

When Christ Returns

SCOTT HOEZEE

Years ago, in one of the science fiction Star Trek movies, some scientists invented a device called “Project Genesis.” Project Genesis was kind of like a nuclear bomb that, when exploded on any planet, would cause a gargantuan fireball to race across the surface of the planet like some runaway prairie fire. It destroyed everything in its path; except that immediately following the fireball, atoms and molecules were recombined so as instantly to create a whole new, beautiful planet of lakes and trees, mountains and birds, blue skies and green meadows. Project Genesis took what had been and put something even better in its place. Well, believe it or not, something kind of like that is in the Bible’s final vision for what God will do to create what we often refer to as heaven, but that the Bible calls a new heaven and a new earth; indeed, a new creation. Today on *Groundwork*, we will ponder that glorious vision. 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now our final program—a third and final in a short series on heaven. In the first program, we said: Did people in the Bible always believe kind of like we do? And we said: No. And so, we looked, especially in that first program, at the Old Testament and its views of sheol; and what seemed to be an ever-changing, progressive picture of what happens after we die; that the closer you get to Christ, the closer you get to more of the view we have today...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then, in the second program, we went to the New Testament, and there we mostly focused on what is often called the *intermediate state*; what happens between the time we die on this earth and the final judgment day? Where are we? Where are our loved ones? Now, in this program, we want to jump way ahead to the very end of history and what is our ultimate destination?

DAVE BAST

Right; and we have talked about that more than once on *Groundwork*. We have had different series on the last things. So, in a sense, we are going over some of the same ground, but I really think it is important as Christians for us to grasp what the New Testament calls the blessed hope; what that really is; and so much of what we think about heaven is ruled by popular culture. You know, the cartoons of angels with halos and wings and standing on the clouds and making jokes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The pearly gates.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the pearly gates.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We have seen hundreds of those cartoons. The New Yorker has had a lot of them; and it sort of looks like whatever heaven is, it is decidedly *not* earthly or earthy. It is the realm of Casper the friendly ghost, where people sprout angel wings and white robes...

DAVE BAST

Except for this; in this sense, the thing that they are all doing is looking back on earth, mostly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

It is either a kind of a perpetual cocktail party up there or they are gazing down on us below, and that is what they are absorbed with, and that is what they are interested in...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And that really is contradictory to what the New Testament says in particular about our future.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; I mean, because in that sense, then heaven doesn't even have flesh and blood people; it doesn't have tiger lilies or sugar maples or bobcats or anything else, but it is sort of this wispy realm; and that, of course, contributes to how we think about our future with God; and so, you know, as N. T. Wright has recently been saying as well, there are a lot of people who say: Why did Jesus die on the cross? He died to forgive my sins and bring me up to heaven. And so, we picture that the result of Jesus' cross is merely to help us evacuate this planet and go somewhere else, wherever that may be, beyond the celestial horizon; but it won't be here, for sure.

DAVE BAST

And there is another kind of parallel view that also contributes to our sort of discrediting the world—the physical creation; and again, it is not our purpose to get into this or to offend anyone necessarily, but the whole idea of a rapture that will, near the end, kind of rip people away and...you know, grab them and they will disappear and they will all escape...all of these views tend to really diminish what ought to be our sense of the importance of *this* world...of this earth...of this universe that God created; and he created it good. Yes, marred by sin; yes, affected by the fall; yes, full of destructive things now and destructive forces that need to be corrected; and that is what we are looking for; but in the meantime, we are meant to value the earth. We are meant to tend it. We are meant to care for it; and it has a future, as well as we do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is exactly why. You know, you can really sort of detect some of these anti-material, anti-creation sentiments when...just really, in the last 30 to 40 years, the Church started to catch up a little bit with the ecological and the environmental movement; and they started to be concerned, and Christians started to advocate for saving the spotted owl or saving the whales or preserving wetlands and natural habitats, and trying to do our best to head off species extinction; and as the Church...and I think many, many, many people...maybe even most by now in the Church...are kind of onboard with that. Certainly, young Christians are today. That is very important to them; but as that was happening, you started to hear a lot of people in the Church say: Why bother? They would make analogies to the ocean liner, the Titanic...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That sank, and they would say: Trying to save the spotted owl or save wetlands is like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. This creation is doomed; it is sinking; it is going down by the head; let it sink. It is not our world anyway. Turn your eyes upon Jesus and the things of *earth* will grow strangely dim...

