

# Heaven: An Inkling of What's To Come

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## Introduction: The ends for which God created the world.

I watched a movie on **Netflix** the other day. It was Swedish. Or Finish. What's the difference?

It was **slow**, dark, **slow**, weird, and did I mention, **slow**.

And after an hour and a half, it **stopped**.

I was going to say it finished but it didn't finish, it just stopped. The credits started rolling and it was over. For an hour and a half, I endured this slow moving, weird thing thinking, the next scene will be good, the next scene something will happen, in the next scene the point will become clear.

But the next scene came and went and with it a little part of my life I will never get back!

And then it stopped. No resolution or culmination. I hate movies like that. Most people hate movies like that and that is why they are rare. They don't sell well. Without resolution, a point, something to make sense of it all, it is, well pointless and senseless.

Without meaning, purpose, resolution, and finality we are deeply disappointed.

And it's not just movies, right. Many **philosophies** are like this (all of them really). Here I think of **Marxism**.

I was in a room once with twenty Marxists. Sounds like the start of a joke – but this was no joke, it was a university group.

I thought I was going to something quite different but here I was, surrounded by hipsters in skinny jeans and crushed velvet telling me how awful those damnable Christians are and how these Marxists needed to protest and petition for change, for a free society, free of religion, intolerance, and disagreement.

**They were quite intolerant of other views actually.**

A guy spoke and then we had to go around the room and everyone had to make a brief response.

I was seated 18 out of 20 in the circle.

Round it went like the swing of the executioner's axe until it was my turn. What could I say!? I was a white, male, western, Christian, theologian!

So, I stood and said, **"I'm a logger!"** No just kidding, That was a reference to a comedy sketch by Ray Stevens.

I stood and said, "I believe I represent the things you most hate. I am a committed Christian."

I then told them my fundamental problem with Marxism – **"It has no end game!"** What you call **Utopia**, I told them, is but a temporary reprieve from the cycle of revolution, waiting to erupt beneath the surface, because in this Utopia, this Marxist paradise, they

think Christians, Muslims, Hindu's, shaman, Satanists, druids, atheists, **and even tax reform advisors** will be blissfully happy keeping their views to themselves and enjoying the one world order that exists.

Fat chance was my response! Look at us Christians now – wherever you find us we are **political agitators**.

- We rally against **injustice**,
- we strive for **human rights**,
- we work for **equality**,
- we campaign for the underdog, the outcaste, the **oppressed**,
- and we remain resolute in our beliefs and convictions even in the teeth of the most severe **opposition**.

We follow the one crucified on a Roman cross who dared to stand up to the human empires of the day and proclaim the Day of the Lord! If our master and commander died for his faith what makes people think his followers won't do the same. **Take up your cross daily he told us, and by God we have!**

So, you Marxists have no end game, it is an illusion, a fantasy at best, and twisted and sadistic sleight of hand at worst.

I don't think I was as articulate as that on the day but many years later that is how I choose to remember it.

The leader of the group rose to his feet to defend their philosophy but when he saw that I meant what I said he had the good sense to adjourn the discussion and invite the company to get on with - **and I kid you not** – making signs for a **protest** they were having tomorrow.

I asked them what they were protesting and he told me: **“we haven't decided yet!”**!

**No end game.** And it's like that for many people today.

Christians, of all people, are aware that life is transitory, fleeting, and fragile. It is but a speck of eternity. One small sliver of consciousness. But Christians are also acutely aware that *this* life is not all there is *to* life.

One writer likened life to a **rope**.<sup>1</sup> The Christian faith is like a **rope pulled tight**.

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<sup>1</sup>     Jenkins, *Invitation to Theology*, 249ff.

In one direction the rope stretches out behind us, disappearing in to the distant past.

The rope is **anchored** in that direction at the point at which the God who created all things, including time, became a human being in our time, lived, suffered, died and was raised again from the dead.

The rope runs straight and true from that distant anchor planted long ago in our history, into the dim future, **our future**, which we are told is ultimately gathered into God's eternal present, the eternal now...

We have our standing in the belly of this beast called time. We exist. We walk, talk, dream, and hope.

We survey our present and savour our past with that combination of pleasure and regret that seems peculiar to our humanity.

We are aware, sometimes distinctly aware, at other times only vaguely, that our lives are shot through with eternal significance that transcends anything in this creaturely realm.

Our identity, Paul tells us, **is hidden with God in Christ**.

Our identity in Jesus Christ pulls us inexorably into the future, God's future on our behalf.

Yet our destination, in a sense, lies as much behind us as before us.

