

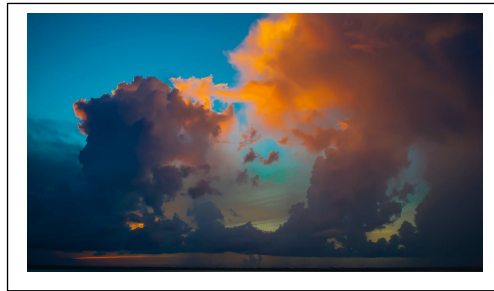
# Our Most Destructive Assumption About Heaven



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Of all the misconceptions we have about heaven, which is the most destructive? That’s a difficult and important question to tackle.

Once, while preaching about the new earth, I cited passages about feasting together in our resurrection bodies. Afterward, a veteran Bible student asked if I really believed we would eat and drink in the afterlife. I told him yes, since Jesus said so. Visibly shaken, he replied, “Engaging in physical activities in heaven sounds *terribly unspiritual*.” Standing there with a body God promised to raise, he was repulsed by the thought of living forever as a physical being in a material world. And he’s not alone. Many Bible-believing Christians would die before denying the doctrine of the resurrection — and yet they don’t fully believe it.

I’ve dialogued with lifelong evangelicals who don’t understand what resurrection means. They really believe they will spend eternity as disembodied spirits. God’s revelation concerning the resurrection and the new earth — our forever home — eludes them. A Christian university professor wrote, “I was floored and dismayed to discover the vast majority of my students don’t believe in the bodily resurrection.” Some evangelicals even believe we become angels when we die.

If I could eliminate one belief about heaven, it would be the heresy that the physical world is an enemy of God’s redemptive plan rather than a central part of it.

# Dangers of Christoplatonism

I coined the term “Christoplatonism” to capture how Plato’s notion of a good spirit realm and an evil material world hijacked the church’s understanding of heaven. From a Christoplatonic perspective, our souls occupy our bodies like a hermit crab inhabits a seashell.

Plato’s statement *Soma sema*, “a body, a tomb,” reflected his belief that the spirit’s ideal state is freedom from the body. The first-century Jewish philosopher Philo tried to integrate Plato’s view with Judaism. In the second and third centuries, some church fathers — including Clement and Origen — followed Philo and reinterpreted Scripture.

But the Bible contradicts Christoplatonism from beginning (Genesis 1, God created the heavens and earth) to end (Revelation 21, God will remake the heavens and earth). The gospel itself centers on the resurrected Jesus who, as part of his redemptive work, will resurrect his people and the world he made for them.

Genesis 2:7 says, “The Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” Adam became alive when God joined his body and spirit together. Your body doesn’t merely house you; in concert with your spirit, it *is* you. Jesus redeems our whole person. When believers die, our spirits go to the present heaven while our bodies go to the grave, awaiting resurrection. We will never be all God intended until body and spirit are reunited in heaven. And just as our new bodies won’t be non-bodies, but real bodies, so the new earth will be a real earth, not a non-earth.

## Disembodied Gospel

If we believe, even subconsciously, that the material world is inherently unspiritual, we will ignore or spiritualize the resurrection. Some speak of spiritual resurrection, but as the sunrise requires a sun, resurrection requires a physical body. That’s what resurrection *means*.

The risen Jesus reassured his disciples, “Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have” (Luke 24:39 CSB). Yet some evangelicals imagine an afterlife in which we become ghosts — the very thing Jesus reassured his followers he wasn’t.

Satan wants us to believe eternal life will be unearthly and boring. Then people focus on bucket lists, thinking here and now is their only chance at *real* human life. Who wants to be a ghost? Why invite others to spend eternity in a heaven we don't look forward to ourselves? Our joy, hope, and motivation to evangelize diminish. Trying to develop an appetite for an eternity of disembodied existence is like trying to develop an appetite for gravel. The only good news about this view of heaven is that it's absolutely false.

The Bible's *actual* teaching should thrill us. Eternity in a redeemed body living in a Jesus-centered culture on a new earth, capital planet of the new universe? That's incredibly *good* news.

## What About the Present Heaven?

God never changes, but heaven *will* change. The Bible indicates that after our resurrection, God will relocate his central dwelling place to the new earth: Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. . . . I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. . . . 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 people, and God himself will be with them as their God." (Revelation 21:1–3)

We're told "the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it [the new earth], and his servants will worship him" (Revelation 22:3). Heaven is where God's throne is, where he dwells with his people. Hence, the new earth will be heaven on earth. When Christians die, we go to live with God in his place. That's the present heaven. But after the resurrection, *God will come down to live with us in our place*. The future heaven, on the new earth, will not be "us with God" but "God with us."

We err when we confuse the present pre-resurrection heaven with the future post-resurrection heaven that God will bring down to the new earth. The present heaven is "far better" (Philippians 1:23) than our lives under the curse of sin and suffering. Upon death, we will be "at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). But my point is, wonderful though it will be, we shouldn't think of the present heaven as if it were our *ultimate* home. The best is yet to come — eternal and delightful life worshipping and serving the forever-incarnate Jesus on the new earth.

# World Worth Anticipating

Spirits without bodies fit Platonism and Eastern mysticism. They do *not* fit Christianity. Paul says if there's no resurrection, we should "be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19).

New bodies and the new earth aren't our inventions; they're God's. He created us to live on and rule the earth, and Jesus became man to redeem his creation (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22). God's people should look forward to living forever in a redeemed cosmos (2 Peter 3:13). That is a life-changing perspective.

The present earth, even under sin and curse, teems with clues about the new earth: mountains, water, trees, people, and cities. Along with other passages, Revelation 21–22 depicts life on the new earth in familiar ways. We will eat, drink, work, play, worship, discover, invent, and travel in a sinless world like — yet even better than — the one God made for Adam and Eve. The word *nations* suggests resurrected civilizations, cultures with distinctive ethnic traits (Revelation 21:24, 26). Multiple new earth passages mention animals (Isaiah 11:6–9; 65:25). What can the rest of "the whole creation" in Romans 8:19–22 be but animals, which along with humans groan and await the resurrection when the earth that fell on our coattails will rise on them?

## Settling for Less Than a Redeemed Earth

Jesus promised his disciples a "renewal of all things" (Matthew 19:28 NIV), which the ESV renders "the new world." Peter preached that Christ won't return "until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets" (Acts 3:21). With the Lord we love, believers will embark on the ultimate adventure. A magnificent new earth awaits our exploration and governance, to God's glory. Jesus will be the cosmic center; joy will be the air we breathe.

Christians are vulnerable to attractive false teachings. Ironically, the true biblical teachings about the new body and new earth are far more robust and appealing than the false Christoplatonic view of heaven. Let's teach our children and our churches what is absolutely true *and* profoundly attractive. Does the thought of experiencing a resurrected world appeal to you? Does it ignite your imagination to realize we will live happily ever after on a planet without sin and suffering? Is this part of the good news you share with others? Let's never settle for less than the full breadth of God's promised salvation — eternal life with God's people on a redeemed earth governed by the King of kings, whom we will joyfully worship and serve forever.

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