A New Heaven and a New Earth
by Sean McCoskey

Catastrophes rarely bequeath blessings; we should quickly become opportunists when they do. These unprecedented days marked by the nearly complete shutdown of modern society afford us a rare opportunity to see things anew. And how often does a fresh look at the whole world occur? Once in a lifetime? Considering we learn more from failure than success, it’s extraordinarily rare.

I have been provoked by joyful curiosity to see Italians singing to one another from their balconies while practicing physical distancing due to the Covid-19 crisis. The American family, plagued by chronic busyness, is at home bored together for the first time literally in decades! Hundreds of thousands of Americans are going home furloughed, forced into the benevolence of family, friends and neighbors to make ends meet and to find the ever so elusive package of toilet paper (hand on face). Arenas sit empty, sporting tournaments cancelled, the gods of our society have been silenced. A moratorium has been placed on the collective web of noise and distraction that has been diminishing our humanity since the advent of the digital age. Simply put, the world is a vastly different place than it was a couple weeks ago. A rare opportunity unfolds before us.

So let it not be lost on us that an invitation for renewal has come on the heels of devastation. After all, roots always go deeper in the winters of life. So toward the end of going deeper and rediscovering what it means for the human race to flourish under God’s benevolent plan for the ages, I propose that we set our sights on heaven. ‘Why?’ you might ask. The irony of the doctrine of heaven is that our beliefs about it can either become gasoline to throw on the fire of escapism, causing us to distance ourselves from involvement in God’s world, or they can drive us right into the heart of good culture making, taking seriously our creation mandate as we await God’s Kingdom fully come.

“Heaven” is not what you think it means

We say the word “heaven” a lot, we sing about it, we use it to pen sentimental love cards, we put it in our colloquialisms, like ‘heavens to Betsy,’ whatever that means. The word we translate as heaven, or shamayim in the Hebrew, simply means sky, or the atmosphere, though it also can mean the supernatural ether of God’s abode. But none of these references have anything to do with the final resting place of the redeemed, which is what we normally call heaven. That place is biblically called “the new heaven and the new earth,” or, “the new Jerusalem.”

Now ‘heaven’ is a lot easier to rhyme than ‘new heaven and new earth,’ so we understand why our hymns prefer the word heaven. But it can be misleading, and some hymns are downright false. For example, “I’ll fly away to that home on God’s celestial shore” gives a strong sense that our final resting place is far away from the earth we now inhabit, situated somewhere in the
realm of distant galaxies. You may think, ‘what’s the big deal?’ The big deal is that if our view of
God’s fully realized kingdom in any way leads us to disregard the significance or potential of our
lives on earth now, we’re not thinking biblically. After all, in the parable of the talents in
Matthew 25, the only servant punished is the one who completely disregards using the talents
God gave him and buries them away unused and uninvested. A distant, galactic heaven,
completely discordant with creation creates distant and discordant believers, confused as to
how God wants them to dirty their hands in the soil of this life. God’s promises to us are
intended to lead us as His church to be faithful ambassadors of Christ among the
neighborhoods and cities we inhabit, not to disengage and long for escape. While we certainly
long for the things to come, a correct view of the new heaven and earth lights a fire within us to
be present where we are in the Spirit’s power! God’s people are hopeful, fruitful and productive
in this world.

Creation regained

The new Jerusalem which God brings down from the sky in Revelation 21:1 will have earth as its
foundation. Sorry to disappoint you if you were planning on escaping to Jupiter someday. :/
As a matter of fact, the new Jerusalem is wildly earthly. While its biblical descriptions in Revelation
21-22 press beyond the borders of our imagination in certain ways, it is also described as having
mountains, hills, trees, rivers, skies, fields, forests, animals and even pearls. You would be
wrong to think that life in heaven will be otherworldly.

Isaiah 11 describes how God always intended human-animal interaction to be: “The wolf shall
dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the
lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall
graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing
child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the
adder’s den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.” Imagine that, children
leading lions and fat cows around, who are delighted to capitulate to the whims of childsplay.
Isaiah prophesies further in chapter 65, “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and
the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind...They shall build houses and
inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit...for like the days of a tree shall the
days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.” While we can’t
lay claim to the precise realities of the new Jerusalem we know our labors will be marked by
joy, curiosity, gladness and flourishing. A correct view of the new heaven and earth lead us to
joyfully imagine the glories of creation perfected. God’s people are playful, imaginative and
creative.