The meaning of our lives derives from our purpose, and our purpose is tied like a rope round the waist of the God who strides knee-deep through our history like a giant walking through the waves that break on the seashore.

And when God strides out into the deep water stained red like blood on its return journey to the heart, and when God disappears from view into the vastness of the ocean of time and space, and swims out past the horizon of possibility beyond the range of our vision, we still have hold of this rope anchored in the past and stretching out into the future, touching at every point on the same eternal moment in the life of God.

The Christian faith, the Christian walk, the Christian life, is one oriented relentlessly toward the **end** or the **purpose** for which God created us!

It stretches like this rope pulled toward a **goal**. The goal lends **meaning** to everything we have ever experienced or will do in this life.

Today, perhaps more than in any other age, we are tempted to allow ourselves to be swallowed up in a sense of our own smallness and meaninglessness, and to conclude that because we are so small, we are also **insignificant**, that we are only, as Michael Jenkins put it:

**'carbon-based planetary parasites infesting the surface of this globe, hedged in by birth and death.'**

*'Is there any meaning to it all?'* we all ask.

- One of the beauties of Christianity, and there are many—is that it is **true**.
- And because Christianity is true—it is **believable**.
- And because it is believable—it is **liveable**.
- And because it is liveable—it is worth **committing** to: body, soul, spirit, and strength.

Christianity has a clear end game, a goal, a purpose, a telos or point to which all is moving. God has created with meaning and with purpose and is working all things together for good for those who love him.

And what is that end game, that all good purpose, **what are the ends for which God created the world? Well, we have to go back in order to then go forward.**

**In the beginning God** created the heavens and the earth, forming and filling his creation day by day.

Until the sixth day, the day when he made a creature different to the rest, a creature like himself—*adam*—male and female, in his image and likeness, and said of them, **“It is very good”** (Gen 1.31).

And here, a collective question should go up to God from all human creatures, **“Good for what?”**

The rest of Holy Scripture gives us the answer. “What are we very good for?”

- We are created to become more and **more like Christ**,
- to have a **resurrected body** like his,
- to **live in the new heavens and earth** with God the Father, Son, and Spirit,
- and to enjoy the **renewed creation** as he always intended it.

Everything else we experience in life is merely the road along which we travel to this ultimate and blessed destination.

- And in the process, we discover that our true home is not the one we currently know, but it is God’s place, in God’s presence, with God’s people.
- **Colossians 3.1-4** (New Living Translation) lays this out for us in stunning brevity.

**Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits at God’s right hand in the place of honour and power. Let heaven fill your thoughts. Do not think only about things down here on earth. For you died when Christ died, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your real life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory.**

The end game or point of it all is for the triune God to dwell with his creation in and new heavens and earth in perfect peace. Where all things are reconciled, where there is resolution, meaning, and fulfilment.

Today in the brief time we have left I want to talk about what we will *do* in the new heavens and earth.

Other questions will have to wait for you to read my book on Heaven!

## An Endless Adventure: What will we do there

Holy Scripture tells us that the new heavens and earth will be a renewed creation: vast, expansive, colourful, and exciting; and in this world we will be physically and bodily resurrected and made fit for living there.

Various aspects of our new life are taught in Scripture. Here I pick up on a few of them as a mere taster. Like drinking water from a fire hydrant, I want to convince by overwhelming you – just as Scripture does.

### We will Rest

Scripture regularly uses the idea of rest as an image of eternal life. But what does it mean?

- In John 14.2 we are told there are many “resting places,”
- Revelation 14.13 promises “rest from our labours,”
- and Hebrews 4.9 speaks of a “Sabbath rest” remaining for the people of God.

In the New Testament *rest* is not the cessation of all activity, or complete motionlessness. It is **relative**, by **contrast** to the sort of activity which has preceded it. That activity is the spiritual **warfare** of the believer here on earth: the battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Such activity is compared to

- a fight (1 Tim 6.12),
- to a race (1 Cor 9.24), or
- to wrestling (Eph 6.12).

And so rest is not the cessation of all activity but the experience of reaching a **goal** of crucial importance. As such heaven is the completion of the Christian pilgrimage, the end of the *struggle* against all forms of sin and evil. **Rest equals the cessation from all opposition.** It is not the rest of something that has wound itself down to stillness; it is rest from endurance against evil.

