

[New Testament Themes, E6]

[Speaker in the audio file: Tim Mackie]

[EMSB theme fades in]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last twenty years' worth of lectures and sermons, where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible, and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB theme fades out]

All right, this episode is number six of a six-part series. And again, it represents—this whole last six episodes have represented teachings that I gave as a part of this thing we did a number of years ago at Door of Hope Church, where, as a teaching pastor, we challenged the whole church to read the whole New Testament in ninety days. We would get up five mornings a week, Monday to Friday, and gather at 6 AM. We'd read that day's readings aloud—talk through them. Then, in the Sunday gatherings, we would teach from key passages that we had just read over the week.

This was one of the final messages in the series. It comes from the end of the New Testament, the final chapters of the Book of Revelation. And here's something that's interesting. If you have been following the BibleProject videos and podcasts, Heaven and Earth was one of our first videos that we released back in 2014.

However, this message—I just realized looking at my notes—was during December 2012, and this was when John Collins and I first started getting together to talk about the BibleProject, just as an idea. And when we thought through what would be some interesting first videos to start making to launch the YouTube channel, we talked about Heaven and Earth for, like, six months. And I just was looking through my notes and was like, "Oh my gosh, these notes for this message reflect the conversations that John Collins and I were having in the latter end of 2012." So that's kind of cool.

So these notes and ideas that I was thinking of then eventually became worked into the Heaven and Earth video that you can watch on the YouTube channel of the BibleProject. So anyway, that's kind of cool. The teaching speaks for itself. There you go. Let's dive in.

[Musical Break (2:46—2:46)]

Today we're going to look at the biblical teaching about God's final justice in his setting right all things—his restoration of all things. What the Bible calls “new creation,” or “Heaven.” Both Heaven and hell—and the reason why we wanted to go at both of these, is because these are two ideas in Christianity that are so drastically misunderstood and so under-understood—but not well-understood, therefore misrepresented, and therefore made fun of, caricatured, whatever, in popular culture.

And often people reject Christianity because of some weird thing to do with the end of the world, or Heaven or hell, or something. But often what they're rejecting is not actually what the Bible says. They're rejecting some distortion of it. And so tonight's message—we're going to just go right at both the deep misunderstandings in popular Christianity about Heaven and new creation.

And so tonight's going to be kind of like teaching-heavy. We're going to look at the Bible a lot, both here in Revelation, but then also in a bunch of biblical verses. If you're a note-taker, you'll want to get ready, because it's going to be like a fire-hose coming at you.

The idea of Heaven, for many, is a profound hope. For many in the modern world, the very idea of Heaven is seen as repulsive, even an insult to human dignity. Vladimir Lenin—he was one of the architects of the communist ideology of communist Russia—he had this to say about Heaven. He said, “Religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression, which everywhere weighs down heavily upon the masses of people. The impotence of the exploited classes inevitably gives rise to the belief in a better life after death. Those who toil and live in want all their lives are taught, by religion, to be submissive and patient while here on earth, and to take comfort in the hope of a heavenly reward. Religion is opium for the people. It's a sort of spiritual booze in which the slaves of capitalism drown their human image.” So says Vladimir Lenin.

And of course, in this little line here, “Religion is opium for the people”—who's he quoting right there? He's quoting Karl Marx, another important architect of communist philosophy. But they both see the idea of Heaven as an insult to human dignity. He says it's like an opium, or a drug that drowns the human image.

Because their idea of humanity is [this]: if only we could free ourselves from the idea that we're somehow subject to some greater being, or greater power called “God,” so that we have someone to answer to—if we could free ourselves from that idea, and just realize we actually have the power to make things happen in the world, and to change the world for the better—once we're freed of those ancient, silly notions, then, human dignity can really take on a life of its own.

And so this ridiculous idea of Heaven that comes among the lower classes—life is really hard, and so you just lull yourself into passivity and withdrawal and disengagement and just hope for a better life in the age to come—that's what he's saying here. And there's a certain sense in which I, personally, somewhat resonate with his critique. Not fully, as you'll see. I believe Heaven is very real. It's actually more real than what we might call “real.” I resonate with his critique to a certain degree.

