
The Restoration of All Things

Sam Storms

The Gospel Coalition Booklets

Edited by **D. A. Carson & Timothy Keller**

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Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again! This simple liturgical refrain reminds us of the profoundly important truth that eschatology is deeply and inextricably grounded in the gospel. The twofold past tense “*has died*” and “*has risen*” is the basis on which the Christian perseveres in hope that “Christ *will* come again.” Simply put, what God *has* already achieved in the past through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son is the foundation for what Scripture says he *will* do in the future, at the consummation.

Christian hope is not a wishful grasping at an uncertain tomorrow but a confident expectation rooted in the reality of what transpired 2,000 years ago. The efficacy and finality of Christ’s redemptive work, together with his resurrection and exaltation as Lord to the right hand of the Father, alone accounts for the anticipation all Christians have of the return of Christ and the consummate fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose in the new heavens and new earth.

The eschatological hope of the Christian is summarized well in the thirteenth and final article of The Gospel Coalition’s Confessional Statement. This statement does not address the variety of end-time scenarios present in the evangelical world but is designed to identify those *essential* elements of our eschatological hope that are embraced by all who affirm the authority of the inspired text. It is, therefore, a broadly evangelical statement that avoids the denominational and sectarian distinctives that have so often marred the discussion of God’s end-time purposes. It reads as follows:

We believe in the personal, glorious, and bodily return of our Lord Jesus Christ with his holy angels, when he will exercise his role as final Judge, and his kingdom will be consummated. We believe in the bodily resurrection of both the just and the unjust—the unjust to judgment and eternal conscious punishment in hell, as our Lord himself taught, and the just to eternal blessedness in the presence of him who sits on the throne and of the Lamb, in the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness. On that day the church

will be presented faultless before God by the obedience, suffering and triumph of Christ, all sin purged and its wretched effects forever banished. God will be all in all and his people will be enthralled by the immediacy of his ineffable holiness, and everything will be to the praise of his glorious grace.

The Inaugural Coming and Ultimate Consummation of the Kingdom of God

The “blessed hope” of the Christian, and thus the controlling theme of biblical eschatology, is “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13), at which time he will consummate the kingdom of God. To understand what this consummation entails we must first explore the inauguration of God’s sovereign rule in the first coming of Christ. As noted above, we see here again that the key to the future lies in the past.

Christ’s first-century proclamation of the kingdom of God must be seen in relation to, indeed, in contrast with, the aspirations of the Jewish people of his day. The expectant attitude and hope of the first-century Israelite was for dominion in the land that God had promised to Abraham and his seed, together with an everlasting throne, international supremacy, and above all else the presence of the King himself in power and glory to rule over God’s people. The questions reverberating in the heart of the Jewish people at the time of Jesus were: “When will Yahweh send the Messiah to deliver us from our oppressors and fulfill the covenant promises given to our fathers? Where is God’s promised fulfillment of the kingdom?”

No one disputes the fact that the focus of Christ’s ministry was the announcement of *the coming of the kingdom of God*: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15; see also Matt. 3:2; 4:17, 23; 10:7; Luke 4:43; 10:9). The concept of the kingdom most prevalent in the mind of the Old Testament Jew was that of God’s visible conquest of his enemies, the vindication and restoration of his people, Israel, to supremacy in the land, and the fulfillment of the promises of a Davidic throne and rule upon the earth in power and glory.

“God’s kingdom, to the Jew-in-the-village in the first half of the first century,” notes N. T. Wright, “meant the coming vindication of Israel, victory over the pagans, the eventual gift of peace, justice and

prosperity. It is scarcely surprising that, when a prophet appeared announcing that this kingdom was dawning, and that Israel's God was at last becoming king, he found an eager audience."¹ The crucial issue was: when will Yahweh return to Zion to dwell with his people, to forgive and restore them? Jewish hope, notes Wright,

was concrete, specific, focused on the people as a whole. If Pilate was still governing Judaea, then the kingdom had not come. If the Temple was not rebuilt, then the kingdom had not come. If the Messiah had not arrived, then the kingdom had not come. If Israel was not observing the Torah properly (however one might define that), then the kingdom had not come. If the pagans were not defeated and/or flocking to Zion for instruction, then the kingdom had not come. These tangible, this-worldly points of reference . . . are all-important.²

For the religious leaders of Jesus' day as well as for the common man, the coming kingdom of God would be a matter of national liberation and the military defeat of the pagan oppressors. This mind-set may well have contributed to John the Baptist's bewilderment concerning Jesus:

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." (Matt. 11:2-6)

In his response to John's disciples, Jesus was claiming that the fulfillment of the Old Testament hope with its attendant blessings was in fact *present* in his person and ministry. The fulfillment, however, was not taking place along anticipated lines; hence John's perplexity.

The unexpected element was that fulfillment *was* occurring in Jesus, *but without the eschatological consummation*. The Old Testament prophetic hope of the coming messianic kingdom of God as promised to Israel is being fulfilled in the person and ministry of Jesus, but not consummated. The Jews of our Lord's day, in keeping with what they read in their inspired writings, expected the consummation of

the kingdom, the complete and final overthrow of Israel's political enemies and the ushering in of the age of blessed peace and prosperity in the land.

