

Introduction

Eschatology, the study of the last days of the world, has always captivated the attention and curiosity of both Christians and non-Christians. In this article we shall consider three questions in this field. First, what is biblical eschatology? Second, how does it relate to the rest of the bible? And third, what does it mean to our lives?

I. What is Biblical Eschatology?

A. Millennialism and Eschatology

When we hear the term eschatology, we usually think of the different views surrounding millennialism. While recognizing that the period of the millennium is important, it must be said that this condition is not eternal. Rather than focusing simply on the millennium, which is temporary, we should reflect more on the final and eternal state of humanity and creation. As Georg E. Ladd comments on the differences surrounding premillennial and amillennial views: "it is often overlooked that in both of these interpretations, the final goal is the same — the consummation of God's kingdom in the age to come."¹ Or again, as F. F. Bruce notes, the differences in the millennialism are "minor questions." He reconfigures the question thus:

What is of the essence to the gospel is the sure expectation of the time when the cosmic effects of Christ's redemptive work will be accomplished and "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8:21).²

Richard Bauckham, one of the top two eschatologists among evangelical scholars, writes:

The millennium is properly a transitional

period of earthly perfection, intervening between the end of history and the new creation of all things.³

Ladd, Bruce and Bauckham urge us to go beyond the different positions in millennialism and focus on the eternal state. Thus, in our article the term eschatology refers specifically to this final stage beyond the millennium.

B. Three Positions on the Eschaton

Richard Bauckham proposes that there have been three historical positions on eschatology.⁴ They are this-worldly, other-worldly, and holistic.

1. This-worldly

The first is "this-worldly" eschatology. Augustine reacted to this popular notion of eschatology of his time, because Christians then simply projected their earthly desires to be fulfilled in the coming kingdom on earth. Seeking an ideal society on earth often appears in non-religious circles as well. Modernism in the 19th century anticipated utopia on earth by means of human reason, Liberalism by both reason and the influence of Church, and Marx-Leninism by revolution. We may call this type of eschatology "this-worldly eschatology," since its primary concern is utopia on earth whether with or without God.

2. Other-worldly

The second type of eschatology is "other-worldly." During the Intertestamental Period, Judaism was deeply influenced by Hellenism and began to see heaven as their final destination, the view of which was not shared by the people of the Old Testament.

After the New Testament, Augustine, who was once a committed neo-Platonist, introduced to the Western Church a modified neo-Platonic spirituality. He emphasized that the union with God would occur only in heaven.

Neo-Platonists believed that the universe was

¹ George E. Ladd, "Kingdom of God," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960).

² F.F. Bruce, "Eschatology," *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960).

³ Richard Bauckham, "Eschatology," in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. Adrian Hastings (Oxford: Open University Press, 2000).

⁴ Bauckham, "Eschatology."

emitted by higher spiritual being, and viewed that the visible things were either evil or lower than the spiritual. Their salvation was to leave the physical body and physical world, ascend to heaven and to be united with the one spirit-God. Due to this influence, it was inconceivable for Augustine that men can be united with God on earth. In the final chapter of his "City of God" (22:30), Augustine describes the final state of humanity. According to him, the saved humanity would be united with God in heaven and spend eternity there. In this union with God, God's creation disappears from the consciousness of the believers, because God becomes everything for Christians. Thus, Bauckham comments,

the future of the individual after death has often been emphasized at the expense of the future of the world. This emphasis was fostered by the influence of Platonism in earlier periods and later by modern individualism.⁵

Although this eschatology rightly longed for the union with God, it diverted attention away from the indispensable aspect of Christian salvation, that is, God's creation.

3. Holistic

The third type of eschatological position is holistic. By "holistic," Bauckham meant the view which upholds aspects of eschatology which are not only spiritual but also bodily, not only individual but also community, and not only human but also the non-human creation. He suggests that in the New Jerusalem portrayed in the book of Revelation, "the polarization" of the this-worldly and other-worldly eschatologies above is overcome. When the New Jerusalem descends from heaven, believers will be united with God. However, this union with God will be accomplished not in heaven, but on earth, not only personally but also communally, and not only for humanity but also for the whole creation.

C. Biblical Eschatology

The union with God on earth as the final state is not an invention in the book of Revelation.

