

RESTORATION : HOPE

sunday school module ten

“No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found.” - Joy to the World

Eschatology literally means the “study of last things”. It is the subject that encompasses the timing and nature of Christ’s return, the final judgment, the millennium and the final remaking of God’s world. There have been many debates about the details of eschatology but far more general agreement. Few people debate the fact that each of these things will happen, it is only the timing and order and exact nature of them that is up for discussion. This means that we should come to eschatology knowing that most Christians throughout history have agreed on the major points of doctrine and only disagreed about the smaller issues. In other words, eschatology should not be as divisive as it has been.

Below we will look at each of the four major eschatological systems, their pros and cons and how they differ from each other. We’ll also see how they fit into larger theological systems that tend to adopt them. But first we will look at the points of agreement between all of the systems.

The Bodily Resurrection of Christ

On several occasions Jesus plainly told his disciples that he planned to return to them after his death. Matthew 24:44 says, “You also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” Again, in John 14:3, “I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.” After Jesus’ ascension, an angel

announced to the disciples who were standing there, “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven (Acts 1:11). All of these verses (and more) suggest a “sudden, personal, visible, bodily return of Christ” that most Christians affirm. This “second coming” of Christ should be a source of great hope and anticipation for Christians. As Paul said in Titus 2:12-13 that we are, “awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

The Mystery of Christ’s Timing

Aside from a few radio preachers and theological nut jobs, it is generally agreed that the timing of Jesus’ return is a mystery that we cannot know. In Matthew 25:13, Jesus says, “Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” Again, in Mark 13:32-33, “But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only Father. Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come.” Jesus couldn’t be more clear that humans cannot know when he will return, so those who make predictions are intentionally deceiving their followers and trying to control what cannot be controlled.

The Final Result of the End Times

All evangelicals agree that the final result of Christ’s second coming is the eternal reign of Father, Son and Holy Spirit over all of Heaven and Earth. Sin will be erased, Satan finally destroyed and those who are Christians will live and thrive with God forever in resurrected bodies. This is the hope that all Christians share and so we join with John at the end of Revelation saying, “Amen, come Lord Jesus!”

Theological Systems of Eschatology

There are four primary systems of eschatology in evangelical Christianity:

Dispensational Premillennial, Historic Premillennial, Amillennial and Postmillennial. The main points of disagreement between these systems is: (1) the nature and timing of the millennium and (2) the order of events surrounding the millennium and judgement. The

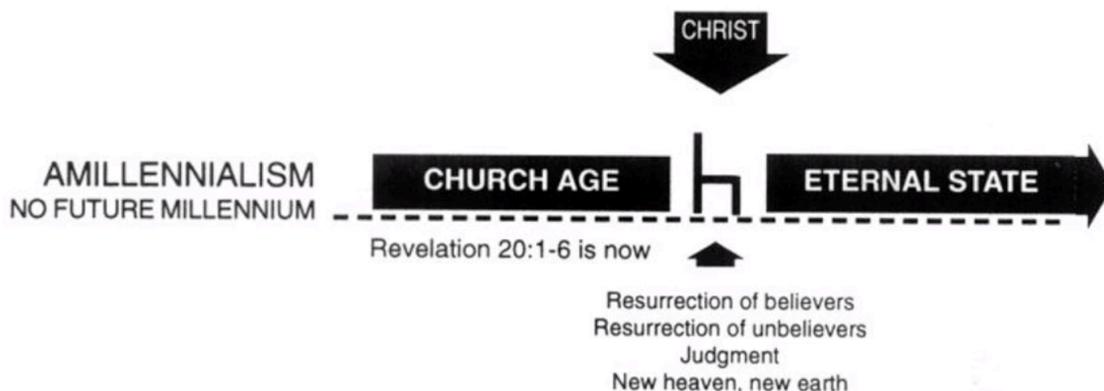
basic beliefs and timeline of each system is outlined below, followed by the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Before we outline the different positions, it's important to notice the recurrence of the word "millennium" in each of these words. The millennium is the "thousand year reign" of Christ that is mentioned in Revelation 20:1-5 which says,

"Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any long, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while. Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection."

