

**“DADDY, WILL
ANIMALS BE IN
HEAVEN?”**

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About the Author

Paul Raabe

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He has published two books, *Psalm Structures: A Study of Psalms with Refrains* (Sheffield Academic Press), and *The Anchor Yale Bible: Obadiah* (Yale University Press). He also contributed to *Listen into the Word of God: Exegetical Approaches* (Seiten). He co-edited *Fortunate the Eyes That See* (Eerdmans) and *The Press of the Text* (Concordia Publishing House), a Festschrift in honor of Concordia Seminary Professor Dr. James W. Voelz. He has authored about 40 articles and presented more than a dozen scholarly papers, and is currently writing for the Concordia Commentary series on Isaiah.

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Raabe and his wife, Dolliene, have one daughter, Sarah.

"Daddy, Will Animals Be in Heaven?"

The Future New Earth

Paul Raabe

A Calvin and Hobbes comic strip pictures Calvin raising his hand in class and asking the teacher, "Miss Wormwood, I have a question about this math lesson." The teacher calls on him, "Yes?" Calvin then asks, "Given that, sooner or later, we're all just going to die, what's the point of learning about integers?" "Turn to page 83, class," says Miss Wormwood. Dejected, Calvin mutters to himself, "Nobody likes us 'big picture' people." Calvin makes a good point. We need to be "big picture" people. That means intentionally appreciating the grand biblical narrative that moves from creation to the death and bodily resurrection of Jesus to the future bodily resurrection and the ultimate eschatological new creation.

My daughter asked, "Daddy, will animals be in heaven?" My immediate response was to say, "Maybe, but no dogs." Yet, that is a common question and a good question. It gets at the big picture. What does the post-resurrection look like? What kind of eschatological future do you lay out before your people? What do you teach your people?

Where does the overall meta-narrative go? Is it that everyone will lose individuality and be absorbed into some all-encompassing unity? Is it that we will be reincarnated as kings or frogs depending on how many good works we do? Is it that this earth will go on forever and get better because of modern science and technology? Is it that the universe will repeatedly collapse and expand, collapse and expand? Or is it that the earth will be annihilated and we will enter some non-local, non-space reality called heaven? With our future resurrection body will we walk and run with our feet? Will there be *terra firma* in the eschatological future?

We confessional Lutherans adhere to the motto *ad fontes* (to the sources). What does the Creator say through his revealed word about the eschatological future? Let's spend some time looking at some texts in both testaments.

Future Destruction of the Corrupted Creation

What do you teach your people? What kind of future do you set before your people? Is it a future that naturally on its own power emerges from the present? By our advances in technology and science will we humans be able to overcome death and decay? By our efforts can we establish a perfect ecological environment, an eco-utopia? Will the earth simply go on forever under human control?

2 Peter 3

The present universe will not simply remain as is nor will it gradually merge into utopia. It will be destroyed. The classic text that stresses this coming destruction occurs in 2 Peter

3:1–13. I quote from Curtis Giese’s commentary.

... a reminder to recall the words previously spoken by the holy prophets and the command of the Lord and Savior [previously spoken] by your apostles, because you know this first of all: that in the last days mockers will come with mocking, by walking according to their own desires and by saying, “Where is the promise of his coming? For (ever) since our fathers fell asleep all things are remaining the same from the beginning of creation.” For by maintaining this, it eludes them that long ago the heavens came into existence and the earth (has) received its form out of water and through water by the Word of God, through which [water and Word] the world that then existed perished when deluged with water. But the present heavens and earth by the same Word have been reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly men. But let this one matter not escape you, beloved, that one day with the Lord is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow regarding his promise as some reckon slowness, but he is patient toward you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance. The Day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise and the elements, by being burned, will be destroyed, and the earth and the works (that are) in it will be disclosed. Since all these things are about to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, as you anticipate and desire to hasten the coming of the Day of God, on account of which the heavens, being consumed by heat, will be destroyed and the elements, being burned, will melt! But we await new heavens and a new earth according to his promise, in which righteousness dwells.¹

Peter responds to mockers who assert that the creation has always and will always continue as it has been. Giese comments: “Their view of the universe is static. Moreover, this raises an epistemological issue. The scoffers choose to trust their own perceptions rather than God’s promise and the testimony of Scripture.”² Against the scoffers Peter stresses three things:

1) Creation is not autonomous. The Creator brought it into existence out of nothing and gave it its form and shape.

