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Heaven

by Randy Alcorn

Chapter 12

Why Does All Creation Await Our Resurrection?

The kingdom of God . . . does not mean merely the salvation of certain individuals nor even the salvation of a chosen group of people. It means nothing less than the complete renewal of the entire cosmos, culminating in the new heaven and the new earth.

Anthony Hoekema

The gospel is far greater than most of us imagine. It isn't just good news for us—it's good news for animals, plants, stars, and planets. It's good news for the sky above and the earth below. Albert Wolters says, "The redemption in Jesus Christ means the restoration of an original good creation."⁹⁴

Broadening Our View of Redemption

Many of us have come to think of redemption far too narrowly. That's why we're fooled into thinking that Heaven must be fundamentally different from Earth—because in our minds, Earth is bad, irredeemable, beyond hope. However, "the teaching that the new creation involves a radically new beginning," writes theologian Cornelius Venema, "would suggest that sin and evil have become so much a part of the substance of the present created order that it is unrelievedly and radically evil. . . . It would even imply that the sinful rebellion of the creation had so ruined God's handiwork as to make it irretrievably wicked."⁹⁵

But let's not forget that God called the original earth "very good"—the true earth, as he designed it to be (Genesis 1:31).

The breadth and depth of Christ's redemptive work will escape us as long as we think it is limited to humanity. In Colossians 1:16-20, notice that God highlights his plan for the church, but then he goes beyond it, emphasizing "all things," "everything," "things on earth," and "things in Heaven":

For by him [Jesus] *all things* were created: *things in heaven and on earth*, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; *all things* were created by him and for him. He is before *all things*, and in him *all things* hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in *everything* he might have the supremacy. For God was

pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether *things on earth* or *things in heaven*, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (emphasis added)

God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things, on Earth and in Heaven*. The Greek words for “all things,” *ta panta*, are extremely broad in their scope.⁹⁶

Eugene Peterson captures the universal implications of Christ’s redemption when he paraphrases Colossians 1:18-20 in *The Message*: “He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he’s there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the Cross.”

The power of Christ’s resurrection is enough not only to remake us, but also to remake every inch of the universe—mountains, rivers, plants, animals, stars, nebulae, quasars, and galaxies. Christ’s redemptive work extends resurrection to the far reaches of the universe. This is a stunning affirmation of God’s greatness. It should move our hearts to wonder and praise.

All Creation Waits in Eager Expectation

Do you ever sense creation’s restlessness? Do you hear groaning in the cold night wind? Do you feel the forest’s loneliness, the ocean’s agitation? Do you hear longing in the cries of whales? Do you see blood and pain in the eyes of wild animals, or the mixture of pleasure and pain in the eyes of your pets? Despite vestiges of beauty and joy, something on this earth is terribly wrong. Not only God’s creatures but even inanimate objects seem to feel it. But there’s also hope, visible in springtime after a hard winter. As Martin Luther put it, “Our Lord has written the promise of the resurrection not in books alone, but in every leaf in springtime.”⁹⁷ The creation hopes for, even anticipates, *resurrection*. That’s exactly what Scripture tells us.

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:19-23)

The “redemption of our bodies” refers to the resurrection of the dead. Paul says that not only we but “the whole creation” awaits the earthwide deliverance that will come with our bodily resurrection. Not only mankind in general but believers in particular (those with God’s Spirit within) are aligned with the rest of creation, which intuitively reaches out to God for deliverance. We know what God intended for mankind and the earth, and therefore we have an object for our longing. We groan for what creation groans for—redemption. God subjected the whole creation to frustration by putting the Curse not

only on mankind but also on the earth (Genesis 3:17). Why? Because human beings and the earth are inseparably linked. And as together we fell, together we shall rise. God will transform the fallen human race into a renewed human race and the present Earth into the New Earth.

What does it mean that creation waits for God's children to be revealed? Our Creator, the Master Artist, will put us on display to a wide-eyed universe. Our revelation will be an unveiling, and we will be seen as what we are, as what we were intended to be—God's image-bearers. We will glorify him by ruling over the physical universe with creativity and camaraderie, showing respect and benevolence for all we rule. We will be revealed at our resurrection, when our adoption will be finalized and our bodies redeemed. We will be fully human, with righteous spirits and incorruptible bodies.

As Mankind Goes, So Goes Creation

John Calvin writes in his commentary on Romans 8:19, "I understand the passage to have this meaning—that there is no element and no part of the world which is being touched, as it were, with a sense of its present misery, that does not intensely hope for a resurrection."⁹⁸

What is "the whole creation" that groans for our resurrection? The phrase appears to be completely inclusive of "the heavens and the earth" that God created in the beginning (Genesis 1:1). So it is the heavens and the earth that eagerly await our resurrection. This includes Earth and everything on it, as well as the planets of our solar system and the far reaches of our galaxy and beyond. If it was created, Paul includes it in "the whole creation."

