

The New Creation

DAVE BAST

I love to read thrillers, but I have a confession to make. I often look ahead to the way the story ends. You know, you get so nervous about the situation that you cannot help but see how disaster is turned into victory; but wouldn't it be nice if we could do that in real life? Well, here is some news: We can. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and joining me once again today as guest co-host is Meg Jenista. Welcome, Meg.

MEG JENISTA

Thank you. It is good to be back. I have enjoyed my time on *Groundwork* as we have been discussing the four last things: Christ's second coming; the resurrection of our bodies; the reality of judgment; and today we will be discussing heaven, new creation, God's kingdom come.

DAVE BAST

The end of the story.

MEG JENISTA

The very end of the story. To help us do that we have author Nathan Bierma, who will be talking with us from his book, *Bringing Heaven Down to Earth*.

DAVE BAST

And we are literally going to look ahead at the last chapter, or just about the last chapter, of the book, where we find out how the whole thing turns out. If you are caught up in a bad time in your life or you are really struggling or you are worried about the future, this program is for you because this is good news for all those who know and love Jesus Christ.

MEG JENISTA

Absolutely; and the final chapter makes a significant difference on the way that we read the whole story. I remember reading a book once and thinking, "The main character is going to die at the end." I spent the whole time expecting this horrible, catastrophic end, and I think I missed a lot of the glory of the book, and I was very confused when the main character did not die at the end; and I wondered what my reading experience would have been like if I had known what the final chapter really was meant to be.

DAVE BAST

But we do have, as Christians, a strange dilemma when it comes to thinking about heaven. You mentioned the fact that Nathan Bierma is going to join us in a few moments, and he opens his book with a really neat story about theologian Lewis Smedes, who happened to be one of my teachers in seminary. Smedes was talking to a group of Christians one day and he said, "How many of you want to go to heaven?" And everybody raised their hand. And then he followed it up by saying, "Okay, put your hands down. Now, how many want to go today?"

MEG JENISTA

I bet he did not get quite as profuse a response.

DAVE BAST

Everybody got alligator arms. But there is the dilemma. We do look forward to this. We know that this is going to be wonderful and great and beyond our imagining, but we love life here. Most of the time, life is pretty good.

MEG JENISTA

I think part of the problem is that we have been taught that it is beyond our imagining, and there is so much about the reality of this world and this creation and the people whom we know and love here that holds us close. So, we feel like do we need to reject all that this earth has in order to participate in God's heaven and the kingdom?

DAVE BAST

And rightly so. We love our families and our friends here. We love the creation. We love the good things of life. We love food and drink and friendship and parties and sports and hunting and good novels; you name it. So, we think, "Well, yes, we have to give all of that up and go off somewhere..."

MEG JENISTA

To what? Heaven and harps and clouds?

DAVE BAST

Yes, and float through the air someplace in a disembodied existence. I think if there is one goal that we have, it is to help us as Christians see that it is not either/or; that what we are really looking forward to is everything we value and treasure here.

MEG JENISTA

But kicked up a notch; refined; redeemed; restored.

DAVE BAST

A few notches, maybe, yes.

Well, okay; so let's look at the last chapter. Why don't you read that for us – a few verses from Revelation 21.

MEG JENISTA

This is John's vision of a new heaven and a new earth, in which he says: ¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them as their God. They will be his people and God himself will be with them. ⁴He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away ⁵and the One who is seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

DAVE BAST

What do you say to that?

MEG JENISTA

Amen?

DAVE BAST

Yes, amen would be appropriate. Well, there is an awful lot there to talk about and to think about, and we are going to do that after a short break as we welcome in Nathan Bierma.

DAVE BAST

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Dave Bast.

MEG JENISTA

And I am Meg Jenista. Right now I would like to welcome author Nathan Bierma to our conversation. Nathan wrote a book called *Bringing Heaven Down to Earth*, and right now he is on staff at Calvin Theological Seminary. It is good to have you here.

NATHAN BIERMA

Thank you; I am delighted to be here.

MEG JENISTA

My first question for you is this: When most people in our generation are living as though they are immortal; there is nothing that can stop us; we are in the prime of life. You wrote a book about heaven. Why would you do that?

NATHAN BIERMA

Well, it was not death that got me thinking about it, it was how the Biblical story fits together. When I was a teenager and made a profession of faith I was given a book called *A Sure Thing*: - by Neal Plantinga - *What We Believe and Why*. I was reading through that book and so many of the concepts in that book seemed familiar to me until I got to the last chapter, which was on the new creation; the consummation; the new heavens and the new earth; and so much of that was brand new to me and strange to me, given what I had heard about going to heaven, floating in the clouds, playing harps; and I thought, “Why is this so strange? Why does so much else of what I am reading here seem familiar, but this seems totally new?” If it is true – if the eternal destiny of the earth and of ourselves is a new earth and not a disembodied, floating around existence, what difference does that make?

