

# New Heavens and New Earth

*A supplemental study for the Life Changes Bible Study*  
March 18, 2010

Life in this world can feel like a perilous and heartbreaking journey. But for the follower of Jesus, an incredible destination is waiting at the end of the trail. The hope of every Christian is the next world, where we shall at last see our Savior face to face and “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

In truth, however, most disciples have more questions about the Next Place than the Bible provides answers. Berkhof’s famous *Systematic Theology* – a comprehensive summary of the New Testament’s teaching – is 737 pages long. But only three of those pages concern life after death, and two of those are about hell.

We understandably want to know everything we can about our future. But it may be that heaven is simply impossible for us to comprehend – a bit like trying to explain trigonometry to a Goldfinch. Or it may be that our final condition falls into the category of spiritual truths that God has simply declined to share with us, for his own reasons: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever” (Deuteronomy 29:29).

The twin goals of this special study are to examine what the Bible tells us about the new heavens and the new earth, and how we might choose to live today in light of our amazing tomorrow.

## What Will Our Future Be Like?

How did you picture heaven when you were growing up?

How has that vision changed over the years?

Maria Shriver, the wife of California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, recently wrote a book for children called *What’s Heaven?* It includes lots of pictures of fluffy clouds set against blue skies. Heaven, says Shriver:

*is somewhere you believe in... It’s a beautiful place where you can sit on soft clouds and talk to other people who are there. At night you can sit next to the stars, which are the brightest of anywhere in the universe... If you’re good throughout your life, then you get to go to heaven... When your life is finished here on earth, God sends*

*angels down to take you up to heaven to be with him... [And Grandma} is alive in me... Most important, she taught me to believe in myself... She's in a safe place, with the stars, with God and the angels... She is watching over us from up there... "I want you to know [says the heroine to her great-grandma] that even though you are no longer here, your spirit will always be alive in me."*

In what ways do you think Shriver's portrayal of the next world is consistent with Scripture? Where does her vision of heaven conflict with what you know of the Bible?

### **A World Made New**

Many Christians have been taught to believe that when Jesus returns God will get rid of this "used up" world forever. Verses like 2 Peter 3:10 do teach that the *present form* of creation will come to an end. What, however, do we learn from other Scripture texts like those below?

Isaiah 65:17

Acts 3:21

Romans 8:18-22

Revelation 21:1

What do we routinely pray for in Matthew 6:10?

Theologian N.T. Wright summarizes, "God made both heaven and earth; at last he will remake them both, and join them together forever."

Most people, when asked to picture heaven, bring to mind some version of ideal conditions – perhaps a combination of Disney World, Hawaii, and license branches in which there are never any lines. But what makes heaven heavenly will not be the size of our living space or the spectacular quality of the view. It will be spending time with the Owner of our new living space, the one whose presence will fill everything in every possible way (I Cor 15:28).

What do we learn about the next world from John 14:1-3?

Many Christians wonder about the condition of those who have already died and are awaiting the final appearing of Jesus and the end of history. This concerns what theologians call the *Intermediate State*. According to the following verses, what is the immediate experience of Christians when they die?

Luke 23:42-43

Philippians 1:21-23

What would you say to a child who asks, "What is Grandma doing right now?"

### **What Do We Know about Our Personal Conditions in the Next World?**

I Corinthians 13 is best known as the "love chapter" of the New Testament. Verses 8-12, however, provide a significant glimpse of our life in the next world. What do they reveal...

Concerning what we will know?

Concerning how God will communicate with us?

Concerning whether we will know each other?

If you could ask Jesus a question upon entering the next world, what would it be?

What person of your own past are you most eager to see again in the future?  
Aside from Jesus, what person of history would you be most eager to meet?

As hard as it is to imagine, the day is coming when you will be an utterly joyful person, without a shadow of doubt or insecurity or anger or resentment or fear. Paul says that our present struggles will seem like nothing compared to the glory that is awaiting us (2 Corinthians 4:17). Sadness and regret will be gone, yet not through denial or ignorance. Somehow we will know the entirety of our own story, which God knows as well, yet not feel shame. All that is painful and wrong will be behind us, and we shall be whole.

