

New Creation: The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth

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For most Christians the idea of a new creation resembles very little of what the Scriptures actually teach. Many of these incorrect ideas have been passed down for generations with little or no biblical examination. For example, dispensationalism misunderstands the continuity found between the Old and New Testament with respect to the promise of land. The promise of land is not just for national Israel, but is for all of redeemed humanity and is inclusive of the entire created cosmos. Another common misconception regarding the idea of new creation is that the present heavens and earth will be annihilated and re-created at the end of the age. However, this idea ignores the principle of redemption found in the Scriptures; a principle that is applied both to the creature and the creation. The biblical presentation of the new heavens and new earth is more dynamic and marvelous than many of these fanciful and sensational ideas found in churches today. It is only from a biblical-theological perspective that the motif of new creation can be properly understood and rightly applied.

Genesis

Any consideration of new creation must begin with the first creation recorded in the book of Genesis. In the opening chapter of Genesis God creates all things, both the heavens and the earth, and the creatures that will inhabit it. God creates a new work (Gen 1:1; cf., Prov 8:22-31); a work that is completely accomplished by his sovereign power (God said) and for his good pleasure (God saw it was good). The first three days God creates the three spheres of habitation (i.e., light, sky and seas, dry land and vegetation) and then, on the last three days, he creates the three rulers of these respective kingdoms (i.e., luminaries, sea and winged creatures, land animals and man).¹ On the final day God rests from his creative work as its creative king. The importance of rest is stressed with its mention three times in the biblical text (Gen 2:2-3). The rest of God on the seventh day represents what his entire creation is to enjoy; rest in him as their creator-king. The idea of rest becomes a central theme in the life of Israel and is meant to remind people (and creation) to find their rest and peace in God (Exo 20:11; 23:10-12; 31:12-17; Lev 25:1ff).

Throughout the creation account, at the end of each creative day, God pronounces that what he created is good. The idea of good refers to something that is useful and desirable, but it also carries a more significant idea in Genesis. The characteristic of goodness signifies not only that creation is without blemish, but that it reflects God's presence since only he is good (cf., Mark 10:18). The creation is not good on its own merit, but is good because it stands in right relationship to its creator (cf., Gen 1:31; Psa 104:1ff). In other words, sin has not entered the picture yet and has not distorted the relationship between God and his creation.

Adam is commanded to have dominion over the earth and cultivate the garden (Gen 1:28-30; 2:15). However, Adam disobeys God and sins by eating from the tree of the knowledge

¹ For a clear and helpful presentation of the framework-hypothesis see Lee Irons with Meredith Kline, "The Framework View," in *The Genesis Debate*, ed. David G. Hagopian (Mission Viejo: Crux Press, 2001), 217-256.

of good and evil (Gen 2:16-17; 3:6-7). Adam sins against God, incurring his judgment, which is separation from God. However, separation from God does not simply take place at the level of humanity, but affects the entire cosmos as sickness, pain, and death now characterize life for humanity and creation (Gen 3:16-19). There is a separation between God and humanity, between man and woman, and between humankind and other creatures. The goodness that once characterized creation is now taken away because presence with God is prohibited due to sin. The hope of restoring this goodness will not be accomplished by the efforts of man, since he is banished from the garden, but only by God (Gen 3:22-24). The inability of man to restore himself to God is clearly seen from two events in the early chapters of Genesis.

The stories of the Flood and Babel tell how corrupt the earth becomes both from a human and environmental standpoint. Humanity is supposed to be the steward of God's creation, but in their quest for autonomy apart from God they not only distort their own lives by rebelling against him, but also fail to carry out their mandate, which was to have dominion over the earth as servants of God.² Despite the wickedness of humanity and their destructive influence on creation, God will restore humanity and creation. God covenants with Noah and creation not to destroy it again with water (Gen 9:8-17; cf., Jer 33:20-25). This covenant is important because it demonstrates that redemption and restoration is not simply for humanity, but includes the entire created order; a theme which the prophets develop later on.

