

Session 6: New Heavens & New Earth

Introduction

“The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ reframes everything, bringing hope, life and meaning to every part of human culture. And yet many of us can't see how our faith shapes much of everyday life and experience.”¹

“Sunday to Sunday, the in-between days, where was Jesus?”²

“I didn't think about the whole of who I am, what was I passionate about, or how God uniquely made me.”³

“What are God's purposes for us? What does it mean to be made in the image of God? How do we live in the world but not of the world?”⁴

“God wants to make us more ourselves.”⁵

“He is holding all things together and that he is reconciling all things to himself.”⁶

“We're exploring: How does the biblical story reframe our story?”⁷

“We live out of our stories.”⁸

“So be located in the story, the biblical story in which God reveals himself, his character, and his life.”⁹

¹ Mark Mayhew, Marketplace Institute, Regent College. (Mark is one of the main presenters of this Series.)

² Hugo Ciro, CEO of Level Ground Trading, Victoria, BC.

³ Christine Lee Buccholz, Consultant and Board Member, Restavek Foundation, Falls Church, Virginia.

⁴ Mark Mayhew.

⁵ Hans Boersma, Professor of Theology, Regent College.

⁶ Amy Sherman, Author, *Kingdom Calling*, Senior Fellow, Sagamore Institute.

⁷ Mark Mayhew.

⁸ Rikk Watts, Professor of New Testament, Regent College.

⁹ Sarah Williams, Professor of History, Regent College.

“In the last episode we were challenged to encounter Jesus as the fulfilment of history. Our Lord, Saviour, and King, redeeming all of creation and restoring it under His rule.”¹⁰

“We know the Bible ends with Jesus coming back, but does what we do now, matter?”¹¹

*Vincent Kong’s Story*¹²

I've visited thousands and thousands of factories who are making products for the west. And when you go in the factory, you can see meters long production line, workers working very hard to put things in and assembling things and I go there to inspect the wages, the labour conditions, environmental issues, health and safety issues, on behalf of the buyers from the West.

“Vincent Kong lives in his native Hong Kong, where he worked as a factory consultant for multinational companies.”¹³

We love Hong Kong. This place is excited, energetic, vibrant, never rests. People work very hard, work very late. Efficiency, productivity, and profit-tivity.

“In early 2000, Vincent got a job inspecting factories in mainland China on behalf of clients in the West.”¹⁴

I thought, you know, when people are doing business, they would fulfil the law in some way. But it is not the case in the real world. I actually found, companies violating the labour law. Like they're not paying the minimum wages as they are set. They are not paying overtime. They employ child labour. I speak it out to the factory owner, 'You are using this kind of child labour and overtime is just terrible, you know? What should you do?' And I got the feedback is he's not going to do anything. I felt upset and I know God will do something, but I just don't know what it is.

¹⁰ Erin Antosh, The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation, and Culture. (Erin is one of the main presenters of the Series.)

¹¹ Mark Mayhew.

¹² Vincent Kong, Sustainability Manager, Hong Kong.

¹³ Mark Mayhew.

¹⁴ Erin Antosh.

“He reported the problems, but got nowhere. He was bound by a nondisclosure agreement to not tell any third party. And gradually he began to lose hope.”¹⁵

In those days, I hardly able to find any meaning. We are taught to have faith, hope, and love every day. And when you actually put that into practice, you came across challenges. Every morning I got up, have my cup of coffee, and pack up my briefcase, put my notebook, laptop computer, and move out. And it's just like a dead man walking. I prayed that I can see something better. You know what I mean? Not see anything worse. But day after another, repeatedly, I still saw these kind of situations. So I start thinking that, first of all, whether I should continue to do this, this is number one. Number two is can my Christian faith enable me to put up with it and sustain me in this kind of tension? At that I felt lost. I knew I shouldn't keep doing it for the next 5 or 10 years or so. But I don't know what to do.

“Like Vincent, we can feel small, lost, and powerless in a complex and sinful world. How do we sustain hope? We know that Jesus' life and death affirms our lives, but what about his resurrection? What about our ultimate hope and significance? Are we just waiting for heaven? Somehow enduring the brokenness of the world? How does the ending of the Bible, our vision of heaven, affect us today?”¹⁶

¹⁵ Erin Antosh.

¹⁶ Erin Antosh and Mark Mayhew.

Revelation 21:1 – 4

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.

The Resurrection

The resurrection. Very important to understand that without the resurrection, there would be no Christianity. Jesus would either have been forgotten or become just some... another slightly odd footnote in the long history of failed prophets. But something happened. And within just a few weeks, these people were proclaiming the good news of Jesus' resurrection. Something had happened and Jesus had been raised from the dead.

