate way. All possibility lies in this: I am the Almighty God.⁶

⁵L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), s.v. “stepped ramp, flight of steps.”

⁶Marcus Dods, *The Book of Genesis* (New York: Armstrong, 1902), 161.

The primary takeaway for Jacob from these three sights is defined by the fourth “behold,” in Genesis 28:15: “Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” In amazing grace, God assures Jacob he is “willing to cast his lot with this man, to stand with him in places of threat.”⁷ Jacob’s existence is now guaranteed by all that God is.

The patriarch’s response, appropriately, is stunned amazement: “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it. . . . How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (vv. 16–17). What Jacob had previously seen as his lonely and precarious existence is in fact the place of God’s very presence, and now Jacob feels it. Now he can see that the hidden reality of his daily life, sins and troubles notwithstanding, is nothing less than mercies from on high moving toward an unworthy man in all his need. One again thinks of Genesis 11 and the Tower of Babel, for *Bab-ilu*/Babylon means “gate of gods.”⁸ That impressive culture saw itself as the entry point for heaven on earth through human self-exaltation. But the gospel of Genesis reverses this way of thinking. It is the God of heaven who is moving down toward earth to take over. The only hope for this world, therefore, comes from beyond this world and is not subject to human control or manipulation.

The first impression of heaven revealed in the Old Testament is that of radical divine grace secretly but faithfully involved on behalf of the helpless, below.

Exodus 24

The second passage is Exodus 24 and the confirmation of the Sinaitic covenant. Representing the people of God, its leaders are summoned into God’s presence, still worshipping “from afar” (v. 1).

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank. (vv. 9–11)

“Heaven” in verse 10 refers not to the abode of God but to the visible

⁷Walter Brueggemann, quoted in Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 391.

⁸Gerald A. Larue, *Babylon and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1969), 69.

skies. Still, this passage opens a view into heaven seen from outside, from underneath, and just a glimpse. What is the insight provided here?

At Mount Sinai the leaders of Israel gather for an audience with their King. Surprisingly and bluntly, the Bible says, “They saw the God of Israel” (v. 10). Since the *visio dei* was fatal for sinners (33:20), theologians have long resisted the plain force of these words. The Hebrew is straightforward. But the Septuagint inserts its own meaning: “And they saw the place where the God of Israel stood.” So do the Targumim: “They saw the glory of the God of Israel.” And Saadia’s Arabic version: “And they saw the angel of the God of Israel.” Maimonides construed the experience as metaphorical: “All these instances [including Exodus 24:10] refer to intellectual perception, and by no means to perception with the eye as in its literal meaning.”⁹ Similar measures are taken to explain verse 11, where the Hebrew clearly says, “They beheld God.” Doubtless, those words must be qualified in some sense. But we must not explain them away with glib evasions. After all, what would be the point of noting that “he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel” (v. 11) if the nature of their experience was to be attenuated into something less than direct and personal? The danger was real because the sight was real. They beheld God.

But it is not God himself the text describes. The focus is directed lower: “There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness” (v. 10). What the leaders of Israel talked about after this experience was not what God himself looked like (Deut. 4:15). Their lasting impression was what lay beneath God’s feet. Lifting their eyes from the slopes of Sinai, they found themselves gazing up through the pavement of the heavenly throne room (cf. Ezek. 1:26; Rev. 4:6). Rather than opaque, the tile work was translucent and of great value—sapphire stone “like the very heaven for clearness,” that is, like the sky on a perfect day: beautiful blue, with nothing to mar or impair the view. God *wanted* heaven above to become visible from below and beautiful to the human eye.

In the presence of the high King, consistent with the vivid reality of the experience, the representatives of the people “ate and drank” (Ex. 24:1). Not only did they survive the experience of seeing God; they thrived. Presumably, the food came from the peace offerings referred to in

⁹Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, I.4.

verse 5. But the covenant was sealed by a sacred meal (cf. Gen. 31:44–46) as a matter of personal fellowship, not mere legal demand.

The insight of Exodus 24 into the reality of heaven is this: there is more to God than the law, as is obvious even at the ratification of the law. “Further up and further in,” to borrow from C. S. Lewis, higher than the heights of Sinai and its furthest reaching and most searching demands, far above the best we can achieve, the gracious Lord of heaven is inviting sinners into personal communion with himself. His highest category for us is not demand but welcome.

1 Kings 22

The third narrative view into heaven is provided in 1 Kings 22. The prophet Micaiah is shown the councils of God above as Jehoshaphat and Ahab form their plans below. The news for Ahab is not good:

And Micaiah said, “Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, ‘I will entice him.’ And the LORD said to him, ‘By what means?’ And he said, ‘I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And he said, ‘You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.’ Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you.” (vv. 19–23)

Two things stand out—one theological, the other moral. Theologically, are we to understand that God in heaven above works by committee? Does he need or even benefit from the ideas of his angelic servants? The prophet Isaiah asked,

Who has directed¹⁰ the Spirit of the LORD,
or what man shows him his counsel?
Whom did he consult,
and who made him understand?
Who taught him the path of justice,
and taught him knowledge,
and showed him the way of understanding? (Isa. 40:13–14)

¹⁰ESV marginal translation. ESV text: “Who has measured . . . ?”

Given the Old Testament's clarity about the sovereign independence of God, the vision of heaven here in 1 Kings 22 is fascinating. The King is holding court. His angelic armies stand before him at attention, awaiting orders. But he puts a challenge to them: "Who will entice Ahab," even to his defeat (v. 20)? Hands go up all over the room, with various proposals. Then one angelic spirit steps forward with a bold plan: "I will . . . be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets" (v. 22). He gets the job.

It is worth noting that God is the one who raises the question of a strategy for bringing Ahab down. The topic does not emerge from the angelic hosts, nor is it prompted by any inadequacy in God. Moreover, the outcome concerning Ahab is certain. The Lord intends to judge him. In addition, it is the Lord's commission and promise that make the angel's mission successful. The only question is one of method.

Still, 1 Kings 22 reminds us that the flinty objectivity of the Bible resists dogmatic over-categorization. I myself see the theological anomaly embedded in this passage as more delightful than problematic—God would, in some real sense, without diminishing himself, draw his mighty angelic servants into discussion and collaboration. And I gladly echo the restraint of John Calvin when he says God's sovereignty is "a secret so much excelling the insight of the human mind that I am not ashamed to confess ignorance. Far be it from any of the faithful to be ashamed of ignorance of what the Lord withdraws."¹¹

The positive exegetical function of this surprising account of heaven is its contrast with the earthly counsels of Jehoshaphat and Ahab. The human kings are sitting on their grandiose earthly thrones (v. 10). But there is a higher throne above (v. 19). The false prophets of Samaria stand before the human kings with one message of foolish encouragement (vv. 11–12). But the superhuman hosts of heaven stand before the divine King with multiple strategies for overruling destruction (vv. 19–21). There is nothing in the text to require a limited view of God—quite the opposite. He is not a helpless spectator as events unfold on earth. He sits enthroned in heaven "above all earthly powers," to quote Luther, bringing judgment with inescapable inevitability.

What raises eyebrows here, concerning morality, is that God would get involved in enticing Ahab by a lie made plausible and popular through the false prophets. The thrice repeated "entice" is the key word (vv. 20, 21, 22). The older standard of Hebrew lexicography defined this word

¹¹ John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: Clarke, 1961), 124.

strongly as “deceive”¹²; the newer authority defines it more moderately as “persuade, convince.”¹³ But, however this Hebrew verb is nuanced, the problem remains in the explicit phrase “a lying spirit” in verses 22 and 23.

Does heaven tell lies? No. But heaven can use lies. Ahab says to Micaiah, “How many times shall I make you swear that you speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?” (v. 16). Outwardly, Ahab not only desires but demands the truth. But, in reality, his heart is open only to flattering assurances. What he wants is impossible—true flattery from heaven through the mouth of a true prophet so that he can then disregard God and do what he wants to anyway. What better plan to defeat such a man, therefore, than by strengthening the illusion he loves? Micaiah does give Ahab fair warning of defeat: “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd” (v. 17). But Ahab dismisses it as the same-old same-old blah-blah-blah (v. 18). It is then that the prophet reveals God’s purpose of judgment. Zedekiah the false prophet responds by mistreating Micaiah, Ahab has him arrested, and the king proceeds toward his own destruction under the power of his chosen lies.

What becomes visible about heaven from 1 Kings 22? The God who rules there is so shrewd that he can advance his purposes on earth through his angelic host without making himself dependent on them. He is so shrewd that he can bring doom through the false promises of false prophets without falsifying himself. And as it was then, so it is now: “Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Thess. 2:11–12). Truly, God is not mocked.

Job 1–2

The fourth passage is Job 1–2. The text does not explicitly locate this drama in heaven, but its situation stands in contrast with the earth (1:7–8; 2:2–3) and is identified as “the presence of the LORD” (1:12; 2:7). The heavenly vision unfolds in two nearly parallel episodes:

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, “From where have you come?” Satan answered the LORD and said, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down

¹²BDB, s.v. “patah.”

¹³Koehler and Baumgartner, *Lexicon*, 985.

on it.” And the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” Then Satan answered the LORD and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.” So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. (1:6–12)

Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD. And the LORD said to Satan, “From where have you come?” Satan answered the LORD and said, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” And the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason.” Then Satan answered the LORD and said, “Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life.” So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. (2:1–7)

Three questions invite reflection. First, why is this in the Bible at all? One reason is to press us toward a more realistic understanding of our own lives. We might read the story of Job as a rare and extreme example of godly suffering. In this case, the message would be, “Look at this worst-case scenario. If you can see the truth here in Job’s life, then surely in your comparatively small problems . . .” Alternatively, we might read the story as a representative and even common experience of godly suffering. In this case, the message would be, “Here is what all of God’s people can expect of life. It is where God calls us all to trust him.” The reasoning of James, namely, that the Old Testament prophets and the sufferer Job teach us what it means to wait patiently on the Lord (James 5:7–11), creates the presumption that the book of Job is indeed to be read as a guide to standard-issue experience for all of God’s people. This being so, the visit of Satan to the court of heaven, though mysterious to us, should be ac-

cepted as paradigmatic of the startling reality we are involved in. Job 1–2 is giving us insight into our own lives.

Second, what does “Satan” mean? In the Hebrew text this word is marked by the definite article—“the Satan”—more like a title than a name. But its force here combines two uses of the root *stn*—to oppose and to accuse.¹⁴ Satan opposes God by accusing Job. The latter’s sufferings consist not only in his afflictions as such but also in the inquisitorial accusing torments of his so-called friends, their outlook apparently inspired by Satan (4:12–21). The crisis of Job’s existence is not pain, horrible as it is, but the insinuation of *guilty* pain for which, his friends believe, he has no one to blame but himself. This common experience among the godly, though instigated by Satan, is nevertheless finally traceable to heaven above. “You incited me against him,” God says (2:3). Satan is true to his name.