DAVE BAST

Strangely dim, yes. Well, you know, it is interesting you bring that up because so much of our popular theology is really formed by the songs and the hymns that we sing; and you think about some of those old gospel songs...and again, I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings. I am not dissing anything; but: This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through; or: I'll fly away, O glory, I'll fly away...you know; someday by and by... All that stuff that kind of...the idea is to try to escape; and you know, many of those hymns came out of an existence that was really hard...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Where life was tough and painful; and death was common; and loss was all over; and you can understand that. You can sympathize with people wanting to go to a better place...wanting to escape the pain...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, exactly; and temporarily you do, right?

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

When you die, you do go to be with the Lord...

DAVE BAST

But the bad part of that is that we tend to denigrate God's good creation, and we forget that he has a purpose for it. It has a future. He has a plan and it involves this world...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And our bodies.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in fact, interestingly...you see this picked up a little bit... I think I may have quoted this on another *Groundwork* program. The Reformed theologian, Anthony Hoekema, said...who is it that has been trying to destroy the creation from the beginning? Satan—the devil; and so, Hoekema said: If your picture of heaven doesn't involve bobcats and tiger lilies, that means the devil won. He actually succeeded in so marring God's creation that even God couldn't save it; and we don't want to grant victory to the devil. Interestingly, in one of C. S. Lewis's novels...I think it is in the space trilogy of novels, he pictures this evil, evil society taking over the world and bulldozing the world, and saying: We are going to make a better world with, not real trees but metal trees...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And won't it be better not to have leaves and bird dirt dropping around? It will be a very nice, tidy world; it will just be all aluminum. That would be a demonic vision for ruining the creation permanently.

DAVE BAST

You know, we want to embrace fully what the Bible speaks of for our future and the creation's future; and that is what heaven really refers to. It is all about a new heaven and a new earth...a new creation; and we are going to look at what scripture says about that, including some passages that *do* seem to indicate the world is going to be destroyed; and we will turn to those in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Dave, you were just saying that the Bible really teaches us to value this current creation; to take care of the animals and the fish and the birds that God created; not just for their own sake and not just because God created them, but because they have a future; and that God is going to renew it all; and that is true. So, the idea that this world is just going to be utterly destroyed and never heard from again and we are going to live on clouds is not true, but there are a couple of passages that *could* lend some credence to that, and one of them is from II Peter 3.

DAVE BAST

Yes, you are right; and here it is. Peter writes: ¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief; and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise and the elements will be dissolved with fire; and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. ¹¹Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, ¹²waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved and the elements will melt with fire; ¹³but in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

So, that sure sounds like, BOOM, it is all going.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it is gone...

DAVE BAST

Dissolving, burning...

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, we are really waiting, not for living on a cloud or going somewhere beyond the outer rim of the edge of known space; but we are waiting for a *new* heaven *and* a new earth, where righteousness is at home. So, what Peter is saying is, sort of that image we had at the head of the program from that Star Trek movie; God purifies it all; he burns it all; and immediately recreates it all...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So it is *not* a non-earthly place; it is earth all over again...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Just purified and purged, and...

DAVE BAST

And fire is an image for purifying...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Absolutely.

DAVE BAST

In the Bible, if you interpret it on the basis of other scripture. You don't just take one verse in isolation and say: See, there it says.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

The Old Testament prophet, Malachi, the last of the prophets, spoke of the refiner's fire and how he [God] shall purify. We put this in context with the rest of the Bible; and as you say, that really cool image of the fire spreads. It is kind of like the Native Americans who used to burn the prairie every year so that the new grass could come up.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is the only way to get good wildflowers, you have to burn the prairie. So, God...it is not a destructive fire, it is a renewing fire; and if we had any doubt about that, then all we need to do is go to Revelation Chapter 21...end of the Bible...this beautiful vision...John writing here: 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. He will dwell with them. 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." So, that is where we end up in the Bible. We don't go up to heaven...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Heaven, as it were, comes down to us; and God makes his home on *this* earth, renewed—recreated—but still very much this earth. We don't go up; God comes down.

DAVE BAST

And that is the basic movement of the consummation of salvation; even in the one passage in the New Testament that mentions the rapture, when we are caught up to be with the Lord in the air; that is from I Thessalonians 4.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is correct, yes.