2) In the past creation has not simply remained the same. On the contrary, the Creator has intervened. Not only did he create it, he also destroyed it. There has been a succession of worlds. The pre-flood world was destroyed by the Creator using the waters of the flood: “the world that then existed perished (*apollymi*) when deluged with water” (2 Pt 3:6).

3) Now the present heavens and earth are being “reserved for fire, being

kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly men.” Peter goes on to expand on this third point. The day of the Lord will come suddenly and unexpectedly like a thief in the night. Then the heavens will “pass away” (*parerchomai*) and the elements³ will be burned and destroyed (*lyo*). Then the earth and the works done in it “will be disclosed/found” (*heurisko*). There is a text-critical question with that last verb. Some manuscripts read “will be burned up” (*katakaio*). If we read “will be disclosed/found” (*heurisko*) as seems more likely, it refers to the way all works will be exposed, evaluated and judged by God at the eschatological judgment.⁴

Peter goes on to say: “But we await new heavens and a new earth according to his promise, in which righteousness dwells.” Does he mean that the present creation will be annihilated according to its substance and replaced by a fundamentally different reality without *terra firma* and without space? No. The phrase “new earth” is not merely symbolical. Just as the pre-flood creation was destroyed by the flood but not annihilated, so also the present creation will be destroyed by fire but not obliterated. The adjective “new” (*kainos*) means “new in quality,” not “new” in the sense of completely novel *ex nihilo*.⁵

What is the problem with the present creation? The present creation is not characterized by human righteousness (2 Pt 3:13). The ungodly dwell here (2 Pt 3:7), and all people on earth are sinners in need of repentance (2 Pt 3:9). In 2 Peter 1:4, Peter speaks of “the corruption in the world by sinful desire.” Peter assumes the inextricable connection between human sin and creation itself.⁶ According to Genesis 3, the “ground” (*adamah*) is cursed because of man/Adam (*adam*). In order for the Creator to have a creation where human righteousness dwells, he must destroy the present creation and make new heavens and a new earth.

In this new heavens and new earth, “righteousness dwells.” With this expression Peter refers to the active righteousness of believers, their righteous character and deeds, their “holy conduct and godliness” (2 Pt 3:11). After their bodily resurrection, Christians will constantly and perfectly do righteousness.⁷ The place where this will happen is on the new earth. The verb “dwell” (*katoikeo*), when used of people, refers to dwelling on earth. Peter was not thinking of a completely different reality without *terra firma* or space. He speaks of what Christians will do on the new earth. Then once again human righteousness will be “at home.” In the words of Martin Franzmann, the ultimate goal for God’s creation, “over which He once spoke His ‘very good’ (Gn 1:31; 1 Tm 4:4), is not extinction but restoration and transfiguration.”⁸ Or as Lenski says, “The heavens and the earth shall be renovated, renewed, purified, made perfect.”⁹ In Acts 3:21 this same Peter speaks of the future, eschatological “restoration of all things,” restoration (*apokatastasis*), not annihilation. Peter agrees with Peter.

Other Texts on the Future Destruction

Peter encourages his readers to recall what was spoken by the Old Testament prophets and by

The present creation is not characterized by human righteousness.

Jesus, the Lord and Savior, himself. The prophets announced the future day of Yahweh when the present creation will be destroyed (for example, Is 34:4; 51:6; Jer 4:23–26; Jl 2:30–31; 3:14–15; Zep 1:2–3; cf. Ps 102:25–27=Heb 1:10–12). Some prophetic texts speak of creation being consumed by fire (Is 30:30; 66:15–17; Zep 1:18; 3:8). Jesus himself spoke of the future destruction of the present universe. For example, in his eschatological discourse he said: “Heaven and earth will pass away (*parerchomai*), but my words will not pass away” (Mt 24:35; Mk 13:31; Lk 21:33; cf. Mt 5:18). Also the apostle John spoke this way. According to Revelation, at Christ’s second coming the earth and sky will flee away (Rv 20:11; cf. 6:14); the first heaven and the first earth will pass away (Rv 21:1). The discontinuity is clear. The current creation, corrupted by sin, death, and decay, will pass away.