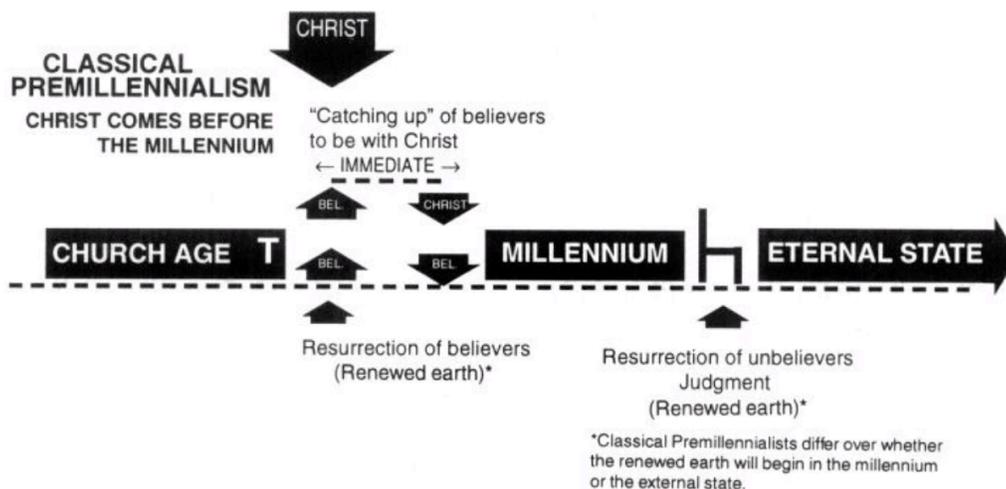
The millennium is really the centerpiece of the whole argument because it serves to define the way we read the whole end times account and is a hinge for many of the other events. In our survey of the positions, we will start with Amillennialism because it is the simplest of the all the systems and deals with the millennium in a unique way.

Amillennialism



Amillennialism is the only system that identifies the millennium as something happening right now. They argue that Revelation 20:1-6 speaks of the current church age, which began at Jesus' resurrection. So when Revelation says that Satan is "bound" for a thousand years and has been thrown "into the pit" and has had it shut over him and "sealed", Amillennialists argue that it happened during Jesus' earthly ministry. In their view, we are in the millennium now, so when Jesus returns, there will be a single resurrection and all of the judgments will happen right away. After the Christians have been judged for their deeds, the nonChristians will be judged for their unbelief and sentenced to hell. After the judgment, Jesus and all the Christians will inhabit the New Heavens and the New Earth and will reign forever.

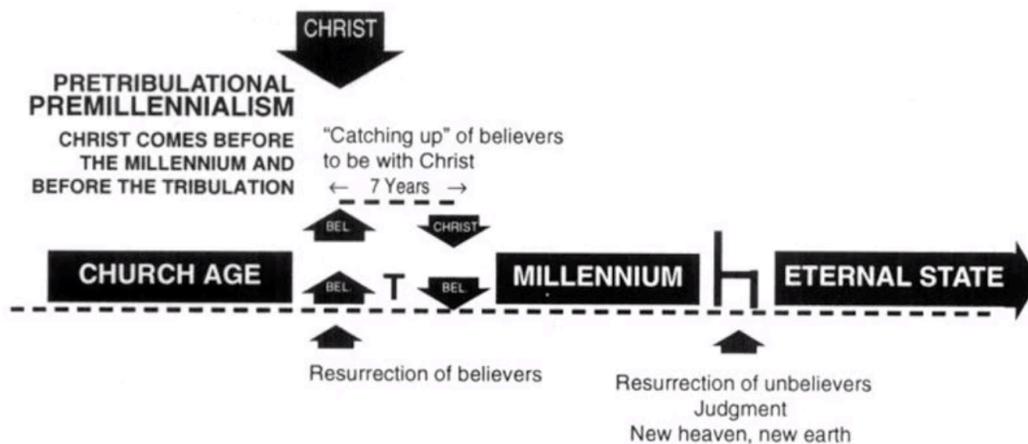
Historic Premillennialism



The Historic Premillennial position is called by that name because it was the majority position of Christianity for a very long time. That's not to say that it is true, but it was the primary position of many important church fathers. The significance of this view is that the Church Age will end with a great Tribulation (designated as T in picture above) that will last for seven years, at which point Jesus will return, resurrect the Christians who have died, give them their resurrected bodies and then return to the earth with them immediately to reign for the millennium. Most Premillennialists would hold that the Millennium is a literal thousand years but it's not an important part of the system. After the Millennium, during which Christians in their resurrected bodies will be on earth with

nonChristians in their normal bodies, there will be a judgement of both Christians (for their deeds) and nonChristians (for their unbelief). After the judgement, Jesus and all the Christians will reign forever in the New Heavens and Earth.