DAVE BAST

What it is, is Christ coming with those who have fallen asleep...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Paul is trying to comfort the Thessalonians, who are kind of bereft. They are puzzled by death. What has happened to our loved ones? They believed in Jesus, but they died...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And Paul says: Don't worry; they are with him; and when he comes, we are going to be caught up and he is going to bring them; and it is like going out to welcome Jesus as he comes back. We are all coming down.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We meet him in the air, but he is on his way down.

DAVE BAST

And we are coming back with him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And this is really...and N. T. Wright has done some...the New Testament theologian from England these days has done such great work on this recently and gave a speech on it that I heard a while back. He is saying really this book ends the whole story of the Bible. The Bible is finally one big story. It started in what we call the Garden of Eden, but it really starts with the whole creation, and what God was doing in Genesis 1 was creating an earthly temple, where he would live with his image bearers; Adam and Eve first of all, and then all who would follow. Sin disrupted that. Did God abandon the idea? No. He creates a new people for himself, which becomes Israel; and the first thing they have to do as soon as they are sprung from Egypt, they have to build this thing called a tabernacle...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the desert, which is the Holy of Holies, which at the end of Exodus we see God's glory in Exodus 40 entering and filling the tabernacle, and we are kind of right back to Genesis 1. This is the little, small version of what God had wanted to be true of all creation; but it is sort of the first down-payment; and of course, God will continue that with the Temple in Jerusalem—the Holy of Holies—where he dwells among his people. That is what he wants. That doesn't always go so good either. Israel was also sinful; and that brings you then right to the New Testament and John Chapter 1: The Word was made flesh and literally *tabernacled* among us. It is the word *skini*, which is the word for tent. Jesus is now the living tabernacle. Again, God wants to

live with us here.

DAVE BAST

And that is exactly the watchword of Revelation 21, the passage you just read, Scott: Behold, the dwelling of God is with people now. God is making his home here with people. That is what the Temple pointed to and the tabernacle before it...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

That is the whole idea of the creation itself. It is a temple to hold the glory of God and the presence of God with his people; and that is why the new creation is the old creation made perfect...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Made better; made over; but still the old creation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here...we don't always like to bring in Greek or Hebrew because people who don't know it are not that interested in it usually, but...and this is important...because there are two different words in Greek that can be translated as *new*. One of the is *neos*, and we kind of get our word for neo and novelty from this; and that would mean something brand-spanking new that nobody has ever seen before; and then there is the word *kainos*, which means *renewed*; and it is that word that is used in Revelation 21. God does not say: Behold, I make all new things.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; he says: I make all things new...tiger lilies and...

DAVE BAST

Kainos...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And broccoli. He is going to make it *renewed*, and so it is going to look very familiar to what was, just purified of its decay and sinfulness.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and so, here is where it's at; this world is where it's at. Not this world as it is now; not some kind of crazy materialist dream of humanity making themselves immortal *without* God or going out to colonize other planets, you know, that kind of vision of the future. No; it is God coming down, coming here with his renewing, recreating power. That is what we are hoping for; that is what we are looking for.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, there won't be a temple, John says. It will *all* be the Temple.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Where is the Holy of Holies? Everywhere is what John is saying.

DAVE BAST

So, the question is, does this affect the way we live now? Peter raised that very question, didn't he? He said: What kind of lives should we be living? In godliness and holiness, so that we can even hasten the day of this new creation; and that is what we want to ask and try to answer in our last segment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and the final program of a three-part series on the afterlife...on heaven. A lot of our pop ideas that we go up to heaven and that heaven is someplace totally unlike anything we have ever seen, that is not true. At the end, after judgment day, after the resurrection of the body where we all get our bodies back, we will be right here. We will still be on this earth. It will be renewed, but it will also be very, very familiar: pear trees and lakes and immense beauty as God intended it in the beginning; but the question you asked, Dave, is: Well, so what for now? Does this just mean that we just kind of wait it out? This has absolutely no meaning for today? We just have to be patient and kind of, you know, wait? I mean, Karl Marx, the atheist philosopher, founder of communism and the like, he famously made that argument that Christians could be so heavenly minded they were of no earthly good. They had no reason to try to change conditions on this earth because they just waiting for something better anyway. So, it is like they were drugged; and Marx thought that was terrible. I think we want to say this vision for the new heaven and the new earth, glorious as it is, does imply a lot of really wonderful things for right now. We are not just waiting.