Living without Sin Coming from a working-class background I was encouraged into a trade at high school, so I took classes in woodwork, metalwork, technical graphics, and the like. I was, to put it mildly, useless. I am practically incompetent; the spirit is willing but the body is weak. I can labour, but skilled labour; that is another thing. Imagine what I will be able to do on the new earth, though! I will be able to be apprenticed by a master builder, I could spend time in the garage with an excellent wood turner, accompany and be trained by an artist, and practice and be mentored by the best artisans in the world. It will take time, effort, trial and error, but I will eventually be able to make things which are both useful and beautiful. I might not ever be as good as the master artisans (in fact, I won't ever be as good as them), but I could be satisfied. The same goes for music. I am tone deaf and can't keep a beat (you might be working out why I am a theologian—I can't do anything else!). But on the new earth, I truly believe I will be able to learn to play the guitar and play riffs from my favorite Mark Knopfler tunes. I won't ever be as good as Knopfler, but I will be satisfied; and at a minimum, I will be able to sing in tune (you don't know how glad my family is to hear this).

Here on earth, I worship God as best I can. I pray regularly, read God's holy Word, attend and serve at church, and try to lead a godly life. But sin gets in the way, my sin, your sin, and sin in general (which we normally call evil).

But think of resurrection life in the new heavens and earth. No more sin, no more struggle to be holy, no more resistance: **rest!** There we will be wholly committed to the will of God and we will be able to bring the Father glory by perfect obedience, bring the Son glory through perfect love, and bring the Spirit glory through perfect fellowship. All our impulses will be godly, all our desires will be holy, and

all our energy will be spent in joyful God-honoring activity. Welcomed by the Father with the words “good and faithful servant” we shall continue to hear the Master’s voice delight in our thoughts, motives, and actions. I can’t wait. The utter peace and *rest* this suggests is almost overwhelming.

### **We will Worship**

Scripture affirms that in the new heavens and earth believers will be given added responsibilities than here on earth, in God’s service. One of the things we will be doing, the most important thing, is **worshipping the triune God of grace and glory**.

Regular worship of God seems to constitute much of our time in heaven (Isa 6.3; Rev 19.1-8). Our worship and praise here and now are **preparation and practice** for future employment of our hearts and voices. We shall pray (which is simply talking with God), sing, and praise God, and in so doing we shall know that this is what we were created to do from the beginning.

### **We shall enjoy Rewards**

In addition to worship, there will be all manner of work to do: life-giving, energy-producing, soul-enlarging work. And this work is pictured in Scripture in part by the idea of receiving rewards. Holy Scripture teaches us about rewards that will be given out based on our faithfulness in this life.

There is a strong compensatory aspect to the new heavens and earth in the biblical view. It is not a compensation for the loss in this world like some eternal life insurance or cosmic karma, but rather the compensation of justice.

Heavenly rewards must, it would seem to me, include an increased opportunity to glorify God through acts of joyous **service**. To serve is grace and reward. “If crowns are suggested,” writes Martindale, “it is only to imply that we will be given tasks of exhilarating importance and fascination.”<sup>2</sup> Hence, reward is a powerful motive for Christian living as it will bring increased joy and pleasure on the new earth. However, that increased joy and pleasure is in glorifying God more in the life to come than it is possible now.

### **We will Party**

Scripture tells us that we will be involved in other activity as well, including but not limited to **eating, drinking, exploring, playing, learning, growing, maturing, hosting, and visiting**.

The first thing we will hear when we enter the new heavens and new earth is the popping of a cork on a **wine bottle**, followed by a **grand party**. In the new heavens and earth, we shall, as physical beings, be eating and drinking, just as we are told we would in Scripture (Rev 9.9).

- Jesus told us he will once again drink wine with his followers in the heavenly kingdom (Luke 22.18).
- The river of life will flow through the middle of the city (Rev 22.1) and the tree of life will bear twelve kinds of fruit each month (Rev 22.2).
- We will eat “hidden manna”—whatever that might be, but we can be sure it will be delicious (Rev 2.17),
- and we will eat off the tree of eternal life—which many think may be tomatoes and not apples, I don’t think it will be either (Rev 2.7).

There is no good reason to consider these images of eating and drinking as simply symbols of non-physical realities. It is more consistent to believe that in the new heavens and earth we shall be frequenting banquets, parties, and many celebrations. The delights of the new earth will be more, not less, than the delights of the earth we currently experience.

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<sup>2</sup> Martindale, *Beyond the Shadowlands*, 40.

### **We will be Cultivating the Cosmos**

Hebrews 2.8 clearly implies that in heaven all things will be subject to humanity. Clearly this first applies to Christ himself, Lord of all, but secondarily it is applicable to us as images of Christ and fellow co-workers and heirs.

In this sense, we “inherit the earth” a fulfilment of a beatitude promise in Matthew 5.5.

What this means is subject to discussion, but it must include bringing order and maintaining it, **cultivating beauty**, and **stewarding God’s good creation** (Gen 1.31).