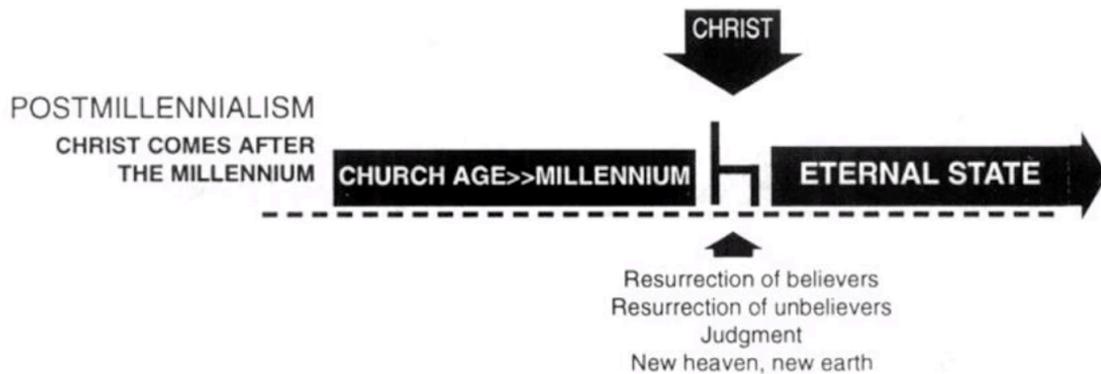
Dispensational (Pretribulational) Premillennialism



The main difference between the Dispensational and Historical views of Premillennialism is the timing of Christ's appearance. Dispensational Premillennialism (DP) is often called Pretribulational simply because it moves Christ's return to (you guessed it) before the Tribulation. But there is more to it than that, because DP's also believe that the Second Coming of Christ will be a secret "rapture" where all of the Christians in the world will disappear and meet up with Jesus in the clouds (1 Thess. 4:17). After the seven year-long Tribulation, Jesus and all the Christians will return to defeat Satan, the anti-Christ and all the nonChristians and set up the Millennial reign. After that thousand year reign, there will be judgement and then Eternity.

This may all seem like splitting hairs but what lies beneath this system is a commitment to a firm differentiation between Israel and the Church. In this view, all of the Old Testament prophecies related to Israel will be consummated in literal, national Israel, not in the Spiritual Israel that includes Gentile Christians. So, after the Christians are raptured, they expect a revival among Jewish people, who will hold down the fort during the Tribulation, when Jesus and the Gentile Christians return.

Postmillennialism



Postmillennialism is an optimistic take on eschatology that combines some of the promises of Jesus in the Great Commission (“all authority has been given to me”) with the descriptions of the Kingdom in some of his parables (Matt. 13:31-33) that seem to indicate that the kingdom will grow slowly over time. One of the challenges of these views is that they don’t always use the same words in the same ways. For instance, when Postmillennialists talk about the Millennium, they mean an increasing earthly influence of Christianity on all spheres of culture. They do not envision Jesus ruling as the King of the Earth but they see the effectiveness of the gospel creating a much more Christian world through revival and conversion. They do believe that at some point Christ will return to judge and then reign over the New Heavens and New Earth but only after the work of the Gospel and Christians have had significant success.

Eschatology Conclusion

Each of these eschatological systems is rooted in the Bible, which should tell us something about eschatology itself. The simple conclusion is that the details about the future are unclear, even while the big idea is very clear. Jesus wins. Satan loses. Get on Team Jesus. This should give us a sober and humble mind any time we are considering eschatology. That being said, here are a few of the author’s conclusions.

First, Dispensational Premillennialism is crazy. It really is a system built from a priori commitments about Israel and the church. There is nothing in the Bible to suggest that there will be more than one return of Christ. There is nothing to suggest that the rapture will be “secret”. In fact, Paul is pretty clear about this when he says, “For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God.” (1 Thess. 4:16). None of those things suggest a secret rapture, but instead describe a very loud and very public event.