Future New Creation

What do you teach your people? Where does the overall meta-narrative go? Is it that the Creator created the earth for his human creatures to live together with animals in the here-and-now, but in the future eschaton the Creator will annihilate the earth and remove his believing human creatures from the earth to live in his presence forever—no animals, no trees, no space, only the Triune God with human creatures and angels?¹⁰ Is the future only heaven and no more earth? What kind of eschatological future should you lay before your people? What, in fact, are the promises of God?

Romans 8

While there will be destruction for this present creation, there will also be a new creation with significant continuity between the two. The new creation of the future will not be a completely novel reality without space or earth. The classic text that stresses the continuity occurs in Romans 8:17–23. From Michael Middendorf’s commentary on Romans:

And since [we are] children, [we are] also heirs—on the one hand, heirs of God and, on the other hand, fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we are suffering with [him] with the result that we might also be glorified with [him]. Indeed, I count that the sufferings of the present time [are] not of equal value [compared] to the glory which is about to be revealed to us. Indeed, the fervent expectation of the creation eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but on account of the one who subjected [it], upon hope that also the creation itself will be freed from the slavery to the corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. Indeed, we know that all the creation is groaning together and suffering birth pangs together until the present. And not only [creation], but ourselves, while having the first-fruits of the Spirit, we ourselves are also groaning within ourselves while eagerly awaiting adoption, [that is,] the redemption of our body.¹¹

Here the apostle Paul makes a contrast.¹² He contrasts the sufferings of the present time with the glory of the age to come. Creation itself has “eager expectation.” The noun in verse 19, *apokaradokia* suggests the picture of a person stretching his head forward to see what is coming. This “eager expectation of creation eagerly awaits” the eschatological future. Paul uses the verb *apekdechomai* for the eager waiting that belongs to Christian hope (Rom 8:19, 23, 25; 1 Cor 1:7; Gal 5:5; Phil 3:20). Creation shares in the Christian hope. The apostle emphasizes the intensity of these eschatological yearnings. In verse 22, he states “all the creation is groaning together and suffering birth pangs together until the present.”

In verses 20–21 Paul explains why the creation is eagerly awaiting. For creation was subjected by God to futility, purposelessness (*mataiotes*). It cannot attain to its goal. It is currently under “slavery to corruption.” Paul is referring to Genesis 3 where the Creator placed creation under a curse. Middendorf writes, “At times the creation’s corruption is the cause of human suffering; at other times, creation suffers due to the activity of fallen humanity.”¹³ Also note that Paul makes a distinction between creation itself and the “futility” and “slavery to corruption” that it is now experiencing. One is reminded of the distinction emphasized in the Formula of Concord article I, the distinction between human nature itself and the original sin that thoroughly corrupts it.¹⁴ The “futility” and “corruption” will end but not creation itself.

Creation was subjected by God to futility “upon hope that also the creation itself will be freed from the slavery to the corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” The eschatological future for creation itself is the freedom that awaits the children of God. It is not a different kind of freedom such as a freedom that results from annihilation, as if God will put groaning creation out of its misery by annihilating it. No, creation will receive the same freedom that will be experienced by the children of God, freedom from corruption, freedom from futility. Creation itself will be glorified with the same glory that the children of God will experience.

Paul emphasizes that the future destiny of creation is tied to the future destiny of God’s people. Creation is now suffering birth pangs until it gives birth to a new creation at the time when our mortal bodies are raised from the dead and glorified. Creation itself has a glorious future of freedom. Not only creation but also we ourselves, as we eagerly await our future of adoption as sons of God, the redemption of our body. Just as creation’s groaning and our groaning are tied together, so also creation’s future and our future are tied together.

