

Heaven

by Randy Alcorn

APPENDIX A

Christoplatonism's False Assumptions

It's no coincidence that Paul wrote his detailed defense of physical resurrection to the Corinthians, who were immersed in the Greek philosophy of dualism. They'd been taught that the spiritual was incompatible with the physical. But Christ, in his incarnation and resurrection, laid claim not only to the spiritual realm but to the physical as well. His redemption wasn't only of spirits but also of bodies and the earth.

Plato was "the first Western philosopher to claim that reality is fundamentally something ideal or abstract."³⁴⁷ To think of the spiritual realm in physical terms or to envision God's presence in the physical world was to do it a disservice. Plato considered the body a liability, not an asset. "For Plato . . . the body is a hindrance, as it opposes and even imprisons the soul (*Phaedo* 65–68; 91–94)."³⁴⁸

But according to Scripture, our bodies aren't just shells for our spirits to inhabit; they're a good and essential aspect of our being. Likewise, the earth is not a second-rate location from which we must be delivered. Rather, it was handmade by God for us. Earth, not some incorporeal state, is God's choice as mankind's original and ultimate dwelling place.

To distinguish the version of Platonism seen among Christians from secular forms of Platonism, I've coined the term *Christoplatonism*. This philosophy has blended elements of Platonism with Christianity, and in so doing has poisoned Christianity and blunted its distinct differences from Eastern religions. Because appeals to Christoplatonism appear to take the spiritual high ground, attempts to refute this false philosophy often appear to be materialistic, hedonistic, or worldly.

Because of Christoplatonism's pervasive influence, we resist the biblical picture of bodily resurrection of the dead and life on the New Earth; of eating and drinking in Heaven; of walking and talking, living in dwelling places, traveling down streets, and going through gates from one place to another; and of ruling, working, playing, and engaging in earthly culture.

One author writes, "Only our redeemed spirits can live in a spiritual realm like heaven. Therefore, the life we know now as spiritual reality will continue in heaven, but we shall not need or desire the things associated with our present physical bodies, simply because we shall not possess physical bodies in heaven."³⁴⁹

This statement constitutes a denial of the foundational doctrine of the bodily resurrection of the dead, and it is utterly contradicted by countless Scriptures. Nevertheless, it's a common perspective among evangelical Christians.

Another writer suggests, "When the material world perishes, we shall find ourselves in the spiritual world; when the dream of life ends, we shall awake in the world of reality;

when our connection with this world comes to a close, we shall find ourselves in our eternal spirit home.”³⁵⁰ According to the Bible, however, our eternal home is on the New Earth!

A godly man, a lifelong Bible student, told me that the thought of eating and drinking and engaging in physical activities in Heaven seemed to him “terribly unspiritual.”

In Plato’s statement, “*Soma sema*” (“a body, a tomb”), he asserts that the spirit’s highest destiny is to be forever free from the body. The Bible, however, contradicts this premise from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation. It says that God is the creator of body and spirit; both were marred by sin, and both were redeemed by Christ.

Yes, we need to be delivered from our earthly bodies, which are subject to sin and decay (Romans 7:24). But the promise of Heaven isn’t the *absence* of body; rather, it’s the attainment of a new and sinless body *and* spirit. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul regards the new *body*—not simply the new spirit—as essential to our redemption. *If the body isn’t redeemed, mankind is not redeemed*, because we’re by nature body as well as spirit. A spirit without a body, like a body without a spirit, isn’t the highest human destiny. Rather, it’s a state of incompleteness, an aberration from the full meaning of being human.

The Influence of Philo and Origen

Platonic ideas began making inroads into Christian theology through the writings of Philo (ca. 20 BC–AD 50). An Alexandrian Jew, Philo admired Greek culture and was enamored with Plato’s philosophy. He was also proud of his Jewish heritage. In his desire to offer the Greeks the best of Judaism and the Jews the best of Greek philosophy, he allegorized Scripture. He did so in contrast to the literal interpretation of many rabbis.³⁵¹

Philo’s ideas caught on. Alexandria became the home of a new school of theological thought. Clement of Alexandria (150–215), an early church father, was a part of this movement, as was Origen (185–254), an Egyptian-born Christian writer and teacher. Clement embraced Greek philosophy and maintained that Scripture must be understood allegorically. Origen developed an entire system of allegorizing Scripture. His method was to see the Bible as a three-part living organism, corresponding to body, soul, and spirit. The body was the literal or historical sense, the soul was the psychic or moral sense, and the spirit was—by far most important—the philosophical sense.

Educated people were considered more qualified to find the Bible’s “hidden” meanings in texts that the average person would take at face value. In other words, Origen’s approach meant that ordinary people couldn’t understand the Bible without the help of trained, educated people. These enlightened teachers could find and teach the Bible’s “true” spiritual meanings, which were usually quite different from its apparent, obvious, and “less spiritual” meanings.

