

HEAVEN

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FOR MANY YEARS, PHILADELPHIA CREAM CHEESE RAN A SERIES OF TELEVISION ADVERTISEMENTS IN WHICH A GROUP OF WINGED ANGELS WERE DEPICTED ON CLOUDS, COMPLETE WITH HARPS, AND SINGING IRVING BERLIN'S 'I'M IN HEAVEN'. It is an interesting advert, not least because it highlights one of the paradoxes we feel as we think about heaven. On the one hand, our culture tends to think of heaven in ethereal terms – not perhaps winged angels on clouds, but, nevertheless, still not quite as concrete as our present experience of earth. On the other hand, the angels are at least eating. They are embodied. They have digestive systems and so could echo the words of Jesus when he ate the broiled fish in front of his stunned disciples: ‘Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have’ (Lk 24.39).

This is the paradox of heaven. We will be embodied, but what kinds of bodies? We look forward to a new earth, but what is its nature? In his resurrection body – which, of course, is the paradigm for our own eternal hopes – Jesus ate and drank, and he encouraged Thomas to touch him. Yet, at the same time, he appeared through walls and was not instantly recognised. To use Tom Wright’s phrase, he had a ‘transphysicality’.¹ Such physicality is different to our own, yet it is still a physicality.

Given all this, what can we say about the new heavens and new earth to which we look forward? Like Christ in his resurrection state, we know it will be *physical*. But what kind of existence is envisaged? The Scriptures give us a number of concepts to help us here, and I will explore just three of them:

- The new Jerusalem
- The perfect union of heaven and earth
- The presence of God

THE NEW JERUSALEM

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes” (Rev 21.1–4).

This is how the author of Revelation describes the heaven and earth that await us. There is much in this passage which we could draw on, but perhaps the first

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point to note is that Christian fulfilment is portrayed in terms of a city. We began in a garden – Eden – but we finish in a city. This is not accidental. Christianity is not an endless series of cycles always returning to the beginning. Rather, what began at Eden as a project is now brought to completion in the grand city of God: the new Jerusalem.

More particularly, what we have going on in the book of Revelation is a deliberate series of contrasts between this vision of the new Jerusalem, the perfected city of God, and the reality of Babylon, a thinly disguised reference to Rome. While Jerusalem indicated the fulfilment of the great eschatological project begun at Eden, Babylon indicated the sum of human evil and idolatry. Richard Bauckham has made much of the fact that the author is writing to those who were being persecuted and killed for their faith and, in that context, he draws these parallels:²

New Jerusalem

Chaste bride (21.2,9)
 Glory of God is her splendour (21.11)
 Nations walk by her light (21.24)
 Sin excluded (21.27)
 Thirst quenched by 'water of life' (21.6)
 Life and healing (22.1–2)
 God's people called to enter (22.14)

Babylon

Harlot (17.2)
 Exploitation is her splendour (17.6)
 Nations corrupted by her (18.3)
 Sin defines her (17.4–6)
 Drunk on 'maddening wine' (14.8)
 Blood of slaughter (17.6)
 God's people called to leave (18.4)

According to Bauckham, the point of these contrasts is that Babylon represents what happens when self-idolatry becomes the norm for humanity. While, in contrast, the new Jerusalem is what we experience when worship of God defines us. One represents the crowning achievement of humanity left to itself. The other represents the crowning achievement of God, in which humanity may participate. So, then, our first vision of heaven is as a city. It is the fulfilment of the project commenced at Eden. It is a place of righteousness, peace and joy, and it has God at its heart.

THE PERFECT UNION OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

If, then, our first vision of heaven is as a city, the second point to be made about heaven is its earthy nature. In

the passage from Revelation 21 cited above, the direction of movement is not of us leaving this physical world, ascending through the clouds, and then joining God in some spiritual (as in non-material) realm. Rather, the trajectory that occurs is that heaven comes down and joins earth. The direction of travel is *downwards* not *upwards*: 'I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, *coming down out of heaven from God*, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband' (Rev 21.2).

The same point is made in Revelation 3.12, which describes the new Jerusalem as 'coming down out of heaven from my God'. The result of this, then, is that 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them' (Rev 21.3). The picture we are being given here is of God joining us, rather than us leaving this world to go to join God. More particularly, the image we are given is of a new heaven and new earth that are perfect because now they are united. At present, heaven and earth are held apart, separated, but in the age to come, there will be no separation.

