

Paradise Lost?

Recapturing a Biblical Doctrine of the New Creation

Gareth Leaney

KEYWORDS: eternity, clouds, angels, white robes, resurrection, pragmatism, vision, judgement, redemption, reality, city, new creation, cross, cleansing, eternal life, worship, sin-free world, presence of God, book of life, holy living, suffering

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp
[Revelation 21:23-24].

The end of the book of Revelation carries a terrifying warning from Christ himself for anyone who would tamper with the book. He warns anyone who adds to the words that, 'God will add to him the plagues described in this book' (22:18). And for anyone who removes anything, 'God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city which are described in this book' (v.19). Hopefully I will do neither over the course of this article! But, sadly, we are in danger of contravening these rules in our treatment of the new creation as presented in Revelation. In what follows, my aim is to draw attention back to this vital doctrine, to try to capture some of the wonder we should feel as we peer into the future, and to highlight its fundamental importance to our lives as Christians in the present.

Just to be clear, I am not going to discuss the period between a person's death and the return of Christ. That is not to say that it is irrelevant or unimportant. But we need to put it into perspective by measuring it against eternity, where it becomes just the blink of an eye. And we are not given a clear picture of what it will be like. There are hints, but we are given a much fuller explanation of the new creation, where Christians will spend the vast proportion of their lives. The reason is that we are not meant to focus our hope on our death, but on our resurrection. We are not to look to what Christopher Ash describes as a 'stopover' on the journey, but to the destination.¹ Christians seem to have concentrated on what happens immediately after we die, rather than looking to the fuller reality of what awaits us after the return of the Lord Jesus. I intend to concentrate on the latter.

I have two main reasons for writing this. One is that we often get eternity very, very wrong. The other is that we play it down and give it a far less significant place in our theology than it deserves. I was provoked into addressing this subject by hearing both of these from people I know. I have heard several friends discussing eternity over recent months.

Their accounts were alarming, and rather depressing, in that they were so wrong.

Have a look at the section in Revelation 21 which describes how we will float around on clouds for eternity . . . Hopefully you will not find it, because it is not there! So why is this the kind of description I keep hearing? In the version I hear, we will spend eternity (although I doubt people appreciate quite what this means) floating around on clouds, probably with wings, certainly wearing nightdresses, and hopefully playing some kind of musical instrument. They believe that this 'existence' will begin when they die, and I imagine they do not give much thought to how long it will go on for.² It is difficult to blame people for having these views. Almost every television or film portrayal of life after death looks like this, from sitcoms to advertisements for cheese spread. One of the most chilling portrayals of the afterlife ever captured on film is featured in *Unlikely Angel*, starring Dolly Parton as the eponymous angel who joins a white-robed, winged choir engaged in eternal singing practice. The Almighty Creator of the universe is conspicuously absent.

This is not what the Bible says. Yes, clouds are mentioned in connection with heaven, as are wings and white robes, but these elements have been taken apart and reconnected to form something awful. In fact, it is nothing short of tragic that we get it so wrong, because the reality is so astonishingly good. It is the glorious glimpse of eternity we are given in Revelation that I want to explore here.

But there is another significant way we can mistreat eternity, namely that we can play it down. It is not that we do not believe we will spend eternity with Jesus when he returns, and that we will be resurrected, sinless, in order to enjoy it. We may understand more of the truth about eternity, but we keep it in the background, preferring not to mention it, and we do not let it inform or affect our lives. There are many possible reasons why we should do this. None of them is very good. Perhaps we think that the promise of eternity sounds a little too much like a fairytale, like a Christian Neverland? We are all too grown up for fairytales. How could we possibly explain this to a rational adult? We cannot and would not explicitly deny it, but we are slightly embarrassed by it.

Or maybe we believe it is better to concentrate on the 'here and now'. There are plenty of problems to sort out in this world, without focusing on the world to come. And it is all very well saying that in the future all sin and suffering will be removed, but that is little comfort to those dealing with it now. We may feel that a romantic Utopian future will dull our sensitivity to the needs of the suffering and oppressed. Or perhaps even that it will prevent the oppressed

themselves from seeking to change their circumstances. James Cone describes how the hope of eternity was used by whites to keep their slaves under control.³ Similarly we may wish to avoid the accusation that we favour a spiritual cure to the problems of society when a material one will be much more effective.