Why does the creation wait eagerly for our resurrection? For one simple but critically important reason: *As mankind goes, so goes all of creation*. Thus, just as all creation was spoiled through our rebellion, the deliverance of all creation hinges on our deliverance. The glorification of the universe hinges on the glorification of a redeemed human race. The destiny of all creation rides on our coattails.

What possible effect could our redemption have on galaxies that are billions of light years away? The same effect that our fall had on them. Adam and Eve's sin did not merely create a personal catastrophe or a local, Edenic catastrophe; it was a catastrophe of cosmic—not just global—proportions.

Astronomy has been my hobby since childhood. Years before I came to know Christ, I was fascinated by the violent collisions of galaxies, explosions of stars, and implosions into neutron stars and black holes. The second law of thermodynamics, entropy, tells us that all things deteriorate. This means that everything was once in a better condition than it is now. Children and stars can both be born, but both ultimately become engaged in a downward spiral. Even the remotest parts of the universe reveal vast realms of fiery destruction. On the one hand, these cataclysms declare God's greatness. On the other hand, they reflect something that is out of order on a massive scale.

It seems possible that even the second law of thermodynamics (at least as it is popularly understood) may have been the product of mankind's fall. If true, it demonstrates the mind-boggling extent of the Curse. The most remote galaxy, the most distant quasar, was somehow shaken by mankind's sin.[†]

Adherents of some views of the origin of the universe believe that entropy (i.e., all things tend toward deterioration and disorder) has *always* been operative. But we should

not look at things as they are now and assume they've always been this way. In 2 Peter 3:4-7, the Bible rejects the uniformitarian view that "processes acting in the same manner as at present and over long spans of time are sufficient to account for all current . . . features [in the universe] and all past . . . changes."⁹⁹ We are so accustomed to the cycle of death in nature that we assume it is natural and has always been as it is. The Bible appears to say otherwise: "Death came through a man [Adam]" (1 Corinthians 15:21). I see no biblical evidence for the assumption that God designed his creation to fall into death, or that animal death predated mankind's fall. Do artists deliberately inject decay into their work? Would an omnipotent Artist do so? Both Genesis and Romans 8 suggest otherwise. (I am well aware that many will disagree with me on this, but I state it based on my understanding of Romans 8.)

Isn't it reasonable to suppose that the pristine conditions of God's original creation were such that humans and animals would not die, stellar energy would be replenished, and planets would not fall out of orbit? What if God intended that our dominion over the earth would ultimately extend to the entire physical universe? Then we would not be surprised to see the whole creation come under our curse, because it would all be under our stewardship.

"Even after the fall," writes theologian Erich Sauer, "the destiny and the redemption of the earth remain indissolubly united with the existence and development of the human race. The redemption of the earth is, in spite of all, still bound up with man. . . . *Man* is the instrument for the redemption of the earthly creation. And because this remains God's way and goal, there can be a new heaven and a new earth only *after* the great white throne, i.e., after the completion and conclusion of the history of human redemption."¹⁰⁰

Was There Really No Death?

God made seasons, and I wouldn't be surprised if in Eden the colors of autumn leaves were more brilliant than we see on the present Earth. This "death" of leaves in the fall could be part of a living tree's beauty, not its curse. Did leaves ever fall in Eden? Once they fell, did they rot? Eventually wouldn't the earth have been covered with leaves? God made us to consume vegetation, which doesn't involve harm or suffering. Why shouldn't he allow it to decompose through natural processes? Did Adam and Eve step ankle deep in human and animal waste because it did not decay? Was there no compost to enrich the garden? Wine requires fermentation, a form of decay. Did bread not rise?¹⁰¹

All of these natural processes could easily have been part of God's original design. What I believe was *not* part of his ideal world was the suffering and death of living creatures. I see no evidence that suffering and death could be part of a world God called "very good."

I realize this raises inevitable objections. Were there no carnivores before the Fall? From the shape of their teeth and claws to the position of their eyes to their digestive systems, it could be argued that carnivores were designed by their creator to stalk, capture, and kill their prey. Were foxes designed to keep rodents in check, and falcons made to dive to catch and eat fish? Did the lion "eat straw like the ox" as we are told he will one day (Isaiah 11:7)? Was it true in Eden as it will be on the New Earth, "[Animals] will neither harm nor destroy" (Isaiah 11:9)? Many think otherwise, but I believe the answer is yes.

I realize that if there was no food chain, then the animal world of Eden was different than the animal world we know today. Indeed, our entire ecosystem was likely changed more by the Fall than we can imagine. We don't know what the animals in Eden looked like. Did God change their form as part of the Curse—or as a way to help them survive after the Curse? Is it possible that originally cheetahs ran for the sheer joy of it rather than to chase their prey? Could a lion have been capable of tearing apart other animals but have no desire to do so? Could he be powerful, even with sharp teeth, without being a killer? I think so. There is a special beauty in great power that refrains from doing harm, as Jesus himself demonstrated.

However, the debates about entropy, plant death, animal death, and the earth's age should not deter us from a central agreement that, as Paul says, "the whole creation" has come under mankind's curse, and God will deliver the whole creation by our resurrection.