And I resonate with it for the same reason that I cannot stand watching romantic comedies. [Laughing] And this is why I've ranted about romantic comedies before, and here I am doing it again. Sorry. I can't stand watching romantic comedies because they offer cheap endings—cheap endings to what we know are incredibly complex, heart-wrenching realities. Namely, human relationships, right?

So we all know human relationships are terribly complex. And so in these stories—romantic comedies—it's just one movie being made over and over and over again, right? And they're always an hour and thirty-eight, to an hour and forty-seven minutes—do you ever notice this? It's not the full two hours and twenty minutes. [Laughing] Who could endure that? So they kind of shorten that, right?

So these two characters—they come from hopelessly broken relationships in the past, and so on. And against impossible odds, somehow they end up together by, like, maybe one hour and twenty-two minutes or something. And then the last eight minutes are the “happily forever after,” and so on. And so these movies end. And it's obvious to everybody: this is a cheap solution to the story.

Yet we all know that this isn't real. This isn't the real world. This is not where we live. No one's life is actually like that. It's like *People* magazine. No one's life is actually like that. There's airbrushed figures, and so on. And to make us feel good about life, the stories—these complex realities of broken hearts and relational wreckage, and so on, throughout our lives—and then it's just all, kind of, neatly tied together, and so on. And we all know it's not real, and we all know it's cheap.

That's why some of us love these stories: because they keep us from actually taking a long, hard look at the complexity and the pain of human relationships. And then that's precisely the reason why some people, I being among them, absolutely hate these movies, because you finish them and you're just like, “Ah.” It's like— it's so cheap. It does no justice to the reality of human relationships, you know what I'm saying?

And in many ways, I think some people's versions of Heaven, and I think the version of Heaven that Lenin is critiquing, is precisely that cheap kind of ending to the story. I call it “the pie in the sky” view of Heaven, or the “wish-fulfillment” view of Heaven. And it's this popular, cultural view that Heaven is the place where everything that you wanted and dreamed of, but never got and were deprived of, you finally get—right?—in the next life.

And so this is the Heaven of cartoons, and so on. People are driving their Ferraris, or whatever, and they live in their mansions, and they have very athletic bodies and so on, whatever. It's the “wish-fulfillment” view of Heaven. Everything I wanted but never got, now I finally get it.

And I would—that's a view of Heaven, or the afterlife, that many people have. And in my opinion, it's dreadfully cheap. It's dreadfully cheap, because what it ignores is the long history—just the horror—of human history, and the pain and the tragedy and the broken relationships. And then, somehow, I die and cross over the river, and then just [vanishing noise]—*whoop*. That's all just kind of [vanishing noise]—*whoop*—gone, and done away with, and now we're happy? No.

And it's like, no, wait. What about all this? This has to be dealt with. You can't just wrap up the story like that. Somehow, whatever the ending of the story is, it has to have a backward effect that explains, or redeems, or does something to this huge mess here.

And romantic comedies, of course, don't have time to do that, and so they just cheaply wrap up the story. And so does a "wish-fulfillment" view of Heaven. And I think, for better or worse, I think that's the view of Heaven that many Christians have come—without thinking about it—I'm not sure, there's lots of different reasons why—have come to accept.

And I heard it called the "evacuation view" of Heaven. And it's the view that the physical world is hopelessly corrupt and bad and evil, and so salvation is about me being rescued from this horrible, corrupt world into a non-material, spiritual world of bliss and harps and clouds, and so on, forever. And that's a view that many people hold. That might be a view that you hold, or people that you know hold.

And so I'm just going to throw a grenade into the room tonight, because actually, after you look at what the Scriptures are saying, you find that you could, maybe, get that out of the Bible—maybe. Maybe out of like two or three passages in the Bible, if you drastically misunderstood them.

But what the Bible is trying to tell us, about the story of our world and where this story's going—it is not cheap. It's not a romantic comedy. And it has something profound to say in response to someone like Vladimir Lenin. Because the biblical vision of Heaven is not about the "whisking away" and ignoring everything that came before. It's about God addressing and redeeming and healing and dealing with all that has come up to Jesus' return, and bringing about what the Bible calls new creation, or the restoration of all things.