Our Lord, however, came with the message that before the kingdom would come in its eschatological consummation, it has come in his own person and work in spirit and power. The kingdom, therefore, is both the present spiritual reign of God and the future realm over which he will rule in power and glory. Thus, George Ladd rightly concludes:

Before the eschatological appearing of God's Kingdom at the end of the age, God's Kingdom has become dynamically active among men in Jesus' person and mission. The Kingdom in this age is not merely the abstract concept of God's universal rule to which men must submit; it is rather a dynamic power at work among men. . . . Before the apocalyptic coming of God's Kingdom and the final manifestation of his rule to bring in the new age, God has manifested his rule, his Kingdom, to bring men in advance of the eschatological era the blessings of his redemptive reign.³

In his response to John's query, Jesus pointed to the binding of Satan as one example of the manifestation of his kingdom reign. "The meaning of Jesus' exorcism of demons in its relationship to the Kingdom of God is precisely this: that before the eschatological conquest of God's Kingdom over evil and the destruction of Satan, the Kingdom of God has invaded the realm of Satan to deal him a preliminary but decisive defeat."⁴ Likewise, the very words of Jesus embodied and gave expression to the presence of the kingdom: "The word which Jesus proclaimed itself brought to pass that which it proclaimed: release for captives, recovery for the blind, freeing of the oppressed. . . . The message creates the new era . . . , it makes possible the signs of the messianic fulfillment. The word brings about the Kingdom of God. The gospel is itself the greatest of the messianic signs."⁵

Thus the kingdom of God is the redemptive reign of God, or his sovereign lordship, dynamically active to establish his rule among men. There are two decisive and dramatic moments in the manifestation of this kingdom: first, as it is fulfilled within history in the first advent of the Son, whereby Satan was defeated and men and women came into the experience of the blessings of God's reign; and second, as

it will be consummated at the close of history in the second advent of the Son, when he will finally and forever destroy his enemies, deliver his people and all of creation from evil, and establish his eternal rule in the new heavens and new earth.

This unexpected expression of the kingdom in its present form as God's redemptive reign is precisely the *mystery* form of the kingdom as illustrated in the parables of Matthew 13. That God proposed to bring in his kingdom is, of course, no secret or mystery. That the kingdom was to come in power and glory was no secret. The mystery is a new disclosure concerning God's purpose for the establishment of that kingdom; to be more specific, that the kingdom which is to come in the future in power and glory has, in point of fact, *already entered into the world in advance in a hidden form* to work secretly within and among men (see Mark 4:26–32). Again, here is Ladd's explanation:

We may conclude that the 'mystery of the kingdom' is the key to the understanding of the unique element in Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom. He announced that the Kingdom of God had come near; in fact, he affirmed that it had actually come upon men (Mt. 12:28). It was present in his word and in his messianic works. It was present in his person; it was present as the messianic salvation. It constituted a fulfillment of the OT expectation. Yet the coming and presence of the Kingdom was not self-explanatory and altogether self-evident. There was something about it which could be understood only by revelation. This meant that while the presence of the Kingdom was a fulfillment of the OT expectation, it was a fulfillment in different terms from those which one might expect from the prophets. Before the end of the age and the coming of the Kingdom in glorious power, it was God's purpose that the powers of that eschatological Kingdom should enter into human history to accomplish a defeat of Satan's kingdom, and to set at work the dynamic power of God's redemptive reign among men. This new manifestation of God's Kingdom was taking place on the level of human history and centered in one man—Jesus Christ.⁶

There is, therefore, a dual manifestation of the kingdom of God corresponding in kind to the two comings of Christ himself. He first appeared in obscurity and humility, to suffer and die for the vindication of God's righteousness and the salvation of his people (Rom. 3:23–26). By this means, said Paul, God "has delivered us from the domain

of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13–14). He will yet appear a second time in visible power and greatness to deliver the earth from the curse of sin, to glorify his people, and to establish his sovereign rule forever in the consummated splendor of the new heavens and new earth.

Thus, we must think in terms of *both* “the present realm of righteousness or salvation when men may accept or reject the kingdom, *and* the future realm when the powers of the kingdom shall be manifested in visible glory. The former was inaugurated in insignificant beginnings without outward display, and those who accept it are to live intermingled with those who reject it until the consummation. Then the kingdom will be disclosed in a mighty manifestation of power and glory. God’s kingdom will come; and the ultimate state will witness the perfect realization of the will of God everywhere and forever.”⁷

Resurrection

An oft-neglected element in the eschatological hope of the believer is the resurrection of the body. The popular image of a shapeless Christian floating in some ethereal spiritual fog, moving from one cloud in the heavens to another, is due more to Greek dualist philosophy than to the biblical text. The people of God will spend eternity in a body, albeit a glorified and resurrected body, but not for that reason any less physical or material in nature. The reality of this resurrection is explicitly affirmed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:50–57. He writes:

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The key phrase is Paul's declaration that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (v. 50). Simply put, a corruptible and perishable nature can neither possess nor participate in an incorruptible and imperishable kingdom. Neither the living ("flesh and blood") nor the dead ("the perishable") can inherit the kingdom in their present state.

