

SESSION 7: THIS WORLD AND THE REAL WORLD

This world, the one we live in, was always going to be temporary.

Due to the fall and/or God's foreknowledge of the fall, it was always destined to pass away, once God's purpose for this temporary world was complete. This is why we find Jesus and the New Testament writers referring to 'this age and the age to come,' implying that this age would be superseded by another. (Mk 10:29-30, Eph 1:21)

John says, for example, in 1 John 2:17, "the world and its desires pass away...", and then in Revelation, John (the same John) sees this having taken place and writes in Revelation 21:1, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away." In verse 4, he says, "the old order of things has passed away," followed by verse 5, where God says, "I am making everything new!"

In place of this world, God has promised a new and better world, in fact, not only a new heavens and a new earth, but an entirely new age where righteousness dwells. (2 Pe 3:13) Can you imagine a world filled with righteousness, love, peace, joy, and the abundance of all things, with the total absence of evil and sin, violence and injustice, chaos and decay? Well, imagine it we must, because such a world is God's future world. This future world was what God had in mind from before the world began, and was always meant to be God's everlasting world. This is, and has always been, God's end-vision!

The temporariness of this current earth and its heavens is very clear in scripture. The first chapter of Hebrews talks about this current heaven and earth giving way to a new heaven and a new earth, to a new cosmos! It predicts this world to wear out like a garment, to be rolled up like a robe and be changed! (Heb 1:10-12)

Most theologians don't see this as the physical replacement of this earth and the universe, but the renewing of it, which Paul affirms in Romans 8. There Paul talks about all creation being subject to the curse of death and decay (Ro 8:20-21), but which will one day be set free into new creation (Ro 8:21). That day will come when Christ returns and new creation fully unfolds, which Paul refers to in verse 19 as the 'revealing of the sons of God' which is another way of referring to the resurrection.

We read prophetic passages that allude to this renewing of the earth, such as Psalm 98:8: "Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the LORD." Another passage is Isaiah 55:12-13 "...the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their

hands. Instead of the thorn-bush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD's renown."

Perhaps, the increased groanings and chaos of our fragile earth are signs that this day is closer than we may have imagined. Jesus alludes to these very signs in Matthew 24:7-8, where he says, "There will be famines and earthquakes in various places"—and we could add etc, etc, etc.

"All these," Jesus said, "are the beginnings of birth pains." But what is about to be born? Well, it's the new heavens and the new earth - God's future glorious world! This is exactly what Paul is saying in Romans 8, the new creation chapter, where he says in verse 22, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now." (ESV)

So the future age is the real age and the future world is the real world. What does this mean?

To help us understand this, let's listen to C.S. Lewis, who was one of the leading theologians and Christian apologists of the last century. C.S. Lewis taught some great theology when he wrote his children's classic series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, by embedding theology into his children's stories. In *The Last Battle*, which is the final book of the *Narnia* series, the old Narnia, or the old world, passes away and a new world takes its place. It takes the children, who are the main characters of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and who have now become part of the new world, a while to realize that this new world is similar to the old, but oh so much better than the old world.

And not only is the new world better, it is also the real world!

Not only do the children discover that the new world is similar to, and even better than, the old world, but that also the new world is, in fact, the real world, the real Narnia! The old Narnia was only a shadow of this new world that they were now experiencing. So it will be with God's future new heavens and new earth! What we now have is only the shadow of something that is so, so, so much better.

And I must be honest and say that, one thing that I really find hard to handle, is Christians who talk about their 'bucket list'—places they want to visit and sights they want to see before they die. When we understand the Bible Story properly, we realize that the most pristine places on this earth, in this current, temporary, decaying world, will be the most ordinary in God's new world.

And it gets even better: Not only is the new world better, but it is the eternal world that God had planned for 'from before the world began!'

The Kingdom New Testament (KNT), a fairly new translation of the New Testament, done by Professor N.T Wright, translates the familiar term 'eternal life' as 'the life of God's new age,' or 'the life of the age to come', in an attempt to correct false ideas about eternal life. In the KNT translation, for example, Titus 1:2 has Paul talking about 'the hope of the life of the coming age.'

Many Christians see eternal life not as the hope of the believers' participation with God in his new world, but rather as 'going to heaven forever when we die.' Sadly, this is not only incorrect, but it distorts God's end-vision, and confuses what God is doing in the present. It really does hinder our ability to 'live a life on mission with God.'

Our theologians talk about the 'intermediate state' and the 'eternal state.'

The intermediate state is that temporary place that we go to when we die. This is most often referred to in scripture as heaven, such as in Luke 24:51, where it speaks of Jesus' ascension and says "While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven."

And it was also what Jesus referred to as paradise (Lk 23:43) and what Paul referred to as being "absent from the body and being at home with the Lord" (2 Co 5:8). It is a place of disembodied spirits—we are present with the Lord but absent from the body. In heaven, we do get to gaze upon Jesus in his resurrected form with his new body, as he is the 'first fruits' of the resurrection. We, however, must wait for Christ's return before we experience our resurrection and new bodies, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:23, "But each in his turn: Christ, the first-fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him."

The intermediate state is not God's end-vision and has never been! The intermediate state can best be described as like being in a transit lounge at an airport we briefly visit, in a country we have to pass through on our way to the country of our final, and ultimate, destination.

Existing permanently in a disembodied state in some heavenly paradise has far more to do with Greek philosophy—and increasingly, popular philosophy promoted by Hollywood and new age thinking—than with sound Jewish or Christian theology. And although it has proven to be effective sermon material for some evangelists, it falls short when scrutinized by Bible teachers.

Plus, when you really think about it, it just doesn't make sense. It suggests that the devil's cunning and Adam's fall forced God into abandoning his Plan A for an inferior Plan B, as God's original purpose for Mankind was to live on earth and for angels to live in heaven. Man was not created for an eternal heavenly existence, but for a physical existence, to live on earth and to steward God's good earth together with God. This was God's Plan A, and still is God's Plan A, and he has never abandoned his glorious Plan A for some inferior Plan B!

Let's be very clear, resurrection and participation in God's new world, the new heaven and earth, is the Christian hope, and was the hope of the early church and even of those in the Old Testament, who walked in the footsteps of faithful Abraham, who the Bible says, was "looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." (Heb 11:15)

So, I would like to suggest that this current world, this current and temporary age, is the laboratory in which God is developing and perfecting his 'creation project.' Once God's 'creation project' is complete, this world as we know it will be done away with

and replaced with another world, an eternal world—a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwells righteousness. It will be a better world, the real world, and God's eternal world, where God's 'before the world began dream' will be fully and gloriously realized.

Therefore, how we live on this earth and in this age does have eternal value and consequences. It is so very important that we know 'the hope of his calling,' and allow God's dream to become our dream, and live, together with God, a life on mission.