

Two Questions after Session 5 (3/18/2024):

Heaven, and What About Apocalyptic Language

Regarding Heaven

Question: *In lieu of what we learned last Monday night, that our final destination (heaven) is not "upward", but that God will come down and transform what we know into the new heavens and the new earth (Rev 21), what then is the appropriate contemporary use of the word "heaven"? In other words, is it biblically correct to say, "So and so died and went to heaven"?*

Pastor Chris: First of all, some theological background and context: In a couple of our lessons, we talked about Abraham already living in the promised land when he said that he was “yet a stranger and a pilgrim.” So, he was still looking for a better, heavenly country. It’s possible that we assume something not quite right about the word “heaven” or “heavenly” in the Bible. There are two or three things that heaven can mean (atmosphere, the starry host, God’s space). But the main thing to remember is that God’s big story is about Him coming down here into our space, not us going up to His. After all, God with us, Emmanuel, tabernacled *with* us.

So, generally speaking, something that’s heavenly is something that has its origins in heaven. It’s here with us, but from heaven. The saints of old mentioned in Hebrews were not looking for something *in* heaven but rather a country *from* heaven. Hebrews goes on to say that the “better country” is the “heavenly Jerusalem,” the “church of the first born,” the “joyful assembly,” the Body of Christ— and it will be right here with us. In many ways, it already is!

Our focus on heaven as a better place we go to somewhere above comes from a Platonic shift in thinking in Christianity, coupled with a dose of Gnosticism, that says 1) ultimate truth and beauty lie above (Plato called it “the upper story”), and 2) that anything earthly, or of the flesh, is bad or perhaps even evil. So, for many Christians, especially those who hold to Dispensational doctrines, going to a disembodied heaven and escaping the earth is the ultimate goal. In other words, some people’s ideas of heaven deny both the body and the goodness of creation.

Cornelis Venema writes, “[T]he portrait of heaven is so 'spiritualized' and ethereal that life in the renewed creation has a barren, almost sterile, quality. Familiar is the picture of believers dressed in white robes flitting about in an indefinable space, playing harps and singing in a celestial choir. The expectation for the life to come is so radically other than the richness and concreteness of life in the creation as it is now experienced that heaven takes on a surreal, even dreamlike, quality” (From “The New Heaven and New Earth,” 1999).

But heaven is not our ultimate goal. The new heavens and the new earth—the new, real creation with new, real, resurrected bodies—is our goal. Again, Venema: “The whole creation, heaven and earth, will undergo by the Triune God's working, a process of renewal and transformation. Through this process the creation will be wholly sanctified, cleansed of every stain and remainder of sin. The new heavens and the new earth will be more glorious and

resplendent of God's power, wisdom and grace, than the creation at its beginning. Once more, but now in a surpassing way, the creation will be a temple fit for the dwelling of God with his people, a place suitable for the enjoyment of communion and friendship between the Creator and the creature" (Ibid).

Heaven— whatever and wherever it may be, and however we will look/exist there— is temporary until the bodily resurrection of the dead and the re-creation of the new heavens and the new earth. That's not to say heaven won't be marvelous. I can only imagine how wonderful it will be, most especially because Jesus is there. We can rest knowing that the Bible says that "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord."

Therefore, it is not inappropriate to say that a believer has died and gone to heaven. It's absolutely true for right now, in this "meantime" between cross and consummation.

But one day, when Jesus returns, the dead in Christ will rise and receive actual resurrected bodies, and the bodies of those who remain will also be transformed in the "twinkling of an eye," and that "better country" Abraham was longing for will come to pass: The new heavens and the new earth— Eden, as it were, gloriously made new and exponentially expanded.

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Regarding Natural Phenomenon (and Historical Elements) Mentioned in Apocalyptic Writing

Question: *In lesson 5 of our study, we heard places in Scripture that talk about the moon turning to blood, etc. My question is: What about all the natural things listed—those things that the pre-tribulation, Rapture, [and] "Left Behind" books and movies emphasize?*

Pastor Chris: My short answer is: Those interpretations can be wildly speculative, if not demonstrably wrong. Why? Most of the Scripture they use is simply not about end times. Then, when Scripture is clearly about end times (Jesus' prophecy about the coming of the Son of Man, in the last half of Matthew 24 and then Matthew 25), the Left Behind concept is completely opposite—backwards—of what a careful reading reveals (i.e. the ones taken away are actually the cursed and condemned, and the ones left behind are safe and secure).

My longer answer is this: Let's first remember that there are several different kinds of Scripture. We take them all seriously, but we don't take them all literally. The Bible has poems and parables, historic narrative, songs and hymns, prophetic passages, and apocalyptic writings. Sometimes, you might even get one or two or more of those things in one passage. Dispensational teachers claim that we must take everything in a literal fashion, though, as we've seen, they often make what seem like arbitrary exceptions.

So, take Matthew 24, for example. This passage is sometimes called "The Little Apocalypse," meaning that Jesus is using prophetic language to talk about future cataclysmic events. In the first half of Matthew 24, He's talking about the coming destruction of the Temple (not the end times as some Dispensationalists claim). And yet the language seems, at first glance, hyperbolic.