Paul, then, is insisting not merely on the necessity of regeneration but of resurrection, which is to say the ultimate glorification of the believer that will occur at the second coming of Christ (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13–18). In a word, only those who have been consummately transformed in body and spirit by that resurrection/glorification brought to pass at the return of Christ shall inherit the kingdom of God.

Second Corinthians 5:1–5 is a crucial text in this regard. There, Paul likens physical death, the dissolution of the body, to the dismantling of a tent. But death should not lead to despair, for "we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (v. 1). Amid the many interpretations, the best option is to see here a reference to the *glorified, resurrection body*, that final and consummate embodiment in which we will live for eternity.⁸

The major objection to this view is Paul's use of the present tense, "we *have* a building from God" (not "we *shall* have"). This seems to imply that immediately upon death the believer receives his or her glorified body. But this would conflict with 1 Corinthians 15:22–28, 15:51–56, 1 Thessalonians 4–5, and perhaps 1 John 3:1–3, all of which indicate that glorification occurs at the second advent of Christ.

Furthermore, frequently in Scripture a future reality or possession is so certain and assured in the perspective of the author that it is appropriately spoken of in the present tense, as if it were already ours in experience. Thus, Paul's present tense "we have" most likely points to the *fact* of having as well as the *permanency* of having, but not the *immediacy* of having. It is the language of hope.

It has been argued that perhaps Paul uses the present tense because the passing of time between physical death and the final resurrection is not sensed or consciously experienced by the saints in heaven, and thus the reception of one's resurrection body *appears* to follow immediately upon death. But against this is the clear teaching of Scripture that the intermediate state is consciously experienced by those who have died (see 2 Cor. 5:6–8; Phil. 1:21–24; Rev. 6:9–11).

If the deceased believer has “departed” to be “with Christ” (Phil. 1:23) and is therefore “with” Christ when he comes (1 Thess. 4:17), it would seem that some kind of conscious existence obtains between a person’s death and the general resurrection, which is why we refer to this time as the *intermediate* state.

Even though Paul appears to envision the possibility (probability?) of his own physical death, he still has hope that he will remain alive until Christ returns. Thus he writes:

For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. (2 Cor. 5:2–5).

Paul speaks here of his desire to be alive when Christ returns, for then he would not have to die physically and experience the separation of body and spirit, a condition he refers to as being “naked” (v. 3) or “unclothed” (v. 4). He much prefers, understandably, to be immediately joined with the Lord in his resurrected and glorified body.

In 2 Corinthians 5:2, which is repeated and expanded somewhat in verse 4, Paul mixes his metaphors by speaking of putting on or being clothed with a building. But it is more than simply putting on a garment: it is putting on a garment *over* another. The heavenly body, like an outer vesture or overcoat, is being put on over the earthly body with which the apostle is, as it were, presently clad. In this way the heavenly, glorified body not only covers but also absorbs and transforms the earthly one (see Phil. 3:20–21; 1 Cor. 15:53).

If he (or we) remains alive until Christ returns, he will be found by the Lord clothed with a body (the present, earthly one), and not in a disembodied state. To be without a body is to be “naked” (2 Cor. 5:3). Clearly, Paul envisaged a state of disembodiment between physical death and the general resurrection (cf. “unclothed” in v. 4).

But what assurance do we have from God that he will in fact supply us with a glorified and eternal body that is no longer subject to the deterioration and disease we now experience? The simple answer is: the Holy Spirit! Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 5:5 is a reminder

“that ‘the earnest of the Spirit’ is not a mere static deposit, but the active vivifying operation of the Holy Spirit within the believer, assuring him that the same principle of power which effected the resurrection of Christ Jesus from the dead is also present and at work within him, preparing his mortal body for the consummation of his redemption in the glorification of his body.”⁹

For the Christian, then, death is not to be feared. We know that whatever illness or debilitation we experience now, whatever degree of suffering or hardship we must face, there is promised to us by the Spirit a glorified, Christlike, transformed, and utterly eternal abode, a body in which there is no disease, no pain, no deprivation, and no decay. The best case scenario, Paul seems to say, is to be alive when Christ returns. That way, the believer would transition instantaneously from this “garment” (our current physical body) into that glorified “vesture” (that is and will forever be our resurrected body). Paul prefers not to get “undressed” but to put the garment of eternity over the garment of time in such a way that the former redeems and transforms the latter.

The apostle is also careful to link the resurrection and final glorification of believers to the reversal of the curse imposed on the natural creation:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:18–23)

The deliverance or redemption of the natural creation is thus inseparably connected with that of the children of God. It is when the sons of God are revealed (Rom. 8:19) that the creation itself will experience its redemption. That is why the creation is personified as waiting “with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.”