As I was asking these key questions as a teenager and continued asking them throughout college, and then when I graduated from college I was working as a journalist in Chicago, and here I was in the middle of this big city, in the center of culture and politics and economics and art, and just wondering what difference does my faith make in this kind of setting?

DAVE BAST

Your faith, specifically, about the future, because as you point out, being raised in a traditional, conservative – we could say – Evangelical church setting, your ideas about what happens in the future for Christians were pretty much limited to going up to heaven when we die; leaving and being there forever and ever with the angels in glory. But that is not really where the Bible ends, so that was the beginning for you.

NATHAN BIERMA

Yes, and I think at the time I did not think of it as ending as much as purpose – not what is the ending, but what is the purpose of this all? Why is there so much culture and economic activity in front of me, and politics? What is this all driving toward? Is Christian faith ultimately just a way to say at the end of your life, “Well, then, I will go to heaven; and in the meantime, I need to try to get everybody else – as many people as I can – to go to heaven,” or is there something more to that?

I really latched on to these Biblical pictures in Isaiah and Revelation of the new earth, the new city, full of bustling, cultural activity; full of the things that we enjoy doing on a daily basis now – the beauty of creation, the energy of culture – and so, as I turned to scripture and saw that picture of a vibrant, eternal place, and could draw lines of continuity between my current life – the current life we see – the current world we see – and the new creation.

Richard Mouw, whose thinking on this I drew a lot on, as you will see from my book; he says that is the key thing; we need to look for some lines of continuity between this life and the life to come, because without that, it is hard to hope for; which is not to say that the end life will be predictable or familiar, or simply more

of the same; it will be vastly different, but there will be lines of continuity between the new creation and the original creation God originally made.

DAVE BAST

If you think about it in terms of direction, in which direction are we headed in the future? Maybe if we call it the traditional view, it is like a rocket ship; you just take off and keep going. You escape the bounds of gravity and never stop going out there somewhere, wherever God is. But the movement of the Bible is from heaven down to earth again. It is Christ's return, as we were looking at in an earlier program.

NATHAN BIERMA

Yes, that is one of the startling things when you look back at scripture and you see creation and then you see God giving the Law; God sending his word through the Prophets; God becoming incarnate and entering human flesh in Jesus; God sending his Spirit, and it is that heaven down to earth; that movement that keeps recurring throughout scripture. So, why, at the very end of scripture would God reverse and say: Okay, now it is all about coming up to heaven. No, it is about God's presence continually trying to come down to earth, to break in, and to have perfect reign.

MEG JENISTA

I wonder – for many of our listeners, they participate in the workforce; they may be listening to this during their commute or at another time – how has this vision changed the way you think of Christian vocation?

NATHAN BIERMA

Yes, I wrote a lot about that in my book because I was thinking a lot about that in high school and college; I was deciding what I want to do with my life and how is what I am doing a part of the kingdom and a part, ultimately, of something larger? For me, I was going into journalism and thinking of journalism as the task of telling the story – of the world, the city, the culture – telling the story in such a way that exposed truth, exposed falsehood, but also wrote about beauty and goodness, as well as deception and evil. So, the task of telling that became much more than just writing stories for the news or informing people of something that they needed to know in their morning paper. It became this task of story-telling and telling the story about this cultural environment that I was so interested in, and in which I saw these – as I like to say – echoes in advance of the new city, which is not to say that...

DAVE BAST

Little signs of the coming kingdom.

MEG JENISTA

I love that: Echoes in advance.

DAVE BAST

The coming kingdom of God, yes. Let's look at Revelation 21. That is the passage – and you do see at the beginning of it this movement, right Meg? A new Jerusalem coming down from heaven like a bride.

MEG JENISTA

Right. Can I stop right there, because there is a phrase in that first section of Revelation 21 that would be very disturbing to many people I know and the idea that there will be no sea in the new creation. People with...

DAVE BAST

A lot of what John says is what will not be there. No tears, no crying... but no sea – that seems a little...

MEG JENISTA

For everyone who has beachfront property, that is not good news.

DAVE BAST

We would kind of like that, wouldn't we?

MEG JENISTA

But it actually echoes the imagery of ancient Hebrew and other ancient texts; the idea that the sea was a place of chaos and distortion and uncertainty. The Jews were not a seafaring people...

DAVE BAST

Here be monsters, as the old maps said.

MEG JENISTA

Right; and so, the idea of saying there will be no more sea is really in effect saying there will be more chaos and uncertainty.

DAVE BAST

No more evil.

MEG JENISTA

No more shipwreck.