Third, that Satan appears in heaven itself—is this home invasion? Is heaven violated? Is God rivaled? What are we to think of the God of Job 1–2? It is important to see Satan’s role in the book of Job as essential to the drama but still minor. His malice leads to Job’s sufferings, but he disappears from the book after chapter 2, like Judas in the story of Jesus. When the tension of this story is finally resolved in chapter 42, Satan does not reappear. Only God appears, for only God is needed. The author attributes to God alone final responsibility for Job’s sufferings as “all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him” (42:11). This is consistent with how the story begins. Satan to God: “But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has” (1:11). God to Satan: “Behold, all that he has is in your hand” (v. 12). Satan to God: “But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh” (2:5). God to Satan: “Behold, he is in your hand” (v. 6). Job is put into Satan’s hand, but Satan is held in God’s hand. “There is evil here, but not dualism.”¹⁵ God lures Satan into a humiliating defeat, Job is memorialized as a triumphant saint, we are instructed in the reality of our lives, and heaven remains inviolate.

What then do we learn of heaven from Job 1–2? The message is summed up well in the classic commentary by Franz Delitzsch when he speaks of “heaven, where everything that is done on earth has its unseen roots, its final cause.”¹⁶ Yes, the objecting thoughts well up in our minds as we consider that strong theology. But we join Job in saying, “I

¹⁴ John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 72n7.

¹⁵ Francis I. Anderson, *Job: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), 83.

¹⁶ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Job* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 1:52.

lay my hand on my mouth” (40:4). The sovereignty of heaven over our sufferings on earth is our biggest perplexity in this life, but it is also our only hope.

Isaiah 6

The fifth passage is Isaiah 6, where God calls the prophet to the difficult ministry of hardening people’s hearts by proclaiming the only truth that could soften them, if only they had not already passed the point of no return. It begins when heaven is opened up to him one day while worshipping at the temple in Jerusalem:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” (vv. 1–7)

The temple provides an entry point into ultimacy, the throne room of the King. Through the earthly keyhole, so to speak, Isaiah is enabled to see into heaven above. Two great realities are deeply impressed upon him.

First, the holiness of God. The Hebrew root for *holy* points to “that which is marked off, separated, withdrawn from ordinary use.”¹⁷ Who God is as God—so infinitely superior to the burning seraphim that they must cover themselves in his presence—demands the unique threefold superlative “Holy, Holy, Holy,” that is, intensely and infinitely holy.¹⁸ He is set apart by his moral majesty: “The Holy God shows himself holy in

¹⁷ Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), I:270.

¹⁸ J. C. L. Gibson, *Davidson’s Introductory Hebrew Grammar: Syntax* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 42.

righteousness” (5:16). He is hazardous to all who are unholy: “The Light¹⁹ of Israel will become a fire, and his Holy One a flame, and it will burn and devour” (10:17). Who he is defies our categories, incomparable with all below: “To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One” (40:25). He dwells in eternal transcendence, beyond our reach: “For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place’” (57:15). At the sight of the Holy One of Israel, guilty little Isaiah panics.

Second, the grace of God. One of the seraphim peels off from his flight path to dive straight at terrified Isaiah. The angel is holding a burning coal from the altar. He holds it with tongs not because it is hot—he himself is a burning one, for that is what *seraph* means—but because it is sacred. But taken from the place of sacrifice, this hot coal, signifying atonement, though untouchable, touches Isaiah. He does not defile the atonement. The atonement purifies him. This grace is powerful grace, grace greater than all our sin. And now, rather than remaining a mere concept, this grace is applied to Isaiah personally with a touch, as *felt* forgiveness: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for” (6:7). A surprise comes down to Isaiah from heaven above. The one he most dreads—pure, industrial-strength deity—is the one, the only one, who can release him from anxiety and qualify him for service.

What is the insight into heaven of Isaiah 6? It is a twofold message. On the one hand, heaven is a dangerous place. Without the grace of God, we might as well walk into a blast furnace to be incinerated. On the other hand, with the grace of God, heaven is a safe place, the only safe place. The various human opinions of us here in this world, including our opinions of ourselves—often a confused mixture of glib self-assurance and angry self-condemnation—matter nothing, less than nothing. All that finally matters is the verdict of heaven. And heaven is the one source of forgiveness in the universe. “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7).

Daniel 7

Our final passage is Daniel 7. The power of this text lies in its contrast between the clash of human kingdoms on earth (vv. 3–8), so savage as to be branded bestial, and the sublime rule of God’s humane kingdom coming down from heaven above to triumph “forever, forever and ever” (v. 18). Verses 9–10, shifting from prose to poetry, set the scene:

¹⁹With other commentators, I construe this as a title for the God of Israel because of the parallelism. ESV: “The light of Israel.”

As I looked,

thrones were placed,
 and the Ancient of Days took his seat;
 his clothing was white as snow,
 and the hair of his head like pure wool;
 his throne was fiery flames;
 its wheels were burning fire.
 A stream of fire issued
 and came out from before him;
 a thousand thousands served him,
 and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him;
 the court sat in judgment,
 and the books were opened.

The court of heaven convenes. At the center is one venerable, majestic, and pure, with vast angelic armies at his command. What are four earthly kingdoms to these myriad superhuman agents of the Judge? The only one qualified to rule the world is fully equipped in every respect to do so.

The assurance of the vision is strong. God can be trusted with the entirety of world history. Far above the reach of earthly opposition, a hope stands as sure as heaven itself that the historical cycles of violent rise and decline will be forever broken. How will this hope come down to us? It will come through a final judgment. The database of heaven is keeping a careful record of every human deed (Rev. 20:12). Nothing escapes the all-seeing eyes of God. His memory is comprehensive and infallible, with instant recall. Therefore, as Daniel 7:10 concludes, with every sufferer on the edge of his seat, glad for the heavenly books to show the truth so long denied in this world of spin and cover-up, longing for the Ancient of Days to put an end to corrupt earthly power, what, in fact, is God's overruling plan for this world?

I saw in the night visions,

and behold, with the clouds of heaven
 there came one like a son of man,
 and he came to the Ancient of Days
 and was presented before him.
 And to him was given dominion
 and glory and a kingdom,
 that all peoples, nations, and languages

should serve him;
 his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
 which shall not pass away,
 and his kingdom one
 that shall not be destroyed. (vv. 13–14)

The royal “one like a son of man” in verse 13 stands in contrast to the beasts of earthly power in verses 3–8. Finally, a humane King, one like us, to rule us!²⁰ The Semitic idiom “son of man” emphasizes his authentic humanity²¹ while the surrounding context argues his deity.²² For everyone who has settled the matter of the authority of Christ, there is no question about the identity of this person. There was no doubt in the mind of Christ himself:

Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” (Mark 14:61–62)

What is the insight into heaven here in Daniel 7? It is that God’s final judgment at the end of history will not bring annihilation but humanization. The kingdom of this world will be “taken away” from those currently holding power; through Jesus our Messiah the new and lasting kingdom will be “given to the people of the saints of the Most High” (vv. 26–27). Quite wonderfully, then, heaven is the most humane and humanizing place in the universe. We do not look to this world for the restoration of our human dignity. It will come down to us through the perfect Son of Man. A. A. Hodge drew out the implications:

Heaven, as the eternal home of the divine man and of all the redeemed members of the human race, must necessarily be thoroughly human in its structure, conditions, and activities. Its joys and occupations must be all rational, moral, emotional, voluntary and active. There must be the exercise of all the faculties, the gratification of all tastes, the development of all latent capacities, the realization of all ideals. The reason, the intellectual curiosity, the imagination, the aesthetic instincts, the holy affections, the social affinities, the inexhaustible resources of strength

²⁰“He is what every human being should be if he is true to type.” Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978), 143.

²¹Koehler and Baumgartner, *Lexicon*, 1839, glosses with “a man.”

²²Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., “The Deity of Christ and the Old Testament,” in *The Deity of Christ*, Theology in Community, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 52–56.

and power native to the human soul, must all find in heaven exercise and satisfaction. . . . Heaven will prove the consummate flower and fruit of the whole creation and of all the history of the universe.²³

Symbolic Suggestions

Returning now to the principle that the eschatology illuminates the protology, our final view into heaven is prompted and guided by Revelation 21–22. The two chapters parallel one another, with 21:1–8 restated and enlarged in 21:9–22:5.²⁴ Many lines of biblical expectation converge here. For example, negatively and surprisingly, no temple is found in heaven (21:22). God had said, “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst” (Ex. 25:8). The sacred precincts of the tabernacle and temple, cleansed by the sacrificial system, constituted ground zero for the saving presence of God among sinners. But in the *eschaton*, everything provisional is fulfilled and transcended. Now the divine presence is fully manifested, directly given, and immediately felt, with God himself and the Lamb being the eternal temple of the redeemed. Other connections with the Old Testament are clearly apparent in Revelation 21–22. But heaven is represented here primarily in the forms of a city and a bride:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (21:2)

The two metaphors, city and bride, point to the same reality (vv. 9–10). From one perspective, heaven as our eternal home will be an organized social collectivity, like a city. From another perspective, heaven as our endless experience will be an ideal romance, like a bride on her wedding day. But the two merge into one experience, as Augustine instructs us:

Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greater glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, “You are my glory.”²⁵

²³ A. A. Hodge, *Evangelical Theology: A Course of Popular Lectures* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 400–401.

²⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 1039.

²⁵ Marcus Dods, ed., *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo: The City of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1872), 2:49.

Heaven will be an eternal community sharing this love for God without diminution or dissent. Both insights into heaven—city and bride—are rooted in and shed light on the Old Testament.

As for the city, it begins in Genesis 4. None other than the violent persecutor Cain invented it: “Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch” (v. 17). God planted a garden, but Cain built a city. Doomed by God to be “a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” (v. 12) because he murdered his godly brother, Cain satisfied his need for security and belonging by his own strategy—a city. In this way he kept the divine curse from exerting its full impact on him.²⁶ A city, therefore, is more than a mere collection of buildings. It was meant, from the beginning, to establish a buffer between the rebellious self and the judging God. It provided a way to thrive without depending on God or facing up to oneself. It was established as a monument to human self-salvation.

There can be no surprise that Cain’s mentality of self-fortification reappears in intensified form at Babel, the height of defiant human autonomy: “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves” (11:4). But God said to Abram, “I will . . . make your name great” (12:2).