The rest of Genesis foreshadows the idea of new creation as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are promised a land in which to dwell (Gen 12:1-3; 26:1-5; 28:13-15). The promise of land captures the idea that God will once again dwell with his people in a new place. The Pentateuch traces how Israel is to possess this land; a land which is full of abundance (Exo 3:8-18; 33:3; Lev 20:24; Num 13:17-24; Deut 6:3; 11:9; 26:9-15; 27:3; Josh 5:6). The descriptions of the land point to the fact that it was a reflection of a new creation. The promise of land is eventually fulfilled in an immediate sense as the Israelites take the land (e.g., Joshua-Kings); however, the promise remains unfulfilled in the ultimate sense. The status that Adam and creation enjoyed prior to the fall has not been fully recaptured, rather humanity and creation continues to plunge into despair and destruction. The promise of God found in the prophets is that he will both restore humanity and creation at the end of the age.

The Prophets

The prophets paint a clear picture of the depravity of humanity, but also show how their sinfulness contributes to the turmoil found in the created order (Isa 24:4; Jer 4:28; Hos 4:3; Zeph 1:3; cf., Rev 11:18). Because of sin both humanity and creation face serious consequences. However, the message of the prophets is that God will restore his people and change their hearts (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:22-37:28). He will place his Spirit within his people and make them all know him from the least to the greatest of them. The principle of redemption that is applied to God's people must also be applied to creation, which becomes part of the message of the prophets. The prophets make clear that because of the influence of sin, even in the created order,

² There is a clear parallel between Adam and Noah. Noah is viewed as the second Adam with the mandate to pro-create and have dominion over the earth (Gen 1:26-30; 9:1-7). Every person after Adam failed to fulfill the creation mandate until the true Son of Man came into the world.

a cosmic upheaval must take place in which both the heavens and the earth will be radically changed in accordance with God's work of redemption.

The prophets highlight that the idea of new creation will mean a time of abundance and fertility in the land. The prophet Isaiah speaks most clearly of a time when the wilderness will produce life, which will give way to a new Eden (Isa 30:23-24; 32:13-15; 35:1-7; 41:18-20; 43:19-21; 51:3; 55:13; cf., Psa 72:16; Jer 31:12; Ezek 34:25-31; 36:35; Hos 2:18-23; Joel 2:18-24; 3:18; Amos 9:13-15). Clearly, the prophets understand that God's future restoration means a reversal of the curse of sin (cf., Gen 3:18), which signifies not only the restoration of humanity to God, but creation too. The prophets do not limit their language only to the land, but also speak of a change that will affect the entire cosmos. There will come a time when peace will dwell upon the earth, which is characterized by the co-habitation between humans and animals (Isa 11:6-8; 35:9; 65:25; Ezek 34:28). Moreover, the entire earth will be judged and evil will be removed (Isa 24:1-20; 51:6; Jer 4:23-24; Joel 2:30-31; Zeph 1:2-3; 15-18; 3:8; Hag 2:4-10), which will pave way for a new heavens and new earth (Isa 65:17-25; 66:22-23). The present created order will be modified to reflect God's character in the new heavens and new earth as he will be the light for his people (Isa 60:19-20; Zech 14:6-7). With the removal of sin and evil, the creation and its inhabitants will once again be characterized as "very good" because fellowship with God will be restored.

Jesus and New Creation

Jesus is portrayed in the gospel of John as the living word that was with God in the beginning (John 1:1; Heb 1:1-4). Just as God began something new back at the inception of time, so now he is beginning something new with the coming of the living word into the world (John 1:14). God is going to make a new creation through his Son. The gospel of Mark demonstrates God's restoration work for man and creation through Jesus' ministry. Mark depicts Jesus' temptation among the wild beasts (Mark 1:13). Jesus faces temptation in a hostile environment (i.e., wilderness), which is a result of Adam's disobedience, but is still able to overcome sin because he is the true Son of God (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 3:21-4:12). Jesus' victory over sin means that the work of restoration and new creation will begin to take shape and eventually be completed in him alone. In the early chapters of Mark, Jesus is portrayed as having authority over the elements, over the supernatural world, and over human death (Mark 4:35-5:43; John 9:1-34; 11:1-46). The miracles of Jesus are not simply proofs for his deity (though that is true; Mark 2:1-12), but are demonstrations of God's work to bring about a new creation (cf., Mark 6:32-44; Luke 5:1-11; John 2:1-11). Jesus' miracles are freeing people from the curse of the fall and from the power of Satan (Matt 12:22-32; Mark 5:22-43; Luke 10:1-16; 11:14-28; John 12:31-32). His miracles signify the renewal of all things. With his miracles, Jesus begins the restoration of God's sovereign reign over his creation (i.e., the Kingdom of God).