Revelation 21

Together with creation itself we await a new creation. According to Peter, “we await new heavens and a new earth according to his [God’s] promise, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pt 3:13). John in Revelation uses the same language.

And I saw a large white throne and the One sitting on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled and a place was not found for them. . . . And I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the

first earth had passed away, and the sea is no longer. And the holy city, new Jerusalem, I saw coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they themselves will be his people, and God himself will be with them [as their God].¹⁵ And he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall no longer be, nor sorrow nor crying nor pain shall be ever again, because the first things have passed away.” And the One sitting on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new!” And he says, “Write, because these words are faithful and true” (Rv 20:11; 21:1–5).¹⁶

In his vision John saw a new creation. The present heaven and earth fled away, passed away, and no place was found for them (Rv 20:11). John saw a new heaven and a new earth. He saw the heavenly Jerusalem coming down to the new earth (see also Rv 3:12). In that future day heaven will be on earth. God alone can make that happen. And what does John conclude from this? That God will dwell with men, the Creator with his human creatures (*anthropoi*). The assumption behind this statement is that humans are earth creatures. If there is to be fellowship between Creator and humans, humans do not ascend but the Creator comes down to earth.

Echoing our Lord’s statement John goes on to say, “the first things passed away” (*aperchomai*). Then the one sitting on the throne said: “Behold, I make all things new.” The two statements go together. The second statement does not say that God makes all new things, as if creating everything *ex nihilo*, but that God makes all things (*panta*) that currently exist new (*kaina*). This second statement helps us understand the first statement. When old things are made new things, then the old things “passed away.” They no longer exist as the old things (cf. 2 Cor 5:17). Brighton comments, “God will not annihilate the present creation, cast it out as some trash, but rather he will, by recreation, transform the old into the new.”¹⁷ John goes on to depict the future new Jerusalem and the future garden of Eden with the tree of life. It is all very physical and material, a future heaven on earth.

Isaiah 65

Peter and John’s language of “a new heaven and a new earth” comes from Isaiah 65:17–25, the mighty seer of old. The translation is by Reed Lessing in his commentary on Isaiah 56–66.

“For behold I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth.
And the former things will not be remembered.
And they will not come up upon [the] heart.”
“Rather they will rejoice and be glad in what I am creating.
For behold I am creating Jerusalem a joy,
and her people rejoicing.”

“And I will be glad in Jerusalem.
 And I will rejoice in her people.
 And there will not be heard again in her the sound of weeping,
 or the sound of crying.”

“There will not be there again an infant of [a few] days.
 Or an elderly man who will not fulfill his days.
 For the young man will die a hundred years old.
 And one missing the mark of a hundred years will be regarded as
 cursed.”

“And they will build houses and live [in them].
 And they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.”

“They will not build and another live [in them].
 They will not plant and another eat.
 For like the days of a tree [will be] the days of my people.
 And the work of their hands my chosen ones will enjoy.”

“They will not toil in vain.
 And they will not give birth for calamity.
 For they [will be] offspring, ones being blessed of Yahweh,
 and their descendants with them.”

“And it will happen that before they call even I myself will answer.
 While they are speaking even I myself will hear.”

“The wolf and the lamb will graze as one.
 And the lion like large cattle will eat straw.
 But [for] the serpent dust [will be] his food.
 And they will not do evil nor will they destroy in all my holy
 mountain,”
 said Yahweh.

Isaiah announces the eschatological day of the Lord, when the Lord will create a new heavens and a new earth. That new creation will so exceed the present creation that we will not even remember the former things. Together with the new creation there will be a new Jerusalem, which rejoices in Yahweh and Yahweh rejoices in her. As Isaiah stresses elsewhere, Yahweh’s glory will fill the earth, and the entire earth will know Yahweh.¹⁸ Verse 20 gives a hypothetical: If someone were to die, it would not be before one hundred years. Everyone will live long. Earlier in Isaiah 25 the prophet proclaimed that death itself will be swallowed up (v. 8). According to Isaiah 65:21–23, God’s people will build houses, plant vineyards, and enjoy the work of their hands. “They will not toil in vain” (v. 23). The future new creation will be the reversal of the curse of Genesis 3, a new earth where God’s people are active, doing constructive activities.