Cain’s city was never complete. The Hebrew does not literally say, “he built a city,” but literally, “he was building a city.”²⁷ He spent his life building it because it was never big enough, secure enough. He named it Enoch after his son, whose name suggests “dedication.”²⁸ Cain dedicated his life to his city project for his own glory through his son. His city and family thus stood for his successful defeat of God’s curse upon him—as he saw it, anyway.

What then does God do with this man-made symbol of anxiety, guilt, and pride? He redeems it. He even takes it into heaven. God takes the garden of Eden from Genesis 2 and the city of Enoch from Genesis 4 and combines them into one heavenly garden-city in Revelation 21–22, his own eternal dwelling place with his people:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with

²⁶ Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 1–9.

²⁷ Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1991), 411.

²⁸ The verbal form of the root is used in Deut. 20:5 for dedicating a new home.

its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. (22:1–3)

The prophetic vision invites us into a world so new we can scarcely imagine it, yet not unlike our present world. The eternal garden-city will be refreshed by a river flowing with the water of life as an outpouring of God's very presence. The Tree of Life will heal all who partake of it. There will be no need of caution or care, for every aspect of the curse will be redeemed. It is a picture of endless human rejuvenation.²⁹ In this way, the Old Testament story of the city is more than fulfilled. It is fulfilled with, so to speak, excess: "Eschatology not only recapitulates the protology . . . but escalates it."³⁰

As for the bride, she appears first in Genesis 2. After making the first woman from Adam's flesh, "God himself, like a father of the bride, leads the woman to the man"³¹:

Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man."

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed. (vv. 23–25)

The most striking thing about Genesis 2, following immediately upon the cosmic grandeur of Genesis 1, is its simple homeliness. The outlook shifts from "God created the heavens and the earth" (1:1) to "the LORD God planted a garden in Eden" (2:8), from mankind dignified with the divine image to Adam enthralled by his wife. This movement is certainly not from the sublime to the ridiculous but from the sublime to the familiar and even common. Our eyes might miss the deeper significance of the story were it not for New Testament revelation.

After quoting Genesis 2:24, the apostle Paul writes, "This mystery is

²⁹T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 155–57.

³⁰G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 368.

³¹Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 84.

profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32). For Paul, a mystery is not an unknowable truth but rather an insight that God must reveal for us to know it. No amount of human genius or research could discern it. The mystery, the insight, present but hidden in Genesis 2 but now revealed clearly in the fullness of the gospel, has to do not with Adam and Eve but with Christ and the church. Human marriage, significant in itself as a unique “one flesh” union, points to the ultimate union of “one spirit” between the believer and Christ (1 Cor. 6:15–17). Our engagement to Christ calls for “a sincere and pure devotion” in this life so that we might be presented to him as a pure virgin in the next (2 Cor. 11:1–3). But the most important point here is that Christ and the church are not, according to Paul’s reasoning in Ephesians 5, a metaphor for understanding the reality of human marriage; human marriage is to be seen as a metaphor for understanding the reality of Christ and the church. This being so, the marriage of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 is not a forced intrusion jarring with the magnificence of Genesis 1. It deserves a place in the Genesis narrative as an early hint at ultimacy in heaven, where we will be always loved and never shamed.

Thanks to Revelation 21:2 and 9, we have every right to see the Genesis account of Adam and Eve as not only instructive for the conduct of a godly marriage but also, and far more, suggestive of our Savior’s eternal love for us—especially when we deserve to be shamed—and our belonging to him. The final reason marriage is to be held in honor among all (Heb. 13:4) is not that marriage in this life is heavenly but that heaven will be a marriage—the marriage.

May it not be said that the ravishing passions and passionate ravishings of most purely spiritual, chaste, and ardent love, burning like coals of juniper, and flaming forth in the excellentest expressions imaginable, do quite surpass, transcend and out-vie those of the most strongly affectionate lovers in the world, whether wooers or married persons? Nay, these scarcely serve darkly to shadow forth those.³²

Conclusion

Pervasive throughout the Old Testament is a conviction that heaven above is clearly separate from earth below. Qohelet bluntly articulates one practical implication: “Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart

³²Margaret Durham, “The Epistle Dedicatory,” in James Durham, *Clavis Cantici* (1668), http://www.puritansermons.com/durham/durham_epistle.htm.

be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few” (Eccles. 5:2). But as the biblical vision comes to finality, astonishingly, we see heaven coming down to earth, transforming earth into the dwelling place of God (Rev. 21:2–3).

The Old Testament itself hints at this final breakthrough of overruling grace. The prophet Isaiah foresees the complete renovation of all things in “new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65:17; 66:22). In contrast with “the former troubles” of our existence in this broken creation (65:16), the renewed universe will finally be the place “in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13). “The first heaven and the first earth” of Genesis 1:1 will pass away (Rev. 21:1), nature yielding to super-nature. But the new creation will remain the creation. The change will be the eternal dwelling place of God—heaven above in the proper sense—descending to become the dwelling place of redeemed mankind as well.

In the end, which will have no end, “even the contrast between heaven and earth is gone. For all the things that are in heaven and on earth have been gathered up in Christ as head (Eph.1:10).”³³ This, and nothing less, is the measure of our salvation.

³³Herman Bavinck, *Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation*, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 729–30.

HEAVEN IN PAUL'S LETTERS

STEPHEN J. WELLUM



When thinking of the subject of heaven, many ideas come to people's minds. Many of our ideas arise from tradition or culture instead of Scripture. For some, heaven is a place where disembodied spirits enjoy eternal bliss on far-off shores removed from any kind of existence on earth. For others it is a place of unending church services, where the last line of the chorus plays over and over again. For still others heaven is viewed merely in terms of a great family reunion, with little focus on enjoyment of the presence and glory of our great triune covenant Lord in a renewed universe. Given this diverse and often contradictory thought about heaven within the church, it is crucial to bring our thought captive to Scripture. The subject of the final state of God's people is one of great importance for both our present living and our future hope. Biblical teaching about heaven is always meant to encourage and spur us on to faith and obedience in our present lives (1 Cor. 15:58; Phil. 3:12–16; Heb. 10:25; 2 Pet. 3:11–13) as we anticipate the glorious appearing of our Lord and the consummation of all things.

Our focus in this chapter is Paul's view of heaven. What did Paul teach regarding the final state of believers? What may we hope for as we live in anticipation of the end? As in other chapters in this book, this study cannot delve into all aspects of Pauline eschatology. It will not discuss the diverse issues surrounding Christ's parousia, the status of a millennial age, or even final judgment.¹ Even though these topics are important in

¹For comprehensive treatments of Pauline eschatology, see Thomas Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001); Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975); Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (repr. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1986); cf. Alan Hultberg et al. *Three Views on The Rapture: Pretribulation, Prewrath, or Posttribulation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010); Darrell Bock, *Three Views of the*

their own right, our focus is limited to Paul's teaching on heaven. We will approach our subject in three steps: (1) the Old Testament background to Paul's understanding of heaven; (2) basic structures of Paul's thought; and (3) a specific focus on the believer's final, future state prior to and as a result of Christ's return.

Old Testament Background to Paul's Understanding of Heaven

In order to understand Paul's view of heaven, we must locate his thinking in the wider context of the Old Testament.² Paul's teaching does not come to us in a vacuum. It is thoroughly rooted in the Old Testament story line, which progressively unfolds God's purposes in creation, the disastrous consequences of the fall, and the gracious promise of redemption, and which in the prophets anticipates a reversal of sin and death and the dawning of a new creation. Let us briefly sketch the Old Testament story line of creation-fall-redemption in order to set the stage for Paul's teaching about heaven and our final state.

Creation

From the opening pages of Scripture, God identifies himself as the sovereign creator and providential Lord. It may seem strange to start with creation in order to understand heaven, but, as in most doctrinal areas, one cannot fully grasp them without first going back to creation. Let us develop four crucial points from creation for rightly comprehending heaven.

First, God is identified as the creator of "the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Here the expression refers to the entire created order, what we call the universe, with the "earth" focusing on the place where humans and animals dwell and the "heavens" on the place where God dwells and rules.³ This is why in the Old Testament, *heaven(s)* (Heb. *shamayim*) can denote "sky" or "air," referring to the atmosphere just above the earth (Gen. 1:20), the firmament in which the sun and moon and stars are located (v. 17), as well as God's abode (Ps. 2:4), including angelic hosts.⁴ Yet, given God's spiritual nature and omnipresence, we are not to think of

Millennium and Beyond (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999); Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979).

²For a development of this point, see G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011).

³J. F. Maile, "Heaven, Heavens, Paradise," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 381, notes this point: "Basic to OT understanding is the duality of heaven and earth which together make up the material creation, an idea retained throughout Scripture, culminating in the promise of a new heaven and a new earth."

⁴See P. S. Johnston, "Heaven," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. D. Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 540–42.

“heavens and earth” in primarily spatial categories. God and heaven are not merely “up” and the earth “down.” Rather, heaven is the spiritual realm where God dwells that presently exists alongside the created world, thus underscoring the foundational Creator-creation distinction of the biblical worldview.⁵

Second, as creator, God is the sovereign ruler and king of the universe. Even though the expression “kingdom of God” is not found directly in the Old Testament, Graeme Goldsworthy is right to assert that “the idea of the rule of God over creation, over all creatures, over the kingdoms of the world, and in a unique and special way, over his chosen and redeemed people, is the very heart of the message of the Hebrew scriptures.”⁶ Additionally, God’s kingly work in creation is never presented as an end in itself; it is rather the beginning of space-time history and the outworking of his eternal plan for the universe that leads to a specific *telos*. In this way, creation and eschatology are interdependent. Creation leads to providence; both creation and providence establish the eschatological direction of God’s plan, particularly worked out in terms of specific covenantal relationships God enters into with his creation that, in the end, lead to a specific goal centered in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:9–10; Col. 1:15–20). As redemptive history unfolds, we increasingly discover what God’s appointed *telos* for the universe and his people is.

Third, Scripture insists God created everything “good” (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), indeed “very good” (v. 31), including finite, temporal, and material-spiritual creatures.⁷ An important implication of this truth is that Scripture nowhere elevates spiritual realities over the physical, since both are created by God with value. As Michael Horton notes, “Human beings—in the totality of their existence as spiritual and physical—belong in this world of time and space. There is no place for the idea of divine soul

⁵In line with the OT, Paul adopts the same view. He uses the word *heaven* (Gk. *ouranos*) 21 times, which includes the description of the universe as the heavens and the earth (1 Cor. 8:5; Eph. 1:10; 3:15; Col. 1:16) and the place where God dwells and from where the Son came down (Eph. 4:9; Rom. 10:6), to which he returned (Eph. 4:10), where he now is (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1; cf. Rom. 8:34), and whence he will return (Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:16; 2 Thess. 1:7). In addition, he also uses the term to refer to the believer’s eternal home (2 Cor. 5:1, 2; Phil. 3:20; cf. Gal. 4:26), where our hoped-for salvation is being kept (Col. 1:5) as we await the coming of our Lord (see Maile, “Heaven, Heavenlies, Paradise,” 381).

