

Will there be work in heaven? And does it matter?

John Lovatt looks at what sort of heaven the Bible expects after the Second Coming, and finds that the earth will be renewed rather than destroyed and replaced. This implies that our work here and now will also be transformed. Nothing will be lost. This joyful anticipation of our work not being lost but made perfect encourages us to do all our work for the glory of God.

The story is told of a man who died and found himself in a region of fabulous abundance. His slightest wish was instantly granted. At last, however, the novelty wore off and he became bored. He told his host he would love to do something. Was there any work he could perform, or any problem he could help solve? His host said, "I am sorry, but there is no work to be done here." "No work!" cried the man in frustration. "Nothing to do!" he shouted. "I

would rather be in hell than have nothing to do forever." His host replied, "Just where do you think you are?"¹

Heavenly work?

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling
together,
and a little child shall lead them.*
(Isaiah 11:6)

This picture of the ultimate *shalom*, or heavenly peace, includes work. That is, the little child 'leads' domestic and wild animals. The Hebrew word for 'lead' is *no-heg* which actually means to 'drive forth' – quite an active form of work. This picture of work implies that it will be easy, a little child can do it, and that the animals have no sin, are well behaved and live peaceably with one another. As a former dairy farmer, I will much appreciate that situation.





However, it could be argued that this passage in Isaiah is just looking forward to an idyllic period in the life of the nation, or at least a prophecy of what might be. What evidence is there in the Bible that there will be heaven at all, and if so, what sort of heaven?

On the Cross Jesus says to the Penitent Thief 'Today you will be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43). This could be useful in a discussion on work in heaven, because in the Bible the Greek word *paradeisos*, meaning a garden, refers only to the garden of Eden. In the garden of Eden, we were asked to work².

Jesus also frequently refers to the next life, and on several occasions this includes work: in the parable of the ten talents, the Lord says. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities'³. In Matthew 19, Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of

Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."⁴. Such administrative and discerning work sounds perhaps not so easy, but as we will be without sin, maybe just fun.

In that passage, Jesus refers to 'the renewal of all things'. This is the Greek phrase *en ty palingenesis*, 'in the regeneration'. This is an important phrase for our work in heaven, which I'll return to later.

What sort of heaven?

It might help to decide whether or not we would have work in heaven if we first decide what sort of heaven we mean. Apart from Jesus' own references to feasting⁵, drinking new wine⁶, lying in Abraham's bosom⁷ and meeting the saints⁸, a fuller picture is given in Revelation:-

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the

*sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.' And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.'*⁹

Tom Wright¹⁰ has made it clear that, at least in the New Testament, heaven is the arrival of Christ on the earth itself, not building a more perfect world elsewhere. The new Jerusalem comes down. And Christ makes all things new. That is, he renews all things. The Greek is clear: 'Behold, new I make all things' – not 'I am making lots of new things'. So

we have a new heaven and a new earth – renewed, not destroyed and replaced. This is the type of heaven in which we may or may not have work to do.

But shall we work there?

Revelation itself gives some clues as to whether we shall work. In 22:3 it refers to the servants of the Lamb who will ‘serve him’. The word for servants is *douloi*, meaning ‘slaves’. This implies work. However, the Greek phrase ‘serve him’ actually specifically means a religious service, that is, a ‘worship’ service. I suppose many clergy consider the Sunday morning service to be part of their work, although for many it is a joy as well. But things have to be arranged. So we could consider that the work of slaves in a service of worship to be one work which we can look forward to. We can praise him and worship him for ever.

Another clue in Revelation to the nature of our work is also in 22:3: ‘No longer will there be any curse’ (NIV) or ‘Every curse will not be [any] longer’ (literal translation of the Greek). Adam’s curse springs immediately to mind. This was the curse on work as a result of the disobedience in the garden of Eden – ‘cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you’¹¹. If we have work in heaven, it will not be subject to that curse; everything will go well.

Consummation

So the new heaven and new earth will be here (not elsewhere), not as a replacement for but a renewal of the old heaven and earth. In other words, it will be the completion and consummation of the work of Christ on the cross, who died for the whole of creation, not just for human beings. The ‘salvation history’ matches this concept – the Flood did not destroy everything and start again, a better world was built from a remnant. Only a few got through to the land of milk and honey after the

40 years in the wilderness. A remnant returned from Babylon.