Jesus' decisive act of restoring creation is his death at the cross. The Old Testament predicted a future day of cosmic upheaval and judgment upon God's enemies. The cosmic shaking at Jesus' death and his defeat over Satan signifies that the promise of new creation has now come (Matt 27:45-54; John 12:31-32; cf., Heb 2:14-15; 9:26; 1 John 3:8). Although Satan has been defeated and the new creation inaugurated, the already-not-yet dynamic of the New

Testament demonstrates that there still remains a future and final restoration for both humanity and creation. Jesus predicts what the new creation will look like when he states that the meek shall inherit the earth (Matt 5:5). In the future, God's people will receive the earth as a place to live; a place that will be renewed and devoid of anything evil (Matt 24:36-44; cf., Psa 37:11).³ The way in which Christ is now restoring the creation is through the message of reconciliation, which is being carried out by his covenant people—the church (Matt 28:18-20; Luke 24:44-49). The rest of the New Testament unpacks what the new creation looks like for both the people of God and creation.

Acts and the Epistles

The book of Acts and the Epistles are full of themes and pictures of the new creation.⁴ In the opening chapters of Acts the coming of the Spirit inaugurates the time of newness in which God is gathering his elect from all over the world (Acts 2:1-41). In other words, there is a reversal of Babel. Whereas people sought to rebel against God at Babel and unified under their own autonomous name; now people are coming together as God's new creation united by participation in the Spirit. The Spirit is the preeminent mark of the new creation. The Spirit now is making new creatures in Christ and bringing them together in God's new community, the church, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:17-21; Gal 6:15-16; Eph 2:1-22; Col 3:9-11). Just as God manifested his power and brought about the first creation, so he exerts his creative might by making this new humanity (2 Cor 4:6). The task of this new humanity is to carry out the message of new creation, which is the proclamation of the good news found in Christ Jesus. The same Jesus that created the world has now brought about his new creation, the church, to proclaim the gospel. The preaching of the gospel is so that all things find their summing up and completion in him (1 Cor 8:6; 2 Cor 5:19; Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:15-29; Heb 1:1-2; cf., Acts 3:19-21). Humanity will find its true destiny and fulfillment in Christ because, as the final Adam, he demonstrates how people are to live as God's image bearers (1 Cor 15:42-49; Col 3:10; Heb 2:5-18). Those who are in Christ find that their complete restoration will arrive with his second coming in which he will raise his people from the dead with incorruptible bodies and put away death forever (1 Cor 15:54-57; Rev 20:7-15).

Not only will redeemed humanity be fully restored, but so will creation; however, its restoration is not apart from the renewal of the children of God (Rom 8:18-25). The inability of creation to reach its goal is a direct result of the fall of man (Gen 3:17). The only way that creation can be properly renewed is when humanity is also renewed (since man is the principle actor in the plotline of Scripture). The renewal of creation in conjunction with the children of God demonstrates two things. First, the principle of redemption that applies to the children of God also applies to creation. In other words, creation is not annihilated and then re-created, but it is purified of sin and made new. Just as redeemed individuals maintain their unique

³ The comparison in Matthew 24:36-41 between the days of Noah and the coming of Christ is not a reference to the rapture, but is intended to prove that just as the wicked were removed in Noah's day, so the wicked will be removed from the earth at Jesus' second coming. Therefore, the earth is an inheritance for the righteous, not the wicked.

⁴ For a good discussion on the idea of newness found in the New Testament see Carl Hoch, *All Things New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995). Although I do not agree with everything he states (e.g., Israel and the Church), he does make many good points about the newness of the New Covenant and all its implications.

personalities, so creation will retain its “personality,” but now in a new and perfect state. Second, the habitation of the godly in the new age is a purified and renewed creation. Both humanity and creation will once again regain the status of goodness as redeemed entities. The inheritance of the saints is a new heavens and new earth, which is an expansion of the land promise given to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 12:1-3; Rom 4:13; cf., Eph 6:1-4). The righteous shall inherit the whole earth and not simply a parcel of land. This inheritance is nothing less than the first heavens and earth restored and renewed to its proper and final goal.

