
Heaven's OK, but It's Not the End of the World

Submitted by Jeffrey Gibbs on April 8, 2012 – 6:37 am 21 Comments



It's Eastertide, and it's been happening for so many years that I just assumed it would happen again: *Time* magazine would feature a cover article that offered some "new take" on why Jesus didn't really rise from the dead, or some such thing. Imagine my surprise (and pleasure) then, when I read the April 16, 2012 article by [Jon Meacham](#), "[Heaven Can't Wait: Why Rethinking the hereafter could make the world a better place.](#)" To be sure, there are at least two confusing and/or misleading things about the article's title, but I'll save that for a minute. First, let me recommend the article to you for careful reading.

Meacham sets out two Christian views of hope. (Note: this is *my* way of saying it in naming "Christian views of hope"—one of the flaws of the article is that it uses the noun "heaven" in confusing and inconsistent ways. More on that in a second). The first view of hope is introduced by referring to the book *Heaven is For Real*, among other sources. [I offered a review of that book here on Concordia Theology](#), and having read it I know that Meacham's description is accurate. The hope of Christians, according to *Heaven is For Real*, is simply and purely the hope of "dying and going to heaven." Nothing else matters—no other hope is mentioned in the book. Meacham notes that many American Christians hold this view. When, therefore, they think about the future and what the promises of God in Christ ultimately entail, they think only of this: dying and going to heaven, leaving this corrupt creation behind, leaving their bodies behind, and going to be with Christ. This is "view of hope #1," and it contains an element of truth while being dreadfully non-creedal and terribly anthropocentric. The element of truth, of course, is the promise of the interim state of the soul (as Francis Pieper terms it). That is, if we die (and Christ might return in glory before we do), then even though death literally rips our human nature apart, nevertheless our souls do experience a blessed rest and awareness of Christ "in paradise," as Jesus said to the thief on the cross. This is true. It is what many people normally refer when they use the noun "heaven," as in "dying and going to heaven." Let me say it again: this is true. But if this is one's basic and entire view of "Christian hope," then it stands in stark contrast to the "other, more radical" view that Meacham describes.

The second view of hope is centered in the promise that Jesus the Lord will return in glory to this creation, and that he will set the creation free from its bondage to decay to enjoy the glorious liberty of the children of God (Romans 8). This is the view promoted by many Christian writers and thinkers today, and over the last dozen years or so I have offered my own small efforts in reflecting and teaching this hope (see my articles in the *Concordia Journal*: "[Regaining Biblical Hope](#)" [2001] and "[Five Things Not to Say at Funerals](#)" [2003]). In describing this view, Meacham rightly highlights the work of N. T. Wright, one of the most interesting and prolific NT scholars of our time. In his books both large and small, for scholars and laity, Wright has emphasized this second view of hope, centered in the return of

Christ, the resurrection of the body, and—well, you know the Creed—the life of the world to come. What remains a genuinely remarkable reality is that, just as Meacham writes, this second view is “radically different” from the common Christian understanding. It is the view of the Lord Jesus in teaching after teaching, parable after parable. It is the view of the Apostle Paul, and LCMS scholar [James Ware has written clearly about it](#) (*Concordia Journal* 2009). This is the hope of the ecumenical Creeds, and of the Small Catechism, that proclaims that “Christ will raise up me and all the dead, and give unto me and all believers eternal life; *this* is most certainly true.”

So, this Eastertime, I recommend this *Time* magazine article for your reading. At the same time, I would like to point out two confusions in the article, and they are present in the title. First, the noun “heaven” is used with a sort of “sliding reference,” and I found it confusing. I have come to think, in fact, that we should speak more often of “eternal life” than “heaven.” In so doing, it would become clear that our hope for eternal life has already begun—it’s already ours, through baptismally-grounded faith in Christ. We have, in the words of John 5, already passed from death and into life. At the same time, to speak of the hope of *eternal life* would make it easier to think clearly about that life that will fully be ours, as the Small Catechism says, when “Christ will raise up me and all the dead.” It is most certainly *not* true to say that “eternal life begins when we die.” No. A blessed rest from labor and toil and sin begins when we die. And a time of waiting (no, *not* purgatory!) ensues, just as the souls of the martyrs under the altar in the Apocalypse reveal: “How long, O Lord?” If we are to use the word “heaven,” I don’t think that Tom Wright’s attempt to change its meaning, as Meacham describes it, is a helpful change. Let “heaven” refer to the interim state of the soul between physical death and physical resurrection. That’s OK. I’m not against heaven. But it is not the End of the World. It’s not the hope of the Church.

The second confusion to point out is the implication that a more eschatological (and biblical) view of Christian hope would lead to the view that it’s our job to “make the world a better place.” To be sure, there is a profound element of truth in this. If this world actually matters, and if this fallen creation is still the work of God that He intends ultimately to cleanse and purge and redeem, then this world *does* matter and what we do in this world *does* matter. One thinks of 1 Corinthians 3, where the beautiful work that we Christians build on the Christ-foundation will remain until and after the Judgment Day. Or, one marvels and rejoices at the promise that comes as the resounding *therefore* at the end of the greatest passage on hope in the entire Bible: “Therefore, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord—in this life, with your bodies, in this creation—your labor in the Lord is not in vain!” (1 Cor 15:58). If this world matters, then Christians are called to care for one another and world in its needs and suffering, and to invite others to become Christians who belong to the Creator God, body and soul and all things. (BTW, [a new video-based Bible study on 1 Corinthians 15 is available from Concordia Seminary](#))

However—it is not our job to “make the world a better place.” N. T. Wright himself offers an important distinction in talking about “the kingdom of God.” To be sure, there are times when it almost seems that Wright loses track of his own distinction. He does carefully distinguish, however, between “bringing” or “building the kingdom” on the one hand, and “working for the kingdom” on the other. The first, only God in Christ can and will do. The second, in the Spirit, the Church is called to do in many and various acts of witness, mercy, and life together. The world is not able to be redeemed by us. But that does not mean that we are not sent into the world to care for the creation and the people in it, by faith in what Christ has already done and because of a powerful hope in what Christ will one day do for us—and for the entire cosmos.

It’s Easter. Jesus is risen, the first fruits of those who sleep. Jesus is risen, the beginning of the new creation. Read the *Time* article, and find good stuff there. Ponder the Creeds, and believe *everything* that is there. Yes, heaven is OK. But it’s not our great hope—it’s not the End of the World.

Note: If you don’t yet have log-in access to the ATLAS database and the Concordia Journal articles linked above, [follow these instructions](#).