NATHAN BIERMA

Remember too, back in Revelation 4 John says before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal; and even though that is a vision of the throne from earlier, the fact that the sea can be an example of God's presence and God's reign, and as a symbol of peace – a sea of glass clear as crystal – complete opposite of the chaos that the sea represented, and in a sense, it is not that there was no more sea, it is that the sea of chaos is...

DAVE BAST

It has been transformed, like so much else. Now, there are Old Testament overtones to Revelation 21 and 22. You mentioned, in fact, Isaiah 60; say a little bit more about that.

NATHAN BIERMA

That is one of the biggest things that struck me. I was reading Rich Mouw's book, *When the Kings Come Marching In*, which is on Isaiah 60 and the new Jerusalem, and as I was reading it, I just thought of all of these overtones that recur or resonate in Revelation 21. Neal Plantinga points them out in his book; that is what got me looking at them. I never knew before how much the book of Revelation – I have to tell you, I often thought that it came out of the blue – it is a new genre; it is a mysterious book; you do not know really where it came from or where it is going, and yet it turns out that John was just steeped in Old Testament prophecy, Old Testament imagery, and if you know your Old Testament backward and forward, you read Revelation and you say, "Oh, okay. I see where this is coming from. I see what this is talking about." So, it is not purely as strange and foreign and out of the blue as we think; and in this case – especially in Revelation 21 and 22 – John's vision is just another vision of the new earth, the new Jerusalem, the new Temple that Isaiah and Ezekiel and other Old Testament prophets had spoken about all throughout the Old Testament. The foundation of that hope was the restoration of Jerusalem, the reign of Christ, and the defeat of God's enemies. That was their – if you want to say – eschatology – their last things – the restoration of Jerusalem. Now for John's vision to turn on the exact same thing, a new Jerusalem, but not in the way that Old Testament believers would have expected. That is the key to the story here.

DAVE BAST

Exactly. It transcends their – I think it is fair to say – narrowly ethnic vision...

MEG JENISTA

Geographical vision.

DAVE BAST

And geographic and physical. We are not really looking for the city of Jerusalem in the Middle East to become the center of the earth and a new temple to be built there despite the fact that some Christians teach that. Following John, we see these things as symbols pointing to what he calls the New Jerusalem; the Bride of Christ; the people of God; Old and New Testament; from every tribe and tongue and nation earlier in Revelation; a recreated earth, really, right? Not necessarily a city; maybe there will be multiple cities; you say something about that, I think, too, when you are thinking about what will it really be like.

NATHAN BIERMA

Right; and does the New Jerusalem mean we are all going to reside within the city limits of the place that we current know as...

DAVE BAST

That is a 1500-mile cube, right?

MEG JENISTA

It sounds great to me.

DAVE BAST

It is like a big spaceship.

MEG JENISTA

I definitely know some people who would think of eternity spent in a city as a disaster. Sign me up, but they might like some suburban or rural property instead.

DAVE BAST

What is he getting at, then? What do you think?

MEG JENISTA

The idea that culture and all that Nathan was speaking about – politics – there is a busyness; there is a vibrancy to the big city, and that is so far removed from the idea that we will be sitting on clouds in a very Zen-like meditative space.

DAVE BAST

Well, to put it quite simply, it is community; it is not just me; it is not even just me and Jesus. It is *us*; it is an *us* thing, that is the future that the Bible points to.

NATHAN BIERMA

And I would say, it is not just that it is a city that happens to be named Jerusalem. The name Jerusalem is important as a symbol, as a focal point of Old Testament prophecy and of God's reign. When you say Jerusalem, then every Bible reader says, "Ah, this is the place of the throne of God," but that does not mean that it is going to be one city named Jerusalem or that everybody will be in that city because, just as you say, the larger picture here is of cultural activity.

Author Eric Jacobsen, who wrote a book called *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, which is another book I talk about, on the Bible and urbanism – how we think about cities. He points out that this idea of Jerusalem in the Old Testament, you would have many ancient Israelites who did not live in Jerusalem; who lived in the countryside; who practiced agriculture; but they would make that pilgrimage once a year to Jerusalem – up to Jerusalem – and that city was the focal point of their faith – of their faith identity. Even though 362 days out of the year or whatever it was, they did not live there, but Jerusalem was the symbol of the reign of God and the focal point of their faith. So we will have both that assurance of the reign of God and this bustling

cultural activity as a part – as even a focal point of our existence in the new earth, I believe.

DAVE BAST

Okay, so, we are looking at an earthly existence. Heaven is actually – paradoxical as it may sound – heaven is actually earth; purged of evil and pain...

MEG JENISTA

Right; because there are images in the Bible of there being fire involved, right? But the imagery of fire in scripture is most often a refining fire; so that the pure metals and the pure gold or whatever it is make it through the fire and everything else is burned away. So what we have is all that we have been part of creating good culture and a good sense of God's presence in the world.

