

5 Common Misconceptions about Heaven and the Afterlife

by [David Qaoud](#) | Filed under: [Theology](#)

Note: The following is a guest post by J. Richard Middleton.

Eschatology (the doctrine of last things) has become a hot topic among Christians since the late nineteenth century, when [John Nelson Darby](#) began to popularize the doctrine of the rapture (as part of what we now call dispensational theology) through a series of Prophecy Conferences in Britain, Canada, and the United States.



Today there are many best-selling books claiming to predict how the end will come, some of them quite sensationalist. But there are also many books that attempt to expound sane biblical teaching about the last things.

Despite the good intentions of many Bible teachers, the popular views found in the church concerning what God's future looks like (and how it ought to impact our life today) does not always conform to what Scripture actually teaches.

In this post I will unpack five common misconceptions Christians have of what the end (Greek *eschaton*) will be like.

Here are five things that the Bible *doesn't* teach.

1. That Christians will live in heaven forever.

Although it has become popular orthodoxy to speak of Christians going to be with God in heaven when you die, the Bible promises, instead, the resurrection of the body and the renewal of creation, what we could call *cosmic redemption*.

Some New Testament texts, like [Revelation 21:1](#) and [2 Peter 3:13](#), speak of “a new heaven and a new earth.”

Since heaven and earth is how the Old Testament understands the created cosmos ([Genesis 1:1](#)), these texts in Revelation and 2 Peter portray nothing less than a *new creation*.

[Isaiah 65:17](#) is the Old Testament origin of the phrase “a new heaven and a new earth.” This verse is part of Isaiah’s vision of a healed world with a redeemed community in rebuilt Jerusalem, where life is restored to flourishing and blessing after the devastation of the Babylonian exile ([Isaiah 65:17–25](#)).

Isaiah’s this-worldly prophetic expectation, focused on the return from exile, is applied to the entire cosmos and human society generally in late Second Temple Judaism and in the New Testament.

Whereas Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3 speak of “a new heaven and a new earth” as the context for redeemed people, other New Testament texts use the phrase “all things” to describe the object of God’s saving activity.

One such text is [Ephesians 1:10](#), which describes God’s purpose in Christ as “a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”

Here salvation is understood as unifying that which has been fragmented through sin; and this unifying action is applied not just to human beings, but to *all things*, which includes *things in heaven and things on earth*. [Ephesians 1](#) envisions a salvation as wide as creation itself.

A similar text is [Colossians 1](#), which explains that God’s purpose in sending Christ was “to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” ([Col 1:20](#)).

Here salvation is conceived as reconciliation (making peace) between those who are at enmity, by removing the source of that enmity, namely sin, through the atoning blood of Christ.

But the reconciliation with God accomplished by Christ’s shed blood is not limited to human beings. Rather, it is applied as comprehensively as possible to *all things, whether on earth or in heaven*. Colossians 1 clearly affirms a reconciliation that is cosmic in scope.

In [Romans 8](#) we find imagery of the bondage in Egypt applied to the entire creation. Just as the Israelites groaned in their bondage under Pharaoh's oppression ([Exodus 2:23](#)), so "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" ([Romans 8:22–23](#)).

God's children thus await the resurrection, which Paul describes as "the redemption of our bodies." But, amazingly, the non-human world can expect a similar redemption. Just as the Israelites of old experienced their exodus, so "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" ([Romans 8:21](#)).

This is consistent with Revelation 21, which pictures the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven to earth, with the proclamation that God's dwelling is now among human beings ([Revelation 21:2–3](#)). Indeed, God's throne, which throughout the Old Testament is said to be in heaven ([Psalms 2:4](#); [11:4](#); [104:1–3](#); [Isaiah 40:22](#); [63:15](#); [66:1–2](#); [Amos 9:6](#)), is now in the midst of the New Jerusalem, which means it is on the renewed earth ([Revelation 22:3](#)).

An expectation of earthly destiny, as opposed to "going to heaven," is assumed in Jesus's promise: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit *the earth*" ([Matthew 5:5](#)).