⁶Graeme Goldsworthy, “Kingdom of God,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 618.

⁷There is debate over the nature of God’s “good” creation. Some argue that “goodness” is merely a correspondence between divine intention and the universe, which was suitable to fulfill the purpose for which it was brought into being. This view does not necessitate a “perfect” world and thus can allow for death prior to human sin. See William Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 20–22. A better option is to see “goodness” in moral terms, thus arguing that death, pain, and suffering did not exist prior to the fall and that these realities in the created order are due to Adam’s sin (see Gen. 2:17; 3:19; Rom. 5:12; 8:19–22). For this view, see, e.g., Andrew S. Kulikovskiy, *Creation, Fall, Restoration: A Biblical Theology of Creation* (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2009), 204–20.

longing to transcend its creaturely finitude in order to return to a primordial condition of eternal preexistence in the unity of being.”⁸ However, in insisting on the goodness of God’s initial creation, the Bible also sets the stage for what goes wrong—sin, death, and destruction—and, thankfully, the promise of God in the sending of the Messiah to set things right. Thus, as a result of the fall, the entire universe is affected by sin, including our body and soul, but in Christ both are redeemed, hence the scriptural emphasis on the resurrection of our bodies to live in God’s presence forever in a new creation (see 1 Corinthians 15; Revelation 21–22). Importantly, as Horton observes, “the original creation is therefore the correlate for the new-creation imagery of the prophets and apostles.”⁹ Ultimately the whole drama of redemptive history anticipates, as D. A. Carson writes, “the restoration of goodness, even the transformation to a greater glory, of the universe gone wrong (Rom. 8:21), and arrives finally at the dawning of a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21–22; cf. Isa. 65:17), the home of righteousness (2 Peter 3:13).”¹⁰

Fourth, creation establishes the unique covenantal representation of Adam for the human race, which eventually sets up the crucial Adam-Christ typological relationship in Scripture. Biblically and theologically it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the Adam-Christ relationship for understanding the story line of Scripture. All human beings fall under the representative headship of two people: Adam and Christ. In Scripture, Adam is not merely the first created man; he also serves as the covenant mediator and representative for all humanity.¹¹ In Adam humanity is represented, which speaks of the incredible role God has given humanity to serve as his vice-regents to rule over creation as his servant kings; it also entails that “in Adam,” when he sins, the entire human race *and* creation are affected. That is why, as Goldsworthy notes, “when man falls because of sin the creation is made to fall with him.”¹² It is also why to restore the whole creation, God must work through a greater Adam, God’s own Son, who must become man in order to restore the human race through his triumphant cross work on our behalf as our new covenant head.

As God’s plan unfolds, and especially in light of Adam’s sin, all tied to the “old creation” is now characterized by sin, death, and judgment.

⁸Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 328.

⁹*Ibid.*, 334.

¹⁰D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 202.

¹¹For a development of these points see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

¹²Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 96.

By contrast, and especially from the perspective of the Old Testament prophets, Christ represents all that is associated with “the age to come,” which is described in terms of a “new covenant” and a “new creation” characterized by salvation, life, and an entirely new order.¹³ This is why Scripture ultimately subsumes Jew and Gentile under Adam—anyone who is “in Adam,” given Adam’s disobedience, now comes into this world dead in their sins and under the judicial sentence of God (Eph. 2:1–3). Adam’s headship has the deeper privilege of more than ordinary fatherhood. It also includes the dignity of defining what it means to be human, for he stands not merely as our physical but also as our covenantal head. As the apostle Paul later states, being human is equivalent to bearing his image, but to be identified with Christ is equivalent to being part of the “new creation” and participating in the realities of that age associated with salvation, life, and the power of the Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45–49). Doug Moo captures this point well:

All people, Paul teaches, stand in relationship to one of two men, whose actions determine the eternal destiny of all who belong to them. Either one “belongs to” Adam and is under sentence of death because of his sin, or disobedience, or one belongs to Christ and is assured of eternal life because of his “righteous” act, or obedience. The actions of Adam and Christ then are similar in having “epochal” significance.¹⁴

even though, as Moo notes, there is massive discontinuity between these two men since “Christ’s act is able completely to overcome the effects of Adam’s.”¹⁵

In addition, the role of Adam and the creation covenant are also important for establishing foundational typological patterns crucial in grasping “heaven” and thus our final state as God’s people. For example, think of the creation week’s culminating in the *rest* of God on the seventh day after he declares everything “very good” (Gen. 1:31). This not only speaks of God’s entering into covenantal enjoyment of his creation; it also establishes a pattern that serves to ground the Sabbath law in the time of Moses (Ex. 20:8–11) and ultimately points forward to a greater “rest” to come in Christ’s work, consummated in our final state in the new creation and “heavenly city” (see Heb. 3:7–4:13; 11:16; 12:22–24; cf.

¹³On these points see Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle*, NSBT 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001); Ridderbos, *Paul*, 44–90; Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 41–116.

¹⁴Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 315.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

Revelation 21–22).¹⁶ Or think of the close connection between Eden as a temple sanctuary, the emphasis on the land tied to creation, and how these structures eventually find their fulfillment in our Lord Jesus, who replaces the temple and ushers in the land/new creation, thus bringing us to our eternal home and rest in a new creation.¹⁷ Or think of the establishment of marriage in Genesis 2:24–25 and how through the biblical covenants marriage typifies a greater reality—God’s relation to his people—and points forward to the end of all things in the new creation.¹⁸ In all these ways the creation covenant establishes in seed form patterns that picture something of what heaven is, which now in Christ we see in full bloom due to his coming and work.

Fall

Unfortunately, Adam as our representative head disobeyed. Given his covenantal role, when he fell, we fell, and the entire creation was affected. In Adam, the reality and power of sin, death, and the curse were introduced into God’s good world. Now the human race is under a death sentence—spiritually and physically (see Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:1–3). Even worse, we who were made to know, love, and serve God—who were to enjoy “rest” and God’s heavenly presence on earth—are now enemies of God, living under his judgment and wrath (Gen. 3:17–24; Eph. 2:1–3).

As the punishment of our sin is described in Genesis 3, the consequences of it become more evident. The breakdown of the covenant relationship results in a horrible twofold alienation: (1) alienation between God and humans, and (2) alienation between humans and creation (which results in further alienation from others, our inheritance of the garden, and the entire created order). God drives us from Eden; he blocks entrance to the Tree of Life, signifying our life-giving fellowship in God’s heavenly presence has been lost. In his justice and holiness, God places the cherubim to block entrance to Eden. Scripture is clear: the only way back to God’s covenantal presence is forward by God’s provision of a redeemer. From Genesis 3 on, the story line of Scripture teaches that our only hope for a reversal of this desperate situation is God’s provision alone. The only hope for Adam’s helpless race is found in the last Adam,

¹⁶ For a development of these ideas see Dan C. Barber and Robert A. Peterson, *Life Everlasting: The Unfolding Story of Heaven* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012), 53–82, 123–53.

¹⁷ See G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, NSBT 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).

¹⁸ See Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *God’s Unfaithful Wife*, NSBT 2 (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity, 2003).

who does not fail and through his obedience wins for us redemption and a new creation.

Redemption

After describing the awful effects of sin upon God's good creation, he—thankfully, and solely due to his sovereign grace—does not leave us to ourselves. A word of promise is given (Gen. 3:15). The triune God as universal King and Lord will act to bring his *saving reign* to this world and make all things right. He will take the initiative to put sin and evil down. Over time and through the biblical covenants, God's initial promise receives greater clarity, definition, and development. Ultimately God's saving kingdom comes to this world through the great antitype of all the previous covenant mediators, our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the context of God's initial promise to save and reverse the effects of the fall, Goldsworthy correctly notes, "The background to God's work of rescuing sinners is his commitment to his creation."¹⁹ Given God's eternal plan, there is no hint that God's creation of the universe was "on a trial basis, or with a view to scrapping it after a period of time."²⁰ Rather, the Genesis narrative, especially with the pronouncement that everything was very good (1:31), is best understood as God's approval of all he had made *and* his commitment to it. In fact, as Goldsworthy notes, "The strength of God's commitment becomes clearer as the narrative progresses. Mankind's rebellion brings judgment but not instant destruction. God preserves order in the universe and in human society, and at the same time begins to reveal his purposes to overcome the effects of human sin."²¹ And it is precisely these purposes to reverse the effects of sin in all of its diverse dimensions, to destroy the powers of "this present age" and ultimately usher in a "new creation," that the story line of Scripture develops in terms of the triune God's great plan of redemption, unfolded through the biblical covenants and anticipated in the coming of a future redeemer. Why is this important to emphasize for our purposes? When Scripture thinks of the final state of God's people, i.e., "heaven," and the enjoyment of God's presence in covenant relationship, it is always in "creation—new creation" categories.

As God's plan of redemption unfolds in the Old Testament, it is the prophets who pick up these promises, hopes, and expectations. The

¹⁹ Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 112.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

prophets proclaim a future age of renewal by recapitulating the history of redemption and projecting it into the future. In the “latter days” the covenant Lord will come and save his people through a new exodus, a new Jerusalem, and a greater Davidic king to usher in God’s eternal kingdom and *saving* reign (Isa. 9:6–7; 11:1–16; 52:13–53:12; Jer. 31:29–34; Ezekiel 34). When this occurs, the YHWH and Messiah will make all things right and reverse the effects of sin and death. The Old Testament’s vision of the end, particularly in Isaiah, speaks of our future state not as disembodied spirits floating on the clouds but in terms of a renewed creation/Eden and resurrection state (Isa. 11:6–9; 65:17–25; cf. Dan. 12:1–2).

It should not surprise us that this teaching serves as the backdrop to the New Testament. In exactly the same way as the Old Testament, yet in greater clarity and specificity now that Christ has come, the New Testament speaks of the final heavenly abode as a created place (Luke 24:51; John 14:2–4; 1 Pet. 3:22), as literally a new heavens and a new earth (Rev. 21:1). The same is true for Paul. Our heavenly hope is for a redeemed and reconciled creation living out its purpose in the presence of our covenant Lord forever (see Rom. 8:19–21; 1 Corinthians 15; cf. Col. 1:15–20). Let us now turn to how Paul picks up and develops these points from the Old Testament.