The creation anxiously awaits the return of Christ and our glori-

fiction, for it is then that it too shall be set free from “its bondage to corruption” into that very “freedom of the glory of the children of God” (v. 21). The creation waits *for* the revealing of the sons of God (v. 19) because it is *into* that very freedom that the creation too will be delivered (v. 21). In other words, the creation and the children of God are intimately intertwined both in present suffering and in future glory. As there was a solidarity in the fall, so also there will be a solidarity in the restoration.

The redemption we will experience at Christ’s return is the complete and final eradication of all sin, of every trace of the corruption in spirit and flesh that was ours prior to that moment. Paul’s point is that the natural creation awaits that day because, then, it will in like fashion be fully redeemed and delivered. If the creation should somehow fall short of complete deliverance from its present corruption, the finality and fullness of our redemption is seriously undermined.

Inasmuch as the natural realm will enter into “the freedom of the glory of the children of God,” any deficiency that it might experience must obtain in the case of Christians as well. To the extent that the created order is not wholly and perfectly redeemed, *we* are not wholly and perfectly redeemed. *Thus the redemption and glory of creation are co-extensive and contemporaneous with ours.*

Judgment

The certainty of final judgment is also affirmed by the apostle in 2 Corinthians 5. Paul insists that “whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor. 5:9–10).

The broader context of 2 Corinthians 4–5 suggests that believers only are in view in this passage. Murray Harris has pointed out that wherever Paul speaks of the recompense, according to works, of all mankind (such as in Rom. 2:6), “there is found a description of two mutually exclusive categories of people (Rom. 2:7–10), not a delineation of two types of action [such as ‘whether good or evil’ in 2 Cor. 5:10] which may be predicated of all people.”¹⁰

Eternal destiny is not at issue in this judgment; eternal reward is (John 3:18; 5:24; Rom. 5:8–9; 8:1; 1 Thess. 1:10). This judgment is not designed to determine entrance into the kingdom of God but blessing,

status, and authority within it. Paul is unclear concerning when this judgment occurs. Is it at the moment of physical death, or perhaps during the intermediate state, or possibly not until the second coming of Christ? The most that we can be sure of is that it happens after death (see Heb. 9:27).

Having said that, the evidence suggests that it happens at the second coming of Christ (see Matt. 16:27; Rev. 22:12), at the close of human history, most likely in conjunction with that larger assize that will include all unbelievers, known to students of the Bible as the great white throne judgment (see Rev. 20:11 ff.).

Paul clearly emphasizes the *individuality* (“each one”) of the final judgment. As important as it is to stress the corporate and communal nature of our life as the body of Christ, each person will be judged individually, no doubt, at least in part, concerning how faithful each person was to his or her corporate responsibilities. “So then *each of us* will give an account of *himself* to God” (Rom. 14:12).

As for the manner of this judgment, we do not merely “show up” but are laid bare before him. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4:5, the Lord “will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.” Murray Harris is right that “not merely an appearance or self-revelation, but, more significantly, a divine scrutiny and disclosure, is the necessary prelude to the receiving of appropriate recompense.”¹¹

Is it not sobering to think that every random thought, every righteous impulse, every secret prayer, hidden deed, long-forgotten sin, or act of compassion will be brought into the open for us to acknowledge and for the Lord to judge? And all this, we are reminded, without any “condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

Most Christians are by now familiar with the term used in 2 Corinthians 5:10 translated judgment “seat” (*bema*). The use of this word “would have been particularly evocative for Paul and the Corinthians since it was before Gallio’s tribunal in Corinth that Paul had stood some four years previously (in AD 52) when the proconsul dismissed the charge that Paul had contravened Roman law (Acts 18:12–17). Archaeologists have identified this Corinthian *bema* which stands on the south side of the *agora*.”¹²

Christ is himself the judge, consistent with what we read in John 5:22 where he declared that “the Father judges no one, but has given all

judgment to the Son.” The *standard* of judgment is “what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” Reference to the “body” indicates that the judgment concerns what we do in this life, not what may or may not be done during the time of the intermediate state itself. We will receive from the Lord “what is due.”

In other words, and somewhat more literally, we will be judged “in accordance with” or perhaps even “in proportion to” deeds done. The deeds are themselves characterized as either “good” (those which “please” Christ, as in 2 Cor. 5:9) or “bad” (those which do not please him).

Finally, the result of the judgment is not explicitly stated but is certainly implied. All will “receive” whatever their deeds deserve. There is a reward or recompense involved. Paul is slightly more specific in 1 Corinthians 3:14–15. There he writes, “If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” The reward is not defined, and the likelihood is that the loss suffered is the reward that would have been given for obedience.

Jesus mentions a great reward in heaven, but doesn’t elaborate (Matt. 5:12). In the parable of the talents (Matt. 25; cf. Luke 19:12–27) he alludes to authority or dominion of some sort, but over whom or what? Paul says that “whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord” (Eph. 6:8). According to 1 Corinthians 4:5, following the judgment “each one will receive his commendation from God.” Both Romans 8:17–18 and 2 Corinthians 4:17 refer to a glory that is reserved for the saints in heaven.