For many decades now I have been asking my students—whether in Bible studies, Sunday School, or in my college and seminary courses—to find even one biblical passage that *clearly* says that Christians will live in heaven forever (or that heaven is the eternal destiny of the believer). I have even offered a reward for success.

So far no one has ever found such a passage.

The popular view that heaven is the eternal destiny of the Christian is simply that—the popular view. [It is not taught in Scripture.](#)

2. That the earth will be destroyed in the judgment when Jesus returns.

But how can the meek "inherit the earth" ([Matthew 5:5](#)) if the earth will be destroyed at Christ's return? After all, doesn't [2 Peter 3:10](#) speak of the earth and all its works being "burned up"?

The idea that the earth will be "burned up" is found in the King James Version (KJV) of [2 Peter 3:10](#), and in all major English translations of that passage, up to the New International Version (NIV), which was published in the 1970s.

Where the KJV has "will be burned up," the NIV has "will be laid bare."

Other recent translations have renderings similar to the NIV. The English Standard Version (ESV) has "will be exposed"; and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) has "will be disclosed."

It turns out that these more recent translations are not disagreeing with the KJV about how to translate a particular Greek word. They are translating an entirely different Greek word. The translators of the KJV used what is called the *Received Text* of the New Testament (sometimes referred to by the Latin term, *Textus Receptus*). This was an edition of the Greek New Testament compiled by Erasmus in 1516, based on the best ancient Greek manuscripts available at the time.

The *Received Text* does, in fact, have the word for “will be burned up” (*katakaesētai*).

But, since the sixteenth century when the KJV was translated, archaeology has uncovered many other ancient manuscripts of the Greek New Testament, and today the edition of the Greek New Testament that modern translations use is based on manuscripts that are much older than the *Received Text*.

It is pretty clear that the most ancient Greek manuscripts of [2 Peter 3:10](#) have the Greek word *heurethēsetai*, which means “will be found.”

Somewhere along the way a scribe who was assigned to copy 2 Peter 3 changed part of the word (the ending remained the same), probably because he thought he was correcting an error.

By this time in the Middle Ages the original biblical vision of a new creation, which included the redemption of the earth, had been largely lost. Plato’s vision of leaving behind this corrupt physical world for an immaterial realm of purity and light had become standard in Christian theology.

Perhaps we could cut that scribe some slack, since the general tenor of [2 Peter 3:10–14](#) seems to support an overall picture of destruction. These verses describe the melting or incineration of the cosmos (specifically, the heavens and the “elements”) with great heat at the return of Christ.

Yet close examination suggests a different picture than the obliteration of the cosmos, since it is only the heavens and the “elements” (*stoicheia*) that will be destroyed. The earth, by contrast, will be “found.”

The picture in 2 Peter 3 is of God destroying the demonic forces in the heavens (the Greek word for “elements” is used for demonic powers in [Galatians 4:8–9](#) and [Colossians 2:8, 20](#)) and stripping away the upper layer of the cosmos (the heavens or sky), in order to expose the earth to divine judgment (using the image of fire). Aspects of this vivid picture are found in Old Testament prophetic texts (e.g., [Isaiah 24:21](#); [34:4–5, 9](#)) and had become a standard way of thinking of cosmic judgment in Jewish thought by the time of the New Testament.

This sense of eschatological “finding” in connection with the coming of God in judgment makes perfect sense of Peter’s exhortation to his readers: “Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be *found* by him at peace, without spot or blemish” ([2 Peter 3:14](#)). Peter thus challenges his readers to be ready, by their righteous behavior, for the day when the Lord comes to judge “the earth and the works in it.”

According to 2 Peter 3, the judgment of the earth will not result in its obliteration, but in its *cleansing* (the image is of refining by fire). Indeed, even the heavens will not strictly be destroyed, but cleansed. The text speaks only of the “destruction of the ungodly” ([2 Peter 3:7](#)) and promises “new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” ([2 Peter 3:13](#)).

3. That the new heavens and new earth will be a replacement cosmos.

Even though the Bible promises a new heaven and earth ([2 Peter 3:13](#); [Revelation 21:1](#)), some Christians think that this will be a replacement cosmos, assuming that the old one will be obliterated when Christ returns.