Basic Biblical-Theological Structures of Paul’s Thought

*Continuation of the Old Testament Story Line*²²

What is true of all the New Testament authors is true of Paul: he builds on the Old Testament teaching. The basic points from creation, fall, and redemption are assumed. Paul’s vision of the final state of God’s people is thoroughly Old Testament in outlook. Yet, like all New Testament authors, Paul acknowledges that in light of Christ’s coming, what God promised and the prophets anticipated is now here in Christ. In fact, in Christ greater clarity has now resulted, especially in understanding the future state of the believer, so that what the Old Testament only hinted at is now made clearer. That is why Paul can say that in Christ “life and immortality” have now been brought to light (2 Tim. 1:10; cf. 2 Cor. 4:6). A helpful way of thinking about the incredible realities Christ has ushered in and their impact on our understanding of our future state is to think in terms of inaugurated eschatology, a key structure of New Testament theology, specifically Paul’s.

²²To see how the NT builds on the OT story line, see Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 129–772.

*Inaugurated Eschatology*²³

The entire New Testament consistently announces that in Christ, God's saving kingdom and reign have broken into this world.²⁴ "Kingdom of God" does *not* primarily refer to a certain geographical location. The phrase tells us more about God (the fact that he reigns) than anything else. But the New Testament is clear: in Jesus, the long-awaited kingdom has come, and the rule of sin and death has been destroyed. Through Jesus' obedient life and cross work, he has *inaugurated* the kingdom over which he now rules and reigns—it is *already* here—in fulfillment of what the prophets predicted. The New Testament also stresses that even though the kingdom is now here, it is still *not yet* in that it awaits its consummation in Christ's return. This *already-not yet* tension that characterizes New Testament eschatology is famously known as "inaugurated eschatology"; i.e., the "last days" the Old Testament anticipated and predicted have actually arrived in the coming of our Lord Jesus yet still await full consummation.

In the New Testament, this tension is presented in a number of ways. For example, in regard to the kingdom of God, the covenant Lord who rules over all (e.g., Pss. 93:1; 97:1; 99:1; 103:19; Dan. 4:34–35) has now brought his saving reign and rule to this fallen world in Jesus Christ, evidenced by the coming of the Spirit (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20) and miraculous signs and preaching (Luke 4:16–30; cf. Isa. 29:18; 58:6; 61:1–2). Truly in Jesus, as he himself announces, God's saving rule has broken into this world (Matt. 4:17). However, even though the kingdom is now here, Jesus still teaches us to pray "Your kingdom come" (6:10) and speaks to his disciples of a future day when he will come "in his kingdom" (16:28; Luke 23:51), "which clearly refers to the future fulfillment of the kingdom promise."²⁵

The same must be said about the coming of the Spirit. Because Jesus has come and has won victory in his cross work, he has poured out the *promised* Spirit (Acts 2; cf. John 14–16; Eph. 1:13–14). However, the gift of the Spirit is the *arrabōn*, the deposit and guarantee of our promised

²³ For a more detailed discussion of inaugurated eschatology, see Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 41–116; Hoekema, *Bible and the Future*, 3–75; Ridderbos, *Paul*, 44–90; Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 1–41.

²⁴ In the Gospels, "kingdom of God" occurs four times in Matthew, fourteen in Mark, thirty-two in Luke, and four in John. Matthew also uses "kingdom of heaven" thirty-two times (see Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 45–49). There is no evidence of a major theological distinction between "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God." Instead, in Matthew the two expressions are basically synonymous, except, as Jonathan Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*, NovTSup 126 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2007), 67–76, has shown, "kingdom of heaven" stresses God's kingdom is from above and represents his rule over all earthly kingdoms. In addition, in Christ heaven has come to earth.

²⁵ Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 51. The "not yet" reality of the kingdom is also seen in such texts as Matt. 5:3–12; 8:11–12; 13:24–30, 36–43; 22:1–14; 25:1–13, 31–46; 26:29.

inheritance awaiting us in the consummation.²⁶ Thus, the reception of the Spirit means one has become a participant in the new mode of existence associated with the future age and now partakes of the powers of the “age to come.” Yet the New Testament insists that what the Spirit gives is only a foretaste of far greater blessings to come. As Hoekema summarizes, “We may say that in the possession of the Spirit we who are in Christ have a foretaste of the blessings of the age to come, and a pledge and guarantee of the resurrection of the body. Yet we have only the firstfruits. We look forward to the final consummation of the kingdom of God, when we shall enjoy these blessings to the full.”²⁷ In these ways and many more, the New Testament teaches that in Christ the “last days” (*eschaton*) have arrived but are not yet consummated in all of their fullness.

This tension can also be explained in terms of a restructuring of the Old Testament redemptive-historical timeline. From an Old Testament perspective, there is a distinction between “this present age”—an age characterized by sin, death, and opposition to God as represented by earthly kingdoms—and “the age to come”—an age in which the covenant Lord will come to rescue his people through his Messiah and to usher in his kingdom, i.e., his saving rule and reign. But how are these two ages related to each other? David Wells nicely states the relationship: “These two ages were related to one another in a chronological sequence. This αἰὼν ended with the coming to earth of the Messiah, and with his arrival there began the heavenly αἰὼν.”²⁸ In other words, from an Old Testament perspective, there would only be one coming of the Lord and Messiah in power and might. And when the Lord and Messiah would finally come and usher in the “last days” and the “age to come” (that associated with heaven), it would be an age characterized by the eschatological hope of the prophets, namely, salvation, judgment, and the new creation. All of these great realities will come at once. However, the New Testament modifies this basic timeline. Instead it speaks of two comings of the Messiah,

²⁶The “already-not yet” tension vis-à-vis the Spirit’s relation to the believer is worked out in five ways in the NT. First, the Spirit testifies of our “sonship” (Gal. 4:4–5; Rom. 8:14–27). The Spirit bears witness that we are the children of God now, even though we still await our full rights associated with sonship. Second, the role of the Spirit is that of “firstfruits” (*aparchē*—1 Cor. 15:20, 23; Rom. 8:23), which speaks of what we have now, yet await in the future. Third, the Spirit is our “pledge” or “deposit” (*arrabōn*—2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14) guaranteeing our future inheritance. Fourth, the Holy Spirit is also called a “seal” (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 4:30; 1:13), which signifies believers are nothing less than God’s possession. Fifth, the Spirit is related to the resurrection of our bodies (Rom. 1:3–4; 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:42–44). The Spirit is said to be active in relation to not only Christ’s resurrection but ours as well, which signifies our bodies shall be raised from the dead, just as Christ was risen from the dead, so we may share in the glorious existence of the final, consummated state. For a further discussion of these points see Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 55–67.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 67.

²⁸David F. Wells, *The Person of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1984), 29.

not just one, as well as an overlap of the ages. In the first coming—all that is associated with the Son's incarnation, life, and cross work—the “age to come” is now here, just like the prophets anticipated. But, even though the future age is in principle here, it is not fully here until Christ returns in glory and power. As such, “this present age” continues until the second coming, even though the “age to come” has been inaugurated in Christ. In this sense, there is an overlap of the ages.

What does all of this have to do with heaven? One cannot fully grasp what Paul means by *heaven* unless one places his thought within the overall framework of inaugurated eschatology. So, for example, in Paul and the New Testament, Christ has inaugurated the kingdom so that in reality, the *heavenly* age has broken into this world—*heaven has come to earth*. In Christ, the triune God of heaven has ushered in his saving rule and reign on earth that is now here in and through his people even though it still awaits the not yet. The Son, who has come from heaven (Eph. 4:9; Rom. 10:6), has returned to heaven (Eph. 4:10; 6:9; Col. 4:1; cf. Rom. 8:34), and will come again from heaven (Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:16; 2 Thess. 1:7), has done a work that *presently* has brought the rule of heaven to earth. For Paul, then, heaven is more than merely a future reality, even though it is that. Paul can call heaven our eternal home (2 Cor. 5:1, 2; Phil. 3:20; cf. Gal. 4:26) and where our hoped-for salvation is being kept (Col. 1:5). In another sense heaven denotes, Maile explains,

a spiritual sphere coexisting with the material world of space and time; it is where the exalted Christ now is, seated at God's right hand. Not only that; the believer is united with Christ, is “in Christ,” and as such belongs already to the company of heaven (Phil. 3:20) and can be thought of as being seated with Christ in the heavenly realms (Eph. 2:6). Even now the believer's life is “hidden with Christ in God,” and the “things above” should be the focus of the believer's attention and should provide the orientation and goal of the Christian's life here and now.²⁹

In fact, in Christ, as Paul uniquely develops in Ephesians, all our *spiritual* blessings, i.e., those pertaining or belonging to the Spirit, are ours now “in the *heavenly realms*” (*en tois epouraniois*) even though we are presently living on earth, awaiting his return from heaven.³⁰ To grasp what Paul is saying, one must place his thought within the two-age, redemp-

²⁹ Maile, “Heaven, Heavenlies, Paradise,” 382.

³⁰ For a discussion of “heavenly realms” in Ephesians, see Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 96–97. This expression is exclusive to Ephesians (1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12).

tive-historical timeline discussed above. As Peter O'Brien reminds us, in Paul the phrase

in the heavenly realms is not describing some celestial topography. . . . *In the heavenly realms* is bound up with the divine saving events and is to be understood within a Pauline eschatological perspective. In line with the Jewish two-age structure heaven is seen from the perspective of the age to come, which has now been inaugurated by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. At the same time, it is still part of this present evil age until the final consummation, for hostile powers are currently active in the heavenly realms (cf. 3:10; 6:12).³¹

In addition, as O'Brien continues, in Christ believers are linked to this *heavenly realm* because the gracious gifts of salvation are "not simply future benefits but are a present reality for us, since they have already been won for us by God's saving action in Christ."³² Even now, we as believers live as citizens of *heaven*, seated with Christ in the *heavenlies* (Eph. 2:6; Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:3), while on earth we live between the two advents of Christ, increasingly conformed to Christ (2 Cor. 3:18) and awaiting his return. We now participate in Christ's rule and reign even though we still await our final inheritance. In Christ we now enter eternal life (Rom. 6:4) and are already participants in the end-time *new creation* (2 Cor. 5:17) even though we long for the dawning of our inheritance of eternal life (Gal. 6:8) and the fullness of the new creation. In all these ways, as believers we now experience heaven in our salvation in Christ as we grow in grace.

However, as important as it is to stress the *present* or *already* aspects we now enjoy, there is still a *future* or *not-yet* aspect that is essential to remember if we are to grasp the depth and breadth of what Paul teaches in regard to the future state of the believer. As Robert Reymond reminds us from Paul,

While our inward man is renewed daily, our outward man (*ho exō anthrōpos*), the body, and the whole universe await the resurrection (2 Cor. 4:16–18; Rom. 8:10ff). Neither we nor any other Christians are ruling and reigning now in the way that we shall (1 Cor. 4:8). Thus our perspective must be, on the one hand, that of a humble and thankful participation in the victory of the inward man here, and on the other hand, expectant anticipation of the victory of the body and that of the

³¹ *Ibid.*, 97, emphasis original.