Now, you have to admit that's a pretty large claim. Jesus had been raised from the dead. And not surprisingly, all kinds of proposals had been made to try and explain this. We don't like stuff that messes up our world. Small doses in a movie theatre, we can handle aliens. That's okay. But not a resurrection in my backyard, thank you.

Now, the first thing to understand is, actually, that these people are Jews. And that's important. No one else in the ancient world at this time, even considered resurrection; it never crossed your mind. So whatever else people might tell you, this story could really only have originated among Jewish people, nowhere else. But actually, that only makes it even more difficult, because when you talk to Jewish people, no one was expecting the resurrection of a single individual simply because resurrection was just one part of a much larger combination of events, all of which were expected to happen at the same time. And here's the checklist: It had to include

- the defeat of the Romans,
- the subjugation of all the nations to Israel, and

- the return of all the exiles, and
- the restoration of Jerusalem, which meant also the eradication of its current corrupt leadership, (haven't finished yet) and
- the enthronement of the Davidic king,
- the amazing renewal and transformation of all of creation, and then, of course,
- the resurrection of everyone.

Now, you put that together and you can understand why nobody in the gospel narratives goes to the tomb to see if Jesus has been resurrected. They don't have to. All they have to do is look outside the window. Nothing's changed. Nor did they understand the language *after three days* to mean literally three days. It's a prophetic metaphor. It means, not tomorrow, but sometime in the future.

Now, you see it's not just that no Jew would believe them, it's more than that. It's that no Jew could even imagine anything like this. It's just not part of their horizon. You just don't have a resurrection in the middle of an unchanged world. It seems to me that the only way actually to explain what happened, to explain the disciples' complete turnaround, is, however difficult we might find it, that something like this actually did happen. And if it did, everything is different.

And what does the resurrection show? Well, many people think, well, it's showing that Jesus was God, but actually probably not. What it's really doing is demonstrating that God had vindicated him. That God had said yes to everything Jesus had said and done. Now, I know it's common to talk about Doubting Thomas, but actually, he's my hero. I don't think Thomas is particularly sceptical. I think he understands what's going on. Because if Jesus has been raised from the dead, then it means that all those mighty deeds and words that Jesus was engaged in, acting and speaking as though he was actually Israel's God on Earth, then it means that all of that is actually true. And that's why, when Jesus appears, it's Thomas who offers the first truly Christian confession of Jesus. He kneels before him and says, *My Lord and my God*. This is a Jew talking to a human being: *My Lord and my God*. That's got to be one of the most astonishing things in history. No Jew is going to say that to a human being. And yet here is Jesus in human form in front of Thomas. And of course, the language

is taken directly from Israel schema: *Here we saw the Lord our God is one.* And Thomas says, *My Lord and my God.*

Jesus' Resurrected Body

So, it's God's yes to Jesus. But it's more than that because Jesus comes back with a body. He's not a ghost. This is not Casper the Friendly Jesus. Now, it's an unusual body because he can appear and disappear at will, but when he eats, it doesn't fall through his sandals. It's a real body. Now you've got to hear that because this is also God's extraordinary affirmation of the human body.

Bodies matter to God. That's why Christians don't actually talk about just saving souls, so the body doesn't matter. We have to have a body in order to reflect God's image. Cannot be human without a body. And the resurrection is God's affirmation of the continuation of this body into the world to come.

And of course, if this body is physical, it's going to need a physical place in which to exist. And the resurrection is also God's affirmation of the goodness of creation. If you like, Jesus' resurrection is our first glimpse of the world to come. And that world to come is going to involve a new heavens and a new Earth. Now, this sometimes surprises in some respects, but fortunately not so much over the last few years, as people have begun to realise what their Bibles actually have to say about this.

New Heavens and New Earth

We already learned from Iaian that creation is God's temple. So, listen to these texts: For God so loved my soul? For God so loved human beings? For God so loved the cosmos – creation is the temple, human beings as his image within – that he gave his Son. Do you get that? God loves his creation and he's not going to let the first set of snake phages that comes along take it over. And right, he'll defeat Satan whether by hook or by cross, but he's going to do it. So committed is he to his creation.

And so, when Jesus teaches us to pray, what do we pray? Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. May your kingdom go and take us with you. Is that what he says? But it's amazing how many Christians actually act as though that is what Jesus says. He doesn't say that. He says what? May your kingdom come, your will be done, where? On earth. Heaven's not the problem Earth is.