Granted that [2 Peter 3:10](#) can't be used to support the idea that the earth will be “burned up.” But what about [Revelation 21:1](#), which says that “the first heaven and the first earth had *passed away*”?

Clearly, the old world as we know it will be gone, to be superseded by a new reality. The question here is whether this is obliteration followed by replacement, or a reference to some form of (admittedly, radical) transformation.

To answer this question we need to turn to Paul's description of conversion as “new creation” in [2 Corinthians 5:17](#). “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has *passed away*; see, everything has become new!”

Here Paul uses the verb *parerchomai* (“has passed away”) for the ending of the old life, which is then replaced by a new life in Christ. This is almost identical to the Greek for “had passed away” (*aperchomai*) in [Revelation 21:1](#) (only the prefixes of the verb are different).

Do we think that Paul means to say in 2 Corinthians 5 that the passing away of the old life is equivalent to the obliteration of the person, who is then replaced by a double? All the Pauline writings, not to mention common sense, suggests that no matter how radical the shift required for conversion to Christ, this describes the transformation, not obliteration, of the person.

Likewise, the passing away of the present heaven and earth to make way for the new creation is also transformative and not a matter of destruction followed by replacement.

This understanding of *passing away* as transformation (rather than obliteration and replacement) is supported by the pattern of Scripture, which assumes a parallel between the redemption of persons (including the body) and the redemption of the non-human world.

In both cases (the new person in Christ and the new heaven and earth), the word “new” has the sense of radical *renewal*, not replacement.

4. That the new heavens and new earth will consist of a never-ending worship service.

Thankfully, most Christians don't take seriously anymore the old caricature of believers sitting on clouds and playing harps in heaven. Nevertheless, it is still common to think that the afterlife

will consist in an eternal worship service, characterized by singing and continuous affirmations of praise.

This notion of a perpetual worship service in an otherworldly afterlife is the assumption in many hymns, like “My Jesus I Love Thee,” which affirms that “In mansions of glory and endless delight, / I’ll ever adore Thee in heaven so bright.”

Likewise, “Come Christians, Join to Sing” affirms that “On heaven’s blissful shore, / His goodness we’ll adore, / Singing forevermore, / ‘Alleluia! Amen!’”

In a similar vein, “As with Gladness Men of Old” expresses the desire that “In the heavenly country bright / . . . There forever may we sing / Alleluias to our King!”

This thinking may be influenced by the visions of worship in heaven found in the book of Revelation ([Revelation 4:8–11](#); [5:8–14](#); [6:9–10](#); [7: 9–12](#); [11:17–19](#); [15:3–4](#); [16:5–6](#); [19:1–9](#)). But a close look at these scenes of worship in heaven will disclose that they depict not the future state of Christ-followers, but worship that is *currently* going on, and this worship is often being offered by non-human (angelic) creatures.

Now, of course we should worship God; and I fully expect we will worship God in the new creation. But worship (in the narrow sense of explicit praise) is only part of an obedient life of discipleship.

Here we need to think of Paul’s exhortation in [Romans 12:1–2](#) about presenting our bodies to God as a living sacrifice, which involves being transformed in our minds and doing God’s will. This, he says, is our *true worship*.

This means that worship should not be reduced to emotionally intense acts of verbal praise. Rather, worship (in the broad sense) encompasses the entire pattern of our discipleship. God is glorified by our entire lives, when we faithfully follow Christ in all that we do.

This is consistent with how the Bible portrays the defining human role in both this world and the next.

In the beginning God gave humans dominion over the earth, and charged us with developing and caring for this world as his stewards ([Genesis 1:26–28](#); [Genesis 2:15](#); [Psalm 8:4–8](#); [Psalm 104:14–15](#)). This is what it means to be God’s image, reflecting his glory in the entirety of our earthly lives.

But sin has impeded our imaging and deformed our God-given rule of the earth, resulting in our development of cultures, societies, and institutions that only partially reflect God’s will. Good and evil are intertwined in all that we do.

If we look beyond the many scenes of worship in the book of Revelation, to how the final state of believers is described, we find that Revelation portrays this final state as the restoration of our original human calling—but this time without sin.