And of course we should consider the many promises in the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2–3, although it is difficult to know if they are bestowed now, during the intermediate state, or only subsequent to the second coming, and if they are granted in differing degrees depending on service and obedience or are equally distributed among God’s children (see Rev. 2:7, 10, 17, 23; 3:5, 12, 21; cf. also Matt. 18:4; 19:29; Luke 14:11; James 1:12).

Two closing comments are in order. First, our deeds do not determine our salvation but demonstrate it. They are not the root of our standing with God but the fruit of it, a standing already attained by faith alone in Christ alone. The visible evidence of an invisible faith

is the good deeds that will be made known at the judgment seat of Christ.

Second, we must not be afraid that, with the exposure and evaluation of our deeds, regret and remorse will spoil the bliss of heaven. If there be tears of grief for opportunities squandered, or tears of shame for sins committed, the Lord will wipe them away (Rev. 20:4a). The ineffable joy of forgiving grace will swallow up all sorrow, and the beauty of Christ will blind us to anything other than the splendor of who he is and what he has, by grace, accomplished on our behalf.

Hell and Eternal Punishment

Perhaps the most explicit description of hell and eternal punishment is found in Revelation 14. There we read:

And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." (vv. 9–11)

This issue has become an evangelical battleground. Is the torment of the lost a conscious experience that never ends? Or is the punishment a form of annihilation in which, after a just season of suffering in perfect proportion to sins committed, the soul ceases to exist? Does the ascending smoke of their torment point to the unending conscious *experience* of suffering they endure? Or does it signify a lasting, irreversible *effect* of their punishment in which they are annihilated? Those who argue for the latter view contend that there will be no rest day or night from torment *while it continues* or *as long as it lasts*. But whether or not it lasts forever or eternally must be determined on other grounds.¹³

Whereas space does not allow interaction with arguments on both sides of this debate, suffice it to say that there is considerable biblical evidence to support the Confessional Statement's affirmation of eternal conscious punishment. For example, we must keep in mind

that the word group that includes “destroy” and its synonyms is used in a variety of ways, some of which do not require or even imply the cessation of existence. Usage indicates that destruction can occur without extinction of being. And before we conclude that the “fire” of hell consumes and utterly “destroys” its object, leaving nothing, we must acknowledge that this is metaphor, and thus not press the terms to prove something about hell’s duration they were never intended to communicate.

Hell in the New Testament is described as utter darkness and as a lake of fire. How do these two descriptions coexist if they are strictly literal? Thus, we must be cautious in drawing rigid doctrinal conclusions about the supposed “function” of fire in hell. Nevertheless, one cannot help but wonder about Matthew 18:8, which speaks of those who are thrown into the eternal fire. As Carson says, “One is surely entitled to ask why the fires should burn forever and the worms not die [cf. Mark 9:47–48] if their purpose comes to an end.”¹⁴

We should also note that there are as many texts where *aiōn*, often rendered “age,” means “eternal” as there are where it refers to a more limited period of time. This argument is indecisive on both sides of the debate. We must also be careful in making emotional appeals to what we, finite humans, consider just recompense for the enormity of our sins. Carson rightly asks whether the magnitude of our sin is established by our own status “or by the degree of offense against the sovereign, transcendent God.”¹⁵ The essential thing, notes Piper, “is that degrees of blameworthiness come not from how long you offend dignity, but from how high the dignity is that you offend.”¹⁶ Our sin is deserving of infinite punishment because of the infinite glory of the one against whom it is perpetrated.

To suggest, as some do, that eternal suffering means that God does not achieve consummate victory over sin and evil fails to realize that only sin that goes *unpunished* would indicate a lapse in justice and a defeat of God’s purpose. The ongoing existence of hell and its occupants would more readily reflect on the glory of God’s holiness and his righteous opposition to evil than it would any supposed cosmological dualism.

Perhaps the idea of endless punishing is less offensive when the idea of endless sinning is considered. If those in hell never cease to sin, why should they ever cease to suffer?¹⁷ If one should argue that people

pay fully for their sins in hell and at some point cease to sin, why can't they then be brought into heaven (thereby turning hell into purgatory)? If their sins have *not* been fully paid for in hell, on what grounds does justice permit them to be annihilated?

Finally, one must explain Matthew 25:46 and Revelation 20:10–15. Regardless of what one thinks about the identity of the beast and false prophet, no evangelical denies that Satan is a being who both thinks and experiences feelings and sensations. Thus here is at least one such “person” who clearly suffers eternal conscious torment. “We may not feel as much sympathy for him as for fellow human beings, and we may cheerfully insist that he is more evil than any human being, but even so, it is hard to see how the arguments deployed against the notion of eternal conscious suffering of sinful human beings would be any less cogent against the devil.”¹⁸

Heaven on Earth

The eschatological hope of the Christian is inescapably earthly in nature. God's ultimate aim in the redemption of his people has always included the restoration of the natural creation. As we noted above, the “kingdom of God” refers primarily to the reign or rule of God over his people. Thus to believe and receive the kingdom is to submit to the yoke of God's sovereignty.