Second, Postmillennialism is compelling in a lot of ways but tends to ebb and flow in popularity with the relative success or failure of the church. When the church is doing well and the culture is changing, Postmillennialism surges. When the church is taking losses, it tends to shrink. Further, there are many passages in the gospels where Jesus makes it clear that very few people will actually be saved, not the majority that Postmillennialism suggests. For instance, in Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus says that the “gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” Matthew 24:21-30 describes the Great Tribulation that will come immediately before Jesus’ arrival, which again refutes the idea that the world will become more peaceful and Christianized right before the Second Coming.

Third, Amillennialism unnecessarily symbolizes Revelation 20:1-6, making “coming to life”, “resurrection”, and the binding of Satan into unrecognizable things in order to fit them into the system. It struggles to understand how Christians in resurrected bodies could live alongside nonChristians during the millennium even though Jesus lived for 40 days in his resurrection body among his disciples after his resurrection. They argue that no one could persist in sin once Christ is seated on the throne during the millennium even though people as close to Jesus as Judas persisted in sin that caused direct rebellion and betrayal.

Fourth, though eschatology is challenging, complicated and unclear about the details, it seems to me that the Historic Premillennial view is the most consistent and Biblically sound of all the positions. It tends to take each passage at face value, allows for

comic) and the Simpsons, among others, our vision of hell includes pitchforks, caves and flames, which are probably not part of the deal.

There are several places in the New Testament that speak of punishment and most scholars have held them together as a unified description of hell. While there is some mystery, that we will discuss below, there are some really clear things that the Bible teaches about hell. The scriptures are clear that hell is a place of judgement and punishment. Jesus says himself in Matthew 25:46 that the condemned, “will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” The scriptures are also clear that it will be terrible torment that will cause its inhabitants to “weep and gnash their teeth” (Matt. 25:30, Rev. 20:10). Lastly, it is clear that hell is reserved for those who reject Christ and live a life of unrighteousness (Matt. 25:46, Rom. 6:23).

What is less clear is the exact experience of hell and how or why the people there are tormented. A common biblical metaphor for punishment is fire and flame. Matthew 25:41 is representative, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” Later, in Revelation 14:9-11, John records that the “smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever”. These verses are the biblical root of the common cultural depictions of hell as a place of eternal fire and torture and it’s very possible that this is exactly what hell will be like. But Jesus also calls hell a place of “outer darkness”, which conflicts with the fiery vision, since fire as we know it always gives off light. Is it possible that God has invented a kind of fire that burns forever without destroying its fuel or giving off light? Of course. Is it likely? I don’t know. Sometimes, this line of inquiry is meant to lessen the harshness of the Bible’s hellish vision, but this should not be so. Even if the fire is metaphorical, it’s not a metaphor for a sandy, Mai Tai-fueled beach experience. If the “unquenchable fire” is a metaphor, it’s a metaphor for something so bad that normal language couldn’t adequately describe it.

Heaven

As dark and depressing as the study of hell can be, Heaven should be equally beautiful and compelling. For many though, this is not the case. Many Christians have a vivid

picture of what hell will be like (even if it's more informed by pop culture than by the Bible) and a very abstract (and often flat-out incorrect) vision of heaven. The result is that people have often chosen to follow Christ out of fear of experiencing what they know, rather than an excited pursuit of the good that is offered to them in salvation. As a pastor, I have found heaven to be one of the most misunderstood doctrines in the whole Bible, especially relative to its significance to the Christian life. Author Randy Alcorn wrote an incredible book entitled Heaven that meticulously teaches all that the Bible says about heaven, and it's a lot more than you may think.

One of the most compelling points that he makes is that the lack of teaching about Heaven has the potential to do far more damage to Christians than a lack of teaching in another area because Heaven is so often the carrot that is meant to entice Christians to pursue life with Christ. Heaven is the promise for the righteous and the arc of history. Alcorn uses the illustration of an expedition preparing for a long and arduous trip. The work of preparing, mapping, training and planning would be fruitless without a clear understanding of where the expedition was headed. In spite of the obvious foolishness of this illustration, it is exactly what many Christians do each day. We prepare and work, plan and sacrifice to embark on a journey that we either do not understand, or worse, our understanding of it leaves us uninspired. As a young child I envisioned heaven as a large amphitheater that held an eternal worship service. I can still picture myself sitting in the back row of that amphitheater with a feeling of dread about what eternal life was going to be. Now, as a grown-up pastor, I love gathered worship, but for eternity? Hard pass.