Then Isaiah repeats the picture of the animals that he gave in Isaiah 11. When the eschatological new creation comes, then “The wolf and the lamb will graze as one, and the

*Together with creation itself
we await the new creation.*

lion like large cattle will eat straw” (Is 65:25). Then both predator and prey will live together peacefully and harmoniously. Then the

carnivorous animals will become herbivores. Then the predatory animals will “not destroy in all my holy mountain” spoke Yahweh. Before the presence of Yahweh humans and animals will live harmoniously. There will be a new creation, established by the Creator himself. The Creator himself through his prophet has promised a new creation with animals. We have no basis to discard this promise as merely symbolical. The Creator will reclaim his messed up creation, including animals.

Old Testament Land Theology

The language of Isaiah needs to be understood in light of the Old Testament’s rich theology about the land.¹⁹ In Genesis 12 God promised Abram “to your offspring I will give this land” (v. 7). Over and over again God repeated that promise to Isaac and Jacob and Jacob’s sons. Years later when the sons of Jacob/Israel were in bondage in Egypt, God came down to deliver them and to lead them to the land he had sworn to give them. Unlike the wilderness the promised land would be almost like a new garden of Eden:

For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. And you shall eat and be full, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. (Dt 8:7–10)

Then under Joshua God began to fulfill that promise. Israel did not take the land; God gave it to them as an undeserved gift. Israel inherited the land. God promised to bless his covenant people by means of that land. The land was a gift and means of blessing from the God of Israel. At the same time Israel’s life in that land was to be distinctive. God called his covenant people to live in the land by walking in God’s ways, not the ways of the other nations. If they imitate the other nations, then God would thrust them out of the land. It is holy land for a holy people under the holy God.

You know the rest of the story. Israel repeatedly rebelled and then had to face the just wrath of God. The north was taken into exile in 722 BC and Samaria, its capital, in 722 BC. Judah was exiled in 587 BC with only Jerusalem left. Then a century later in 587 BC, Jerusalem was exiled.

Amos 9

Yet that was not the end of the story. God promised through his prophets that God will

bring his exiled people back to the land. A good example occurs in Amos 9:11–15. The translation is by Reed Lessing in his commentary on Amos:

On that day I will raise up the falling tabernacle of David.
I will repair their breaches,
and his ruins I will raise up,
and I will rebuild it as in days of old,
so that they will possess the remnant of Edom,
that is, all the nations over whom my name is called,”
declares Yahweh, who is doing this.
“Behold, days are coming,”
declares Yahweh,
“when the plower will overtake the reaper,
and the treader of grapes [will overtake] the one sowing the seed.
The mountains will drip sweet wine,
and all the hills will wave [with grain].
And I will restore the restoration of my people Israel,
and they will rebuild desolated cities and dwell in them,
and they will plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they will work gardens and eat their fruit.
And I will plant them in their soil,
and they will never again be uprooted from the soil that I have given to
them,”
says Yahweh your God.²⁰

At the time of Amos the house of David was more like a flimsy hut about to fall. God would bring down the hut of David and exile his people. Yet God promised that he would then rebuild the Davidic house, restore his people, incorporate Gentiles into his people, and fructify the land.

God began to fulfill his restoration promise by bringing his people back from exile to the land where they built their houses, planted their vineyards, and made their gardens. Only it was clear that the promise still awaited its full realization. The crops of the land did not abound, and the Messiah of the line of David had not yet come.