And so tonight we're just going to do a lot of Bible—because this is not my opinion, this is just, like, what the Scriptures are saying. And this is not idle teaching. Your view of how the story ends has huge implications for what you think you're doing, right here, in the middle of the story, right? Huge implications on how we live and how we think about what Jesus wants us to be up to as his followers today. So, you guys with me? Let's dive in.

Revelation chapter twenty-one—not Revelations chapter twenty-one, not—Singular: the Revelation. The Revelation, chapter twenty-one. You know, I think the main reason why this book mystifies so many people—it's scary to people—is, it's unique. It's unique in the Scriptures. And it's a unique kind of literature. There's nothing else quite like it. There's some things that are kind of like it, in the Old Testament prophets, not quite—not totally identical.

It's a type of writing that was, actually, quite common in Jewish and Christian circles around the time of Jesus. And the name of this type of literature is the name of the book. "Revelation" is just a translation of a Greek word, *apokalupsis*. *Apokalupsis*. What English word do we get from that? "Apocalypse," yeah, apocalypse. And we think apocalypse, and we think, like, movies about the end of the world, or something like that. That's not what apocalypse means.

So here's John. He's a prophetic visionary, the author of the book. And he's also a pastor—connected to a number of Jesus communities—of churches. And he knows that a number of people in these Jesus communities are totally abandoning the faith. They're just compromising and accommodating their lives into Greek and Roman culture, and so on. And then there are a

number of Christians in these churches who are remaining faithful to Jesus, and they're being persecuted, some of whom are being killed for it.

And so if you're in a church, and let's say the house that you met in just got confiscated, and your mom and your brother just got kidnapped, and you're never going to see them again, and you're getting death threats, and your friends just lost their job because they're all Christians—do you feel like Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords in that moment?

What John does is, he has this visionary experience of a revelation, an apocalypse. And in the Bible, an apocalypse is a moment where the curtain is pulled back, and all of a sudden I see the events of my life and of human history from a God's-eye perspective. And in this case, the apocalypse—the God's eye perspective—is that it looks like God's not in control now. It looks like the big bad, whatever, empire powers—in their case, Rome—is in control, but actually this story is moving towards resolution. And be patient, but not passive—but never, never passive. That's the message of the book of Revelation.

And so this is a peeling back of the curtains. What I think is the stumbling block for most of us is just the bread and butter of Christian and Jewish apocalypses from this time period—and that's the fact that they speak in symbolism. They deal in prophetic poetry, imagery, and symbolism. And it's so bizarre to us, 2,000 years removed. We don't read anything like this, and we just like —“This is like somebody's acid trip,” or something. This is so bizarre.

I mean, it really, really is bizarre to us. And that's because we're not familiar with where John is pulling all of these images out of. He's steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures. And so he's constantly quoting, alluding to the Hebrew Scriptures. Or he's steeped in first-century Greek and Roman politics and popular stories that are being told in his day. And so he's constantly alluding and pulling from that cultural source, and he weaves these pictures of symbols and images and so on.

And if you try and paint a picture of it visually—which is never the intention—you get these bizarro pictures. What you're not supposed to do is have a little mental movie. What you're supposed to do is ask for the *meaning* of the symbols. What is the meaning based on its background, and what is the reality that this symbol is pointing to? That's what it means to be an informed reader of the apocalypse. And we'll flesh that out as we read here in Revelation chapter twenty-one. Let's dive in.

Chapter twenty-one, verse one, “Then”—that's important. That's important. So what's just happened? “Then”—we're transitioning from chapter twenty to chapter twenty-one. What's happened in chapters nineteen and twenty is the return of Christ, bringing Heaven with him—and coming to defeat evil, in both its human and spiritual forms—to bring final justice. That's what's happening in chapters nineteen through twenty. And they're symbols of a great war, where God defeats evil, finally and for good. Chapter twenty-one then issues into the results of Jesus dealing evil a final blow.