On the other hand, God's rule manifests itself and is realized in a specific historical and earthly realm. Therefore, we cannot speak meaningfully of the kingdom of God apart from the promise of the land originally given to the Patriarchs.¹⁹

Some insist that the land was figurative in purpose, a prophetic type of heavenly or spiritual blessings which are either being fulfilled now by the church or will be fulfilled in the age to come. The earthly Canaan, therefore, was never designed to be literally possessed as an eternal inheritance but was to serve as a model of a future blessing, heavenly and spiritual in nature.

But, as Ladd so helpfully reminds us, “the biblical idea of redemption always includes the earth.”²⁰ Many evangelicals envision the fulfillment of the earthly dimension of God's kingdom promise in a one-thousand-year interregnum, subsequent to the second coming of Christ but before the inauguration of the eternal state (Rev. 20:1–10). This millennial age will serve as the time and place (at least initially)

wherein the Old Testament promises of God's earthly rule over his people will be fulfilled.

It is in this way that Christ's kingdom might also be disclosed in history, as a testimony to his ultimate triumph over the powers of sin and darkness. Others believe that the Old Testament prophetic promise of God's rule over his people in the land will be fulfilled in the new earth, which inaugurates the eternal state. According to this view, the Old Testament promise of a messianic reign among God's people in the land will be literally fulfilled. It will be fulfilled, however, not on the present, unredeemed earth, but on the new earth described in Revelation 21–22.

The principal Old Testament text relating to the new heavens and new earth is found in Isaiah 65:17–25 (see also 66:22). It's important to note that this text poses a problem for all eschatological views, whether premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial. The difficulty we face is found in verses 20 and 23. There we read that in the new heavens and new earth there shall not be “an infant who lives but a few days or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed” (v. 20). And in verse 23 it appears to suggest that people during that time will bear children. If Isaiah is describing conditions that obtain in the eternal state, and his reference to the new heavens and new earth would appear to indicate that such is the case, all Christians, and not those of only one particular eschatological perspective, must account for the less-than-consummate experience of God's people.

We may find help in addressing this problem by taking note of one possible way of interpreting prophetic literature:

Prophecy is characteristically cast in terms of the limited understanding of the person to whom it was given. That is to say, the language of prophecy is conditioned by the historical and cultural setting in which the prophet and the people found themselves. . . . [Thus] the future kingdom is beheld as an extension and glorification of the theocracy, the most common representation of which is its condition in the reigns of David and Solomon. The prospect for the future, accordingly, is portrayed in terms of *the ideal past*, in terms both familiar and pleasing to the contemporaries of the prophet. This phenomenon has been termed “recapitulation escha-

tology," i.e., the future is depicted as a recapitulation or repetition of the past glory of the kingdom.²¹

Garlington's point is that Old Testament authors may, on occasion, speak of the future in terms, images, and concepts borrowed from the social and cultural world with which he and his contemporaries were familiar. Since he cannot fully grasp how his words find fulfillment in a distant time and altogether new world transformed by the coming of Christ, he clothes the eschatological purposes of God, including the glory of the new heaven and new earth, in the beliefs, fears, and hopes of those to whom they are originally delivered. Thus, when prophets speak about the future, they may choose to employ terms and realities that exist in their own past and present experience, such as the land, the law, the city of Jerusalem, the temple, the sacrificial system, and the priesthood.²²

It should also be noted that the fulfillment of such prophecies, cast in terms of those contemporary realities with which the original audience was conversant, would often go beyond and transcend them. There is often an element of escalation or intensification in the fulfillment of any particular promise.

Thus, one of the ways in which the original author of this prophecy might communicate the realistic future glory of the new heaven and new earth to people who were necessarily limited by the progress of revelation to that point in time was to portray it in the hyperbolic or exaggerated terms of an *ideal present*.²³ One can well imagine the impression upon the original audience to whom Isaiah wrote of an age in which a person dying at one hundred is thought of as an infant, an age in which the all too familiar anguish of childbirth is a thing of the past.

The New Testament expands greatly upon this theme of the new heavens and new earth as the focal point of God's restoration of all things. This is most clearly seen, first in Hebrews 11 and then in Revelation 21–22. In the former we are told that when Abraham finally arrived in the land of promise he only sojourned there, as a stranger and exile, "as in a foreign land" (Heb. 11:9, 13). Should one ask how he could be said to receive this land as an inheritance when he had no right of ownership, the text is quick with its answer: "For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God."

This is the city which God has prepared for them (Heb. 11:16), mentioned again in Hebrews 12:22 as the “city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” We read again in 13:14 that “here [that is, on this present earth] we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” This surely refers to the heavenly Jerusalem of Hebrews 12:22, the city which has foundations (Heb. 11:10).

Relevant here is Revelation 21:1–2, where we read that John “saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (cf. 21:9–11). The reason, then, why Abraham was a sojourner and exile in Canaan was that he viewed that earthly land to be a type of the heavenly and more substantial land/country. The focus of the Old Testament land promise was on land, to be sure, but on the *heavenly* land (or “country,” Heb. 11:16) of the new earth with its central feature, the New Jerusalem.