1. Old Testament

James D. Tabor notes that in the Ancient Near East "any report of a human being ascending to heaven would be seen as not only extraordinary, but often even as an intrusion or invasion of the divine realm." Also in the Old Testament, Tabor continues,

The normal fate, even of the great heroes of the Hebrew Bible such as Abraham, Moses, and David, is death or "rest" in Sheol (Gen 25:7-9; Deut 34:6; 1 Kgs 2:10, cf Acts 2:29-34).⁶

Isaiah prophesied that the Lord would come to Jerusalem and he will reign over the whole earth as king (Is. 2). Not only for Isaiah, but also for most of the prophets, salvation meant the coming of YHWH or the messiah to establish his kingship on earth with Jerusalem as the center.

For Old Testament writers, salvation was not for a man to go to heaven, but for God to come down to judge the wicked, to be with the righteous, and to rule the earth forever.

2. New Testament

a. Paul

Paul appears to have employed the expectation of Hellenism that souls will depart from the physical body after death and be with God in the heavens (Eph 1:21-24; 2 Cor 5:1-10). However, Paul seems to understand that this stay in heaven is only temporary. Paul's emphasis is not so much going to heaven after death, but on Jesus' coming to earth and on the physical resurrection (1 Cor. 15). When Christ comes, the dead will be raised and the body of the

⁶ "Heaven, Ascent to" in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992). The only two exceptions are Enoch and Elijah. Referring to Gen. 5:24 ("God took him") Tabor comments that this may mean that God transferred Enoch to "some special region on this earth, as in the cases of Gilgamesh's Utnapishtim or Menelaus in Homer." Elijah seems to fall in this case and Tabor suggests that "heaven" in 2 Kings 2:11 may simply mean "sky" as it does in other numerous passages in the Old Testament.

⁵ Bauckham, "Eschatology."

living will be transformed. Therefore, when Paul wrote that "our citizenship is in heaven," he moved on to say "and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20).

It is noteworthy that Paul did not only believe in the redemption of the human body, but also of the whole creation (Rom 8:19ff). For him, the creation would not be annihilated but would be "liberated from its bondage to decay" (Rom 8:20). Paul also emphasized that God's reconciliation through Christ encompasses *ta panta*, all things, even the whole creation (Col. 1:16, 17, 20). It is impossible to hold to the idea that Christian salvation is only for humanity. God intends to redeem the whole creation. The idea that the liberated creation will not decay echoes the statement in Isaiah "the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me" (66:22).

Unlike Augustine, the creation will not disappear in the final state according to Paul. It will be redeemed. Paul also embraces the belief in the union with God on earth.

b. The book of Hebrews

The author of the book of Hebrews emphasizes that Christians are "longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them" (Heb 11:16). This city is "the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God" (12:22). Is the author then saying that we are longing to go to heaven? The book often tells about "the world to come" (2:5), "the powers of the coming age" (6:5), and that "He who is coming will come and will not delay" (10:37). What the book of Hebrews is hoping to see is not the present Jerusalem, nor the heavens, "but we are looking for the city that is *to come*" (13:14 emphasis mine).

Revelation describes this moment in the future:

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, . . .

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." (21:2-4).

The writer of the book of Hebrews encourages us to wait for the Holy City to come to us on earth.

c. John

Eternal life for John the apostle was not the eternal bliss of souls in heaven. It was the life of resurrection at the eschaton. As John writes, "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40, see also v. 54). It is in this eschatological context that Jesus said, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me" (John 14:3). When Jesus comes back to earth, he will raise us from the dead, and we will have a place in the Father's Holy City, which will descend from heaven to earth (Rev. 21, 22).

d. Peter

Peter did not believe in the annihilation of creation either. Some conclude from the two Greek terms in 2 Pet. 3:10 and in the Gospels: *parerchomai* (pass away) or *eurischo* (lay bear) that the present world will become extinct. It may not be wise at present to draw this conclusion and make it a central doctrine for our theology and life, because these terms do not necessarily suggest extinction.

The overall context and the words used in chapter three (and in the Gospels) seem to emphasize the purification and renewal of the universe, not its extinction or annihilation.⁷ Just as the old heaven and earth was destroyed by water, the present heaven and earth will be destroyed by fire. However, just as the old heaven and earth was not annihilated by water,

⁷ For a critical exegesis of this passage, see also David M. Russell, *The "New Heavens and New Earth": Hope for the Creation in Jewish Apocalyptic and the New Testament*, Studies in Biblical Apocalyptic Literature, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Visionary Press, 1996).

but was cleansed, purified and renewed, the present heaven and earth will not be annihilated by fire, but will be cleansed, purified, and renewed. Peter anticipates that righteousness will dwell in the new heaven and the new earth (2 Peter 3:13, 14). Just as we put our feet on the present earth, we will put our feet on the new earth (see Rev. 22 and Isaiah 65-66 where the new earth is described as peopled by a renewed humanity).