Origen typically dismissed or ignored literal meanings in favor of fanciful ideas foreign to the text. At the time, his modern approach was embraced by Christian intellectuals as a sort of Gnostic and elitist approach that separated the educated clergy from the ignorant laity. This distinction still continues in some circles, with literal interpretations seen as suspect, and allegorical and symbolic interpretations deemed more spiritual and intellectually appealing.

Judged by christoplatonic presuppositions, anytime the Bible speaks about Heaven in plain, ordinary, or straightforward ways, the assumption is that it doesn’t actually mean

what it says. For example, the plain meaning of living as resurrected beings in a resurrected society in a resurrected city on a resurrected Earth cannot be real, because it doesn't jibe with the Platonic assumption that the body is bad and the spirit good. Consequently, Heaven cannot possibly be like what Revelation 21–22 appears to say. There could not be bodies, nations, kings, buildings, streets, gates, water, trees, and fruit, because these are physical, and what's physical is not spiritual. The prophetic statements about life on a perfect Earth are considered mere symbols of the promise of a disembodied spiritual world.

Tragically, the allegorical method of interpretation—rooted in explicitly unchristian assumptions—came to rule the church's theology. (We'll deal more with this in appendix B.) Even today, commentaries and books on Heaven seem to automatically regard all Scripture about Heaven as figurative. For instance, in his commentary on Revelation, Leon Morris says, "When John speaks of streets paved with gold, of a city whose gates are made of single pearls and the like, we must not understand that the heavenly city will be as material as present earthly cities."³⁵² But given what Scripture teaches about the resurrection of mankind and the earth, *why not?*

Was the body of the resurrected Jesus as material as our present earthly bodies? Yes. If, in our resurrected bodies—which we're told will be like his—we'll be as material as we are now, why wouldn't the resurrected Earth also be as material as it is now? Likewise, why wouldn't New Earth cities be as material as those on the present Earth? Is there something wrong with material things? To Platonists, the answer was yes—to the apostles and prophets, the answer was no. If our material, resurrected bodies will walk on the ground, why not on streets? And considering God's unlimited resources, is there any reason why those streets couldn't be made of gold?

An allegorical interpretive approach undercuts Scripture's magnificent revelation that there will be one world, both spiritual and material. The two aspects will coexist in perfect harmony, made by a God who forever linked the spiritual and material worlds both by incarnation and resurrection.

Accommodation

Earth is not the opposite of Heaven. But our christoplatonic assumptions prompt us to polarize Heaven and Earth. Theologians speak of the language of *accommodation*. "The doctrine of accommodation asserts that in the Bible, God, who is spiritual, has accommodated Himself to human understanding by portraying Himself and heavenly reality in humanly understandable images."³⁵³ There is, of course, truth in the doctrine of accommodation. But the Bible explicitly tells us that we'll live forever, in resurrected bodies, on a resurrected Earth. It tells us that Jesus became a man and will be a man forever. It tells us that God will bring down the New Jerusalem from Heaven to Earth, and that's where he will live with us.

The Incarnation wasn't God talking *as if* he'd become a man—it was God actually becoming a man. The doctrine of the bodily resurrection of the dead isn't God telling us we'll have bodies because that's all we're capable of understanding. We really *will* have bodies. The doctrine of the New Earth isn't God acting as if we'll live in an earthly realm—rather, it's God explicitly telling us that we *will* live on the New Earth.

The "New Earth" isn't a figure of speech any more than calling Jesus a "man" is a figure of speech. He *is* a man. The Resurrection was not merely a symbol of God

overcoming spiritual darkness; it was an actual, physical resurrection. The New Earth will be a real Earth where mankind and God will dwell together. Therefore, we should be open to taking literally its depiction of earthlike realities.

Jesus really *did* become a man. He really *did* rise from the grave. We really will rise too. The incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ literally happened. The biblical texts aren't merely using the language of accommodation. Likewise, when Scripture speaks of our bodily resurrection and the coming of the New Earth, this isn't accommodation—it's *revelation* that we will spend eternity as physical beings in a physical universe.

If the Bible taught that the intermediate Heaven and the eternal Heaven were both unearthly realms of disembodied spirits, then we should consider as figurative the repeated depictions of Heaven in physical terms. However, if people really will live on the New Earth in resurrected bodies—and if even the current, intermediate Heaven contains physical objects, including the risen body of Christ—then we shouldn't base our hermeneutic of Heaven on the assumptions of Philo and Origen. We should base our understanding on the testimony of Jesus and the apostle John.

Given the weight of biblical revelation, I believe that descriptions of resurrected humanity and the resurrected Earth should be understood as literal, and interpreted figuratively only when a plain literal understanding is impossible or highly unlikely.

For those accustomed to always spiritualizing Scripture when it comes to Heaven, I'd encourage you to ask yourself the following questions: What if the resurrection of the dead is an actual, bodily resurrection? What if the New Earth will be real? What if Heaven will be a tangible, earthly place inhabited by people with bodies, intellect, creativity, and culture-building relational skills? What if a physical Heaven is God's plan and has been all along? What terminology would God have to use to convince us of this? How would it be different from what he has actually used in Scripture?