³² *Ibid.*

united body and soul together in the Eschaton in a new heaven and new earth.³³

With this in mind, let us now turn from the *already* to the *not yet* focus of inaugurated eschatology. What is our future state as believers, initially in death prior to our Lord's return and later as a result of Christ's parousia and the consummation of all things?

The Christian's Final State and Heaven

The Intermediate State

For Paul and the entire New Testament, our *ultimate* hope is found in Christ's return and the resurrection (1 Thess. 4:13–18; cf. 1 Cor. 15:26). Yet prior to Christ's return, there is a temporary state for believers between their death and resurrection, what has been called the "intermediate state." Unlike some have proposed, it is incorrect to think that Paul did not foresee believers' dying before Christ's parousia. In fact, this is why he desires to inform the church about the fate of deceased believers.³⁴ Prior to Christ's return, those believers who have died in Christ have either "fallen asleep" (*koimasthai*; cf. 1 Cor. 11:30; 15:6, 18, 20; 1 Thess. 4:13ff) or are "sleeping" (*katheudein*; Eph. 5:14; 1 Thess. 5:10).³⁵ This description, as Ridderbos notes, does not entail a lack of "all activity and consciousness."³⁶ Instead, it is a way of speaking of a state between our present and final states that Paul can describe as "far better" than our present existence.

Philippians 1:21–24 is probably the clearest text on this point: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain [*kerdos*]. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better [*pollō mallon kreisson*]. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account."³⁷ It is difficult to deny that Paul is contrasting life here on earth with being "with Christ," which is described as not remaining in the flesh.³⁸ It is possible to think Paul anticipates being with Christ in his resurrection, but because Paul assumes an instantaneous benefit in his death, it is better to think in terms of an intermediate

³³ R. L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1016–17.

³⁴ On this issue see the helpful discussion in Ridderbos, *Paul*, 495–508; L. J. Kreitzer, "Intermediate State," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 43–41.

³⁵ See Ridderbos, *Paul*, 497.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ For a more complete treatment see Kreitzer, "Intermediate State," 438–41; Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 116–37.

³⁸ See Schreiner, *Paul*, 467; O'Brien, *Philippians*, 116–37.

state. This is not to say Paul views his present life as insignificant; he does desire to remain in the body so he can continue to serve the church. Yet to depart and be “with Christ” is viewed as *better*, even though it is not the final resurrection state. For Paul, the believer’s union with Christ cannot be broken even in death, even though death is an enemy that must be destroyed finally in Christ’s return (Rom. 8:18–39). Furthermore, as Horton reminds us, nowhere does Paul view the death of a believer “as a benign deliverer, the sunset that is as beautiful as the sunrise, or as a portal to a ‘better life.’”³⁹ Death brings legitimate tears and grief, yet we do not mourn as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). Our union with Christ is stronger than the power of death; even if the intermediate state is temporary, Scripture views it as better because we are “with Christ.” In Christ the sting and power of death has been removed as we await our resurrection, for we depart to dwell in the presence of Christ in a living, conscious way (see Luke 16:22; 23:43; Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:8; Rev. 6:9–11; 14:13). Even though this intermediate state is never called “heaven” in Scripture, in theology we speak of it as such because we go to be “with Christ,” who is now there (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1) and whence will return (Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:16; 2 Thess. 1:7).

In recent days, however, some evangelicals have disputed the reality of the intermediate state. Operating with a nonreductive physicalism, they deny that Scripture teaches a body-soul distinction and thus at death a temporary disembodied state awaiting the consummation.⁴⁰ Yet this view is very difficult to maintain, for a couple of reasons. First, Scripture overall teaches a holistic duality, i.e., a distinction between body and soul, even though Scripture views us holistically. Due to the effects of sin and death, we know body and soul can be separated, at least temporarily.⁴¹ Second, as noted above, it is due to such passages as Philippians 1:21–23 (cf. Matt. 10:28; Luke 23:43; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 6:9–11), which affirm a disembodied intermediate state, that we have grounds to affirm that deceased believers are presently “with Christ” in a “better” state, which minimally implies a self-conscious, real, and living relationship.

In fact, it is best to interpret 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 in this way as well. Even though this text has generated a lot of discussion, it does seem to

³⁹ Horton, *Christian Faith*, 911.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008).

⁴¹ See John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

imply an intermediate state.⁴² In these verses, Paul speaks of being “away from the body and being at home with the Lord” (v. 8), with “the death of the believer being the transitional event moving the believer from one ‘home’ to the other.”⁴³ This seems to imply a period of time between our death and resurrection. To come to this conclusion, as Reymond notes, the “*crux interpretum* centers around this phrase in verse 8 and the correlative terms ‘house,’ ‘building,’ and ‘eternal in the heavens’ (v. 1), and the concepts of ‘clothed’ and ‘naked’ (vv. 2–4).”⁴⁴ Some have appealed to the present tense “we have” (*echomen*) in verse 1 and the references to “house,” “building,” and “eternal in the heavens” to say we receive our resurrection body at death and thus conclude this text does not teach a disembodied existence. But more likely, as Schreiner argues, “the present tense is used to denote the confidence and certainty of the reception of the resurrection body.”⁴⁵ This makes a lot of sense especially given that the terms “desiring to be clothed” (v. 2) and “naked” (v. 3) are best viewed as references to our intermediate existence apart from our resurrection bodies while we are present with the Lord.

Moreover, considering the combination of this with “away from the body” and “at home with the Lord” (v. 8) over against “away from the Lord” and “at home in the body” (v. 6) and the note of preference for that conditional over our present earthly existence, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Paul is teaching that we continue to exist independent of our bodies for a temporary period of time. As Reymond rightly observes, “What Paul would most prefer would be that he might be alive at the return of the Lord and be clothed with the resurrection body without laying the mortal body down in death (vv. 2–4). But even the intermediate state is better by far than this present existence, beset as the present is with sin in which we have less direct communion with the Lord (v. 6).”⁴⁶

However, even though there are excellent grounds to affirm the reality of the intermediate state, Paul says little about it. Instead, his primary focus is on the future, final, resurrection state. Ridderbos is correct to note,

⁴² Some have argued 2 Corinthians 5 reflects a change in Paul's theology regarding the status of the believer at death. It is argued that in 1 Corinthians, Paul believes the resurrection of believers will coincide with Christ's coming (15:23–24, 52), yet now Paul seems to teach resurrection will occur immediately upon death. The problem with this view is that Paul in addressing the same church should have clarified this change of viewpoint, but he does not. It is better to see his teaching in both epistles remaining the same and consistent. On this debate see Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 851–57; Ridderbos, *Paul*, 499–508; Murray J. Harris, *From Grave to Glory: Resurrection in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990).

⁴³ Kreitzer, “Intermediate State,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 439.

⁴⁴ Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, 1018.

⁴⁵ Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 856. This interpretation is confirmed by Phil. 3:20–21, likely written after 2 Corinthians, where Paul expects the present body to be transformed when Christ appears.

⁴⁶ Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, 1018.

“It is certainly true therefore that to be with Christ after death and before the resurrection does not have the full redemptive significance in Paul’s epistles that the resurrection has.”⁴⁷ In death, believers are not separated from Christ; we are with him (Rom. 8:38; Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:1–10), but even then we await the consummation of all things at Christ’s return. Let us now turn to discussing Paul’s view of our final state and eternal home.

The Future and Final State

The final goal of God’s redemptive purposes, planned from eternity, is the uniting of all things *in heaven and earth* in Christ (Eph. 1:9–10).⁴⁸ In Ephesians and elsewhere in Paul (see Col. 1:15–20), Christ as God the Son incarnate is the one in whom God chooses to sum up (*anakephalaiōsis*) all things, the one in whom reconciliation of this disrupted, fallen creation will take place. Sin and its effects in both the angelic and human realms have disrupted God’s good universe. However, in Christ reconciliation and restoration have now taken place in his death and resurrection (Col. 1:20–22), but it still awaits the *not-yet* realities of the consummation. But it is important to note, given the believer’s covenantal union with Christ, that our future hope and final state is intimately bound up with him. What he has achieved is now ours; what he will complete and consummate is ours—a future, certain hope that entails nothing less than our bodily resurrection, transformation, and glorification in a renewed new creation. There are many texts that teach these glorious truths, but we will focus on two.

Romans 8:18–25. Romans 8 is an incredible text of confidence and assurance for the believer in Christ. After proclaiming how our Lord has broken the power of sin and death by his cross and resurrection, and how the era of sin and death has ceased due to the inauguration of the promised new covenant age, evidenced by the Spirit’s enabling believers to begin to live out what we are in Christ, and how the church as God’s new humanity is now receiving promises made to Israel as God’s adopted children—heirs and coheirs with Christ, ultimately awaiting our inheritance in a new creation (vv. 1–17; cf. Isa. 65:17; 66:22)—Paul makes clear that the new creation is not only our future hope but also the end of all things. In the truest sense, then, heaven in terms of the final state of the believer is our dwelling in the presence of our triune God in our resurrection bodies in a renewed universe forever.

⁴⁷ Ridderbos, *Paul*, 506. Also see Schreiner, *Paul*, 466–67, who makes the same point.

⁴⁸ For a helpful discussion of this text, see O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 108–15.

This is made clear by Paul's comparing and contrasting our present condition with what is to come. Presently we endure suffering, but along with creation we long for the end of all things, when everything will be made new. In fact, Paul personifies creation as one who eagerly expects (*apokaradokia*, "eager expectation") and longs for (*apekdechetai*, "eagerly wait for") the *eschaton*, when the children of God will be made known publicly.⁴⁹ What Paul envisions is precisely what the Old Testament teaches. As noted above, the link between creation and God's redemptive work in humans is close. Since it was by Adam and his rebellion that creation came under its curse and present abnormality, it will be by the work of the last Adam that both creation and God's people will be redeemed from the curse. Creation, then, in this personified way groans under the curse but longs for the fulfillment of all God has pledged in his new-covenant promises.

This point is further reinforced in Romans 8:20–22. Paul explains (*gar*) why the entire created order anticipates so avidly the future revelation of God's children.⁵⁰ Due to Adam's sin, God has subjected the creation to frustration or futility (*mataiotēti*) by placing a curse upon it (cf. Gen. 3:17–19). The futility is also described in terms of "the bondage to corruption" (*tēs douleias tēs phthoras*), which entails "corruption, decay, and death, which pervade the natural world."⁵¹ As a result, the entire creation groans (*systemazei*) and suffers birth pangs (*synōdinei*) along with believers. Both of these verbs signify that the created order has not fulfilled its purpose. Its frustration and failure to reach its full potential, thankfully, anticipates something greater, namely, being liberated from its bondage (Rom. 8:21), which, in light of Old Testament expectation, anticipates the fulfillment of creation's purpose in the new creation.