It is for this reason that our resurrection hopes are earthed. It is a purified and perfected form of this earth that we look forward to, not a disembodied existence. Of course, far too often, this is not how we think.

1 Thessalonians 4.17 has proved particularly troubling here: 'After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever.' It is not just the Left Behind series of novels that have understood this verse in terms of us leaving this world to join with God in the heavenly realms.

However, as a number of commentators have pointed out, that is a significant misunderstanding of what Paul is trying to communicate here. The first-century background to this verse is the practice in Roman colonies – such as Thessalonica – of city officials going outside the gates to meet visiting dignitaries. On greeting the dignitaries, they would then escort their visitors back *into* the city. Hence, the image we are presented with in Thessalonians is not of humans disappearing from this world to go and join God in some other place. Rather, we meet him 'in the air' in order to escort him back to earth as he approaches the new Jerusalem, the restored and perfected heavens and earth that is our final dwelling place. Now, we must not take this description too literally, and think we will actually meet God on some cloud, before floating back to earth together. That is not the point, but it is to say that *parousia*, the royal presence of God, does not occur

NOTES

1. NT Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 478.
2. R Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
3. Noted in NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), p. 57.
4. MJ Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), p. 49.
5. Cited in *ibid.*

'It is not the absence of the material that makes heaven heaven, but the presence of God'

► when we leave this world, but rather when we enjoy God's presence in it.

THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Finally, the last aspect of heaven I want to address is 'the presence of God'.

'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes' (Rev 21.3).

'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes' (Rev 7.16,17).

The significance of these passages is that they indicate to us an aspect of heaven that it is all too easy to miss. What is important in both of them is the way in which the absence of suffering is tied, not to our abandonment of this earth, but rather to the presence of God, indeed the intimate presence of God. The reason the new heavens and new earth are perfect is not because we have left this fallen world and escaped, but rather because God's unhindered presence is realised among us. It is not the *absence* of the material that makes heaven heaven, but the *presence* of God.

The point seems to be that the reason that there is no more pain or suffering or death or mourning is not because, in the abstract, these things have been removed, but rather because God's *presence* banishes them, or prevents them from being realised. When God is absent, then fear, pain and suffering may flourish. But where God is present, these things simply cannot be. All of which leads me on to the relevance of our eschatological hopes for our present existence.

There is a great danger that the purpose of heaven becomes simply a hope that sustains us through the dark times, something that we anticipate, but not something that transforms our present existence. But while heaven is indeed something to which we look forward, it is also meant to give us a vision of the kind of transformation to which we are presently called. JD Crossan has coined the term 'collaborative eschatology' for this.³ Its basic idea is that we have a role to play in working with God in bringing his eschatological fulfilment to bear now. We are no doubt familiar with the idea that Christ's resurrection brings God's future into our present. The Jews were expecting a future

resurrection of all the redeemed, but with Christ's resurrection that future has been catapulted, as it were, into the midst of time. The eschaton, then, is not entirely future. What this means is that with Christ's resurrection, God's grand project of building the eternal Kingdom has already begun. And Crossan's point seems to be that we have a role to play in working with God to bring that project to completion. This is collaborative eschatology. The point, then, of our eternal hopes is not really that we sit back, relax and wait for their eternal consummation, but rather that we get on with the job God has given us.

If though our final destiny is God's unhindered presence among us, and if we have a role to play in bringing that final destiny to bear, then we can only do that to the extent that we are bringing Christ's presence to bear on the world. Millard Erickson puts it this way: 'The church, then, is called to mediate the presence of Christ, who in turn mediates the future of God. But how do we mediate this hope? It is not by merely waiting passively, or even by announcing what is to come. The community has been called upon to bring about that future.'⁴ And Jürgen Moltmann has said this: 'We are construction workers and not only interpreters of the future whose power in hope as well as in fulfilment is God. The horizon of eschatological expectation produces here a horizon of ethical intentions.'⁵

On this understanding, then, the new heavens and new earth are not so much something to which we look forward, but represent rather a summons to obedience. ■