Okay, now I'll actually read the sentence. Verse one, “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.” Sad for beachgoers, right? “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, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with mankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God, and he will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning or crying or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

“And he who was seated on the throne”—who's that? That's exactly—or God, is saying the exact same thing, right? So God the Father and Jesus. “The one who is seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new.’ And he also said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’”

Now, we're going to go back over this a little more slowly in a few minutes, but just one question here. Do you see anything that fits the traditional idea of some people's view of Heaven? Do you see anywhere the idea of *going to* Heaven? People *going to* Heaven? Did you see that anywhere in this paragraph here? No. Actually, what you see is movement in precisely the opposite direction. Did you see that?

Actually, it's about Heaven *coming here*. So, a Heaven coming, represented with this image of the holy city—the new Jerusalem—coming down *out of* Heaven, from God to here. In other words, whatever Revelation's view of how things are going to finally turn out, it doesn't involve people going *away*. It involves God's presence coming *here* in a transforming, healing way—a restoring way.

And we have this new Heaven and new Earth, and then we have God's city—God's presence, God's space coming down out of Heaven. Now, if you have, what I would call, the standard, kind of, popular, cultural view of Heaven and of Earth in your head, this will make no sense to you at all. “What—you mean there's a new Heaven and a new Earth? But then Heaven comes out—something comes out of Heaven? I thought it's a new Heaven and a new Earth. How does Heaven come out of Heaven?” You know what I'm saying? If you have a standard view, it won't make any sense.

So I drew some circles in, like, one of the first or second messages of the series to help explain this—and the circles are going to come back. I think most people have a standard view of Heaven and Earth. And it could be represented this way. So [Earth] would be physical space, something like that. It's where humans live. And maybe it used to be a lot better than now. If you are informed by the Scriptures, you think, “Yeah, this was meant to be good, created by God to be good, and everything. We've ruined it through human sin and selfishness.

“And so Jesus comes from Heaven to die on the cross, so that people can be forgiven and so that they can have eternal life, which means the evacuation view of Heaven. Which means that at death, I'm evacuated out of the physical earth into a non-physical Heaven, where I'm, like, a disembodied spirit in God's presence. And there's harps and music—or something, in people's view of this.

But—I'm caricaturing a little bit—but that's what most people in our culture have in their heads when they think of Heaven and Earth. Am I right or am I wrong? Yeah, I think this is most people's view. So again, there are a handful of passages in the Bible that, if you misunderstood them, you might be able to squeeze this story out of them.

But if you actually read those passages with a close eye, which we're going to do in just a few minutes, and when you read *all* of what the Scriptures are saying, you see this is actually not

the story the Bible is telling. There are elements of it that are distortions of something that's actually much more profound and true. It's the story that the Scriptures are telling.

And that story will be told. The story the Bible is telling—because it's the last message in the series, we're just going to retell the story of the whole Bible in about seven minutes here. So it begins with a view of Earth and Heaven as completely overlapping realities. In the Bible, Heaven is both the sky, but then the sky—it becomes a metaphor or an image for God's space—transcendent and other, full of mystery and power and so on.

Biblical authors didn't actually believe God lives in the sky, right? And neither should you, right? Heaven is—we might say in modern terms, because of what we're learning about physics and so on—Heaven is like a dimension of existence. But it's not accessible fully and all of the time to another dimension of existence that we might call Earth or human space.

And so there's God space, and there's human space. And the story of the Bible begins with both God's space and human space completely overlapping—all of the story about the garden represents . . . And so it's the—God and the humans go for walks in the cool evening breeze of the garden, and so on. God makes these creatures, these image-bearing creatures, and He gives them a job—a task, and a commission—to, first of all, reproduce. "Go make more of yourselves," and to make the world flourish—to be kings and queens. He says to rule, and to harness the raw potential of God's good world and make gardens, just like God made a really sweet garden and gave it to you.

And so the making of gardens . . . In Genesis 2:17, God gives a commission to the humans to work the land and to guard it, to care for it. And so the humans have this commission: Go make the world—make the garden bigger. Make more gardens, make more of yourselves, go make families, and neighborhoods and so on. And this is all done in harmony with the Creator.