Yet I do not believe that we are too pragmatic, nor that we are not pragmatic enough. Rather, the problem is that the picture we have in our heads is so bland and uninspiring that we find it difficult to be bothered at all. If we have in mind the cloudy, ethereal, night-dress-wearing view of eternity described earlier, then there is little wonder we do not focus on it. In fact, I have heard people remark that they would prefer hell – at least all of the cool people will be there! Admittedly, this says as much about our treatment of hell as it does about our teaching on the new creation, but once the reality of this kicks in, such an attitude becomes alarming. People are on their way to an eternity separated from God, but expecting star-studded debauchery, and understandably preferring this to eternal boredom!

I want to try to address both of these by looking at the final two chapters of Revelation. On the one hand, I hope to consider our *understanding* of eternity. Much could be written on these two chapters, but I hope I will at least be able to stimulate further thought. Yet doctrine which has no effect on our lives is useless. Therefore I also hope to consider our *attitude* towards eternity, and to show that it is far from irrelevant.

Chapters 21 and 22 come at the end of the revelation given to John, part of the spectacular climax to history that he witnesses. Over twenty-two chapters, John is exposed to startling scenes, which range from the gut-wrenching terror of judgement to the majesty of the new creation. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how John could have coped with what he saw, had it not ended with the promise of the new creation. The climax of God's plan of redemption is not judgement, but the eternity beyond it. What a reassurance it must have been for John as the vision faded from view.

Yet this glimpse of the future is not simply given to John for his own benefit. Rather, the testimony given to John is 'for the churches' (22:16). The whole of Revelation is the continuation of the warnings given by Christ to his churches in the opening chapters of the book. There he encourages the good he sees, but delivers stinging rebukes and stern warnings. The rest of the book backs up those warnings with formidable force. Time is limited. However long the end times are, there will be an end, and it will be devastating. 'I am coming soon', the Lord says (v.20). And so John is dispatched with his open book (v.10), a public revelation of what will come. In one hand, he carries the warning of judgement (v.13), in the other the offer of grace (v.14). And the clock is ticking.

There are three specific points I wish to draw out of these chapters. Again, there is much that could be said, but these three aspects represent three great truths about the new creation which we sadly neglect. But if we fully appreciate them, they cannot fail to affect our lives as we wait for our Lord's return. These aspects are: the *reality* of the new creation, the *residents* of the new creation, and the *restoration* of the new creation.

The Reality of the New Creation

This sounds like a simple point. It is, but I wish to make it nonetheless. The new creation is real. There is nothing vague or ethereal about it. John sees its walls (21:12) and its foundations (v.14). He walks its streets, and he stands by his angelic guide as he proudly measures the walls (v.15). The city defies description, and so John is forced to resort to statements like 'the city was pure gold, clear as glass' (v.18, and similarly in v.21). Yet he is struggling to express the reality he is being shown – the jaw-dropping, tongue-twisting reality of God's city, purged of sin and inhabited by God himself!

In fact, the new creation is doubly real. Beyond the bricks and mortar John saw, it is also real in that it has been promised by the Lord Jesus. 'Behold, I am making all things new . . . Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true' (v.5). If Christ has promised it, then it is real, regardless of whether it has happened yet; thus it is right to speak of the present reality of the new creation. If the promise is true then its fulfilment is equally so. Christ can exclaim, 'it is done!' (v.6), even though the events John witnessed lie in the future.

And the reality of this future is secured because it is rooted in an event which has already taken place. On the cross, Christ's willing self-sacrifice secured the future which John sees – our reconciliation to God has already been achieved through his death. And his resurrection not only proved that his sacrifice was sufficient, but it pointed to the resurrection that will be granted to those who are his.

To doubt the reality of the new creation robs Christ's work on the cross of its eternal dimension. This firm reality of the new creation should move us not only to examine our attitude towards the new creation, but also our attitude to the power and authority of Christ himself. If we treat eternity as a fairytale, is it that we struggle to believe the truth of his words? Or is it because we have reduced the cross to a simple legal exchange rather than an event of cosmic proportions which guarantees the future we see in Revelation?

The Residents Of The New Creation

The quality of any city is only partly determined by the quality of its buildings – its citizens are equally important. And so a significant proportion of the description of these chapters is given over to the residents of the new Jerusalem. The inhabitants of the city are also deeply relevant to the message of Revelation. Christ wants the readers, the recipients of his warnings, to spend eternity in the heavenly city. Accordingly, the description makes it extremely clear who will be there, and what eternity will be like for them.