This promise and others like it met its full fulfillment with the first coming of Jesus and his church. For two thousand years we have been witnessing Gentiles coming to Israel’s Messiah and having Yahweh’s name called upon them. In fact, we Gentile Christians are part of the fulfillment of Amos 9:12 (cf. Acts 15:13–18). Nevertheless, there is still a not-yet. The promise still awaits its full consummation when the earth will abound with crops and the mountains will drip sweet wine.²¹

What does Jesus do with this type of land promise? He expands it. Psalm 37 promised that “the meek shall inherit the land” (v. 11); “those blessed by the LORD shall inherit

the land” (v. 22); “The righteous shall inherit the land and dwell upon it forever” (v. 29). Jesus expands the promise by saying “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Mt 5:5). Jesus promises the future eschatological new creation.²² The Old Testament promised land becomes the eschatological new earth. Or consider Romans 4:13: “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world . . .” The land of Canaan becomes the world. In light of the fulfillment in Christ, “the original land of Canaan and the city of Jerusalem were only an anticipatory fulfillment of God’s promise. As such they function in Scripture as a sign of the future universal city on the renewed earth, the place where righteousness dwells.”²³

Hosea 2

What about animals? Isaiah depicts animals living in peace in the future new creation. Hosea gives a similar promise in Hosea 2. God announced that he will punish the idolatrous Israelites by laying waste her vines and fig trees and by having the wild animals of the countryside devour them (Hos 2:14). The Creator punishes by the reversal of creation. But then God promises to bless by restoring creation. Later in Hosea 2 God promises to make a new covenant, only this covenant will be with animals and to the benefit of Israel.

And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground.
And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. (Hos 2:18)

This covenant with the animals reminds the reader of the covenant after the flood. God promised to Noah and his sons, “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth.” (Gn 9:9–10). God cares for all his creation, not only humans. He went to a lot of bother to save every kind of animal at the time of the flood. He includes animals in his post-flood covenant. Then through Hosea he promises a new covenant with the animals. Here the emphasis rests on their benign character. They will no longer threaten or hurt God’s restored Israel.

Proleptic Eschatology: Jesus with the Wild Animals

And lo and behold, Jesus of Nazareth spent forty days and nights in the desert and “he was with the wild animals” (Mk 1:13). Wild animals (Greek *theria*) were typically seen as a dangerous threat to humans, animals such as bears, leopards, wolves, and poisonous snakes. Jesus in his weakened, vulnerable condition “was with the wild animals.” Yet the wild desert animals did not hurt Jesus. In Mark’s gospel the expression “to be with someone” suggests close and friendly companionship (Mk 3:14; 5:18; 14:67; cf. 4:36).²⁴ This is an example of what Jim Voelz calls “proleptic eschatology.” Jesus inaugurated the

future eschatological new creation ahead of time. As Jim Voelz says in his commentary on Mark, “his being with the wild beasts (*theria*) incarnates the new relationship between the formerly hostile elements of the old creation and the people of God.”²⁵ It is important that we run Old Testament promises through Christ and the New Testament. In light of Mark 1:13 we may conclude that the Old Testament promise of peaceful animals is not mere symbolism. Those days when Jesus the Messiah, the last Adam, was with the wild animals gave a visible promise that in the future new creation there will be perfect harmony between God’s human creatures and animals.

Exhortations

The biblical texts clearly depict an eschatological future characterized by both discontinuity and continuity. Both sets of texts need emphasis. The present creation will pass away and the Creator will create a new creation. Here I wish to draw out of these texts some practical suggestions for pastors.

I sense that commonly in preaching and teaching not enough use is being made of the future tense. One important way to articulate the law is to preach the threats, and one important way to articulate the gospel is to preach the promises. Threats and promises are by definition future tense statements. Beware of over-realized eschatology. There is still a not-yet. Some things in God’s overall narrative have not yet happened. Make frequent use of the future tense.

By proclaiming the threats of God, you are warning sinners to turn from sin to God before it’s too late. Warning is an important speech act. And by proclaiming the promises of God, you are inculcating hope in your hearers so that they will wait in eager expectation for the *Parousia*, for the day of resurrection, for the new creation. By means of your proclamation of the threats and promises of God the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens the eschatological yearnings of people.