3. Early Fathers

The idea of the union with God on earth was also held during the period of the early (post-apostolic) church.

a. The Didache

According to the Didache, which was used as a baptismal class textbook in Syria about 100 AD (the period right after the New Testament) we can observe that what the early church waited for as salvation was not to go to heaven but the resurrection of the dead (16:6) and Jesus' second coming. The Didache closes with this sentence: "then the world will see the Lord coming on the cloud in heaven"(16:8).

b. Irenaeus

In his "Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching," Irenaeus (140-200 AD) also understood that Christian salvation is the victory over sin and death in the physical body. And that Christ will "recapitulate in himself all things in heaven and on earth" (ch. 30). Gustaf Aulén notes that Irenaeus' recapitulation means "the restoring and the perfecting of the creation. . . The Recapitulation does not end with the triumph of Christ over the enemies . . . ; it continues in the work of the Spirit in the church. . . But the completeness of the Recapitulation is not realized in this life. Irenaeus' outlook is strongly eschatological."⁸ For him, recapitulation is not annihilation but the transformation of the universe,

⁸ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (London: SPCK, 1931), 37-38.

which was started on the Cross and will be perfected at His second coming. Irenaeus also encouraged the believers "to keep the body unstained unto resurrection and the soul incorruptible" (ch. 41).⁹ For Irenaeus, Christian salvation was not for the soul to go to heaven, but for the whole creation, including our physical bodies, to be transformed and renewed by Christ's return.

c. Old Roman Creed

In the baptismal confession used in 200 AD, the applicant was not asked if he believed that he would go to heaven after death, but was asked, "do you believe that Christ Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead? . . . do you believe in the resurrection of the body?"¹⁰

d. Nicene Creed

The Nicene Constantinople Creed, an ecumenical confession in 381 AD¹¹ (both valued by the Eastern and the Western Church) does not touch on the heavenly realm either, but states that the Lord "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. . . . We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

e. Summary

To sum it up, the consummation of salvation that the authentic church awaited during the 1st to 4th century AD was not for a Christian soul to go up to heaven, but for Jesus to come down to earth to establish his kingdom on earth and for a Christian to be raised from the dead and live there for eternity.

⁹ Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. Joseph P. Smith, *Ancient Christian Writers*, ed. Johannes Quasten (London: Longmans, 1952), p. 74.

¹⁰ John H. Leith, "Creeds," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

¹¹ The Old Roman Creed was the forerunner of the Apostles' Creed. It was used in the West from the 2nd to the 3rd century (e.g., St. Hippolytus) in the form of question and answer. The Apostles' Creed was established in the present form in about 710-20 AD and had been used only in the Western Church.

4. Eastern Church¹²

The eschatology of the Eastern Church, which was less influenced by Greek Philosophy, maintains the understanding of the Early Church. They do not believe in going to heaven or in the annihilation of the universe. A prominent Greek Orthodox theologian, John Meyendorff writes:

the Church expects the second coming of Christ in power as the visible triumph of God in the world and the final transfiguration of the whole creation. Man, as center and lord of the creation, will then be restored to his original stature, which has been corrupted by sin and death; this restoration will imply the "resurrection of the flesh," because man is not only a "soul," but a psychosomatic whole, necessarily incomplete without his body.¹³

The Eastern Church firmly believes that the final transfiguration of the whole creation is the ultimate goal of the salvation brought by Christ.

5. Modern Evangelical Scholarship

Not only the Early Church and the Eastern Church, but also some modern evangelical scholars maintain a holistic eschatology.

For example, Baptist theologian Dr. Henry Thiessen, a former chairman of the faculty of the Graduate School, Wheaton College, is a strong pre-millennialist. In his classic textbook on systematic theology he probes the notion of the new heaven and the new earth: "Neither heaven nor earth will be annihilated," and "Why should it be thought a strange

thing that matter is to exist forever?"¹⁴

Also Lutheran theologian H. Jacobs concludes, "therefore, the home of the blessed after the final judgment is the new heaven and the new earth, the new earth in particular."¹⁵ He also describes the new earth as "the real world" (p. 621).