However, Jesus says he will make all things new; all things, not just a remnant. So all the things we have created (or rather the things we have created through Christ, through whom all things are made) will survive, and be made perfect. This includes presumably the resurrection of our bodies. Bodily resurrection does not appeal to all Christians, it never has, but again, Tom Wright has pointed out that this is a central belief of the early church, as set out in the New Testament¹². If however, you do believe in the resurrection of the body, the exciting prospect of all your creations in this life

being renewed and forming part of the new heaven and the new earth remains. If that is not your belief, you might wish to stop reading on! It’s tempting to wonder how the new creation could accommodate all the creations, implying a rather cluttered or at least crowded new heaven and new earth. Tom Wright answers this question for our resurrected bodies: the earth is big enough already¹³. A similar answer could be given for all creation – indeed a larger earth and heaven is surely not outside the power of the Creator. However, in Revelation 21:24–26, people will bring into the city the ‘glory and honour of the nations’. Does this imply a selective process? Hopefully not – surely our transformed work will come in, and that indeed will bring glory and honour: just as our bodies will be ‘sown in dishonour and will be raised in glory’ – surely also the whole creation¹⁴.

Nothing will be lost

At the end of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, Jesus orders the disciples to gather up all the remnants, ‘so that nothing be lost’¹⁵. Again, in his final discourse in St. John, he says ‘none of them is lost except the one who had to be lost’¹⁶. The parables of

the lost sheep¹⁷ and the lost coin¹⁸ all show that God wants nothing to be lost – a sense of loss is not to be part of the new Kingdom. All your careful work, and your creations of various sorts are not destined to be lost eternally, but instead, with all their faults redeemed, they will still form part of the New Creation, and glorify God by being as they should be. So our labour is not in vain. Thanks to Christ’s work set out in the New Testament we cannot say, with the Preacher in Ecclesiastes, that ‘I

‘the exciting prospect of all your creations in this life being renewed’

turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun, because sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it.’¹⁹

What about work with evil intent?

At this point some rather serious questions arise. What about the careful detailed work of Himmler and Goring to plan the Final Solution to the Jewish Question in 1941? What about the careful planning of the murders by evil people such as Charles Manson and Shahid Mohammed²⁰? Will such work survive? How could it ever be redeemed? What about my own serious mistakes in my work, causing pain and misery to many, which I would much rather were completely erased? I suppose nothing is impossible with God²¹. Perhaps it’s necessary to distinguish between the person (who may or may not repent) and the creativity/creation which comes from God (and if used for evil ends is therefore a form of blasphemy). That organisational creativity belongs to God, and was used for evil, but if the person through whom God’s creative power was working is forgiven, perhaps that work can survive. On the other hand, Jesus talks about weeping and gnashing of teeth, and Dives in torment. Perhaps there will be some destruction. Judas had to be lost.

The work in heaven starts here

So if there is continuity between our work here and now, and its position in the new Creation, just as there is continuity between our bodies here and now and our resurrected bodies, does our work then have a continuous connection between now and eternity, with no break at death? If so, all our work to try and make the world a better place, to bring God's kingdom here on earth, is just part of a continuous process. Tom Wright suggests something similar²². We were taught to pray, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in *heaven*'. We are to bring heaven on earth.

What sort of work will we do?

So our work will be in heaven (perhaps subject to a few caveats), but it will be perfected at the consummation of all things. Will we continue at it, or will there be new work? What sort of work might we do? What will our transformed work look like?

At this point it might be as well to heed St. Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 15: we cannot know what our new bodies will be like – the wheat seed bears no resemblance to the wheat plant, although there is continuity. So with our work – speculation about what our earthly work will look like when transformed, and perhaps indeed what sort of work we will do may be, to use St Paul's phrase, just plain foolish. But Paul does go on to try and discuss the matter, so perhaps it is legitimate for us to do so.