Fortunately, the Biblical description of heaven has nary a harp or cloud and no mention of an eighty-eighth verse of How Great Thou Art. Somehow, Heaven has been depicted in a way that completely misrepresents it and God and this misrepresentation has become the default understanding, not only in pop culture but, more dangerously, in the imaginations of the Christians who are destined to live there for eternity. The truth is that the biblical vision for Heaven is incredibly compelling and easy to imagine. In fact, it's not just easy to imagine, it's really exciting to imagine and mentally explore its

topography. So, if Heaven isn't all clouds and harps and worship choruses, what is it? In the last several sections we'll unpack a biblical framework of Heaven and give you the tools to imagine the details yourself.

The logic of the big story

In order to understand the end of the story, we have to start at the beginning. "In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth...and it was good". This is how Genesis 1 begins and ends, with the creation of Earth and all its inhabitants, from the fruit of the ground to humanity itself. After creating, God takes a step back, looks at his handiwork and declares that it is all "good". God's intention for his creation from the very beginning is that it would live and flourish on the earth. If it were not for sin, mankind would have lived in perfect harmony with God and the rest of creation for all eternity. It's important for us to note the details of God's original creation. For the sake of brevity, I'll point out a few things worth noting:

1. From the beginning, God created the world to be physical and three-dimensional. God didn't create humans until after he had created a physical, three-dimensional world to put them in.
2. Before the Fall, there were plants, animals and people, all in harmonious relationship with one another. The plants existed, in part, to nourish the animals and humans and the humans were told to have dominion over (cultivate and care for) the rest of creation.
3. Mankind was given the "Cultural Mandate" before the Fall. God's vision was that mankind would take the raw materials of his creation and cultivate them into every more complex products. He intended that mankind would be co-creators with him, imaging him in their work. God never intended for them to stay in the Garden of Eden or to keep it in the state that it was, it was supposed to grow, both in size and complexity.
4. God's domain was borderless. God existed both in Heaven and on Earth with no apparent trouble or contradiction. Adam "walked with God in the cool of the day" as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

There is more, but this will suffice for now. The picture painted above is God's intention in creation. Our understanding of God's intention for the future ought to reflect what we know was God's intention at the beginning. Any assumption that the future would be radically different than the beginning is unfounded in scripture and more a reflection of Greek, dualistic philosophy.

Of course, we know that God's intention in creation was only realized for a short time. By the third chapter of Genesis, we already see sin entering God's world and corrupting it. If every inch of God's creation was "good", sin's corrupting reach was just as comprehensive. Nothing escaped sin's touch and so, nothing in our human experience is exactly the way it was meant to be. Although, sin's corruption touched every inch of creation, it didn't corrupt everything fully. In other words, though our experience of God's world is tainted by sin, it hasn't been transformed by it. We can still see God's imprint everywhere we look. We see the sin in and around nature because of decay and rebellion but we can still recognize its beauty. We know the sin in ourselves and other people, but we can also still identify a human's essential image bearing nature. We can have a sense of what might have been God's intention and can celebrate it. God has planted a sense of the divine in us so that we can recognize him, when we see his handiwork (Rom. 1).

As we know, the story of God's world doesn't end with corruption. The promise of God, even in the immediate moments following sin's entrance into the world, is that it will one day be overcome. Genesis 3 contains the first telling of the Gospel, the promise that God will one day crush the head of Satan and be finally victorious over evil. It is this redemptive turn that gives us our first clear view of Heaven.

The Re- Words

Once we fully understand the nature of creation and sin, we can turn our attention to God's redemptive work. Jesus' perfect life, sacrificial death and death-destroying resurrection offer salvation to all who would believe. This much we know. For many though, this transaction is understood in purely spiritual terms. In other words, "Jesus

died to save my soul so that I can go to Heaven”. This is the default understanding of salvation for many Christians but it is woefully inadequate and sells the miracle of the resurrection short by a mile.

The impact of Christ’s redemption on us has to be understood in light of creation and fall. God made us good and intended that we would live with him in perfect harmony forever. We would have obeyed fully, thought clearly and had intimate relationship with him and each other without shame or fear. Sin destroyed all of that, broke every relationship and perverted every thought and action with selfishness and pride.

Therefore, if Christ’s work on the cross was truly redemptive, it didn’t just bleach our past so that every individual bad thing we’ve done would be struck from our record but leave us otherwise intact. In that case, Jesus’ death would have only been powerful enough to make God overlook our sin and pretend that it wasn’t there anymore. But the impact of sin wasn’t just to make us guilty, it was to really break us so that, in spite of the fact that we will never not be image bearers, that image has been marred to a great degree. Sin didn’t just make us guilty, it made us perverted and broken.