In his enduring work on dogmatics,¹⁶ *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), Gordon J. Spykman asserts:

The parousia [Jesus' second coming], therefore, does not introduce a radical break with the past. . . . The familiar contours of the created order, with its divinely given structures and functions, give shape and form to the life of a resurrected humanity in God's renewed world where everything will be thoroughly redeemed, completely redirected to its appointed end. Isaiah's prophecy (chapter 60 and 65) of a time of "beating swords into ploughshares" will come to final fulfillment in the new earth. (p. 559)

Spykman also notes:

But what about us, late twentieth-century Christians? We sometimes repaint John's picture in such otherworldly terms ("beyond the blue horizon"), as a faraway place ("beautiful isle of somewhere") with strange-sounding names ("Beulah land"), that we can hardly conceive of it as real, let alone want it very much. Such ethereal projections lead Hoekema to ask pointedly:

¹² The Eastern Church understands that Roman Diocesan gradually departed from the other 6 dioceses and became influenced by Greek Philosophy. Protestantism which was born out of the western tradition was more Platonic than Roman Church and then secularized. Y. Takahashi, *Greek Orthodox*, Kodansha Gakujuzubunko (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1980).

¹³ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends & Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 219.

¹⁴ Henry C. Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 516.

¹⁵ H. Jacobs, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. Nabetani (Tokyo, Seibunsha: 1970), 619.

¹⁶ Among others, seasoned evangelical theologian J. I. Packer gives it a high commendation.: "This rigorous neo-Kuyperian rethinks of how theology should be done is a milestone in Reformed exposition. It is the most stimulating systematics that I have read for a long time."

. . . does such a conception do justice to biblical eschatology? Are we to spend eternity somewhere off in space, wearing white robes, plucking harps, singing songs, and flitting from cloud to cloud while doing so? On the contrary, the Bible assures us that God will create a new earth on which we shall live to God's praise in glorified, resurrected bodies. On that new earth, therefore, we hope to spend eternity, enjoying its beauties, exploring its resources, and using its treasures to the glory of God. (*The Bible and the Future*, p. 274) (pp. 559-60).

H. Bavinck, a Dutch Reformed theologian, likewise emphasizes this same point of creational continuity in the midst of discontinuity:

We are not to think in terms of a completely new creation. For heaven and earth as they presently exist will indeed come to an end in their present form (I Corinthians 7:31), and will be burned and purged by fire (II Peter 3:6, 7, 10), just as the ancient earth was deluged by the flood. Yet, just as human beings are renewed by Christ, but are not destroyed to be created again (II Corinthians 5:17), so essentially the world will be preserved, even though it will experience such a great change in form that it is called a new heaven and a new earth (*Magnalia Dei*, p 644)¹⁷

Not only systematic theologians, but a number of biblical theologians also take the same position. For example, the author of *The Book of Revelation* in The New International Commentary on the New Testament Series, Robert H. Mounce, notes:

In the closing chapter of Isaiah God

promised that he would "create new heavens and a new earth" (Is 65:17) which would remain before him forever (Is 66:22). The fulfillment of this promise begins to unfold in John's vision of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven to take its place upon a renewed earth. It comprises the last major unit of the Apocalypse (21:1-22:5). Ladd emphasizes that Biblical thought — in contrast to Greek dualism in which salvation consists of the flight of the soul from the earthly and transitory to the spiritual and eternal— "always places man on a redeemed earth, not in a heavenly realm removed from earthly existence"¹⁸

A renowned NT scholar, N.T. Wright, comments on Rev. 21:

But that future, according to Revelation 21, is *not* that people will escape up to heaven, but that the new Jerusalem will come down *from* heaven, so that the dwelling of God will be with his human creatures.¹⁹

Another NT scholar, George E. Ladd, concurs:

The final restoration includes the material world. Creation awaits the disclosure of the children of God when they will experience the redemption of their bodies, for creation itself will be freed from the bondage to decay and will experience freedom from the evil to which it has been subjected (Rom. 8:19-23). Thus the redemption of the natural world from evil and decay is the corollary of the redemption of the body. While Paul does not develop this truth, it is built upon the same profound biblical theology that is found in the OT. The prophets constantly

¹⁸ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 368.