A Biblical View of Pleasure

One of Christoplatonism's false assumptions is that spiritual people should shun physical pleasures. But who's the inventor of pleasure? Who made food and water, eating and drinking, marriage and sex, friendship and games, art and music, celebration and laughter? God did.

The Bible knows only one Creator: God; and only one race of subcreators: mankind. Satan cannot create. Ultimately, he can't even destroy. He can only twist and pervert what God has created, as C. S. Lewis depicts in a correspondence between two demons in *The Screwtape Letters*:

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden. Hence we always try to work away from the natural condition of any pleasure to that in which it is least natural, least redolent of its Maker, and least pleasurable. An ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure is the formula.³⁵⁴

“Sin does not create things,” writes Paul Marshall. “It has no originality, no creativity, no being in itself. Sin lives off that which is good. It is a parasite, feeding greedily on the goodness of what God has made.”³⁵⁵ God will remove the parasite without killing the patient.

“Nothing is evil in the beginning,” says the Elf king Elrond in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Once that idea is clearly in our minds, we can never again regard mankind or the earth, plants, animals, natural wonders, stars, or planets as lost causes. Created with purpose by an omniscient God, they’re not disposable. Because they’re part of God’s creation, they’re fully within the scope of his redemption.

A Positive View of the Natural Realm

Every belief that would make our resurrection bodies less physical than Adam’s and Eve’s, or that makes the New Earth less earthly than the original Earth, essentially credits Satan with a victory over God by suggesting that Satan has permanently marred God’s original intention, design, and creation.

Anthony Hoekema writes,

If the resurrection body were non-material or non-physical, the devil would have won a great victory, since God would then have been compelled to change human beings with physical bodies such as he had created into creatures of a different sort, without physical bodies (like the angels). Then it would indeed seem that matter had become intrinsically evil so that it had to be banished. And then, in a sense, the Greek philosophers would have been proved right. But matter is not evil; it is part of God’s good creation. Therefore the goal of God’s redemption is the resurrection of the physical body, and the creation of a new earth on which his redeemed people can live and serve God forever with glorified bodies. Thus the universe will not be destroyed but renewed, and God will win the victory.³⁵⁶

After reading a first draft of this book, a friend sent me an e-mail. She has attended a Bible-teaching evangelical church for many years, reads widely, and is very intelligent. She wrote, “Because I believed that places didn’t matter to God, I didn’t want them to matter to me. Because I believed that animals didn’t really matter to God, I didn’t want them to matter to me. Because I believed that my spirit was really all that mattered to God, I didn’t let my body matter to me.” She was glad to be free from these christoplatonic beliefs.

If I could snap my fingers and eliminate a single false assumption that keeps us from accurately understanding Scripture’s revelation about Heaven, it would be the heretical notion that the physical realm is an obstacle to God’s plan rather than a central part of it.

Wayne Grudem argues for the physical nature of the realm we’ll live in forever: “God will not completely destroy the physical world (which would be an acknowledgment that sin had frustrated and defeated God’s purposes), but rather he will perfect the entire creation and bring it into harmony with the purposes for which he originally created it. Therefore we can expect that in the new heavens and new earth there will be a fully perfect earth that is once again ‘very good.’ And we can expect that we will have physical bodies that will once again be ‘very good’ in God’s sight, and that will function to fulfill the purposes for which he originally placed man on the earth.”³⁵⁷

Consider the biblical facts that give us a very positive view of the physical realm:

- God made Adam and Eve to be spiritual *and* physical—they were not human until they were both.
- God often took on human form in Old Testament times. He was also likely in human form as he walked in Eden.
- God took on a human body, becoming a man in Christ, not just temporarily but forever.
- God raised Christ in a human body with physical properties, a body that walked, talked, ate, and could be touched. He explicitly stated he wasn't a ghost.
- God made mankind in his image, and because humans are physical beings—though God is spirit—there must be something in our human bodies that reflects God's identity. Certainly there's nothing about our bodies that repulses God, who created humanity as his crowning achievement.
- God's Holy Spirit indwells human bodies and calls them his holy temples.
- God will raise people with eternal physical-spiritual bodies, then come down to inhabit the New Earth with them.

All seven of these assertions are undeniable to most Bible-believers. Yet somehow, many Christians imagine they will live forever in a disembodied existence in an immaterial realm. As a result, they wear blinders when they interpret Scripture, and they fail to understand the richness of God's revelation concerning the world we'll inhabit forever.

The christoplatic view of the eternal Heaven is an insult to Christ's redemption and his resurrection. Christ did not die to give disembodied people a refuge in the spirit realm. He didn't rise to offer us a mere symbol of new spiritual life. On the contrary, he died to restore to us the fullness of our humanity—spirit *and* body. He rose to lay claim to and exemplify our destiny, to walk and rule the physical Earth as physical beings, to his glory. He died to lift Earth's curse and rose to guarantee that the earth itself would rise from misery and destruction to be a realm ruled by righteous humanity, to God's eternal glory.