The crucial detail is there there is an entry requirement. The simplicity of it is shocking and terrifying and beautiful. It is put in stark terms in verse 27: 'But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but *only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.*' There is a list of those who are to be admitted – all others are not. To many this sounds arbitrary and cold, and it would be if the list was handled like that of a celebrity party. But the Lamb's book of life is not compiled according to popularity,

beauty or achievement. Rather, it is a record of those who have received eternal life from the Lamb (hence the name of the book in verse 27).

In verse 6, Jesus repeats the offer of life to all those who will take it. 'To the thirsty, I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment' (v.6). His words here echo his conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4:13. The thirsty are compelled to come to him, and when they do their thirst is quenched *for free*. In light of this, the following verses are puzzling:

The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death

[Revelation 21:7-8].

Are works important too? Must we achieve some kind of victory to become residents of the new creation? And are there some activities which put us 'beyond the pale'? Based on what Christ has just said, this cannot be the case – either of these options negates grace and turns the gospel into a gospel of works. What these two categories describe are two responses to the gospel: those who accept it and are freed from sin, and those who reject the gospel and so continue in it. The 'one who conquers' (v.7) conquers sin, not based on what he has done, but by joining the side of the conqueror. It is in coming to him, thirsty and helpless, that we conquer. '[T]he cowardly, the faithless' and others (v.8) do not come to him and so are cut off from the life he offers. But this is not a list of factors which disqualify people who come to Christ for eternal life. When people are faced with the gospel, they are presented with a choice, and life can never be the same again. For some, the consequences in this life are too great, or the pull of sin is too strong, and so they choose to continue without Christ. Yet they must live with their decision for eternity, and 'their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur which is the second death' (v.8). Here we again feel the force of Christ's warning. Christians could read verse 8 with a note of triumph, but I do not believe that is how Jesus, who willingly bore our punishment so we could escape such a fate, would say it. I believe he would say it with tears in his eyes. And so should we.

The importance of grace is made clear again in 22:14. Those who will be saved are those who have washed their robes. But, of course, he does not mean that only those with clean clothes will be spared. Rather, he is recalling the multitude of chapter 7, who 'have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (7:14). It is a puzzling image, that blood-soaked robes should be whiter than white. The image is completely counter-intuitive, but then, isn't the gospel? Our efforts to clean our own robes will always prove fruitless – we will never get them clean enough. Rather, they must be cleaned for us in a way we would never expect or choose: through the death of the Son of God. Only those who have been cleansed by the sin-bearing blood-sacrifice of Christ are considered fit to join the assembly.

So the Lamb's book of life does not record those who have done anything to merit it – he is not Santa Claus, categorising people as 'Naughty' or 'Nice'! Nor should Christians take

any pride in being included. The book of life records, name by name, the work of God in the lives of his people. It is a testimony to God's all-surpassing glory, displayed in his infinite grace to sinners who would not have given him a passing thought were it not for that same grace.

Before moving on to the final point, which incorporates elements of both of these, it is worth pausing to consider what the residents of the new creation will spend their eternity *doing*. In discussing eternity, questions often arise about what we will do. *Will we have jobs? Will there be windsurfing? What will my house be like?* We do not have the answers to such questions. But they also point to a deeper misunderstanding of what eternity is all about. They hint that our view of eternity is centred on us, that we will achieve our hearts' desires, whatever they may be, and we will be able to enjoy them unhindered by the cares of the world. But the Bible's version of things is different – the centre of the new creation is God. 'No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him' (22:3). We may find this attitude to worship difficult to imagine in our present sin-tainted state. But if God is at the centre of the new creation, will we still want to skip church for a game of golf?

The Restoration Of The New Creation

As with the previous two, this point will not win any prizes for originality. But it is the most important point about the new creation. The key word is *new*. John's vision is of a *new* heaven and a *new* earth (v.1). He describes the holy city as the *new* Jerusalem (v.2) and Christ declares that he is making 'all things *new*' (v.5). The ultimate end of the cataclysmic events of Revelation is not destruction, but restoration!

While discussing this subject with a friend, he asked me: 'Are you "new creation" or "recreation"?' I have to admit I was stumped for a while. His question was basically whether, in forming the new heaven and new earth, did I think God will completely do away with the old and make something new in its place or restore what is already here. I was stumped because both seem to happen. The 'first heaven and the first earth' pass away (v.1), but it also sounds as if Christ is renewing what is already there (v.5). On reflection, both are true. There is both continuity and discontinuity between creation and the new creation. The word *new* itself implies this. Take the new Wembley stadium as an example. It can be described as 'new', because it has just been built. It is better, an upgraded and expanded version of the old one. But it is the *new* Wembley – it has a definite link to the old. The new stadium carries on the history, purpose and even some of the architecture of the old. The same applies to the new creation. It will be restored so that, in many ways, it will be completely unlike the creation we are familiar with. But it will maintain some continuity with the old. These two chapters do not explain exactly how this discontinuity and continuity will work together, yet they seem to show that it will be familiar, but unlike anything we know.