Salvation now

Salvation (σωτηρία or sotería in Greek) is an important word. It is inseparably connected to the
saints’ final resting place. While overcoming death is our final deliverance, Scripture is
abundantly clear that salvation begins when we meet and follow Jesus. To be saved is to know
the Savior. But our popular use of the word has reduced it to something less holistic and
comprehensive than it ought to be. Salvation carries far more meaning than mere deliverance from judgment, it affects all of life, the sum of our relationships, our merrymaking and our everyday realities.

While Romans 10 is a wonderful and common place we go to clearly teach how salvation comes to the lost, another surprising place to consider is Luke 19, Jesus’ interaction with Zacchaeus. In this account Jesus seems to completely contradict the Romans 10 mandate that we must “confess with our mouths.” But it’s not a contradiction, it’s a deepening of the word.

Zacchaeus, the slimy, Roman-sympathizing, Jewish tax collector is called by name by Jesus, who insists that He dine with him that evening, which the Pharisees were of course deeply bothered by—the rabbi who feasts with sinners! After what is clearly a life-changing time with Jesus, Zacchaeus promises that very evening to give half of his goods to the poor and to return any amount defrauded, and Jesus unexpectedly says, “Today salvation has come to this house.” Zacchaeus made no confession of Jesus’ lordship, though that is implied. What he clearly did do is put others before himself through the practice of almsgiving and restitution. He repented of his greed.

J. Richard Middleton imparts some context to this moment, “...salvation cannot be limited to the forgiveness of sins or escaping judgment. In the Bible, salvation is a comprehensive reality. The most fundamental meaning of salvation in Scripture is...God’s deliverance of those in a situation of need from that which impedes their well-being, resulting in their restoration to wholeness.”

God is in the business of restoring perfect community between Himself, humanity and even creation. Anytime we join in that work we are truly gladdening the heart of God. Our God is generous, He is purely inclined to give, to share. Consequently, Scripture is less concerned about whether you’ve said some magical salvation words than about whether you’re interested in worshiping God by loving your neighbor. Faith without works is dead. Those who follow Jesus protect, provide for and nourish orphans, widows and the most vulnerable of society. The beautiful truth is that, we can participate in the very ethic of “heaven” right now!

What do we do now?

If we’re being honest with ourselves, our whole society is built around self-preservation. We build our own kingdoms, seeking to dwell in comfort and if possible procure a decent retirement. Perhaps we have forgotten that in Christ we are part of a much larger story. Perhaps we have forgotten to wonder with awe at the incredible story Scripture is telling.

Michael Gorman connects Genesis to Revelation, the garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem (which means the city of the king), “The grand narrative that began with creation now ends in new creation...The original garden that became a source of curse and death because of human disobedience is now an urban garden, the place where millenia of human civilization come to fulfillment and nations finally live in peace.” The whole Bible, Both the Old Testament and New
Testament, are filled with allusions to what the saints’ final resting place will be. The whole Bible itself from beginning to end creates a worshipful and anticipatory posture for God’s plan for the ages, down to the very last verses in Revelation 22.

Soon the Covid-19 pandemic will end. Slowly the collapsed market will rise. The idols of our nation will once again take their thrones in cathedrals we call stadiums across our world. **But don’t miss this opportunity to see with new eyes the story you are part of!** What have you to fear!? In Christ your future is good beyond imagination. And as the body of Christ we get to live that story RIGHT NOW. Dear Christian, if you’re willing to hear it, you’re free. You’re free to become a servant to all. You’re free from the fears terrorizing our world. You’re free to participate in the life of the Church, the body of Christ, as we live every day to hasten His coming. The security this world offers is not worth fighting for. But you know what is? The crown of unfading glory and rewards in the new heaven and earth which thieves can’t steal and rust or moths won’t destroy. So love your neighbor where you are. Be generous. Don’t be afraid. Be attentive to the manifold opportunities surrounding us to be God-glorifying culture makers. Participating in God’s kingdom has just as much to do with laughter, friendship and generosity as it has to do with tithing, singing hymns and going to church. So when the world goes back to its unwholesome rhythms, don’t follow. Stand with your brothers and sisters in Christ as the better city, the brighter city, the New Jerusalem. May the glory and joy of Revelation 21-22 (go read it) lead us to plunge our hands into the soil beneath our feet, making investments into the kingdom of God which we’ll never regret.

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