¹⁹ N. T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 1999), 11.

¹⁷ *Reformed Systematic Theology for Lay People*, trans. Kazuo Matsuda (Takehara: Seikei Jusanjo, 1985), 603-04.

described the establishment of God's kingdom in terms of a redeemed world (Is. 11:6-9; 65:17-25); the NT shares the same theology. Creation is never viewed as something evil that must be escaped.²⁰

D. Conclusion

Let us summarize now what we have discussed. In the beginning, we briefly surveyed three positions on the eschaton. The this-worldly eschatology anticipates utopia on earth without God. The other-worldly eschatology longs for the union with God in heaven at the expense of God's creation. The biblical and holistic eschatology embraces the two: God comes down on earth to be with his people, which involves the redemption of the whole creation.

The Old Testament, the New Testament, the Early Fathers, the ecumenical creeds, the Eastern Church and even some modern evangelical scholars – premillennialists, Baptist, Lutheran and Reformed – hold that Christian Eschatology is not "for a soul to go to heaven and spend eternity there," or that Christians will build utopia on earth without God. Instead biblical Eschatology awaits Christ's visible return when we will be resurrected from the dead onto earth. Christ will judge the living and the dead, and rule the transformed earth forever. As Paul himself affirms, "through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col. 1:20).

II. How does it relate to the rest of the Bible?

We shall now turn to the second question: how does this holistic eschatology relate to the rest of the Bible? This question may be rephrased as follows. Why does God need to redeem the whole universe? Why is the redemption of human souls not good

enough? What is wrong with the neo-Platonic spirituality which longs for the union with God in heaven, forgetting the creation? The answer is simply that God created humanity and the rest of creation not to abandon them. In spite of evil and sin that distorted them, God intends to restore the whole creation. To put it another way, Christian salvation is to restore the damage done to God's original plan for his Creation. George Ladd helpfully explains this point:

The goal of God's redemptive purpose is the restoration of order to a universe that has been disrupted by evil and sin. This includes the realm of human experience, the spiritual world (Eph. 1:10), and, as we shall see, even nature itself. God will finally reconcile all things to Himself through Christ (Col. 1:20). All things were originally created through Christ and for Him (v. 16), and He will finally enjoy the preeminence that is His due (v. 18). The very cosmos that has been rent by conflict and chaos will be restored to peace with its Creator. This eschatological reconciliation will be accomplished through the blood of the cross (v. 20). Paul sees in the death of Christ a triumph over evil spiritual powers, (2:14f.), although he nowhere explains what this involves; and the final eschatological reconciliation is but the effective extension of the victory won on the cross.²¹

This cosmic perspective of salvation was present from the very beginning in the OT. Old Testament scholars such as William J. Dumbrell,²² Christopher J.H. Wright,²³ and Al Wolters,²⁴ vigorously argue for

²¹ Ibid.

²² *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants*, Biblical and Theological Classics Library (Exeter, Devon UK: Paternoster Press, 1984).

²³ *God's People in God's Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament*, Biblical and Theological

²⁰ George E. Ladd, "Eschatology," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

this understanding in their writings. OT scholar John Goldingay²⁵ from Fuller Theological Seminary, also affirms the same point:

The object of redemption is the restoration of creation. Human beings are redeemed so as to live again their created life before God, the life God still intends for all his creatures (229).

In this sense what the book of Isaiah finally envisages is a restoration of creation order and a reintegration of human history into that order (238).

Let me summarize in a schematic way the main points these biblical scholars are making.

A. Creation

When God created the whole universe, God saw it and said that it was good (Gen. 1:31). This is unlike Neo-platonism, which conceives the material as evil, or at least a lower state than the spirit. We were created with flesh and spirit in union and in the image of God (1:27), which is the visible representative of the invisible God in the Ancient Near East context.

We were created as beings who live in relationship to God, our fellow humans and nature. There in Eden, humanity was to live a life of worship to God (the union with God), of mutual love for one another (community), and in harmony with nature (non-human creation). God commanded humankind to: fill the earth with families, communities and nations in worship of God; embodying love and justice; and tasked to take care of the earth (Gen. 1:28, 2:15). This was the plan of God for the whole humanity and for his whole creation (in other words, God creation order). The Garden of Eden shows how things were supposed to be in the beginning.

Classics Library (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1997 (90)).

²⁴ *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, Biblical Classics Library (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1996).