The great miracle of the cross and resurrection then is that Jesus actually rolled back the effects of sin. Or at least he has begun to. The guilt of sin is not the only thing that has been washed away, so too has the effect of sin on our life. This is what enables us to begin walking out the life that he made us for, that vision of perfect relationship with ourselves, each other, creation and God Himself. When we are regenerated, a process of undoing begins. This is why we see so many words in the Bible that begin with the prefix “re”. This prefix means “to do again” and it finds itself at the front of nearly every major word that the biblical writers use to describe the effects of the cross. Redemption, regeneration, renewal, reconcile, restore, recover, return, and resurrect all communicate the same basic effect of the cross, the undoing and redoing of what once was.

Redeemed means that we are given back our value, regenerated means we are given back our life, reconciled means our relationship has been put back together, you get the picture.

So, what does this mean about Heaven? What God began on the cross he will complete in the New Heavens and New Earth. What he set out to create in Genesis 1, he will recreate in Revelation 21. God's plan will not be thwarted, Satan will not cause him to destroy his masterwork, sin cannot ultimately pervert and corrupt. If Darth Vader still had good in him that a sacrificial Luke Skywalker could bring out him, don't you think God's sacrificial work could cause the curse to be rolled back? Acts 3:21 says very plainly that Jesus is waiting "until the time for restoring all things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago."

The scope of Resurrection

What does this mean practically for our vision of Heaven? Instead of imagining Heaven as an eternal worship service, we ought to see it as an extension of God's redemptive work. To put it plainly, Heaven will be a lot like Earth, except without the corruption of sin. So, imagine doing your favorite things, with many of your favorite people, without any of the effects of sin, for all eternity. That's Heaven. It's not hard to imagine, its actually really easy to imagine what that might be like. Because it's eternal, you'll never run out of time to work on a project, to learn a skill or cultivate some new thing. Without the constraints of sin or time, just imagine the things we will be able to accomplish and discover about God's world!

You probably have a lot of questions, and I can't answer them all here, but I want to say a few things that I think are probably rolling around in your head. First of all, we should expect that the world will be physical, much the same way we know it now. Humans were not created to be disembodied spirits but three-dimensional, physical beings. There is no reason to believe that when we are given resurrection bodies for eternity, that they would be anything but the kinds of bodies that Adam and Eve had before the fall and that Jesus had after the resurrection.

Continuity

One of the most interesting ideas to me is the idea of continuity between our present experience of Earth and the (Re)Newed Earth. The Bible teaches us that in the

transition between the old and renewed Earth, there will be a process of destruction. It's important to understand that the Bible never says that the whole Earth will be destroyed in the sense that it will cease to exist and be replaced, that would be a great victory for sin and Satan! The imagery of fire in the Bible is often used to describe the process of purification, and in fact 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 has some interesting implications,

“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”

Could this mean that some of the “work of our hands”, our actual cultivating and creating could survive to the New Earth? I think so, and it makes perfect sense. Revelation 14:13 tells us, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!” Most Christians tend to think of this in purely spiritual terms, as if this only means that the moments when we obeyed God will “follow us” to Heaven in the sense that we will be rewarded for them (we will). But this both reads too much into the text and ignores the whole biblical arc. The force of our call in the Cultural Mandate is not primarily ethical, it is creative. Thus it stands to reason that if we were made to cultivate the earth in ways that reflect the glory of God, that when we do that, our work is “gold, silver and precious stones” that will be refined but essentially preserved into the New Earth.

There are a lot more implications of the biblical teaching on Heaven and each is more exciting than the last. If you are interested in more, I encourage you to read Heaven by Randy Alcorn, it is the best and most comprehensive treatment of eternity and it will stir

your affections for God and eternity! Until then, I will leave you with this quote from the eminent theologians, Pippin and Gandalf the White.

“PIPPIN: I didn't think it would end this way.

GANDALF: End? No, the journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path, one that we all must take. The grey rain-curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to silver glass, and then you see it.

PIPPIN: What? Gandalf? See what?

GANDALF: White shores, and beyond, a far green country under a swift sunrise.

PIPPIN: Well, that isn't so bad.

GANDALF: No. No, it isn't.”