DAVE BAST

And so the old criticism as it was sometimes put: All Christians' promise is pie in the sky by and by...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Is not true; although we have to admit some validity because it is too true, sadly, that too many Christians have been sort of allied with the forces of power and wealth and privilege, and have ignored the needs of the poor and the dispossessed and the downtrodden...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And...

SCOTT HOEZEE

God will take care of you by and by, but for now just put up with it.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, to the extent that that has been true, that is to the shame of the Church, and we need to challenge that and correct that; and I think today that's a terrible caricature because I think most churches and Christians are in the forefront of ministry to people's social need now and here. So, that is one aspect of it; because the world has a future, we need to care about conditions on it right here and now.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. The whole idea that we go *up* to heaven and it is someplace totally different from where we have ever been is not true. God comes down to us. Well, does that have any pastoral implication for us today? I think

the answer is yes, because what that means is, the fact that this creation has a future, the fact that this world is important to God tells that he is looking down on us and actually present among us right now; and that is something we need to remember, too. So, if Jesus, we said, sort of was the living tabernacle—the living temple of God—Jesus wasn't the endgame either—the ultimate recreation of the world's endgame—but we are still in this in-between time, and now *we* are temples of the Holy Spirit, every one of us. We are little tabernacles, too. We, in each of our own lives, are sneak previews of what is going to be true of the whole world in the end. God is not disinterested; he is not aloof; he is living inside of us because this body and this world have a future, and that means God is infusing it with his presence right now. We never are apart from God.

DAVE BAST

Which is a wonderful truth; and here is another one: We don't have to save the world by ourselves.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is not a matter of desperate attempts on our own with only our own human power or wisdom or wealth to kind of fix everything that is wrong. We are not going to fix the world; only God will do that. The new creation is *his* work. We can participate in it...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

We can strive to create signs of its coming; we can pray for it to come. I think of that wonderful prayer of the early Church that they preserved...Paul preserved it at the end of I Corinthians 16: Marana tha...our Lord, come; come, Lord Jesus. We can pray for that because in praying for that we are not praying an escapism; we are not praying to somehow get out of this. We are praying for him to come and fix things and renew this world; and he will do it. It is not going to be all on our shoulders.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is not going to be just us. We had a series not long ago with Kristen Deede Johnson on the justice calling, and one of the great points she made in that book is the work of trying to bring justice to the world is too big for any of us. It is so daunting, all it does is burn us out; but if we are just working with God and participating in what he is doing, that is manageable.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if we know that that is what God is up to, and we know what his end goal is...and we saw it in II Peter 3, we saw it in Revelation 21 in this program...if we *know* that, we can avoid two pitfalls. One you just said: Despair; of, for goodness sake, the problems of this world are too big; I cannot make any difference so I will just quit.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; just stick with it because, as Mother Teresa used to say of herself: I am a little pencil in the hand of God. I am just a pencil, but it is in God's hand, and so what little I can do, I will.

So, we avoid despair. We also avoid guilt. We don't have to guilt people into doing this: If you don't do this God won't love you. No; he already so loved the world that he sent his Son. So, you don't have to feel guilty if you don't think you are doing enough, or we don't have to use guilt to trick you into saving the environment or recycling cans or ministering to people in need and in poverty. We are just doing what we saw Jesus doing; we are just doing what we see the Holy Spirit doing right now because we are on this great trajectory. We are marching onto Zion, as the old song says, and Zion is going to be the new heaven and the new earth right here; and that gives us motivation aplenty.

DAVE BAST

You know, you mentioned the old criticism that Christians are too heavenly-minded to be any earthly good; and actually, C. S. Lewis responded to that criticism in a wonderful passage, where he said: It is the heavenly-minded Christians that have actually done the most good...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That's right.

DAVE BAST

On earth, because they were committed to God's justice and God's purpose; and Lewis said: If you look at the early evangelicals who abolished the slave trade and other great causes like that, you will see that it was the Christians; and then he concludes with this line: If you aim at heaven, you get the earth thrown in. If you aim at the earth, you get nothing...you get neither one, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You get neither one; because we do, indeed, believe that heaven has come down and will come down, and glory fills our soul as a result. The glory is now, thanks be to God.

Well, thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we want to know how we can help you to dig deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com and tell us topics and passages to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/when-christ-returns>

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