In fact, we would not be wrong to think that the whole gamut of human enterprise and investigation, human exploration and creativity, human industry and enterprise will be part of what we will do in the new heavens and earth.

### **We will be Cultivating Culture**

Another feature of life on the new earth is the **diversity of people** there. The population of the new earth will be made up of a vast array of cultures, ethnicities, languages, tribes, and people.

“After this I looked, and there before me was **a great multitude** that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands” (Rev 7.9).

What each will have in common is Christ and the Gospel. The community of the new earth will be truly **multicultural**. Revelation 21.3 has an interesting and important teaching buried within it, “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his *peoples*, and God himself will be with them as their God.”

Notice that it says God will be with his *peoples*—plural. We see here a fulfilment of what was promised earlier in Isaiah 25, where God promised to prepare a feast at the end times on Mount Zion for “all peoples.” Revelation 21.24 reminds us that not only will people from every nation, tribe, and tongue be present on the new earth, but they will take redeemed aspects of their cultures with them;

**“The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it.”**

**Nothing of worth that has begun on earth will fail to make an appearance on the new earth.** What God has begun now he will continue to perfect then. Bruce Milne helpfully reminds us that “Everything which authentically reflects the God of truth, all that is of abiding worth from within the national stories and the cultural inheritance of the world’s peoples, will find its place in the New Jerusalem.”<sup>3</sup>

Working within a multicultural context in New Zealand, I am often confronted with questions from students such as,

- “Can I be **Samoan** and Christian?”
- Or “Do I have to give up my cultural identity as **Māori** in order to embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ?”

This and other verses in Holy Scripture teach us that we don’t have to give up our cultural and ethnic identity in order to be like Christ. Instead, God redeems all cultures and makes them fit for the new heavens and earth.

One of the ways we image Jesus Christ in our humanity is through the **cultivation of culture**.

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<sup>3</sup> Milne, *The Message of Heaven and Hell*, 321.

We are tasked with bringing all creation under God's rule and presenting it to him in an act of worship. Life in the new heavens and earth will be no different, except sin and folly will no longer be our constant companions. Life in eternity will be full of **creative expression** in the arts, sciences, sports, and recreation, and all of life.

As created co-creators of God, we will be given a vast canvas to work on, increased levels of skillfulness to draw on, and a collaborative environment to work within. The imagination is our only barrier to what we might accomplish in this renewed world.

- Do you like the earth? Then you are going to love heaven!
- Do you enjoy earthly delights—like ripe tomatoes, fresh strawberries, feijoas from the tree, the feel of sand between your toes as you walk along the beach, seeing a rainbow break through a cloudy sky, the smell of a newborn, the anticipation of Christmas Eve, losing yourself in a dance or a song?
- Then remember where such gifts come from—God who through Christ and by the Spirit invented all the pleasures of creation—every taste, smell, sight, and sense was his extravagant idea.
- And that same creative triune God is right now, preparing a place for us to inhabit for all eternity.

### **Fulfilled Desires**

God has made us for the new heavens and earth and so he has placed a proper desire for himself within us.

- What desires do they have and how can they be seen as God-given capacities for eternal life?

I want to press this point home even more.

Some of you will be **lawyers**, others stay at home **parents**, and others still may be **nurses, teachers, engineers, laborers, plumbers, or artists**.

If this is a job you have chosen, and one in which you find a good deal of joy (despite the trials that necessarily come with all jobs), then I ask you:

- Where did the **lawyer's** joy in bringing order out of chaos come from? Here I would point you *back* to creation and how the triune God created all things before turning your thoughts *forward* to eternity. What might our lawyers be doing in eternity? They won't be litigating! But it is possible they will still be using their God-given talents in administration, in judging (without conflict), and in bringing further order to what is already ordered.
- Or what will God have in store for **accountants**? What will they be calculating, counting, and balancing I wonder?
- You see whatever the passion, whatever the talent, God will redeem it and use it and enable you to use that for his praise and for your enjoyment.

What will we be doing in the new heavens and earth?

- We will be resting and we will be working,
- we will be creating and
- we will be playing.
- With all of the creation we will be worshipping God by doing that for which we were created.

I am reminded of Richard Middleton's words.