Some say that some work, such as that of funeral directors or wheelchair manufacturers, or even doctors will not exist. However, such thoughts will preclude almost all forms of work, especially some of the more inspiring work in healing people, because they are fighting evil (which won't be there) and bringing God's kingdom on earth (which will have already arrived). Perhaps the equivalent of the grain of wheat will come through to form the equivalent

of the wheat plant. My inventive gift from God might result in new creations, or I might have fun embellishing some of the restored items I made. The doctors' care and love of people might come through as care and love for all those around them. The funeral director's respect and understanding might come through as a deep understanding of us lesser saints. Wheelchairs can be beautiful in their own right, a bit like antique bicycles. The use to which they are put may not be too relevant in the new world.

Heaven now and heaven in the future

Jesus refers to heaven as being there at the moment. He looks up to heaven. He tells us there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents²³. He tells the Penitent Thief, 'Today you will be with me in paradise'. We need to distinguish this present heaven, where we are in direct touch now with the Father, where angels visit



Wheelchairs can be beautiful in their own right

Designer: Amos Winter


us²⁴, and where the dead are presently residing²⁵, from the future consummation, the Second Coming. The New Testament is clear that there are two stages in the life after death, though this is not always appreciated or understood²⁶. The first stage seems to be one of rest. Jesus refers to Lazarus being in Abraham's bosom. The Epistle to the Hebrews refers to a sabbath rest for those who don't fall into disobedience; they enter into God's rest. This sabbath rest (for us as for God) is surely the precursor to our and God's work²⁷ of making the new creation. It is the first stage of life after death, a sabbath time of rest and quiet. The second stage is the New Creation, where activity seems to be going on, for example the worship in

Revelation 4. However, I like to think of my late wife dancing in heaven now – perhaps that is a form of sabbatical for her!

Will there be work in heaven?

So will there be work in heaven? Yes, but not as we know it. There will be no toil, only enjoyment and satisfaction. No cut fingers or frustration at our bodies or a world where the toast always falls marmalade down. Only joy at seeing creation released from its bondage to frustration and decay²⁸. No misery and regret at the botched work we did, only rejoicing at it being presented to us renewed and restored to glory, even though, like Jesus' body, it will have the scars of its earlier journey (healed scars).

And does it matter to us now?

And does it matter to our work today? 'They shall not labour in vain'²⁹. Our work has an eternal dimension, and has significance beyond this life into the new creation. Nothing will be lost, except what has to be lost. So it's not a waste of time. All the work you do is precious to Christ and will form part of his kingdom at his second coming. His redeeming work repairs all the inadequacies in it, leaving only scars to remind us of the hassle and frustration. Of course, the work of bringing his kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven, starts now: it's just that it will continue in the next world, but with joy and satisfaction. This gives us courage and inspiration to continue to work and do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus³⁰. 

1 'Occupations in Heaven', sermon by Glenn Pease <https://sermons.faithlife.com/sermons/124758-occupations-in-heaven> (2014).

2 Gen 2:15: 'The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.'

3 Luke 19:17, NIV.

4 Matthew 19:28

5 Luke 14:16-23; Matthew 8:11; Matthew 22:1-11

6 Matthew 26:29

7 Luke 16:22

8 John 14:3 'I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also'.

9 Revelation 21:1-5

10 Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, SPCK, 2007, pp. 115-116.

11 Genesis 3:17-18

12 N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, SPCK, 2003.

13 Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, SPCK, 2007, p. 171.

14 Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, SPCK, 2007, p. 112.

15 John 6:12

16 John 17:12

17 Matthew 18:12-14

18 Luke 15:8-10

19 Ecclesiastes 2:20-21

20 The Birkby firebomb killer

21 Matthew 19:26 in relation to the fate of the rich.

22 Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, SPCK, 2007, p. 214.

23 Luke 15:10

24 Matthew 4:11: Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

25 Consider Luke 16:19-30 where Lazarus dies and is carried immediately by the angels to Abraham's bosom, and the rich man dies and is buried, then lifts up his eyes in hell. Also, the witch of Endor bringing Samuel (1 Samuel 28); and Jesus telling the Sadducees that God is God of the living not of the dead - 'I am the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob' (Matthew 22:32).

26 See Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, SPCK, 2007, especially p.163

27 Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, SPCK, 2007, p. 197

28 Romans 8:20-21

29 Isaiah 65:23

30 Colossians 3:17: 'And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him'.



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