And God is committed to restoring it, that his will, his kingdom, might be done here. Paul, in Romans 8, says something similar, Creation groans waiting for its destruction. No. It's redemption. And that's the language that comes straight out of the account of the Exodus.

When God redeems Israel, he doesn't destroy them. He doesn't burn them up and start something new. They're the ones who come through this. When you get to Revelation, what are we told? The Saints will reign upon the earth. Of course we are not made for wings. You can understand why God also, in Revelation, says He will destroy those who destroy the Earth. You and I wouldn't dream of dumping toxic waste in our lounge rooms, but will happily do it to God's temple. Stop. No more.

And the end of all things, the new Jerusalem does what? comes from heaven to earth. And there's the great acclamation at the end: Behold, behold, behold, the dwelling of God is with humanity. We are going nowhere. Heaven and God, it seems, are coming here. That is an extraordinary thought.

The resurrection, then, is God's first down payment. It's his guarantee. It's God's commitment to this future. What he's done to Jesus, he will do to us. And through that, creation, too, will be set free from its bondage to decay. Can you imagine what that's like? Anyone here enjoy coffee? You ain't had nothing yet, baby. You like that fruit juice that comes from the vine, especially after it's been matured for a little while? You haven't anything yet. Oh boy!

Well, I can hear some of you raising some questions. *Well, hang on a minute, hang on a minute, aren't there are a few little problems here, right? For example, what do we do with this: Revelation 21 says the heaven and Earth are going to pass away. First heaven, first Earth gone. So a new heaven, a new Earth.* Hang on. Hold your horses. Go back and read Paul. What does it say? If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creature. The old has gone and the new has come. You didn't suddenly change. You weren't burned up and suddenly reappeared. No, no, no. It's using this language because this transformation is so remarkable. So astonishing. You can only use this language. And even then, you don't get close to the edge of it. It's an extraordinary future that God has envisioned for us, his enemies, and for his creation.

Well, doesn't 2 Peter talk about the heaven and Earth being kept for fire? Well, yes, but read the rest of the passage. It's actually the wicked who are burned up, not creation. What about the heavens passing away with a loud noise, the elements melting, the earth being burned up? What about that text? What you're seeing here is a cosmic Mt. Sinai. What happened at Mt. Sinai? The heavens moved apart, God descended, roaring noise, and came face to face with his people. That's what's envisioned here. The coming of the glory of God to earth. It's not a cosmic annihilation. It's a cosmic Mt. Sinai, As God's presence comes to us. So the resurrection, God's yes to Jesus, and because of him, to humanity, and therefore to His creation. It points to the promise of this cosmic shalom -- peace, a garden city with plentiful river and trees of healing for the nations.

“There are lots of misconceptions about heaven, and I will just mention briefly two. One probably still fairly common misconception of heaven is that it is completely separate from Earth. Heaven is above, Earth is below, heaven is in the clouds or above the clouds. And the purpose that we have is to get away from this Earth because it is something bad to escape and to go to this place up there somewhere in order to escape our bodies, in order to escape the material world that God has made and thus finally to be at home. It's a terrible way of understanding the Christian faith, because God has made the created order, God has made the material, created order. God has made our bodies, He's made them good, and he's made them with an eternal purpose.

“The second misconception, it seems to me, is to completely conflate heaven and earth. To lapse into a strictly materialist understanding of this world. To say matter is all there is and everything spiritual can be explained in terms of matter. Scripture purposely, it seems to me, purposely speaks of both heaven and earth. We are looking forward to a fullness, the fullness of what it means to be in Christ, the fullness of what it means to see God face to face, as Scripture often puts it. We're looking forward to something that we haven't even begun to comprehend.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Hans Boersma.

“The picture of the new heaven and the new earth is a picture. That's the first thing to say. It's a picture that has reality at the heart of it, but it's a picture of something beyond our imagining. Pictures often are like that. They are better than we can imagine, profounder, more wonderful. The things that we can be certain of with regard to heaven, are that we shall be even closer to the Lord Jesus as individuals than any of us have been in this world, and we shall be surrounded by, I am going to say, a transformed creation, and we shall be in that transformed milieu in resurrection bodies modelled, in some way that, again, we can't imagine, on the resurrection body of the Lord Jesus, because without matter and material bodies you can't have relationships. And without relationships, you simply can't have meaning.”¹⁸

“Jesus' resurrection shows us that there's continuity of our physical bodies, of the physical reality, and validates that. But it also shows us that there's a radical discontinuity. He's able to appear in locked rooms, which I think would be fascinating how you do that. And so we can't just assume that things will be exactly the same. Somehow or other, we're brought to our perfection in that resurrected body. The same thing will happen with creation. It's brought to its completion at the time of Christ's return.”¹⁹

Now, what does this mean for us today? Well, the first thing it means is that whatever the gospel is about, it's about life, and God's life, life that never runs out. Today, here now, in anticipation of this world to come, that's what the gospel is about. And that's exactly John's point, if you read his gospel. Unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he doesn't talk much about the kingdom of God. Why? Because he knows most of us non-Jews won't get what that means. So, he translates it.