²⁵ *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1987).

B. Fall

However, man severed his relationship with God. As a result, sin entered the world, and in the process, the other two relationships (community and nature) were also corrupted (Gen. 3:12, 16, 17-19). The creation order has been distorted.

C. Restoration Planned

1. Noah

Through the Flood God destroyed humans and the earth (Gen. 6:17). However it did not mean annihilation by destruction. God did not annihilate the visible, nor bring the soul of Noah to heaven. God put Noah back on the renewed earth and repeated to Noah the same command that he gave to Adam (Gen. 8:15-17, 9:1, 2). God intended to restore the creation order in the renewed earth and to preserve it through his covenant. God made this covenant not only with humans, but also with all the living (9:9), even with the whole earth (9:13). Here we see God's commitment for his visible creation. Noah's story is not an illustration for us to go to heaven. Rather it shows how God loves the whole creation and is committed to restore the creation order on the renewed earth. However, the new humanity has failed (Gen. chap. 10-11).

2. Abraham

God led Abraham out of Ur. He promised Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) that his descendants would become God's people (a God-centered community), and would live in a land (nature) and also that Abraham's descendants would be the source of blessing to the entire world (and thus, the whole creation). God did not give up his plan for his creation.

3. The Land of Canaan, the Second Eden

God fulfilled this three-fold promise partially through Moses.

a. Exodus

Quite obviously, the deliverance (salvation) from Egypt was not merely a matter of the soul. If it were so, God would have taken the Israelites directly to heaven from Egypt. God meant that the Israelites

would occupy a land and live according to His plan that He originally had for his creation. God intended that the Israelites would become a model for humanity.

b. The Law

Through the law, God showed the secularized Israel an image of a community which would fear God, be filled with love and justice, and which would take care of the land (or the earth, which is the same word in Hebrew). We may say that the purpose of the Law was to restore God's order for creation at a particular time and in a particular land. This is clearly shown in Exodus and Deuteronomy:

The Lord is the God of love and justice for the oppressed and the weak (Dt. 10:17-19). Therefore, God ordered the Israelites to take care of the poor (Dt. 15:11) in at least four ways: (1) to cancel the debts after 7 years (Dt. 15:4, 7); (2) to free slaves after 7 years (Dt. 15:12); (3) to pay the wages within the day (Dt. 24:14-15); and (4) to leave the crop for the widows, etc. (Dt. 24:19-22). God also ordered love and justice in the judicial realm (Dt. 16:18-20), in business (Dt. 25:13-16), as well as in dealing with slaves (note reference to slave girls, cf. Dt. 21:14), in the matter of sexuality (Dt. 22:13-19, 23-30), and even in building a new house (Dt. 22:8).

God demanded justice and love for his other creation as well. For example, the Decalogue commands to make the land, slaves, and cattle rest (Exod. 20:10, see also Exod. 23:10-12). And God expressed opposition to unnecessary tree felling (Dt. 20:19).

The land of Canaan "drinks rain from heaven" (Dt. 11:11) like Eden (Gen. 2:6, 10) and there the people of God will gather grain, new wine and oil abundantly. They will eat and be satisfied (Dt. 11:14, 15) as in Eden (Gen. 1:29, 30). Work will become a joyful task (Dt. 12:7, 12, 28). These are the blessings that restore the original state of creation from its cursed state (Gen. 3:17-19).

Here, the development of Eden can be seen:

God is at the center of a community in the land of Canaan. This lifestyle constitutes what may be called the Second Eden.

God planned that other peoples would look at the blessing of the Israelites and return to Him as well (Dt. 4:6-8, 26:18-19). This would have been the blessing to the whole nations.

c. Monarchy

Even at the period of the monarchy, it was the king's calling to turn the hearts of the people to God and to pursue social justice (1 Chr. 18:14). Solomon was once the ideal king (2 Chr. 9:8). He asked the Lord for wisdom to do justice (Ps 72, 1 King 3:9). God promised that the Davidic king would reign forever (2 Sam. 7:9-11) and eventually would rule the entire world with love and justice (Ps 72, 110). The promise to Abraham that God would establish his people on earth and would make them a blessing to the world will be fulfilled by a future Davidic king. Then the whole earth will be filled with communities which fear God, and are filled with love and justice even as they take care of the earth.