In the biblical worldview mountains and stars worship God just as much as humans do... (Ps 148)... But how do mountains and stars worship God? Certainly not verbally or with emotions. Rather, mountains worship God simply by being mountains... And Stars worship God by being stars... If mountains worship God by being mountains and stars worship God by being stars how do humans worship God? By being human, in the full glory of what that means. Humans,



the Bible tells us, are cultural beings, defined not by our worship, for worship is what defines creation (all creatures are called to worship). But the human creature is made to worship God in a distinctive way: by interacting with the earth, using our God-given power to transform our earthly environment into a complex world (a sociocultural world) that glorifies the creator.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion: Two Contrasting Stories

A popular rock group released a half hour video movie based on a song entitled **August 7, 4:15**. The song is dedicated to the memory of Katherine Korzilius, a young girl who was the victim of a hit-and-run. The band sing the chorus of the song:

Tell me it was just a dream - August 7, 4.15, God closed his eyes and the world got mean,  
August 7, 4.15

A stanza reads:

I know tonight that there's an angel, Up on heaven's highest hill, And no one there can hurt you  
baby, No one ever will, Somewhere, someone's conscience, Is like a burning bed, The flames  
are all around you, How you gonna sleep again.

Tell me it was just a dream - August 7, 4.15, God closed his eyes and the world got mean,  
August 7, 4.15.”

The couple are struggling to find answers to why this could happen. Why their little girl was killed so senselessly.

- Who do they blame? Where do they turn? What can they do?

The wife clams up, suffering depression and guilt. The husband seeks to help his wife but can't get through. The video is gloomy, depressing, and offers no hope. The wife eventually blames the husband for the death of their daughter. He should have protected her, he should have been there.

Later the husband finds a scrapbook of his wife. He opens it to find it filled with pictures of their lost baby, and repeatedly scribbled “**Why, why, why?**” The scrapbook is a gallery of guilt, unresolved pain, and blame.

He writes in the scrapbook “**What's it gonna take to make you believe in me?**”

Eventually the wife steals a baby from the hospital she works in, the husband finds her and they both fall to the ground crying.

**And then the video stops. It doesn't finish; there is no resolution, no completion., It just stops.**

Where can these parents turn? Who can they turn to?

The following is a true story, and quite different. A Christian couple asks why God would allow their little child to live for **two minutes** and then to let him die of a chromosome abnormality. How can a loving God do that? Where could they turn to make sense of this tragedy?

“As far as I was concerned, this was a design flaw. The designer was directly responsible.”

The doctor advised them to abort the baby when the problem was initially diagnosed. In an amazing testimony of faith Susan, the wife responded,

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<sup>4</sup> J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 41.

“We believe God is the giver and taker of life. If the only opportunity I have to know this child is in my womb, I don’t want to cut that time short. If the only world he is to know is the womb, I want that world to be as safe as I can make it.”

They left the medical centre stunned. Susan said to her husband

“Pregnancy is hard enough when you know you’re going to leave the hospital with a baby. I don’t know how I can go through the pain of childbirth knowing I won’t have a child to hold.”

The parents had prayed to God that if it was at all possible would he allow the baby to at least **experience the breath of life**. That prayer was answered. The baby was born and they saw its chest rise and fall - the breath of life. But then he **turned blue and passed away**.

“Do you have a name for the baby?” Asked the nurse.

“Toby,” Susan replied, “A biblical name short for Tobiah - God is faithful.”

Three months later an elder daughter also died, just short of her second birthday. She was severely disabled.

In desperation, agony and helplessness Marshall and Susan turned to Scripture for guidance. Where else could they turn? And their attention was drawn to heaven. They saw that heaven is a place of intense activity, of work and of worship. They saw that heaven is our home that Jesus is preparing for those that love him.

Marshall wrote that “What is clear is that heaven will be a place of active duty. Even after the ultimate spiritual battle is over, our responsibilities continue.”

He concludes “I can’t be specific about how we will assist in reigning with Christ. But those tasks sound like they have more significance than most careers we pursue in our lifetimes. Could it be that when I finally start the most significant service of my life, I will find that this is that for which I was truly created for? I may find I was created not for what I would accomplish on earth, but for the role I will fulfil in heaven.

Why did God create a child to live two minutes? He didn’t. God created Toby for eternity. He created each of us for eternity, where we may be surprised to find our true calling, which always seemed just out of reach here on earth.”

As I finish

“Remember the words of Paul in Philippians 1: **“But I am hard pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.”** (Phil. 1.23-24).

And just prior to that: **“For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”** (Phil. 1.21)

The great American pastor and spiritual director Eugene Peterson commented once that *amen* is the last word in worship. ‘It is,’ he said, ‘the worshipping affirmation to the God who affirms us.’<sup>5</sup>

It is appropriate then, that amen should be the final word in a sermon on heaven because heaven is the ultimate place of worship where God is most fully God and you and I are most fully ourselves.

**AMEN!**

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<sup>5</sup> E.H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 68.