The Scriptures do not speak of Christians at the bodily resurrection “going to heaven.” The ascension of Christ is not the eschatological paradigm for us. The biblical depiction of the last day is not that we ascend to heaven but that Christ in public, visible glory will come down to us. Even a text like Philippians 3:20, which speaks of our citizenship in heaven, does not mean that in the end we will go to heaven but that Jesus Christ will come again in glory to transform us.²⁶ Just as God came down to us and became flesh, so on the last day God in the flesh will come down to us. Let us pray with Isaiah, “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down” (Is 64:1).

Talk about the future the way the Scriptures talk about the future. Instead of using only the word “heaven” for the future, speak of the future “heaven on earth” a la Revelation 21. Or simply say “the earth” as in “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Mt 5:5) or God’s people “shall reign on the earth” (Rv 5:10). Instead of using the verb “to go” as if leaving the earth behind, use biblical expressions such as “inherit the earth;” “inherit the kingdom;” “enter eternal life.”

Follow the Scriptures in depicting life in eternity as active, dynamic, involving

worship and work, and all in the immediate presence of the Triune God. Too often we depict the future eternal life as boring. That is not the way the Scriptures depict it.²⁷

Annihilation or Transformation

Francis Pieper in his magisterial dogmatics discusses the future “end of the world.”²⁸ He notes that our old Lutheran theologians disagreed on how to understand the “passing away” of the world. Is it total annihilation according to substance or is it transformation? Luther, Brenz, Nicolai and others taught a transformation, while Johann Gerhard, Quenstedt, and Calov taught annihilation according to substance. Pieper follows Gerhard in preferring the annihilation view but leaving it as an open question.

Part of my purpose here is to reopen this debate. Will *terra firma* and space come to an end? Is the future of believers at the day of bodily resurrection away from earth in heaven, defined not as a place but as “wherever God reveals Himself in His uncovered glory, ‘face to face’”?²⁹ For Christians on the future resurrection day is the paradigm the ascension of Christ so that we too will ascend? Does the overall narrative lead to the goal that we will ascend into God’s immediate, visible presence where there will be no trees, no animals, no *terra firma*, no space? Or is the narrative’s goal a new creation, heaven on earth where God’s immediate, visible presence will dwell among his people? Will there be the new physical earth, *terra firma* with trees and animals? Will God’s people have work to do as stewards of this new creation?

What's at Stake Here?

There is a lot at stake in the question of the ultimate future of creation itself. Will the Creator reclaim his creation or not? If the physical earth, the *terra firma*, will one day be annihilated, and we will live forever with God in a completely alternative reality without space, then the Creator would end up discarding his creation. As Hoekema puts it:

If God would have to annihilate the present cosmos, Satan would have won a great victory. For then Satan would have succeeded in so devastatingly corrupting the present cosmos and the present earth that God could do nothing with it but to blot it totally out of existence. But Satan did not win such a victory. On the contrary, Satan has been decisively defeated. God will reveal the full dimensions of that defeat when he shall renew this very earth on which Satan deceived mankind and finally banish from it all the results of Satan’s evil machinations.³⁰

On the last day the Creator will reclaim his corrupted creation just as he will reclaim his sinful human creatures. As Romans 8 stresses, the future of creation itself is tied together with the future of the sons of God.

The biblical texts we have looked at are clearly on the side of new creation. This is true especially if we let the Old Testament have a say in the discussion. The Old Testament Scriptures keep our feet on the ground.

Everywhere they presuppose and affirm the goodness of God's creation. The ancient Israelites were a down-to-earth people, for the most part agriculturalists and owners of sheep and goats. They rejoiced in their concrete physical life. Their hope was not to become deified or divinized but to live in fellowship with YHWH in a fully human way, the way the Creator had made them and intended them to be. To live under your own vine and fig tree, to enjoy the fruits of your own fields, to drink the wine from your own vineyard, that is the good life. "It doesn't get any better than this." No one steeped in the earthy BC Scriptures would be tempted toward Gnosticism, Platonic dualism, Docetism, asceticism, or spiritualism, alternatives that are as prevalent today as they ever were.³¹

Conclusion

You Christians have such a bright future ahead of you. The Lord Jesus will come again visibly in glory and transform your lowly body to be like his glorious body. Then he will say to you his sheep, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." And you will enter the new and greater promised land, the new creation, where the crops will abound, the hills will flow with new wine, and the wolf will lie down with the lamb. Then you will see your Creator and Savior as he is, face-to-face. Then God's name shall be perfectly hallowed, his kingdom shall come in all its fullness, and his will shall be done perfectly on earth. What a future of eternal joy and bliss. Come Lord Jesus, come quickly.