When will this take place? It will take place on the final day, when Christ returns, and we, as the children of God, are publicly revealed (v. 23). But what is important to note is how Paul links our redemption (adoption) and resurrection. In fact, in placing "the redemption of our bodies" (*tēn apolytrōsin tou sōmatos hēmōn*) in apposition to our public revelation of our adoption, Paul underscores the fact our final state is organically related to our resurrection from the dead. Heaven, in the final-state sense, does not take place until the end. Until that day, believers,

⁴⁹Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 434–35, rightly argues the language used by Paul refers to the eschatological end of all things (cf. Rom. 8:23, 25; 1 Cor. 1:7; Gal. 5:5; Phil. 3:20).

⁵⁰There is a debate over the meaning of *ktisis*. It best refers to the nonhuman creation Paul personifies. See Schreiner, *Romans*, 435.

⁵¹Ibid., 436.

along with the entire created order, long for our Lord's return. Until then, even though we are already in Christ, we still groan; we have not yet obtained the resurrection of the dead and full realities of the new creation. Yet our groaning is in hope—our future inheritance is sure, evidenced and sealed by the Spirit. Even though we experience suffering now, our eschatological inheritance is sure; our sovereign, triune God works out everything for our good—all of life's circumstances will accomplish the goal of conforming us to Christ and bringing us safely to our heavenly home (v. 28; Gal. 4:26).

What will this future age be like? Romans 8:19–22 certainly entails indescribable glory. Creation itself longs for it, as do believers (vv. 23–25); the assumption is that this new creation will be a perfect world, without sin and all of its corrosive effects. Adam's sin and all of its ramifications will be reversed. Creation will be set free, death and every demonic power will be defeated, and all creation will pay homage to Christ (Phil. 2:10–11) as all enemies are put under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25–27). Not only will we enjoy this world; we will also rule with Christ as his covenant people, inheriting God's kingdom and our heavenly home (1 Cor. 6:9–10; 15:50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5).

1 Corinthians 15. This chapter is the most detailed discussion in Paul of our final state, linking that final state to our bodily resurrection and the renewing of the entire creation. As elsewhere, Paul does not teach salvation as simply “going to heaven when I die;”⁵² he instead grounds our *ultimate* hope in the “the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.” In the consummation, not only earth but heaven itself will become new. Human bodies will be reunited with their souls, and, as Horton beautifully states, heaven and earth will become “one cosmic sanctuary of everlasting joy.”⁵³ Interestingly, it was false ideas in the Corinthian church that led Paul to write this wonderful chapter. Sadly, this church had adopted false ideas of spirituality that were leading to disastrous conclusions. Not only were they leading to a partisan spirit within the church (chaps. 1–3), immorality (chap. 5), lawsuits between believers (chap. 6), and abuse of the Lord's Supper and spiritual gifts (chaps. 11–14); it was also leading to a denial of the future, bodily resurrection state that 15:12 makes clear. It is important to note that they were not denying the reality of an afterlife. Rather, they were denying the resurrection of the dead in terms of its bodily, new-creation features.

⁵² Horton, *Christian Faith*, 915.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

How did they come to such a belief? Probably it was due to a false view of spirituality, of what it means to be *pneumatikos* (“spiritual”). As Gordon Fee elaborates, “In their view, by the reception of the Spirit, and especially the gift of tongues, they thought that they had already entered the true spirituality that is to be (4:8); already they had begun a form of angelic existence (13:1; cf. 4:9; 7:1–7) in which the body was unnecessary and unwanted, and would finally be destroyed.”⁵⁴ Thus, for them life in the Spirit seemed to entail the undesirability and superfluousness of the future bodily resurrection of believers. It is hard to know for sure, but Fee thinks at least two historical realities merged to bring about the Corinthians’ actual denial of a bodily resurrection.⁵⁵ First, it is possible that the doctrine of the resurrection was not well articulated in early years, especially among Gentiles. No doubt, Christ’s resurrection was affirmed as central in securing for believers salvation from sin and hope for the future. But would that hope necessarily have been thought of in terms of our resurrection, especially given the fact so few Christians would have yet died and coupled with a longing for an imminent parousia? Second—and probably more significant—it seemed a false theology began to gain ground in Corinth after Paul’s departure that not only denied the value and significance of the body but also was “over-realized” in its eschatological focus. The Corinthians rightly saw in the coming of Christ the dawning of blessings of God’s kingdom and “age to come” realities, but they failed to grasp there was a *not yet* reality tied to the second coming of Christ still to come. In so doing, they so exaggerated their present “spiritual” state that they thought they had already entered into the final state. Thus, some of them began to deny the reality of a future bodily resurrection and become careless about their present lives in terms of how they lived and what they did with their bodies.⁵⁶

Paul was not pleased with this turn of events. He was deeply concerned about their false ideas of spirituality—their denial of a future bodily resurrection was, in reality, a denial of the gospel. For Paul, Christ’s resurrection is *the* resurrection, that which the Scriptures anticipated, the firstfruits of the final consummated state still to come. Paul rightly views Jesus’ cross and resurrection as *the* event that restores what was lost under

⁵⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 715.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 715–17.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., 1 Cor. 5:1–12; 6:12–20; 7:1–8:13. For more on the “over-realized” eschatology of the Corinthians see Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 40–41, 1169–78; and Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 25.

Adam and ushers in a new creation. But if this is so, we as believers *must* participate in it due to our faith union with our covenant head. Denying our bodily resurrection is tantamount to denying Christ's resurrection. Paul is horrified by the false teaching of the Corinthian church. Ironically, we should be thankful for this sad confusion in Corinth—not because we rejoice in the Corinthians' errors, but because in 1 Corinthians 15, under inspiration of the Spirit, we have for all generations one of the greatest theological treasures of the church. In Paul's response to the Corinthians' denial of the future bodily resurrection of believers, we discover anew the centrality and utter significance of Christ's resurrection to God's redemptive purposes and the glorious hope that is ours as those who are found in Christ. Let us briefly unpack the text as we think about the wonder and glory of our future state in Christ.

Paul begins addressing the Corinthians' aberrant theology by reminding them of what they both hold in common: the objective reality of Christ's resurrection. There is no evidence the Corinthians denied the reality of Christ's resurrection; it was the link between Christ's resurrection and ours they were confused about. That is why Paul in verses 1–2 and 11 appeals to that which they believe and upon which have taken their stand. And it is from this common conviction that Paul will argue against their assertion that there is no resurrection of the dead.

With an explanatory “for” (*gar*) in verse 3 Paul proceeds to introduce the gospel message he had received and passed on, that “of first importance.” What is important about this early confession is its clear grasp of the significance of the death and resurrection of Christ. “Christ died for (*hyper*) our sins.” In this simple statement the horrific realities of human depravity, alienation between God and human beings, and death as the just penalty for sin are assumed, built upon the Old Testament Scriptures. Christ's death is viewed as substitutionary and vicarious, linked to God's plan in redemptive history—evidenced by the expression “in accordance with the Scriptures.” In verse 4 Paul stresses both the burial and resurrection of Christ. In linking both of these together, Paul is clearly emphasizing the reality of Christ's death and thus the bodily nature of his resurrection. Christ's resurrection was not to be viewed as some bodiless “spiritual” renewal of life after death. This emphasis is also underscored by the stress placed upon his resurrection appearances (vv. 5–8). Just as Christ was truly dead and buried, so he was truly raised from the dead and seen by a large number of witnesses on a variety of occasions and circumstances. After recounting God's sovereign electing grace in his life, Paul in

verse 11 comes back full circle to verses 1–2 and the common confession of Christ's resurrection they affirm but do not see implications of for their own bodily resurrection.

On the basis of their common confession, Paul now turns to a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. His purpose is to demonstrate that their view is logically inconsistent and should thus be rejected. Concerning belief in Christ's resurrection (vv. 1–11) yet denial of our own future resurrection (v. 12), Paul establishes an internal contradiction between these two beliefs. Both beliefs cannot be held simultaneously if one is to remain consistent in one's overall theology. And even worse: if the Corinthians consistently deny the future resurrection of believers, it will inevitably lead to a denial of the resurrection of Christ and thus the gospel. Indeed, the stakes could not be higher!

Paul begins in verses 12–19 by hypothetically granting their viewpoint for sake of argument and then draws the entailment of it, that Christ is not raised (v. 13). But, of course, given the common confession of the church that Christ has indeed been raised (vv. 1–11), the Corinthian position is contradictory and thus impossible. It is important to note that what Paul assumes, even though he does not fully argue it until verses 20–28, is an intimate, indissoluble, covenantal relation between the believer and Christ. If Christ is raised, the believer must too be raised; if the believer is not raised, then Christ is not raised.⁵⁷ Paul then begins to flesh out at least four disastrous implications of denying Christ's resurrection (vv. 14–19): (1) if Christ has not been raised, both the people's faith and apostolic preaching is "in vain," that is, without basis; (2) if Christ is not raised, the apostles who have proclaimed the resurrection are false witnesses, distorters of the truth (v. 15); (3) if Christ is not raised, there is a sense in which God is implicated as well (vv. 15–16); and (4) if Christ is not raised, Christian faith is futile in a further sense: "you are still in your sins" (v. 17), and dead believers are forever lost (v. 18). If Christ has not been raised, what guarantee is there that his death "for our sins according to the Scriptures" (v. 3) accomplished anything? A dead savior is no savior at all. And all those who have trusted Christ for the forgiveness of their sins and who have now died are forever lost if he is not raised (v. 18). Indeed, these are disastrous implications! Paul concludes in verse 19 by stating, "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people the most to be pitied."