The main discontinuity will be that sin will be removed. We cannot imagine a world free from the effects of sin, because we are surrounded by it and soaked in it. But the new creation will be cleansed of all that mars our world. Just

as we are reconciled to God by Christ's death on the cross, so the rest of creation will be put back in order now that sin is paid for. 'The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8:21). This is an aspect of the gospel that can be easily obscured when we treat it solely in individual terms. The cross was an event of cosmic proportions, which did not just heal the fractures in our relationship with God (both as individuals and as a species), but which repaired the damage caused to the whole of creation by the fall!

This restored, new creation resembles more closely the world God designed, which sin ruined. It will be perfect. 'He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away' (Rev. 21:4). And such things will be prevented from ever entering again (v.27).

This similarity is made even more obvious by some of the features of the new Jerusalem. Beside the river of life, flowing through the city from the throne of God, stands the tree of life. Ever since Genesis 3:22-23, we have been cut off from it; here our access is restored, now that our sin has been pardoned. The tree bears fruit constantly, and its leaves heal the nations (Rev. 22:3). The tree draws its water from the river of life, which flows from the throne of God. Life is eternally available to all who dwell in the city of God.

But these are only parts of the most important truth about the new creation: that the vast chasm separating heaven and earth is closed, and the 'dwelling place of God is with man' (22:3)! The rupture between heaven and earth, between God and humanity, is healed as sin is paid for by Christ. In Revelation 21, John sees heaven literally reconnecting with earth, as the new Jerusalem descends. Heaven meets earth, and God walks among his people as he once did in Eden. And God's people can worship him face to face without fear.

This is summed up in verses 22 and 23, which is the high point of the chapter and, indeed, the whole book.

I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp
[Revelation 21:22-23].

The temple stood as a reminder of two things. It represented God's presence among his people. But it also reminded them of the separation from God. Even the building with all its courts and curtains was designed to make this clear. But now both are redundant as God makes his dwelling personally among his people. There are no lights, because the glory of God shines constantly (v.23). There is no night, no darkness because God will never withdraw from them. The whole of the Bible has been leading to this point, where God receives due glory from his rescued people for all eternity! This is the fulfilment of all God's promises to reconcile us to himself. He has been promising this all along, from the first glimmer of hope in Genesis 3. It happened at the cross. And in eternity, when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to judge, we will see the full effects of what was accomplished there!

Living with One Eye on Eternity

Johnny Cash once sang that 'you're so heavenly minded you're no earthly good'. Cash was singing about hypocrisy in those who claimed to be Christians. But if we have a biblical understanding of eternity, then his statement will never be true. A robustly biblical view of the new creation will not just be a distant future hope, but its effects will flow back into our lives here and now. And this will have an impact on how we think, how we live and how we speak. There are numerous applications of what I have covered thus far, but here are a few:

1. *It is the gospel!*

It is the heart of the good news: In Christ, God has repaired the damage that has been done to creation as a result of our sin. And he repairs the damage done to our relationship with him. It is remarkable that by God's grace we were saved *from* hell, but it is astonishing that we were saved *for* eternity with God as his people! God goes beyond simply saving us to inviting us to live with him in his newly created city.

Of course, this immediately confronts us with an important question: will this apply to us? Will your name be written in the Lamb's book of life?

2. *It should motivate us to worship*

We should worship God because of what he has done, what he gave, to make this fantastic future possible. We should worship him because of this magnificent future which awaits us. And we should worship in response to his all-surpassing glory which is displayed in his grace to us and in his victory over death. We should also worship with excitement that we will spend the rest of eternity doing it!

3. *It should strengthen us as we seek to live holy lives*

Living for Jesus, striving to be like him, is a struggle. It takes effort. If the Holy Spirit is at work in our hearts, then we will be constantly aware of our sin. Yet when the slog seems never-ending, when we run out of steam and feel like giving up, the hope of the new creation will keep us going. In Hebrews 12, Paul describes the Christian life as a race to be run. He urges his readers to keep going, and he urges them to focus on the goal ahead. This is the finish line we are running toward. The cloudy, ethereal eternity people are so fond of will not keep us running, but the real one will. One day, the struggle with sin and temptation will be over, and we will enjoy the rest we are promised (Hebrews 4:9).