4. Captivity

However, the people of Israel failed to live as God's people. They worshipped idols; the king and the people ignored justice and fattened themselves (Amos, etc.). They probably did not give rest to their flocks on every Sabbath, nor gave rest to the land every seventh year. Without a doubt they did not keep the year of Jubilee. They did not live up to the standard of the Law which was an application of the creation order. Although the prophets called for repentance, they did not change their ways. As a result, God's chastisement came upon them (the Babylonian Exile).

D. Restoration and Consummation

As we look back to the account of the Old Testament, human history is a succession of failures to accomplish God's will on earth. Adam failed and God gave another chance to Noah. But he also failed. God even gave the Law for the Israelites to restore

his order for creation in the land of Canaan, but they failed, too. Does this mean that God failed on his plan to restore creation order on earth through his people? No. Through the prophets God promised to send his anointed King and suffering Servant who will eventually establish God's kingdom not only in Canaan, but also on the entire earth (Isaiah 9:6-7, 11:1-5, 10, 42:1-4, 53:5-11). By this messianic and suffering King, the people of God will be forgiven and restored (Isaiah chapter 1 and 2). Our physical body will be changed (Is. 35:5-6, 65:19-22) and the rest of creation will be renewed (11:6-9, 35:6, 41:18-20). Because it is a renewed creation, Isaiah called it the New Heaven and the New Earth (65:17). This King of love and justice will reign over the earth. The earth will be filled with people who fear God (God-centered), who will be filled with love and justice (community), and who will take care of the earth (non-human creation). God's original plan for the whole creation (creation order) will be finally consummated, and it will last forever (66:22).

E. Summary

From the beginning of the Old Testament to its end, we can observe God's love and commitment for his whole creation. The New Testament shows that this awaited messianic King is Jesus.

III. Implications

Theologian Stanley Grenz of Regent College suggests that we see the consummation of salvation beyond the problematic of millennialism, just as George E. Ladd, F.F. Bruce and Richard Bauckham do.²⁶ He claims that whenever the Old Testament prophets prophesied, their purpose was always to influence the life of the people then and there.²⁷ How does what we have studied so far affect our life here and now? In order to answer the question, we would like to focus on one implication among many.

²⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), chapter 8.

²⁷ Stanley, *Millennial*, 202.

A. Neo-Platonic Spirituality

From the time of Augustine, the Western Church has been heavily influenced by neo-Platonic spirituality which duly emphasized the intimate fellowship with God but looks down on God's creation. This spirituality misunderstands that the union with God can only be achieved through going to heaven by departing from the physical world. This eschatology has gradually become popular in the Western Church, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. Protestantism became more Platonic due to the influence of modernism that emphasized reason and the soul over emotion and the body.

The zeal for the union with God and for evangelism – truly biblical themes – becomes sadly distorted because of Greek influence. According to this type of eschatology, since the whole universe will be annihilated anyway, anything you do on earth cannot have eternal or ultimate meaning. Only the saved souls will go to heaven and spend eternity there. Therefore, the only valuable work on earth is evangelism and everything else is a mere tool for evangelism. You do everything well because it is a good testimony to win souls. Art and music are mere tools for evangelism. Even friendship becomes a means. If you spend more time in a secular job, you are not doing valuable work, unless you give money to missions.

You may cook good meals for your family with love; clean the house carefully; raise your children with love; help the poor and the oppressed; fight against diseases by researching medical cures; join a civil group for environmental protection; do honest and quality work at the office; work on a critical research with a humble heart; and seek good art music and literature. However, in whatever you do on earth, because the earth will be annihilated and become extinct, there is no ultimate meaning in your life, unless it is "a good testimony" and saves other souls.

Evangelical New Testament scholar N.T.

Wright²⁸ contends that the concept of going to heaven after death is of Gnosis and Stoic origin (p. 9) and is close to Buddhism (p. 23). This Greek concept has become widespread among us through hymns and literature and is now influential in our Biblical hermeneutics and everyday life. He states:

The idea of escaping from the world to a non-spacio-temporal heaven encourages an unbiblical attitude towards creation, so that anyone who engages in ecological activity or perhaps even feeding the hungry, is seen as somehow selling the pass. One should be doing something more 'spiritual.' (p. 18)

Wright calls this spirituality "a Gnostic spirituality." (p. 18)

