



Surprised by Hope

Session 7

September 23, 2024

Opening Prayer:

Let us pray: Loving and Eternal God, you are the creator of all. You have granted us life and faith, offering each of us a glimpse into your glory. We rejoice in what is before us. Yet, we know your glory goes beyond our senses in this reality. We ask you to open our hearts and minds in reflection about what might be beyond. Help us to imagine, to wish, to hope, and to do this all without fear, but rather in wonder. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I. **Marriage of Heaven and Earth**

- a. Wright leads us into Revelation.
 - i. It is a book full of cosmic drama.
 - ii. The image is that of a marriage. Jerusalem comes down out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband.
- b. As Christians, we have an image of us going off to heaven as a soul, naked and unadorned to meet its maker in fear and trembling.
- c. Paul's letters to the Philippians is the heavenly church that comes to earth.
- d. It is the fulfillment of the Lord's Prayer: God's kingdom will come and his will be done on earth as in heaven.
- e. It is the final accomplishment of God's great design, to defeat and abolish death forever – which can only mean the rescue of creation from its present plight of decay.
- f. The living God will dwell among his people, filling the city with his life and love pouring out grace and healing in the river of life that flows from the city out to the nations.
- g. Rather than sitting on clouds and playing harps, the redeemed people will be agents of God's love going out in new ways to accomplish new creative tasks, to celebrate and extend the glory of God's love.

II. **Jesus, Heaven, and New Creation**

- a. Luke is the only Evangelist to specifically write about the Ascension (twice – in the Gospel, and in Acts).
- b. Yet, the Ascension is necessary as a transition in our theology. It is separate from the Resurrection.
- c. **Reflection: If you were to animate the Ascension, what would it look like?**
- d. Church windows show Jesus' feet poking out of a cloud while others look on.
 - i. Jesus did a vertical take-off - like he is going to live in outer space.



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- ii. It could be another way of showing Jesus' disappearance as a way of saying that after his death he became 'spiritually present' everywhere, especially with his followers.
 - iii. It becomes difficult to understand how the physical body of Jesus can reside in the spiritual world of heaven.
- e. Theologians who take the Ascension seriously insist that it demands a 'relational view.' Heaven and earth in biblical cosmology are not two different locations, but rather are two different dimensions of God's creation.
 - i. This means that one who is in heaven can be present simultaneously anywhere and everywhere on earth.
 - ii. Jesus, then, can be available and accessible from anywhere. There is no need to go to a specific place.
 - iii. Heaven is then the CEO's office, where Jesus said, "All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth."
 - iv. **Reflection: What is your perception of the relationship between heaven and earth?**
 - v. **Reflection: If Jesus is the CEO running creation, how would you rate His job performance?**
 - vi. If Jesus is pulling divine levers and pushing buttons to run the world, it does not appear that He is doing a great job.
 - 1. If Jesus, as the new CEO, His new processes need to be introduced and the details worked out. It would be a theocracy where the church is telling us what to do.
 - 2. Historically, when this happens, it ends up disastrous.
 - vii. Another option: The method of the kingdom will match the message of the kingdom. The kingdom will come as the church, energized by the Spirit, goes out into the world vulnerable, suffering, praising, praying, misunderstood, misjudged, vindicated, celebrating – bearing in the body the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed.
 - viii. Wright suggests that Jesus and the church are the same thing. The truth of the ascension is that the one who is indeed present with us by the Spirit is also the Lord who is strangely absent, strangely other, strangely different from us and over against us, the one who tells Mary Magdalene not to cling to him – only then are we rescued from despair.
 - ix. Only when we grasp and celebrate that Jesus has gone ahead of us into God's space, God's new world, and is both already ruling the rebellious present world as its rightful Lord and also interceding for us at the Father's



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right hand – when we grasp and celebrate what the ascension tells us about Jesus’s continuing human work in the present – are we rescued from a wrong view of world history and equipped for the task of justice in the present.

- x. We can be rescued from the attempts made to create alternative mediators in his place.
- xi. **Reflection: What does this say about the Trinity?**
- xii. The Trinity is a way of recognizing and celebrating the fact that Jesus of Nazareth as distinct from while still identified with God the Father (he didn’t just go back to being God again after his earthly life), on the one hand, and the Spirit, on the other hand (the Jesus who is near us and with us by the Spirit remains the Jesus who is other than us).
- xiii. To embrace the ascension is to ‘heave a sigh of relief,’ to give up the struggle to be God, and to enjoy our status as creatures: image-bearing creatures, but creatures nonetheless.
- xiv. The Jesus who is absent becomes present to us in the Sacraments.
- xv. The lordship of Jesus; the fact that here is already a human being at the helm of the world; his present intercession for us – all this is over and above his presence with us.
- f. Parallel realities
 - i. The ascension is a mystery.
 - ii. Biblical heaven and earth are not two localities within the same space-time continuum, or about a nonphysical world contrasted with a physical one, but about two different kinds of what we call matter, and two different kinds of what we call time.
 - iii. Consider C.S. Lewis’s Narnia – imagining two worlds relate and interlock.
- g. Acts tells us that Jesus is in heaven, ruling the whole world, and he will one day return to make that rule complete.

III. What about the Second Coming?

- a. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.
- b. Creed: He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.
- c. **Reflection: What does this mean?**
- d. **Reflection: Are we living in the End Times? Will there be a rapture? (True Christians are snatched away from the earth; and those left behind are now struggling to survive in a godless world.)**
- e. There is an unrelenting belief that we are living in the End Times. If that is the case, there is no point in trying to be good stewards of the earth. It’s all going to end anyhow. Fear and dislike of the Second Coming:



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- i. Christ will come again – Jesus will come into the world like a spaceman and intervene in the world.
 - ii. Will judge the living and the dead – Judgment rings of vengeance, wrath, punishment, and fury – with a goal of throwing as many people as possible into hell.
 - iii. The Psalmists knew: that for God to judge the world meant that he would, in the end, put it all to rights, straighten it out, producing not just a sigh of relief all around but shouting for joy from the trees and fields, the seas and the floods.
- f. Eschatology
- i. It is a term that is often confused with the Second Coming, death, judgment, heaven, and hell.
 - ii. Eschatology simply means, “the study of last things.”
 - iii. First-century Jews and early Christians believed that history was going somewhere under the guidance of God and where it was going was toward God’s new world of justice, healing, and peace. The transition from the present world to the new one would be the radical healing of our space-time universe.
 - iv. Jesus’s resurrection was the first fruits of this event. The entire sense of God’s future for the world and the belief that the future has already begun to come forward to meet us in the present.

IV. Final questions, comments, observations, suggestions.

Next session will discuss: Jesus, Heaven, and the New Creation

Closing Prayer:

Let us pray: Loving and Eternal God: We praise You for Your love and goodness. You have created us in uniqueness and wonder. You granted us the power to imagine and dream of life with You hereafter. Help us to honor all perspectives, and offer us the wisdom to have faith in your providence. We give glory to You through Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Note: The information above is taken, whether in part or in whole, from *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* by N.T. Wright.