From the Fall to Our Resurrection

How will the effects of our bodily resurrection be felt by the entire universe? In exactly the same way that all creation suffered from our fall into sin. There is a metaphysical and moral link between mankind and the physical universe.

Romans 8 is a profound theological statement in that it extends the doctrine of the Fall far beyond what we might have expected. But in doing so—and we often miss this—it extends the doctrine of Christ's redemption every bit as far.

We should expect that anything affected by the Fall will be restored to its original condition. Things will no longer get worse. When they change, they will only get better. That will be true of our bodies and our minds and human culture in the new universe. And there are no grounds to imagine that the link between mankind and the universe will cease. Why shouldn't it continue for all eternity?

"We know," Paul says, "that the whole creation has been groaning" (Romans 8:22). Consider the shocking cruelty in the animal world, where mothers sometimes devour their offspring, and most of those that survive are mercilessly killed by predators. If "the whole creation" is as comprehensive as it appears, then there is not an amoeba or chromosome or DNA strand or galaxy unaffected by mankind's fall. That is the bad news. Paul follows with the good news—that what went down with mankind in the Fall will come back up with us when Christ's redemptive work is completed. The God who raised Jesus will in turn raise his people and the universe.

There is such a close biblical connection between the inhabitants of the earth and Earth itself that the phrase "the world" (*kosmos*) is sometimes synonymous with *people*: "God so loved the world," and "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ" (John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 5:19). In John's Gospel, "the world" often refers to fallen humanity in rebellion against God. And it is people, not the planet, who believe in Christ. Still, there are words for mankind that don't connect us to the earth, unlike *kosmos*, which does. In Romans 8 we see that the redemptive work of Christ not only rescues people who believe in him, it rescues the world itself. Just as we will die, the earth will be destroyed; and just as we will be raised, the earth will be renewed.

John Piper writes, "What happens to our bodies and what happens to the creation go together. And what happens to our bodies is not annihilation but redemption. . . . Our

bodies will be redeemed, restored, made new, not thrown away. And so it is with the heavens and the earth.”¹⁰²

The Pains and Promise of Childbirth

It’s fair to say that most Christians believe there will be no carryover into Heaven of our present culture, art, technology, or the products of human creativity. Indeed, it’s common to doubt if we will even remember our lives on Earth or the people whom God used to influence and shape us, including our families and closest friends.

If our assumptions about the end of the world were correct, what analogy would we expect Paul to use for what will happen to creation? An old man dying? A mortally wounded soldier gasping his final breaths? Those images would fit well with a belief that the universe will come to a violent, final end. But Paul doesn’t use analogies of death and destruction. He uses the analogy of childbirth: “The whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up until the present time” (Romans 8:22).

There are pains in childbirth for mother and child, but the result is a continuation, a fulfillment of a process that has long been underway. The pains of childbirth are analogous to the present sufferings of mankind, animals, and the entire universe. But those sufferings are temporary because of the imminent miracle of birth. A far better world will be born out of this one, and a far better humanity will be born out of what we now are.

The fallen but redeemed children of God will be transformed into something new: sinless, wise stewards of the earth. Today the earth is dying; but before it dies—or in its death—it will give birth to the New Earth. The New Earth will be the child of the old Earth, just as the new human race will be the children of the old race. Yet it is still *us*, the same human beings, and it will also be the same Earth.

Romans 8 contains a powerful theology of suffering. There’s the groaning of those dying without hope, and in contrast, the groaning of those in childbirth. Both processes are painful, yet they are very different. The one is the pain of hopeless dread, the other the pain of hopeful anticipation. The Christian’s pain is very real, but it’s the pain of a mother anticipating the joy of holding her child.

It is no coincidence that the first two chapters of the Bible (Genesis 1–2) begin with the creation of the heavens and the earth and the last two chapters (Revelation 21–22) begin with the re-creation of the heavens and the earth.

All that was lost at the beginning will be restored at the end. And far more will be added besides.



eternal perspective ministries
with author Randy Alcorn

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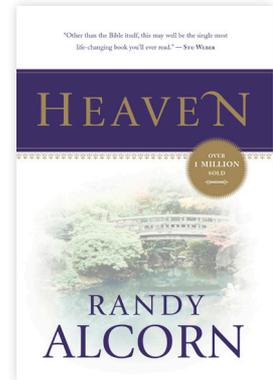
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About Randy Alcorn

Randy is the founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries and the best-selling author of over 50 books (over nine million in print) including *Heaven*, *The Treasure Principle*, and the Gold Medallion winner *Safely Home*.

Randy resides in Gresham, Oregon with his wife, Nanci. They have two married daughters and five grandsons. He enjoys hanging out with his family, biking, tennis, research, and reading.



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Eternal Perspective Ministries (EPM) is a nonprofit ministry dedicated to teaching principles of God’s Word and assisting the church in ministering to the unreached, unfed, unborn, uneducated, unreconciled, and unsupported people around the world. The common element in all of our writing and teaching ministry is an emphasis on seeing life through the eyes of eternity, and thereby learning to live now to the glory of God.

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