A popular view among many evangelicals is that the present heavens and earth will be annihilated with fire and God will create a brand new heavens and earth. This idea is typically supported by an appeal to 2 Peter 3:10. However, a careful consideration of the context will demonstrate that Peter’s words are in conformity with the rest of the New Testament when it comes to the idea of new creation. Peter is addressing those who say that the coming of Christ is not a reality because things have continued to be the same since the beginning of time. However, Peter reminds these false teachers that God, who created all things, once destroyed the world with water and at this present time is reserving fire to bring about the judgment and destruction of the ungodly (2 Pet 3:3-7). God’s timing is not man’s time, but his delay in coming is because he desires to see all his people redeemed (2 Pet 3:8-9). At the end of the age the Lord will come again and the present heavens and earth will be burned up and dissolved (2 Pet 3:10); therefore, God’s people should live holy and godly lives (2 Pet 3:11-13). There is little doubt that the coming of the new heavens and new earth will be characterized by cosmic upheaval (Mark 13:24-25), but this grand alteration does not lend credence to the idea that God will exterminate the present creation in favor for a brand new creation. Peter is not arguing that the present heavens and earth will be completely annihilated and then re-created, but is showing the continuity between God’s past judgment and his future judgment. Just as God destroyed the wicked by wiping them out with the flood, so he will judge the wicked in the future with fire and destruction, a fact that false teachers have forgotten.

There are three points from the text that help support the idea that the burning up of the present heavens and earth is not complete annihilation, but renewal and restoration. First, the continuity between God’s first judgment with water and his second judgment with fire is that in the first instance it was the ungodly that were removed from the earth and not the righteous, which demonstrates that the object of God’s judgment is not creation itself, but the wicked that infect and destroy his good creation. Second, the word used for newness in verse thirteen is *kainos*, not *neos*, which demonstrates that there will be continuity between the first creation and the new creation. The word *neos* means new in time or origin (i.e., brand new), whereas *kainos* means new in nature or quality. Thus, the new heavens and earth are not wholly new unlike the previous heavens and earth, but new in the sense of perfection and superiority over the old creation. There is continuity between the first heavens and earth and the new heavens and earth; a continuity in which the creation maintains its essential and unique characteristics, but in a consummated and flawless sense. Finally, Peter’s admonition to the saints is to be holy and godly with respect to the coming of the Lord and the new heavens and new earth (2 Pet 3:11-12). Righteousness will dwell in the new heavens and new earth, which is why the saints are to pursue holiness and godliness now. The principle of redemption must be understood to properly see the correlation between the righteous and their righteous habitation. In the pursuit of holy and godly living God’s people are not annihilated and then re-created, but are renewed and restored according to the image of Christ, which was the goal for humanity since the beginning

of time (Rom 8:28-29; 1 Cor 15:35-57; Col 3:10). Likewise, creation is going to be renewed and restored for the purpose for which it was created, which was to be a righteous habitation for God's people. The sin of Adam delivered the entire cosmos into a state of decay and futility (Rom 8:20-22), but just as God will remove sin and imperfection from his people so he will remove it from the creation by the means of fire. Fire is a method used to bring about purification and it will be no different at the end of the age. The fire of God's judgment will bring to surface the evil and sin that has plagued the creation and it will be taken away with swift judgment. Only that which is holy and righteous will remain (cf., Heb 12:25-29).⁵ Both humanity and creation will realize their glorious destinies at the return of Christ; a destiny which consists of eternal fellowship with God.