In verses 20–28 Paul now reverses his argument by appealing to what

⁵⁷ On this point see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), 33–74; Ridderbos, *Paul*, 44–90; Schreiner, *Paul*, 456–59.

the Corinthians and he have in common, the conviction that Christ is indeed raised. What again grounds Paul's argument is an entire biblical theology following the story line of Scripture. In fact, Paul assumes at least three truths foundational to his argument: (1) Paul views the coming, life, death, and resurrection of Christ in thoroughly redemptive-historical and eschatological categories.⁵⁸ As God's Son, the last Adam (vv. 21–22), Christ has inaugurated a new creation, supremely evidenced in his death, resurrection, and gift of the Spirit. As such, he has ushered in the promised "age to come" from the Old Testament even though the consummation of this age awaits his second coming. Furthermore, even though the resurrection of believers is not until the parousia, Christ's resurrection serves as the ground and guarantee that all those who are "in Christ" shall be raised, patterned after his glorious resurrection. (2) Paul assumes an indissoluble covenantal union between the resurrection of Christ and the bodily resurrection of believers, which makes sense in light of the Adam-Christ typological contrast in verses 21–22. What then happens to Christ must also happen to his people. Fee captures this point well: "Thus Christ is the firstfruits; he is God's pledge that all who are his will be raised from the dead. The inevitable process of death begun in Adam will be reversed by the equally inevitable process of 'bringing to life' begun in Christ. Therefore, it is not possible for the Corinthians to say there is no resurrection of the dead. Such a resurrection is necessitated by Christ's."⁵⁹ (3) Paul views the resurrection of Christ in light of God's sovereign purposes and the fact that not all of God's enemies have been subjected to him and destroyed, specifically the enemy of death. But, precisely because *God* raised Jesus triumphantly from the dead, Paul is confident God has set in motion an "inevitable chain of events"⁶⁰ that will only be completed when all of God's enemies are destroyed, including death itself. That is why Christ's resurrection *demand*s our resurrection: if we are not raised bodily from the grave, death is never truly defeated and God can never be "all in all." Ultimately, unless death is destroyed and we are raised, God's place as sovereign Lord of creation, history, and redemption is in question. That is the point Paul stresses in verses 23–26 by emphasizing the order of events that lead to the consummation—Christ's resurrection is the firstfruits (v. 23); then (*epeita*), at his coming, believers will be raised (v. 23); then (*eita*) there will be the end or goal (*telos*) of human history, when the Lord

⁵⁸ See Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 746.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 751.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 747.

Jesus hands over the kingdom to God the Father after having destroyed every foe and enemy, including the last enemy, death (vv. 24–26).

Paul finishes his powerful argument in verses 29–34 by once again hypothetically assuming the Corinthian viewpoint and then drawing the logical conclusion: if they are correct, his and their present practices are inconsistent with their viewpoint. Ultimately, he puts his finger on their overall problem: what the Corinthians fail to realize is that through Christ's resurrection, the Father has set in motion a chain of events that will ensure the fulfillment of all of his redemptive purposes, including our bodily resurrection.

Paul takes up a new issue in verse 35: the *nature* of the resurrection body and future state of the believer. In spite of his appeal in verse 34 to the knowledge of God, and hence the sovereign power of God, he anticipates a skeptical objection, introduced by a strong contrastive: "But [*alla*] someone will ask, 'How [*pōs*]⁶¹ are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?'" (v. 35). Paul now makes clear our future resurrection is a *physical* resurrection in a *transformed body*, patterned after Christ and perfectly suited for our final state. Due to the intimate relationship between Christ and his people, there must of necessity be a bodily resurrection for believers since Christ was raised bodily. However, our resurrection body is not merely a resuscitation of a dead body; rather, it is a body adapted to the new conditions of the future. There is, then, both continuity and discontinuity between our present bodies and those of the resurrection. Our present body is earthly, natural (*psychikon*), and subject to decay, but the raised body is heavenly, spiritual (*pneumatikon*), and incorruptible. The final result is a glorious resurrection transformation of both the dead and the living wherein the final enemy—death—is swallowed up in victory.

There are three interlocking and ascending steps Paul makes: (1) an appeal to the natural order God made to argue for the *reasonableness* of the resurrection body (vv. 36–44); (2) an appeal to the nature of Christ's resurrection body to argue for the *certainty* of the resurrection body (vv. 45–49); and (3) an appeal for the *absolute necessity* of the resurrection in order for believers to enter our heavenly existence and God's plan of redemption to be complete (vv. 50–57). Let us briefly comment on each of these steps.

First, in verses 36–44 Paul appeals to what God has made in the natu-

⁶¹ Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1261, argues the emphasis is on "how" in the sense of "how is it possible?"

ral order, to seeds and kinds of bodies (*sōma*)—an analogy and appeal from the known to the unknown. Paul links the way God has ordered the natural world with the *reasonableness* of the resurrection body. Paul first appeals to how God has designed a seed. One ought to notice from nature that it is only when the seed is sown and dies that life comes (v. 36). Death, then, is a kind of precondition for life, not in the sense that Paul thinks death is an inevitable fact of the universe but in the sense that God has so ordered nature, particularly the seed, so that it “demonstrates that *out of death* a new expression of life springs forth.”⁶² Even in death God’s purposes are not thwarted. Why should the Corinthians find it incredible that, in the case of their death, the resurrection body comes as a new expression of life? “What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable” (v. 42).

Paul then goes one step further: not only does the seed in the natural realm demonstrate that life arises out of death, but it also displays that the life that comes forth does so in a *transformed* body (vv. 37–38). In other words, the end product of the seed planted in the ground does *not* look like the original seed, even though there is obviously some kind of continuity. By analogy, if God has so arranged and ordered the natural realm in this way, it ought to be easy to imagine him able to transform our present body, which will die and be buried, into that of a transformed resurrection body. Paul concludes: “It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power” (v. 43). Lastly, Paul observes, God gives to each seed a body adapted to its own kind of existence (vv. 38–41). By analogy, if God has so ordered the natural realm this way, why is it hard to imagine God doing this in the case of the resurrection body? Just as God creates every seed or thing with a body adapted to its own kind of existence, so God gives us resurrection bodies adapted to a future resurrection existence. Paul concludes: “It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body [*sōma pneumatikon*]” (v. 44), i.e., a body adapted for our final consummated state—dominated by the Spirit of God and living in a new creation.⁶³

Second, in verses 45–49 Paul does not want to leave his argument merely at the *reasonable* level; he instead wants to argue for *certainty* of our resurrection body due to our union with Christ. He once again develops the Adam-Christ typological relation, this time to demonstrate that the *kind* of body we will have as believers is patterned after Christ’s

⁶² Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 781; cf. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1264.

⁶³ On this point see Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 249–50, and Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 167–71.

resurrection body. In verse 45 Paul quotes from Genesis 2:7. Paul's main point is that Adam was given a certain kind of body at creation—a natural (*psychē*) body, a body of the earth, a body subject to death and decay as a result of sin—and “in Adam” we bear his likeness. But Christ is different; he is a life-giving spirit (*pneuma zōopoioun*), and his life is the life of heaven itself. As the head of his people, his resurrection body, thankfully, becomes the pattern for us—a *certain* pattern. But, Paul reminds the Corinthians, our reality of a resurrection patterned after Christ's resurrection is still future. Just as we have worn the image of Adam, so we shall wear⁶⁴ the “image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor. 15:49). Even though the new order Christ inaugurated has already broken in, we must still await a future when our lowly bodies will be transformed, fitted for the condition of the consummated state. This is what the Corinthians have failed to understand.

Third, in verses 50–57 Paul finishes this glorious chapter by raising his argument a notch. He is not content to argue for merely the *reasonableness* or even the *certainty* of our resurrection body. He insists for the absolute *necessity* of it. Our perishable and mortal body must (*dei*) be clothed with that which is imperishable and immortal (v. 53). Believers, dead or alive, *must* be transformed in order to enter the kingdom of God in its fullness (see vv. 50, 53–54). As Hoekema comments: “It is impossible for us in our present state of being, in our present bodies, weak and perishable as they are, to inherit the full blessings of the life to come. There must be change.”⁶⁵ Once again, this was something the Corinthians forgot. They were influenced by false beliefs that ultimately undermined the significance of the physical order. Paul does not agree. The triune God of redemption is also the God of creation; because sin has marred God's good order, redemption is not complete until sin and death are destroyed. For death to be destroyed completely, there must of necessity be the resurrection of the dead. Biblically, one cannot think of the final state of believers without resurrected, transformed bodies. Considering creation-fall structures, as noted above, if God is truly to redeem his people and transform this world, not only must Christ be raised—*we must be raised with him*. Without Christ's resurrection, without our resurrection in him, there is no biblical salvation. This is why all those who die in Christ and those who

⁶⁴ There is a textual issue of whether v. 49 should read future indicative, “we shall wear,” or aorist subjunctive, “let us wear.” I have followed the former. For contrary viewpoints see Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1288–89, who opts for the future, and Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 794–95, who opts for the aorist subjunctive.

⁶⁵ Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 251. Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 802n28, argues *dei* is a divinely ordained necessity.

are alive when Christ returns will, and must, be raised and transformed. God's plan of salvation is only complete when it is so.

When will this take place? At the end, in an instant, when the trumpet sounds.⁶⁶ Those who are alive when Christ returns will be transformed (v. 51). Those who are dead will come out of their graves—transformed (v. 52). And it *must* be so. Our bodies, whether dead or alive, in their present “natural” form must be transformed into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ and his glorious resurrection body. For it is only then that what Christ inaugurated in his first coming will be consummated in his second. As Fee states so well, “The long chain of decay and death inaugurated by the first Adam will finally be irrevocably broken by the last Adam.”⁶⁷ Death itself, the last enemy, will finally and definitively be destroyed.

What implications does this have for our understanding of heaven? For Paul, and the entire Bible, heaven must be viewed in new-creation terms: raised, transformed, and glorified people forever dwelling in God's presence, living in a renewed universe, carrying out our tasks as image bearers for his glory. In such a state, as Paul wonderfully teaches, our resurrection bodies will be imperishable (*phtharton*) and immortal (*athanasian*), that is, sustained by God's power and grace forever. Like Christ's resurrection body, our resurrection bodies will be fitted for the new creation. They will not be susceptible to disease or death. They will be physical bodies raised in glory and power and “dominated and directed by the Holy Spirit” (*pneumatikos*), having some kind of continuity with our present bodies but being gloriously transformed.

Concluding Reflection

What a fitting way to conclude this chapter—thinking about Paul's view of heaven. Here is Paul's vision of our final state. Is it any wonder that Paul finishes his treatment of our resurrection bodies by taunting death before turning to exuberant praise? (1 Cor. 15:54–57). He knows what is true of all believers: if Christ does not return before he dies, he will be laid in the grave. In spite of that, he looks in the face of the reality of death and mocks it solely due to the glorious work of Christ Jesus our Lord. In Jesus' death and resurrection, death has been destroyed because sin has been paid for and the demands of the law have been met (v. 56). Jesus has nailed our sin to his cross, thus securing our justification, rec-

⁶⁶ I will not discuss the debate regarding the timing of these events, the rapture, and the possibility of a millennium. See n1 for some resources on these topics.

⁶⁷ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 803.

conciliation, and redemption. In breaking the power of sin and satisfying the demands of the law, he has destroyed the power of death and removed its sting. Ours is the victory in Christ Jesus. In his resurrection the end has dawned; even though we may die before he returns, we shall—indeed we must—be raised, for we are in Christ, safe and secure. Even though we now still bear the marks of this present, fallen age, Christ's coming, death, and resurrection are our surety and guarantee. What should be our response? "Therefore," Paul concludes, "stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (v. 58), for it is that which will last for all eternity.



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