An adjunct professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and at the Free University of Amsterdam, Paul Marshall has written a book with a provocative title, *Heaven Is Not My Home* (Nashville, Tennessee: Word Publishing, 1998). There he laments the fact that:

over half of America goes to church regularly, and many attend evangelical churches. Yet in much of our society, Christian beliefs and value are conspicuously absent. . . . One reason is that among those who actually teach at major universities, work in network television or in movies, write for major newspapers, . . . the percentage of committed believers seems to be only about 3 per cent. (p. 9)

The reason for this disproportionate absence of Christian influence in the United States is, the predominance of an other-worldly eschatology: "We have accepted the heretical idea that the body will pass permanently away after death, . . . that the earth doesn't matter because we are going to heaven when we die" (p. 11). Marshall illustrates that the earth has

become a waiting room of heaven for passive clients (p. 12).

B. Biblical Spirituality

In contrast to neo-Platonic spirituality, N.T. Wright argues that the Bible hails the resurrection of the body and the accomplishment of justice on earth. He states:

It gives us a view of creation which emphasizes the goodness of God's world, and God's intention to renew it. It gives us, therefore, every possible incentive, or at least every Christian incentive, to work for the renewal of God's creation, and for justice within God's creation. (*New Heaven and New Earth* p. 22)

We need to recover this biblical and holistic eschatology that will form a biblical spirituality and way of life.

C. Reality of Sin

The correct understanding of God's plan for us and for the world does not necessarily guarantee a perfect way of life. It is impossible for us to keep an intimate fellowship with God, to serve society with love and justice, and to have concern for the environment. Adam, Noah, and the Israelites failed to do so. We may face ridicule and persecution. We are discouraged when we see that injustice is triumphant. Our own life style is far from perfect. We suffer from wounds in the body and the heart. We become sick, grow old and finally die. We groan in sin and death along with the creation that is also suffering the destruction due to humanity (Rom 8:18-30).

D. Christ's Work by His Spirit: the New Creation

However, Christ came 2000 years ago, and his incarnation signifies the beginning of the last days. God came down on earth to be with His people. Jesus is the second Adam, restored and perfected. He won the victory over sin, death, and Satan through his Incarnation, Cross and Resurrection. When Jesus was raised from the dead, the eschaton has officially

²⁸ N. T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 1999)

begun. Jesus as the new creation belongs to the age to come and he has invaded the present age.

Jesus is the first fruit of the new creation, yet, we are also the new creation. He has forgiven those who believe in him, justified them, and has given his Spirit to them. By his Spirit, Jesus has revealed his victory within us. We can experience the foretaste of life in the age to come. God is within us by his Spirit. This is the ultimate union with God on earth. The kingdom of God that will prevail on the entire earth has started to reveal its manifestation *now*. It is visible in our lives at present. The eschaton has indeed begun.

We may not feel that way. Especially when we look back at our own lives in the past and also at what the Church has done in the past 2000 years, it seems that we have simply defiled the name of God and Jesus. We feel, together with Paul, that we are miserable sinners (Rom 7,8).

However, I believe that the Lord of the Church is still working in us, among us, and through us by his Spirit. Only by his Spirit, we endeavor to bring love and justice to society, at home, office, and through civil movements. We seek to heal ourselves and become a healing balm to others. We aim to form humane cultures which encompass the diverse structures of creation – where cooking, art, music, architecture, science, politics and child rearing have their integral dignity. We try our best to protect and nurture God's creation. In whatever we do, we aim to restore the creation order. Even if we cannot move our hands or legs, we will live as a human being with dignity.

All of these, even if we are not conscious of them and our works seem so trifle and incomplete, are Christ's works to restore the creation order and they are manifestations of the Kingdom of God.

E. Not in Vain

Therefore whatever we do in Christ is not in vain. Jesus will accomplish his work when he returns. Toshio Goto mentioned that "our cultural endeavor

will be somehow brought into the new heaven and the new earth"²⁹. H. Takahashi said, "God uses your daily labor in order to lead the whole creation into perfection."³⁰ And Jesus will return. Then, and only then, will our groaning change into the shouts of joyous victory. Paul said in the context of the eschaton:

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1Cor 15:58)

We would like to live *this* gospel and make disciples of all nations who will give honor to *this* gospel for the glory of God.

²⁹ Toshio Goto, *God's People living in the Eschaton* (Tokyo, Word of Life, 1990), p. 35.

³⁰ from his preaching at Tachikawa Evangelical Free Church (Feb 13, 2000).