DAVE BAST

Do we then say to people when they lose their beloved, "Well, tough luck. You have to wait for the new heaven and the new earth."

MEG JENISTA

Well, no.

DAVE BAST

What about all of our traditional language about: You go to heaven when you die. Is that not true?

NATHAN BIERMA

The interesting thing here, first of all, is that the Bible actually says very, very little about that. Paul does say it is better to depart and to be with God...

DAVE BAST

With Christ, actually.

NATHAN BIERMA

With Christ in an immediate sense, and yet the force of Paul's writing is pushing toward this new earth. The book of Hebrews, which probably was not written by Paul, makes no mention of what we would call the intermediate state at all. It just says you will be martyred and you will see the heavenly city. One and then two; that is it.

So, we try to think and believe about the intermediate state, we have to rely on those brief mentions, like when Paul says it is better to depart and be with Christ; and so, I have relied on Reformed theologians and others who talk about the intermediate state as one in which we are separated from the body, but the key is that even in death being with Christ – separated from the body – that person – and even Christ himself – is not yet content until Christ's full reign is restored after the second coming on the new earth.

DAVE BAST

Well, let me just throw it over to you, Meg. You are a pastor; you have to conduct funerals; I do not do that so much anymore. What do you say to people?

MEG JENISTA

That is a good question, and in seminary we talked about all of the theological, philosophical ramifications of bodies being gone, but souls still being present and how does that work philosophically; but at the end of the day, you do have to rely on what Nathan mentioned and the idea that we are present with God. We do not understand how that works, but there is not a lot of comfort in standing next to someone who has lost a loved one and saying, "Well, they are kind of not really around-*ish*, but they will be again." You have to go with the comfort of their presence with God even if you do not understand the philosophical ramifications.

DAVE BAST

How does it work? Yes, we do not know.

NATHAN BIERMA

That is also not the time to do a lot of philosophical and theological heavy lifting.

DAVE BAST

Yes, good point.

NATHAN BIERMA

In terms of, well, let's break down our eschatological premise.

DAVE BAST

Well, let me distinguish between the intermediate state and our eschatological paradox, no...

NATHAN BIERMA

Let's look at the Greek here. No, but we do take comfort in the fact...

DAVE BAST

And scripture is pretty clear: Absent from the body; present with the Lord.

NATHAN BIERMA

And there is comfort in that fact, but what I tried to get at in my book is that even for Paul – and I think even for Christ – there is not complete contentment until after that second coming; the full restoration of Christ's reign; the removal of death as we heard about in this passage from Revelation 21 – that is the key thing – it is a tension that I have been trying to think of ever since encountering this in writing my book is we do take comfort in that intermediate state; we just cannot invest all of our hope in it because that is not the last step.

DAVE BAST

Turning again to Revelation, there is a little snippet among the visions of the seals being broken of the souls of the martyrs underneath the altar crying out: How long, O Lord? And that is actually pointing toward judgment, which was an earlier program in this series; but, there is an incompleteness until the end comes.

NATHAN BIERMA

Yes; if the martyrs surrounding the throne, who are in heaven with God...

DAVE BAST

Are still saying: How long until... Hey, when do we get our...

NATHAN BIERMA

And one possible answer is: You are in heaven. You are fine now. You are free from suffering, so you should be content with it, and they are not because justice and righteousness have not yet been restored.

DAVE BAST

Exactly. So, there is one more thing I think we need to talk about and that is: So what? If this is our future – the new earth, the new creation, the kingdom of God come – and that is eternity – that is really heaven – does it matter or does it somehow affect specifically how we live now?

MEG JENISTA

I think in your book you record a prayer that your father prayed for you at your wedding and the prayer was: May Your kingdom come just a little bit more as a result of this union; and I need to confess that I have stolen that countless times. The idea that God's kingdom might come just a little bit more through our marriages; through our families; through our vocation; that to me was the high point of your book.

NATHAN BIERMA

What I like about that prayer is that there are two extreme responses to this that you can think of: On the one hand, well, we will just sit around and wait for heaven to come and we will try to save souls, but beyond that, there is nothing we can do. On the other hand, there is the extreme of let's try to bring heaven to earth now. Let's try to build that perfect city; and frankly, every cult, every false messiah, has tried to do exactly that. We cannot do that because we are still encumbered by sin; we are still stuck with corruption. Through that fog of darkness and despair, God is bringing heaven down to earth, making his presence and his reign known a little bit more through us, through the church, even through creation. So, that is, I think, what we pray to get from here to there.

MEG JENISTA

Nathan Bierma, thank you so much for joining us today. We appreciate your insight, your scholarship, your wisdom on these matters.

NATHAN BIERMA

My pleasure, thanks.

MEG JENISTA

And thank you for joining *Groundwork*. Don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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