### **What Will We Do in the New Heavens and New Earth?**

Some people worry that heaven will be like an eternal retirement village, and that our greatest concern will be dealing with everlasting boredom. One of the Bible's most striking portraits of the next world is found in Isaiah 65:17-25.

What sorts of human activities are included in this vision?

What promises are made concerning our safety and happiness?

Since the last two chapters of Revelation present a vision of Future Paradise that is amazingly similar to the Paradise Lost after the first two chapters of Genesis, it is worth noting what kind of life God originally intended for Adam and Eve.

What assignment did God give to Adam in Genesis 2:15?

What did God say was "not good" in Genesis 2:18?

What are the ramifications of these two verses for our life in the re-made earth?

"Some people wonder if there will be intellectual challenges and adventures that require greatness of spirit when they get to heaven. Others wonder if there will be tasks that need strength and will and character. Some wonder if there will be a place for creative, compelling, articulate communication. Of course there will! Dallas Willard puts it like this: 'You will know fullness of function, the unending creativity involved in a cosmos-wide cooperative pursuit of a created order that continuously approaches but never reaches the limitless goodness of the triune personality of God.'" (from *Experiencing God's Power*)

### **Until That Day**

George Bernard Shaw once quipped, "The statistics concerning death are impressive. One out of one people die." Western secular society would strongly prefer not to reflect on this truth, however. Ours has been described as a "culture of distraction," in which sports, entertainment, travel, pleasures, hobbies, possessions and even church activities keep our minds from dwelling on our own mortality.

What, if anything, do you fear about death and dying? How does knowing Christ help you address those fears?

Paul boldly says in I Corinthians 15:58 that because of the resurrection, our present labors in the Lord are “not in vain.”

Since God is going to *heal* our world instead of destroy it, how does this affect your attitude toward ecological issues?

Do you sometimes feel that working for justice and the betterment of humankind in the here and now is a bit like rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*? What do you think Paul would say about that?

Do you believe you need to accomplish something before your life on earth comes to an end?

Is there anyone with whom you need to have a conversation before you die?

If you died today, would you want the last seven days to represent your final week on earth? Why or why not?

*Ask God to help you establish a plan concerning any decisions you have made regarding the questions above, and invite your small group members to support you in prayer.*

# New Heavens & New Earth

March 18, 2010

## **Maria Shriver Knows Arnold...But Does She Know Anything About Heaven?**

Our culture's perceptions about heaven may be fixed, but they are certainly not biblical.

It's even more frustrating that *Christian* views of the future are often biblically inaccurate.

We sing (from *How Great Thou Art*):

"When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation  
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart!"

The New Testament ought to lead us to sing instead:

"And heal \_\_\_\_\_, what joy shall fill my heart!"

## **God's Incredible Future**

The God who made both heaven and earth will at last remake them both, and join them together forever.

What does the Bible mean by "heaven"? It is the present \_\_\_\_\_ of God, where Jesus currently reigns as King.

The *appearing* of Jesus will be akin to drawing back a curtain; the whole world will finally see Jesus where he is at this very moment.

Paul teaches that we will have a new \_\_\_\_\_ existence in a newly remade world.

The creation will be liberated from its bondage to sin and decay (Romans 8:19-23).

The earth will not be thrown away or destroyed, but fully healed.

One day God will do for the cosmos what he has already done for \_\_\_\_\_.

Instead of saying that "when we die we go heaven," it's more accurate to say that heaven (that is, all of its realities and priorities) will fully come to earth.

In the resurrection of Jesus, the future has come to meet us in the present.

Salvation is more than just getting our hearts right with God; it is God's own work of getting all of reality right with him...forever.

## What Do We Do in the Meantime?

Paul makes it clear in I Corinthians 15:58 that whatever work we undertake now will not be \_\_\_\_\_.

“You are – strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself – accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God’s new world.”

“What you *do* in the present – by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, painting, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself – *will last into God’s future.*”

N.T. Wright (*Surprised by Hope*)

We should act today to fulfill the Lord’s Prayer – helping God’s will be done on earth as it presently finds full expression in heaven.

Martin Luther, when asked what he would do if he knew that the present world would end the next day, said he would go out and \_\_\_\_\_.

God’s wonderful future, where Jesus rules as King, has already come to this world – if only within our hearts.

Therefore we should live *right now* as people who know that we are one day going to be made complete...just as Jesus is.