Right in the midst of one of the songs of praise offered by strange heavenly beings ([Revelation 5:9–10](#)), Christ is extolled for having redeemed people from “every tribe and language and people and nation” ([Revelation 5:9](#)) and for making them into “a kingdom and priests” to serve God ([Revelation 5:10](#)).

But this royal-priestly service in the new creation is not identified with an eternal praise service. Instead, these redeemed believers “will reign on the earth” ([Revelation 5:10](#)). Indeed, “they will reign for ever and ever” ([Revelation 22:5](#)). This is nothing less than the reinstatement of the original human calling to rule the earth as the authorized image of God.

The good news of Scripture is that the day will come when (to use language from the Lord’s prayer) God’s kingdom shall come, and God’s will shall be done *on earth* as it is in heaven ([Matthew 6:10](#)).

And in that day, I will bend my knees in worship of the Creator of heaven and earth and sing his praise; then I will get on with the task of righteous rule of the earth.

5. That the way we live now doesn’t affect the afterlife (and vice versa).

There is a troubling assumption in some Christian circles that how we actually live in the present (including how we treat God’s creation) has no bearing on either our future or the future of creation.

There are usually two reasons for this way of thinking.

The first is the contrast between justification by faith and by works. Since we are saved by faith, not works ([Ephesians 2:8–9](#)), we sometimes think that what we actually do with our lives doesn’t matter, at least not in an ultimate sense, concerning our final destiny.

But Paul, the greatest advocate of salvation by grace, explains that we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works” ([Ephesians 2:10](#)), and he encourages believers to “work out [their] salvation with fear and trembling” ([Philippians 2:12](#)).

James goes so far as to tell us that faith without works is dead ([James 2:14–26](#)). He even compares faith to the human body, while works corresponds to the spirit that animates the body ([James 2:26](#)). Faith without works is thus like a corpse. The only way to tell if faith is alive is by seeing the sort of actions that accompany it.

And Jesus explains that our final destiny depends on the deeds we have done in this life ([Matthew 25:31–46](#)); this doesn’t mean that we are saved by works, but that our deeds indicate the state of our hearts.

But there is another reason Christians often think that the present lives have no bearing on the world to come (and vice versa)—besides the issue of faith and works.

It is because they assume a total discontinuity between how they live now and God's promised future.

But, as we have seen, the Bible portrays the world to come as the renewal of the earth, involving the restoration of our human calling as God's image. So our lives now are practice for the world to come.

Paul explains that our works will be tested by the fire of judgment at the Last Day ([1 Corinthians 3:11–15](#)). While some of our works will be burned up, some will be purified and withstand judgment into the age to come ([1 Corinthians 3:12](#)).

Revelation 21 even mentions the “glory and honor” of the nations being brought into the New Jerusalem ([Revelation 21:26](#)), suggesting that some of the best of what human beings have produced will find a place in the new creation.

So our present lives can impact the new creation.

Likewise, how we live now is a testimony to the sort of future we expect.

As I have been putting it of late: [Ethics is lived eschatology](#) (*A New Heaven and a New Earth*, p. 24).

If we live selfishly, ignoring the needs of our human neighbors—including our neighbors around the globe—then we contradict the Bible's vision of an international community of redeemed people as “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” ([Revelation 7:9](#)).

If we pursue our consumption of goods and resources without caring for the needs of our fragile planet (which is our home) and for the other species who share this world with us, we do not bear witness to the God who so *loves* this world that he gave his only Son to redeem it ([John 3:16](#)).

The link between our present lives and the expected future is evident in Peter's challenge for us to live holy and godly lives now because of the coming judgment, which will result in the new heavens and new earth ([2 Peter 3:10-12](#)). He even suggests that we can, somehow, impact the timing of the eschaton, as we “look forward to the day of God and speed its coming” ([2 Peter 3:12](#)).

If we took seriously the biblical vision of God's love for his creation—including his desire to redeem and renew it—this could impact everything we do on earth. Then we would show by our actions that we are truly the image of God, following in the path of Christ, our Lord.

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