More than 40 times, Jesus says this: *What does God want from you? He wants you to open your hands and accept His gift of eternal life. That's what he wants. I have come to bring you life, and to give it to you more abundantly than you've ever known.*

¹⁸ J. I. Packer, Author, Knowing God, Professor Emeritus, Regent College.

¹⁹ Mariam Kamell, Associate Professor, New Testament Studies, Regent College.

Is this how we come across to people around us? In our workplaces, in our cities, suburbs, where people bump up against us, and when they meet Christians, do they immediately think life? Because if they don't, we have a problem.

What's your vision of God like? What if holiness is not about keeping all these rules, not about being the moral police? What if holiness is actually a matter of whether I bring the life of God to somebody or not? What is the mark of me being holy, of you being holy, of us being holy, is that people feel more alive after they've been with us than they were before. Would you like that? You kind of get a bit tired of waving the finger at people. Wouldn't it be nice just to offer them God's life? Wouldn't that be great?

Citizens of Heaven

That's what we're called to be: Citizens of heaven living in anticipation of this glorious coming kingdom. And it doesn't mean we just sit around holding on. No. Just like the incarnation, the resurrection, our following Jesus is meant to be lived out in the coffee shops, in the schools, in the parks, on the highways, in the workplaces, in the fields. The whole earth is the Lord and the fullness thereof. (Or, is the Lord's.) Now. That's how we meant to be living, in the light of that.

We are about people keeping. That long history of Christian engagement in the world, high view of women in those early Christian meetings, not only could women pray, they could also prophesy, speak on behalf of God to his people. Astonishing. A high view of sexuality where people weren't just objects to satisfy our wandering desires. Imagine that: you're living in the first century, you're a young boy, nine years old, you were bought by a very wealthy master to be his sexual plaything, and that's all you know, except on one day of the week you come to a meal at which there are all kinds of people – Jews, Romans, Greeks, all kinds of status, men and women, rich and poor, slave and free, like you – and you sit down together, and this is the one meal in the week where everyone around that table treats you with dignity and respect. Start doing that. And the world cannot stay the same. And it doesn't matter how many legions you have at your disposal. People respond to being loved. Children mattered. They weren't just about forming better financial relationships with wealthy, rich families. A high view of slaves so that even slaves can become bishops in God's church.

Limiting the power of the state. Protecting the weak from the powerful. Now, I know we've not always done this well, I know that, but it is part of our history. And since creation is part of this future that God has destined for us. It's high time and past high time that we began to show the way in caring for creation. We are the sign and the foretaste of what is to come. Paul says, we are meant to be shining like stars, holding out the promise of life to others.

“Every human being asks questions of eschatology, of what the future will be like. You don't have to be a Christian to do that. So, what we believe about the future actually affects the way that we live our lives now, which is why the language of a new heaven and a new earth matters.”²⁰

“The Christian story is not just that we started with creation and we're waiting for God to get rid of it so we can enter into a kind of eastern mystic, you know, spiritual reality. Christianity didn't teach that. And the fact that the whole biblical narrative starts with two chapters on creation, the goodness of creation, and ends with two chapters on the goodness of creation, ought to be a giveaway that the stuff in between means that we live in this world as God's world, hopeful of the renewal of creation, but caring for it as best we can while we wait.”²¹

“Years ago, a minister in Harlem named Jeff White gave a great analogy. He held up a little pink spoon, the type that you get when you go like to a Baskin-Robbins ice cream store, and you've got all your 31 flavours there. And essentially, they give you this little taste of the chocolate or the strawberry or whatever and it's a foretaste of the ice cream to come. And so, there's a way in which we can sort of stand up with one another and say, you know, Jesus is calling us to be this, he's calling us to be these pink spoons, people whose lives give to other people this foretaste of what is coming in the future kingdom.”²²

²⁰ Steven Garber, Founder, The Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation, and Culture.