Perhaps there are elements that are purposefully colorful. And yet a careful reading of the extra-biblical, historic accounts of the siege of Jerusalem show Jesus' words to be stunningly accurate. The Roman persecution and eventual siege of the city was horrific. Virtually no one escaped. The accounts are grizzly and included mass crucifixions, starvation, and cannibalism.

Jesus purposefully borrows language from Daniel about a severe tribulation in Daniel's day, but states that this coming tribulation will be even worse. In fact and interestingly, Jesus says that the coming tribulation that He's prophesying about will be the greatest of all tribulations "From the beginning of the world until now, no and never will be surpassed " (Matt 24:21).

Space won't allow here, but excellent biblical scholarship has shown that even the more "end-times-looking" spots in Matthew 24 (for example, verses 29-31) were indeed realized and came to fulfillment at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. I highly recommend the historical account by Josephus, and also the thorough work on Jesus' discourse by David B. Currie in *Rapture: The End-Times Error that Leaves the Bible Behind*.

As for the "blood moon" prophecy in Revelation 6, recall that the book is written in apocalyptic language and so, therefore, interpretations can vary widely. Revelation is perhaps the most misused and misunderstood books of the Bible. Dispensationalists have a very detailed and precise interpretation of how Revelation will be fulfilled in our future. Yet, there are at least four overall, basic interpretations (that I know of): The "Historicist" approach that sees the book as a prewritten record of history from the time of John to the end of the world (fulfillment is in progress now); The "Preterist" approach, which views the fulfillment of the prophecies as having already occurred (additionally, there is also a "Semi-preterist" view, which I more or less hold, that sees most of the final chapters as looking forward to the Second Coming); The "Futurist" view that says that most of the prophecies have not yet been fulfilled and will be in the future; and what is called the "Idealist" approach that doesn't try to find individual fulfillments but sees the book as a "great drama depicting transcendent spiritual realities."

If you believe, as I do, that the book was written in 68 AD, or at least before 70 AD, then it's possible to ascribe many of the events in Revelation to the destruction of the Temple. In fact, even if the dating of the book is later, there is "wide scholarly support for the idea that 68 AD is the frame of reference that John is using regardless of the actual date of authorship."

The blood moon language in chapter 6 is part of a long discourse about the opening of the "Seven Seals." This section of Revelation contains very highly descriptive and dramatic themes—earthquakes, hail, fire, trumpets, blood moons, and wormwood and so on. It is also the part of Revelation that Dispensationalists, in particular, engage in very colorful (and usually contemporary/future) interpretations of things described (locusts as "war machines or UFOs," for example, as per Charles Ryrie).

And yet, the generally accepted historical interpretation of the events described here, as I understand it, is that it describes to the tribulations and subsequent destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. And that's my own conviction as well. Can't the "locusts" coming in great numbers to

attack just as easily be attributed to Roman legions surrounding Jerusalem as they can be to UFOs? Compared to the prophecy of Jesus in Matthew 24, both passages use common words and themes. For example, “Great Tribulation” is used only three times in the New Testament: Jesus in Matthew 24, referring to the Roman Empire’s cruelty before and during the Temple’s destruction, and the other two times in Revelation (2:22 and 7:14) which is thought by many to refer to the same Roman persecution. By the way, and this is remarkable, the Great Tribulation, said by many to be seven years long, is precisely the length of the Roman oppression and siege of Jerusalem (3.5 years of intense persecution and 3.5 years of actual siege warfare).

By the way, a close look at the contemporary historical accounts of the siege of Jerusalem show astonishing resonance with this part of Revelation. For example, in Revelation 6:15, using the same kind of language that Jesus uses in Matthew 24, John says that people will “hide in caves and among the rocks of the mountains.” Josephus tells us that during the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, many people actually did hide in caves around the city.

Two other interesting notes that also link this passage to Jesus’ “Little Apocalypse” in Matthew 24. The first is use of the “trumpet” language found in both accounts. More fascinating to me is this point: The seals of Revelation are opened in the same order that Jesus used in warning His disciples about the destruction of the Temple (signs 2 and 3 of Jesus’ prophecy). John seems to be describing the fulfillment of Jesus’ predictions.

Summary: Christians are not on solid footing if they attribute this section of Revelation to the future. There is no good reason, in my view, to consider these parts of the book as end times events. They can refer, and in my opinion are referring, to the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Trying to ascribe future, literal interpretations to apocalyptic passages is highly speculative. Charting blood moons (at least one prominent Dispensationalist is said to have such charts “all over his office walls”) is, in my view, highly unnecessary and an enormous waste of time.

At least one thing is clear: John tells us his purpose right from the beginning of Revelation: He wants to encourage Christians to have “patient endurance” in their present tribulations (1:9).

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For further reading, I highly recommend the Currie book, already mentioned above. As far as I’m concerned, it’s the “gold standard” for looking at every single Scripture that has anything allegedly to do with a Rapture and dismantling it in a meticulous, thorough, and scholarly way. (He is a Roman Catholic theologian, so there are some Marian references that evangelicals will have to be aware of, but it’s a tremendous treatise on the subject). I also highly recommend *Revelation: Four Views* by Steve Gregg. It’s an unbiased examination of the entire Book of Revelation that lays out, interlinear style, the four main interpretations I already mentioned above. The reader can see, without partisan commentary, different perspectives side by side. I am indebted to both books in my commentary on Revelation here. I have used their ideas as starting points and cannot claim this material as completely my own.