4. *It should strengthen us as we suffer*

Just as our struggle with sin will one day come to an end, so also will our suffering. 'He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more . . .' (Rev. 21:4). One day, suffering will be over. Whatever we must endure in this life, it is temporary. Persecution, illness and grief will all be gone, forever.

Again, the fluffy clouds and white night-dresses will be of no comfort to us as we suffer. In suffering, the clouds will be shown up for what they are – insubstantial mist which

will not bear weight. But the sure and solid hope of eternity with God will strengthen us as we look to the day when our suffering will be at an end.

5. *This should drive us to tell other people*

Christ clearly sent John out with a message for others to hear; a message of warning, and a message of hope. Clouds, wings and eternal boredom are not good news. But this is fantastic news! How can we possibly keep it quiet?

'Surely I am coming soon', the Lord Jesus declares in the closing words of Revelation (22:20). We must leave Revelation, as John must have, with this promise ringing in our ears. We desperately need to recover the glorious reality of eternity with which we are presented, for our own sake but much more for the sake of the countless millions who have yet to hear of it. We must be heavenly minded if we are to be of any earthly good!

Gareth Leaney is Associate Pastor of Ferndale Baptist Church, Southend-on-Sea. He is currently studying for his MTh with WEST.

Notes

- 1 In a lecture given at the National Evangelists Conference, 2006 (available at www.evangelists-conference.org.uk/SearchingforEden.mp3). For similar comments, see Christopher Ash, 'On the dangers of Christian shorthand: Going to heaven', *The Briefing*, #327, (December 2005).
- 2 Granted, such people are often describing the period I am deliberately avoiding, but I think they would probably see it as the 'final destination' anyway.
- 3 James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 130.

Scripture alone: 'Is the Bible all we need?'

Tim Grass

This is the third of four addresses, subtitled 'Key Themes of the Protestant Reformation' by one of the Editorial Board of Evangel. It was originally delivered in an Anglican context (and is coloured thereby!).

KEYWORDS: Reformation, faith, practice, tradition, individualism, authority, creeds, church, revelation, inspired, salvation, holiness, Jesus Christ, word, sacrament, translation, relationship

Many Christians nowadays say that the Bible alone is our authority in faith and practice. We sometimes hear the Reformation described as a contest of Scripture *versus* tradition. You will often find the phrase '**Scripture alone**' is used to summarise Reformation thinking about Scripture, as if they didn't accept any other authority. But don't be misled. That kind of approach says more about the thinking of some people today than about the Reformers! What people today often mean by 'the Bible alone' is 'me and the Bible without any outside help', or 'my interpretation of the Bible is the only one' (cf. Gilbert & Sullivan 'In matters controversial my perception's very fine, / I always see both points of view, the one that's wrong – and mine.'). It is not surprising, therefore, that Orthodox and Roman Catholic writers accuse us of individualism, of believing that individual Christians have no need of the church or of the tradition of Christian theology.

But when the Reformers talked about 'Scripture alone', they did not mean to say that we can do without the church or tradition. For the Reformers, Scripture was not the *only* authority, but it was the *supreme* authority, in all aspects of

Christian faith and practice. Every other source of Christian teaching, such as preachers, creeds or confessions of faith, was subject to correction in the light of Scripture. In the same way, the Reformers valued the church's theological tradition, but they held that it must always be subject to further reform in the light of Scripture. The other authorities, such as the creeds of the early church, were accepted because they were seen as faithful summaries of Bible teaching (Article 8). On the other hand, there were some more recent traditional practices and beliefs which the Reformers wanted to question. Often, in the Articles, particular ideas were rejected precisely because they were believed to be contrary to Scripture. The church is to be 'a witness and a keeper' of Holy Scripture (Article 19). It must not insist that its members believe or practise anything which is contrary to Scripture. In the eyes of the Reformers, the medieval church was guilty of the same sin as the scribes in Jesus' day: he condemned them because by their traditions they made the word of God ineffective (Mark 7); they rejected the commandments of God in order to keep their own traditions. So the Reformers insisted that theology should return to Scripture as its primary source and supreme authority. And they treated the Scriptures as the supreme authority because they believed that the Bible was unique.

For the Reformers, **the Bible was unique** because it had its origin in God's revelation of himself to humanity. They explained that, as finite and sinful human beings, we can know God only because he has chosen to make himself