²¹ John Dickson, Pastor and Founder, Centre for Public Christianity

²² Amy Sherman

“Irenaeus was a second century Christian theologian, a very distinguished one, actually. And one of the things he said was that the glory of God is a human being fully alive. And I think that that's a profound truth.”²³

Conclusion

Why is it that so many Christians have trouble living this out? I think it comes back to the fact that we don't really understand what it means to become a citizen of heaven. And that's because we haven't really understood how fundamental stories are, to who we are as people. We live out of our stories. When I react, I'm reacting out of my story. When I show kindness, it's because of who I understand myself to be on the basis of my story.

You see, we learn who we are by looking into other people's faces. Right? And we get the chance in Jesus to look into God's kindly face toward us. And his first words to us, as to the woman caught in adultery, are, *I don't condemn you*. Offering life. But we don't quite live out of that story because we're still trying to be Australians, and Canadians, and Chinese. And those things are not bad in themselves, except every one of our countries, every one of our histories are broken, insecure, alienated, wanting to force their will upon others. I'm better than you because I'm a straight. No, you're not. That is not right.

How in the world can we bring the life of God when we try to live those two narratives? What we have to do, folks, is learn to live out of Israel's story. We are now children of Abraham called to be a blessing to the nations, a follower of Jesus, the servant king. That's one of the things Reframe is trying to do here. We're trying to inculcate God's story in you so deeply. That when something happens, you just instinctively react with the character of God that's expressed in that story. You don't have to think about it because it's who you are and it's so deep inside of you, that's just where you come from.

Well, Jesus is very clear about this. This thing is not something we can do on our own strength. This life comes through the Spirit, and that's what makes the difference. It began with Jesus' baptism, when the Spirit of God came upon him. It was that Spirit in whose power he came out of the desert. You can't even think about beginning to live the Christian life, to live as Jesus, without being filled

²³ J. I. Packer.

with the Spirit. And that's the great promise of the New Testament. You could have your sins forgiven at the altar in the temple. What you didn't get was a transforming life of God's Spirit freely poured into you. That's the gift. That's the great joy that just runs all the way through the New Testament. Now it's about God living out of me. That's the great promise. Our sins having been forgiven, we are set free from the past. And with his Spirit now in us, transformed, ready to live into the future. The new heavens and the new Earth.

“The biblical story begins in a garden, and ends in a city, but it's a garden city. The peoples of the earth bring their glory into it. There's a great text at the very end of 1 Corinthians 15, in which Paul says, Because of the resurrection, therefore, your work is not in vain, in the Lord. Because God is making all things new and invited us to participate in that newness, our work is not in vain in the Lord. That too, can be brought into the city of God.”²⁴

“I don't think he's just talking about so-called gospel work or ministry work. I think he's saying if we do things with faith, hope, and love for the Lord, that in some way beyond our imagination, I think, it may find its place in the new heaven and the new Earth. So I don't know whether, you know, my carvings are going to be in the new heaven and Earth, but I wouldn't be surprised.”²⁵

Vincent Kong's Story cont'd

“Back in Hong Kong. Vincent had lost hope while working as an inspector in a broken factory system. But this biblical vision of new creation changed his perspective about what he was doing.”²⁶

I rediscovered the meaning of my work every day, and filling up with the purpose. I live in the kingdom. The kingdom comes. But when I see the bad side around me, I also realise that the kingdom is not yet come and I have to deal with that every day, to give it attention, even though I may not see immediate changes, I start to trust that God will someday... it will make a difference. That's. Just wait and see what God will be doing after. Some of the factories I revisit

²⁴ Loren Wilkinson, Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies, Regent College.

²⁵ Paul Stevens, Professor Emeritus, Marketplace Theology, Regent College.

²⁶ Erin Antosh.

again after four years, something's changed. The entire time. I thought, this is useless, this is just a checkbox. But four years after, and after the buyers read my report, they start to do something and then they got some improvement. God taught me to listen to people's needs. Every time, when I talk to the factory owners, if they say, *Oh Vincent, this is very difficult to change*. Sometimes I'm confident, *You know, I'm a Christian, so if you need me, I can pray for you*. What I really hope is, more authentic Christians stand up, and put up their faith every day, and make a difference in the workplace. The workplace is complex and complicated and difficult to work out your Christian belief from time to time, but we believe that this is what God wants me to do.

“So, it seems that what we believe about the future really does affect how we live today. When we think that heaven is completely disconnected from this world, it's difficult to see how what we do now matters. It's all about waiting to escape. But the Bible tells us that what we do now does matter, and somehow God will incorporate it into His kingdom. Christians are called to be signs and foretastes of the kingdom today. And God promises that we don't do this alone. This is the great gift of Pentecost and the next episode in the Biblical drama.”²⁷

²⁷ Erin Antosh and Mark Mayhew.