

Hope for Home

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a four-part series

December 9, 2018

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Genesis 1:1–5 (NRSV)

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³ Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.

⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.

⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Micah 4:3–4 (NRSV)

- ³ He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
⁴ but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

Revelation 21:3–4 (NRSV)

- ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

2 Corinthians 5:1–5 (The Message)

For instance, we know that when these bodies of ours are taken down like tents and folded away, they will be replaced by resurrection bodies in heaven—God-made, not hand-made—and we’ll never have to relocate our “tents” again. Sometimes we can hardly wait to move—and so we cry out in frustration. Compared to what’s coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an unfurnished shack, and we’re tired of it! We’ve been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home, our resurrection bodies! The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what’s ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we’ll never settle for less.

What is the nature of our Christmas hope?

Last week, we saw that Advent and Christmas are but dim portraits of all that God has in store for us. As wonderful as the celebrations can be, they are still meant to point us to God’s work in this world, his work of creation, renewal, and restoration. The incarnation of Jesus was the culmination of that work, when God stepped in to do for us what we are unwilling to do for ourselves: to simply love God and others. But even the incarnation, the birth of Christ, was not the full consummation of God’s work, for that still lies ahead. So what does God have in store for us and all of his creation? I’ve collected a few biblical passages that paint pictures of where all this is headed.

God creates everything, and it is good

Even those who may know little else about the Bible are familiar with its opening: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, . . .” Most also know that God pronounced it good: “And God saw that the light was good; . . .” God created all that is and, not surprisingly, it is a good creation. Nonetheless, we humans seem to be drawn to the idea that the physical world is somehow inferior to the spiritual or, as some might say, “it is our souls that really matter, our bodies are just smelly, easy-to-break vessels for our souls.” But this is not the Christian view.

I never thought that I would use the word “Gnosticism” in one of these studies. But some years ago, I was walking through Barnes & Noble and saw a sign, “Gnostic Writings,” on a prominent end-cap. I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. Talk of Gnosticism arrived in the public eye with *The DaVinci Code*, which relies on Gnostic writings for much of its depiction of Christianity. The interest is in keeping with a book of theology on my shelf: *Against the Protestant Gnostics* by Philip Lee.

Gnosticism (from the Greek word for “knowledge,” *gnosis*) is not a religion but more of a perspective about the world that sits on the edge of many religions. Gnosticism has two hallmark beliefs. *First*, the Gnostic perspective is that the material world was created by a lesser, inferior god and, hence, is inferior to the spiritual realm. For many Gnostics, the material world is not just inferior, it is evil. Not surprisingly then, the purpose of life becomes to leave the material world and to ascend to the higher, superior spiritual realm. *Second*, in Gnosticism the path to the higher, spiritual realm is reached through some sort of secret knowledge. For example, the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas¹ begins by saying that it contains the secret sayings of Jesus.

Why does this matter? It matters for more reasons than I could touch on here, but let’s look at one. Embracing the goodness and the inherent value of God’s creation helps us to understand and to accomplish the work God has given us. This world is not a place to be escaped from or even tolerated as we await our trip to heaven. Yes, the world is in much need of renewal and restoration. There is often little evidence of God’s kingdom. But our charge is to do all we can to make God’s kingdom evident to all. We can’t build the kingdom, that is God’s work, but we can build *for* the kingdom. Every kind touch, every mouth we feed and body we clothe, every act of selfless giving, every word of truth, every work of beauty we create, all compassion, all sacrifice – none of it will be lost, all of it will be incorporated into God’s renewal of creation, a restoration of the physical *and* the spiritual.

In the context of the season, Christmas is the anticipation not of an idea, no matter how spiritual, but of a material, concrete reality in which God has put all things right. The incarnation is the very concrete (childbirth!) expression of God’s sacrificial commitment to rescuing not only humanity, but God’s creation.

New Creation

Let’s jump from Christmas to Jesus’ return and the consummation of God’s rescue. Look at the passages above. See how concrete they are. No more war, no more violence, everyone living in peace. Isaiah spoke of no more infant death, wolves and lambs sharing a meal, lions eating like they are oxen (see Isaiah 65: 17-25). Centuries later, John would incorporate these images and more into his Revelation, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven . . . then the angel showed me the river of the water of life . . . on either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit . . .” (from Rev. 21 and 22). All these images appeal to our imaginations as we contemplate the glories of God’s renewed creation. And their concreteness expresses the Christian hope, the confidence,

¹The Gospel of Thomas dates to the mid-2nd Century AD. It is a list of roughly 110 so-called secret sayings of Jesus. It bears no resemblance to the Gospels canonized in the NT and, so far as we know, was never considered for canonization by significant portions of the Christian community.

that God will one day, in a burst of new creative energy, restore creation to the full goodness expressed in the opening two chapters of Genesis. From Isaiah's "new heavens and new earth" to our own weekly affirmation of the resurrection of our bodies, we look forward to and work toward a new life in a renewed world that overflows with the love of God and one another.