Endnotes

- 1 Curtis P. Giese, *2 Peter and Jude, Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 161, 184.
- 2 Giese, *2 Peter and Jude*, 173–174.
- 3 The Greek noun *stoicheia*, “elements,” designates either the heavenly bodies such as sun, moon, and stars, or the basic elements that constitute the whole universe. See Giese, *2 Peter and Jude*, 189–190.
- 4 A good parallel occurs in 1 Corinthians 3:12–15.
- 5 The adjective “new” (*kainos*) does not imply a totally different, unique substance. For example, according to 2 Corinthians 5:17, a Christian is a “new creation” (*kaine ktisis*) but still the same human creature as before.
- 6 Compare, for example, Isaiah 24:4–7.
- 7 In 2 Peter 1:1 the apostle refers to the passive righteousness of justification, “to those having obtained faith of equal value with ours, in connection with righteousness from our God and Savior Jesus Christ.” See R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1945), 247–253.
- 8 Walter R. Roehrs and Martin H. Franzmann, *Concordia Self-Study Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), s.v. Second Peter 3.
- 9 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1945), 350.
- 10 As I understand it, this seems to be the view of Johann Gerhard, the classic seventeenth-century Lutheran dogmatician. See his *Loci Theologici*, under *de consummatione seculi* and *de vita aeterna*. Also see Robert O. Neff Jr., *The Preservation and Restoration of Creation with a Special Reference to Romans 8:18–23* (ThD Dissertation, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1980).
- 11 Michael P. Middendorf, *Romans 1–8, Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 635, 656.
- 12 John Reumann argues that Romans 8:19–22 is an apocalyptic fragment from a different source. According to Reumann, while Paul uses this fragment to emphasize the not-yet dimension, Paul’s interest is supposedly only with people, not creation. However, Paul explicitly affirms what verses 19–22 say by stating in verse 23 “And not only” does creation groan but also we ourselves. John Reumann, *Creation and New Creation: The Past, Present, and Future of God’s Creative Activity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1973), 98–99.
- 13 Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, 670.
- 14 Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. “The Formula of Concord I: Concerning Original Sin,” *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 487–491, 531–542.
- 15 On the text-critical question regarding the words *auton theos* (“their God”), see Louis A. Brighton, *Revelation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 589.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 580, 588.
- 17 Brighton, *Revelation*, 601. Brighton references G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 265.
- 18 See Isaiah 6:3 and 11:9. On 6:3, see Andrew H. Bartelt, “The Centrality of Isaiah 6 (-8) Within Isaiah 2-12,” *Concordia Journal* 30 (October 2004): 316–335, especially 328.
- 19 For good introductions to Old Testament land theology, see Elmer A. Martens, *God’s Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981); Christopher J. H. Wright, *An Eye for An Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983).
- 20 R. Reed Lessing, *Amos, Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009) 575.
- 21 Other land promises stress the same sort of fecundity of the future land. See Horace D. Hummel, *Ezekiel 21–48, Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 1333–1337.
- 22 Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1, Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 244.
- 23 David E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 112.
- 24 See Richard Bauckham, “Jesus and Animals II: What did he Practise?” *Animals on the Agenda: Questions about Animals for Theology and Ethics*, eds. Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 47–60, especially 54–60.
- 25 James W. Voelz, *Mark 1–8, Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 136–137.

- 26 See N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 143.
- 27 For a provocative and challenging discussion of how the Scriptures depict the future new creation, see Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2004).
- 28 Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics III* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953; original *Christliche Dogmatik III* published in 1920), 542–543.
- 29 Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics III*, 553.
- 30 Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 281.
- 31 Paul R. Raabe, “Why the BC Scriptures Are Necessary for the AD Church” *Lutheran Forum* (Summer 1998): 11–12.

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