Thus Abraham, to whom the land of Canaan was originally promised, anticipated its consummate and everlasting fulfillment in the heavenly Jerusalem. Abraham is heir, not merely of Canaan, but of the world (Rom. 4:13). Indeed, according to Hebrews 11:9–10, it was Abraham’s expectation of permanent and perfect blessing in the heavenly city that enabled him to submit patiently to the inconvenience and disappointments during his pilgrimage in Canaan.

This is confirmed yet again in Hebrews 11:13–16. The patriarchs themselves “acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth” (v. 13). They died without receiving the promise, having only seen it from afar. Their ultimate hope was not focused on any this-earthly-inheritance, but, as verse 16 indicates, on “a better country, that is, a heavenly one.”

The exalted life in the new heavens and new earth is unpacked with even more vivid imagery in Revelation 21–22. Space permits only a brief summation of the glories of our eternal destiny in the presence of God.

The relationship between this present earth and the new earth is one of both continuity and discontinuity, even as there is between our present, corruptible bodies and our future, incorruptible, and glorified bodies. We will be in heaven the same, though transformed, people that we are now. Yet, the heaven and earth to come are also said to be “new” (*kainos*), a word which typically indicates newness of quality, not time.

One element of discontinuity is the absence of the sea in the new

creation, which was typically regarded as symbolic of evil, chaos, and anti-kingdom powers with whom Yahweh must contend (see Job 26:7–13; Isa. 17:12,13; 51:9–10; 27:1; 57:20; Jer. 46:7–12; Rev. 17:8; 21:1). As Ladd has noted, in ancient times the sea “represented the realm of the dark, the mysterious, and the treacherous” (cf. Ps. 107:25–28; Ezek. 28:8; Dan. 7:3ff).²⁴ This is John’s way of saying that in the new creation all such evil, corruption, unbelief, and darkness will be banished.

The fullness of God’s presence among his people necessarily demands the banishment of any and all forms of suffering associated with the old creation. Gone forever are the debilitating effects of sin (Rev. 21:3–4). Gone are the tears caused by grief and pain and moral failure (in fulfillment of Isa. 25:8). Gone is death, because its source, sin, will have been eradicated. Gone are mourning, crying, and pain. All such experiences are linked to the “first things” which have now “passed away.”

The New Jerusalem is said to have “the glory of God” (Rev. 21:11). Whereas in the Old Testament the physical temple was the place where God’s glory resided and was manifested, in the new creation God’s presence will abide in and with his people. The absence of “night” (Rev. 21:25b) points to the unhindered access to God’s radiant presence as well as to the fact that there will be no darkness to dim the brilliance of divine splendor. Indeed, as Revelation 22:5 indicates, the absence of darkness is due to the continual illumination that God himself provides.

In Revelation 22:1 we find the first of several examples where John links the end of history with its beginning. In the consummation are features that characterized the beginning of time. It is not as though the end is a *reversal* to the beginning, “but the circumstances of the beginning are viewed as prophetic of the nature of God’s purpose in history. In all respects, however, the last things surpass the first in overwhelming measure, as we see in this paragraph.”²⁵ If Genesis 3 tells the story of paradise lost, Revelation 22 tells of paradise regained. Heaven (on earth) is but the glorious consummation of God’s original design for the garden of Eden.

And what will we do in heaven? We will serve God (Rev. 22:3). We will see God (v. 4a; see Ex. 33:20; Matt. 5:8; John 17:24; 1 Tim. 6:16; 1 John 3:1–3). We will enjoy the depths of intimacy with him (Rev.

22:4b). We will experience the fascination of his presence (v. 5a; cf. Num. 6:24–26). We will reign forever and ever (Rev. 22:5b).

Conclusion

What Christians have traditionally referred to as “heaven” is, as we have seen, eternal life in the presence of God on the new earth. It is there, as the Confessional Statement makes clear, that “God will be all in all and his people will be enthralled by the immediacy of his ineffable holiness, and everything will be to the praise of his glorious grace.” We can do no better than to conclude with the words of Jonathan Edwards:

If we can learn anything of the state of heaven from the Scripture, the love and joy that the saints have there, is exceeding great and vigorous; impressing the heart with the strongest and most lively sensation, of inexpressible sweetness, mightily moving, animating, and engaging them, making them like to a flame of fire. And if such love and joy be not affections, then the word “affection” is of no use in language. Will any say, that the saints in heaven, in beholding the face of their Father, and the glory of their Redeemer, and contemplating his wonderful works, and particularly his laying down his life for them, have their hearts nothing moved and affected, by all which they behold or consider?²⁶