This affirmation of the material renewal of all creation is seen throughout the New Testament. One lesser known but powerful passage from Paul is found in his letter, 2 Corinthians, found above. It is a difficult passage in that Paul isn't terribly clear, so I've printed Peterson's paraphrase from *The Message*, as I think it makes clearer while respecting Paul's meaning. Here are some of N.T. Wright's observations on the passage:

First, he refers to the body as a 'house' or 'tent' (in his world, of course, many people lived in tents all the time, which was one of the reasons why there was always work for a tentmaker like him). This enables him to say both that the present body can be exchanged for a better one in due course, and that being embodied matters. . . .

He combines this with the idea of the body as 'clothing'. This enables him to say a similar thing from a slightly different angle: the Christian hope for the future is not about becoming *disembodied* but about being *re-embodied*. We don't, as he says, want to turn out to be 'naked', a bare spirit or soul without any 'clothing'. In fact, the hope he expresses in verse 4 is seen in terms of putting more clothes on, on top of the ones we're wearing already: we don't want to be *unclothed*, but to be *more fully clothed*. And the transformation he has in mind, exactly as in 1 Corinthians 15, is that whereas the present body is 'mortal', 'doomed to die', heading for corruption and decay whether we like it or not, the body that is to come will be full of life, a life that nothing can harm or destroy. . . .

The resurrection body, then, will be similar to the present one in some respects and quite different in others. It's hard to imagine just what it will be like; the resurrection of Jesus himself was regarded by Paul and others in the early church as the model and prototype of the one that is to come, but that doesn't tell us much except that it really is what we would call a body but with startling new properties. . . .

The reason Paul is saying all this is not simply that he wants the Corinthians to understand the resurrection hope (though of course he does, and the present passage is an important supplement to what he said in 1 Corinthians 15). It is, rather, that he wants them to understand that his present work as an apostle, though it carries death about with it, also carries, by the spirit, the sure hope of resurrection. Once they realize that, they may learn to see not only him, but their own selves, in quite a new light.

And the same applies to us, too.²

Thus our question is this: Do we see ourselves and our world in a new light, in the light of the incarnation? That is the really the point of Christmas. Advent is a brief season of making ourselves ready to behold again the Child of Promise, in whom we grasp the depth of God's love for us and the home, the material home, that will one day be yet another gift from our Creator. Christmas hope is not a dream, it is the sure confidence that, despite our sin, God loves us and will one day, fulfill our most extravagant dreams.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. This week's study is largely focused on a single theme, that the biblical perspective of God's new creation, of God's kingdom, is not merely spiritual but also physical. This may seem self-evident given that every week we rise and say the Apostles

² Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians* (pp. 52–54). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Creed aloud, affirming our belief in the “resurrection of the body.” However, I’ve learned that many Christians think the affirmation is speaking only of Jesus, not of ourselves. But the affirmation *is* about our own resurrection. Jesus’ resurrection came first but it will not have been unique!

2. You might begin by reflecting and talking about this business of a *physical* renewal of creation and the *physical* resurrection of ourselves. Do you believe it? What do you think it means? If you are like me, you’d like a whole more information than the Bible gives us (will I get all my hair back!?). How can we embrace the notion of a renewed creation without knowing the details? Might it come down to trusting God? Can we trust that regardless of what this renewal will be like, it will be good?
3. What are the implications for *this life* of a physical end/new beginning to our story? Does it make any difference at all? If your body is as important as your soul, how does it change your view of your own body?

Daily Bible Readings

More on the new creation

Monday, Isaiah 65:17-25 The entire “new creation” passage from which today’s Scripture passage was taken

Tuesday, Isaiah 66:14-24 The reign and the indignation of God

Wednesday, 1 Corinthians 15. Paul’s majestic chapter on the resurrection, Jesus’ and our own

Thursday, 2 Peter 3:1-13 The promise of Jesus’ second coming

Friday, Revelation 21 The new heavens, new earth, and new Jerusalem

Saturday, Revelation 22:1-7 The river of the water of life and the tree of life

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Acts.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2).

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: The Good News in *A Christmas Carol*