

# What Is this World Coming to?

Actually, it is looking good, from what we hear Paul saying in Romans 8. He says that the whole creation is waiting eagerly for the time when it will experience God's redemption (v. 19). He goes on to express the astounding hope that "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (v. 21).

## Creation Will Not Be Left Behind

It is clear from Scripture and our observation of the world that all is not well with creation. As Paul puts it, the whole creation is under bondage to decay and "has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Rom. 8:22). Throughout human history, there have been many natural catastrophes, ravages of war and disease, environmental disasters due to human exploitation, and unspeakable suffering due to oppressive social institutions and ruthless dictatorships. The effects of a fallen humanity are visible everywhere. Creation has been "groaning."

Nevertheless, the world that God created has a bright future. It will not be destroyed. It will not be annihilated. It will not go up in smoke. In spite of the bleak picture of the present, God intends to redeem not only human beings, but all of creation. In fact, John Wesley goes so far as to argue in a sermon on Romans 8:19-22 that the redeemed creation will even surpass the original creation:

The whole brute creation will then, undoubtedly, be restored, not only to the vigour, strength, and swiftness which they had at their creation, but to a far higher degree of each than they ever enjoyed . . . What, if it should then please the all-wise, the all-gracious Creator to raise them higher in the scale of beings? What, if it should please him, when he makes us "equal to angels," to make them what we are now,—creatures capable of God; capable of knowing and loving and enjoying the Author of their being?\*

What Paul says in Romans 8, then, has immense theological implications. It means that the world will not be "left behind."

## A New Heaven and a New Earth

Not only Paul, but all of Scripture expresses the hope that someday God will redeem all of creation. Even the flood narrative in Genesis affirms that God will remain committed to creation, in spite of God's catastrophic judgment on sinful humanity. God declares, "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans . . . As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease" (Gen. 8:21-22). "I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth . . . Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth" (9:13, 16).

Other Old Testament texts likewise envision a day when God will bring about a renewal of the whole creation. The book of Isaiah is particularly replete with such a hope. Isaiah's grand vision is that God will not only bring exiled Israelites back to their homeland, but also that other nations will gather in Jerusalem and fully participate in the worship of the one true God. "And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, . . . these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer" (Isa. 56:6-7). "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth" (65:17). "The wolf and the lamb will feed together" (v. 25; cf. 11:6-9). "And I . . . am about to come and gather all nations and tongues, and they will come and see my glory" (66:18).

This Old Testament tradition of a renewed heaven and earth is picked up in various places in the New Testament. A saying of Jesus in Matthew 19:28 makes reference to "the renewal of all things."

On the other hand, several texts in the New Testament state that heaven and earth will pass away (Mark 13:31 and parallels in Matt. 5:18 and Luke 16:17; Heb. 1:10-12). Second Peter 3:7-12 seems to expect a cosmic fireball that will destroy everything, when "the heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare" (v. 10). However, even in this passage, there is the expectation that the fiery destruction is only a prelude to a renewed creation. Thus, verse 13 states, "But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."

Perhaps the clearest example in the New Testament of a renewed and redeemed creation outside of Romans 8 is in Revelation 21. In this final vision of the book, John sees "a new heaven and a new earth" (v. 1). The city of God, the New Jerusalem, has come down from heaven. The dwelling of God is with human beings on this redeemed earth (vv. 2-3). God says, "I am making everything new!" (v. 5). Nations and kings will continue to exist in this redeemed world, except that now they will conduct their affairs in accordance with God's ways (vv. 24-27).

Even though Paul's cryptic statement in Romans 8:21 does not spell out the details of this cosmic redemption, elsewhere in his writings he gives us some hints. Paul's most significant statement on this future hope is in 1 Corinthians (15:22, 24-26, 28, 53-54), where he counteracts the Corinthian Christians' doubts about a future resurrection for believers.

Still, he goes further. He envisions that the redemption of creation will involve the subjugation of all enemy powers to God, "so that God may be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). This will mean that the perishable and the mortal will give way to the imperishable and the immortal. Death will no longer threaten redeemed creation.

## Christ Victorious

The most important aspect of this cosmic redemption is the role of Christ. It is through Christ that this final victory over enemy powers will be accomplished. Paul celebrates this supremacy of Christ in several poetic texts in his letters, most notably in Philippians 2:10-11, Colossians 1:19-20, and Ephesians 1:9-10.

Christ will in the end become the head of all creation. The process has already begun in Christ's resurrection, and it will someday reach its climax, so that finally, "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every

tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10-11).

---

\*John Wesley, Sermon 60, "The General Deliverance," from *The Sermons of John Wesley*, 1872 ed., Thos. Jackson, ed. (as posted at <[http://wesley.nnu.edu/john\\_wesley/sermons/060.htm](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john_wesley/sermons/060.htm)>, The Wesley Center Online, Wesley Center for Applied Theology, sponsored by Northwest Nazarene University, July 11, 2007).

BY JIRAIR TASHJIAN is retired professor of New Testament, Southern Nazarene University.