Notes

1. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 204.
2. *Ibid.*, 223.
3. George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 139.
4. *Ibid.*, 151.
5. *Ibid.*, 165.
6. *Ibid.*, 227–29.
7. George Eldon Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 131–32.
8. There are two reasons for this. First, the “building” or “house” in v. 1b stands in a parallel relationship with “home” in v. 1a. Since the latter refers to our earthly, unglorified body, it seems reasonable to conclude that the former refers to our heavenly, glorified body. Secondly, the description in v. 1b (“not made with hands,” “eternal,” and “in the heavens”) is more suitable to the glorified body (see esp. 1 Cor. 15:35–49). Paul’s point would be that our heavenly embodiment is indestructible, not susceptible to decay or corruption or dissolution.
9. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1973), 174.
10. Murray Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 406.
11. *Ibid.*, 405.
12. *Ibid.*, 406.
13. A brief but exceptionally helpful treatment of this issue is provided by D. A. Carson, *The Gaggling of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 515–36.
14. *Ibid.*, 525.
15. *Ibid.*, 534.
16. John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 2nd ed., rev. and exp. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 122.
17. See Rev. 22:10–11. On this latter text Carson comments: “If the holy and those who do right continue to be holy and to do right, in anticipation of the perfect holiness and rightness to be lived and practiced throughout all eternity, should we not also conclude that the vile continue in their vileness in anticipation of the vileness they will live and practice throughout all eternity?” (*Gagging of God*, 533); emphasis in original.
18. *Ibid.*, 527.
19. See the promise as given to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; 13:14–17; 15:7; 17:8), and in turn to Isaac (Gen. 26:1–5), Jacob (Gen. 28:13–14; 35:12), and Moses (Ex. 6:4,8; 13:5–11; 32:13; 33:1; Num. 10:29; cf. Num. 11:12; 14:23; 32:11; Deut. 12:8–11).
20. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 59. In this regard, see esp. Matt. 5:5 and Rev. 5:10.
21. Donald Garlington, “Reigning with Christ: Revelation 20:1–6 and the Question of the Millennium,” in *Reformation and Revival Journal*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1997): 61; emphasis in original.
22. This is the contention of Christopher Wright in his article, “A Christian Approach to Old Testament Prophecy Concerning Israel,” in *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God*, ed. P. W. L. Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
23. G. K. Beale rightly reminds us that “the progress of revelation reveals enlarged meanings of earlier biblical texts, and later biblical writers further interpret prior canonical writings in ways that amplify earlier texts. These later interpretations may formulate meanings of which earlier authors may not have been conscious, but which do not contravene their original organic intention but may ‘supervene’ on it. This is to say that original meanings have ‘thick’ content and that original authors likely were not exhaustively aware (in the way God was) of the full extent of that content. In this regard, fulfillment

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often 'fleshes out' prophecy with details of which even the prophet may not have been fully cognizant" (*The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004], 381).

24. George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 276.
25. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Greenwood, SC: Attic Press, 1974), 330.
26. Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969), 2:114.

The Gospel Coalition

The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have become deeply concerned about some movements within traditional evangelicalism that seem to be diminishing the church's life and leading us away from our historic beliefs and practices. On the one hand, we are troubled by the idolatry of personal consumerism and the politicization of faith; on the other hand, we are distressed by the unchallenged acceptance of theological and moral relativism. These movements have led to the easy abandonment of both biblical truth and the transformed living mandated by our historic faith. We not only hear of these influences; we see their effects. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We believe that in many evangelical churches a deep and broad consensus exists regarding the truths of the gospel. Yet we often see the celebration of our union with Christ replaced by the age-old attractions of power and affluence or by monastic retreats into ritual, liturgy, and sacrament. What replaces the gospel will never promote a mission-hearted faith anchored in enduring truth working itself out in unashamed discipleship eager to stand the tests of kingdom calling and sacrifice. We desire to advance along the King's highway, always aiming to provide gospel advocacy, encouragement, and education so that current- and next-generation church leaders are better equipped to fuel their ministries with principles and practices that glorify the Savior and do good to those for whom he shed his life's blood.

We want to generate a unified effort among all peoples—an effort that is zealous to honor Christ and multiply his disciples, joining in a true coalition for Jesus. Such a biblically grounded and united mission

is the only enduring future for the church. This reality compels us to stand with others who are stirred by the conviction that the mercy of God in Jesus Christ is our only hope of eternal salvation. We desire to champion this gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines.

Our desire is to serve the church we love by inviting all our brothers and sisters to join us in an effort to renew the contemporary church in the ancient gospel of Christ so that we truly speak and live for him in a way that clearly communicates to our age. We intend to do this through the ordinary means of his grace: prayer, the ministry of the Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the fellowship of the saints. We yearn to work with all who, in addition to embracing the confession and vision set out here, seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.

“What God has already achieved in the past through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son is the foundation for what Scripture says he will do in the future, at the consummation. Christian hope is not a wishful grasping at an uncertain tomorrow but a confident expectation rooted in the reality of what transpired 2,000 years ago. The efficacy and finality of Christ’s redemptive work, together with his resurrection and exaltation as Lord to the right hand of the Father, alone accounts for the anticipation all Christians have of the return of Christ and the consummate fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose in the new heavens and new earth.”

—From the booklet

These Gospel Coalition booklets are edited by D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller and are designed to offer thoughtful explanations of the ministry’s confessional statement. The Gospel Coalition is an evangelical movement dedicated to the gospel of Christ and a Scripture-based reformation of ministry practices.

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