Revelation

The promise in the Old Testament is that God will make a new heavens and new earth (Isa 65:17-25). In the book of Revelation the final picture of this promise is provided (Rev 21:1-22:5). With the passing of the old corrupt age, comes a new age and a new heavens and earth (Rev 21:1). Just like 2 Peter 3:13, the word for 'new' in Revelation 21:1 is *kainos* not *neos*. Thus, the idea of newness here is not in terms of time or origin, but in terms of nature or quality. The new creation will be similar to the first creation, but be fully consummated as a glorious and holy habitation for God and his people. The mention of the removal of the sea lends support to the notion that this new creation is free from decay and corruption. The absence of the sea is significant because the sea is symbolic of the powers against God and his people. With the sea removed, the presence of chaos and evil, the wicked nations, the abode of the dead, the place of idolatry, and the old creation is now taken away and God's presence with his people is fully restored (cf., Gen 1:9-10; 6:5-8; Psa 69:1; Isa 27:1; 51:9-11; 57:20; Jer 51:36; Dan 7:2-3; Rev 7:1-3; 8:8-9; 13:1; 14:7; 16:3; 17:2; 18:10-19; 20:13; 21:24-27).

John sees the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven made ready for her husband (Rev 21:2-3). With the arrival of the New Jerusalem from heaven, eternal peace and righteousness are ushered in because of God's presence.⁶ God will dwell among his people once again in an uninhibited manner. The promise of God in the Old Testament is to walk among his people and to be their God (Gen 2:7; 3:8; 17:7; Exo 6:7; 25:8; 29:45-46; 40:34; Lev 26:11-12; 1 Kings 8:16-29; Ezek 11:20; 37:26-27; Zech 2:10-11; 8:3-16). Although this promise is fulfilled initially in Christ and the church (John 1:14; 2:19-21; 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16-18), now the complete restoration between God and his people will take place in the new creation, a restoration that is characterized by God's presence permeating every aspect of his people (Zech 14:20-21).

God is not only coming to dwell with his people, but he is going to make all things new (Rev 21:4-5). With the removal of sin, God's people will experience an intimacy with him

⁵ The Scriptures seem to present that the good works committed by believers in the present heavens and earth will follow them into the new creation (Eph 2:10; Rev 14:13; 21:26). For further discussion on this topic see David Hegeman, *Plowing in Hope* (Moscow: Canon, 1999) and Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

⁶ For most Christians the idea of heaven is a place up in the sky; however, heaven is presence with God. For further discussion on this topic see the following links: <http://theroadtoemmaus.wordpress.com/2007/05/24/what-is-heaven-like-part-1/>; <http://theroadtoemmaus.wordpress.com/2007/06/04/what-is-heaven-like-part-2/>

that they have never known before. This intimacy is characterized by God wiping every tear from their eyes (Isa 25:8; Jer 31:16; Rev 7:17). God will make the former things pass away (death, mourning, crying, and pain) and make everything new (Isa 35:10; 42:9; 43:18-19; 51:11; 65:17-19; cf., Matt 5:4). The removal of the former things is not achieved by re-creation, but renovation through the means of purification with fire (2 Pet 3:1-13). In essence, the new heavens and new earth is paradise restored. The presence of the tree of life (Rev 22:2; cf., Gen 2:9), the river coming from the throne of God (Rev 22:1; Gen 2:10), and the Lord as the light for his people (Rev 21:23; 22:5; cf., Gen 1:1-5; Isa 60:20; Zech 14:7) signifies a new Garden of Eden in which redeemed humanity and creation will be set free from sin and find their true purpose and destiny in Christ (Eph 1:10; Col 1:20). The characteristic of goodness that described the first creation will be realized again in the new creation because both humanity and creation are properly restored to their creator.

The gospel message is not just concerned with personal renewal, but with an entire renovation of all things in Christ (e.g., new creation, new humanity, new Jerusalem, new covenant, new heart). The church has a tremendous responsibility in light of the biblical teaching on the new creation to not only hold to a proper view of the environment, but to practice and promote such a view.⁷ Creation was made good and should be respected and understood from a healthy biblical-theological perspective. Christians should not simply dismiss the present heavens and earth as worthless, which has led to all sorts of abuses to God's creation, but it should be regarded with the same view that Scripture presents, a creation to be enjoyed and redeemed. Despite its flaws, the present creation will one day be renewed and the new heavens and new earth will become the eternal habitation for the meek.

⁷ For an excellent discussion on the responsibilities of Christians as it relates to the environment and the idea of renewed creation see Douglas Moo, "Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment," *JETS* 49 (2006): 449-488.