But these humans, they're given a choice, right? They're given a choice about whether they're going to trust the creator's definition of good and evil, or—they're given a choice. "Will we choose to seize autonomy from the creator, and choose autonomy to define good and evil for ourselves, according to my terms?" And what did the humans choose?

Okay, we know how that story goes, right? They seize—that's what the story of the tree is, going on here—they seize autonomy, define good and evil for ourselves, not relying on God's wisdom. And we know how the rest of the story goes. We also know how it goes because you and I relive that story every day, don't we? It's part of the power of those narratives in Genesis two and three. It's the human story.

And so once humans declare autonomy, we want to clear out a space that's for us and not for God. We want to clear out a space where we get to define the terms and don't have to put ourselves under, or submit—make ourselves accountable to anybody. And so the great rift takes place in the story of the Bible. The rift of Heaven and Earth.

Now, of course, humans can't drive the creator out of His own creation. That doesn't make any sense. But God allows, and gives humans over to, their own choices, to their own sin and selfishness. And so Paul the Apostle—he calls this "the world of sin and death," where the selfish decisions of human beings create a world of violence, of vengeance, of oppression, and of death.

But God always retains a hold, a strong foothold, in this world. Places—unique moments or times, or places where Heaven (God's space) and earth (our space) overlap. And throughout the story of Israel, those places are located in these places called temples or tents, right? And so what's the tent called in the Old Testament wilderness wanderings—remember that? It's called “the Tabernacle,” yes.

And if you read the book of Exodus, you'll notice something. You'll notice that in the descriptions of this tent, it was made totally different [shows audience an image]—but that's my little cartoon. If you go to the inside of the tent, it's actually—it's made to look like the garden of Eden. And so there's flowers and fruit trees all over the place, and embroidery and carvings, and so on. And there's fresh water, and everything's made out of gold. It's a little, portable Eden. It's a little portable place where Heaven and Earth still overlap.

And of course, then, the temple in Jerusalem was seen as a magnified version of this. The one place where God and humanity still meet together. But how many humans can meet in God's presence here in the temple? So a few. First of all, if you and I come into God's presence, the first problem you're gonna have to deal with is that you just cheated your neighbor last week, and you had to gossip about somebody, and you kind of laundered some money from that other person, and you think you're just gonna walk into the purity and the power and the presence of God? How is that going to go over, right? How did that go over for Isaiah in Isaiah chapter six? He feared for his life. He feared for his life.

And so this was—the whole mechanism to deal with this was . . . I'll kind of draw this with the blood here—this was the dead animals and the sacrifices. When God and humans meet together, the sin and selfishness of humanity has to be dealt with. And so it's these sacrifices that are substitutes and reminders of how serious and tragic human sin is.

And so this story goes on for some time, and it doesn't resolve itself within the story of Israel. In fact, all the reminders of sacrifices do is just underline that this is a fundamental problem that needs to be solved in some way. And it's not abstract theology. This is, like, where we live. We live in the world of our own sin, or other people's sin, constantly spilling over into my life. And it creates this world that you and I call Earth. And this is not okay with God.

And God's way of dealing with this is not to evacuate people out of this whole thing: “Let's just start a ‘plan B,’ where you get your Ferrari after all.” It's like, that's not a story of the Bible. So the story of the Bible leads—from this moment in the temple right here—leads up to the story of Jesus. In the story of the Gospels—again, just kind of recapping the storyline of the New Testament—we're introduced to this figure, Jesus of Nazareth. And in just one of the Gospels—the Gospel of John, chapter one—we are told two things about Jesus that meet this reality right here.

And here in John, chapter one, verse fourteen, we're told that “the Word became flesh.” Who's “the Word”? Jesus—pre-human Jesus. Jesus, before he becomes human. Jesus, in his pre-incarnate state. “The Word became flesh”—became a human being—“and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

And so the Creator, the Word who was with God and is God, makes his dwelling among us. John uses the word, right there, that is used to describe the Israelite tent and tabernacle. Jesus is a little temple, walking around. Jesus, in human form, is now the place where Heaven and

Earth unite. He's the place where Heaven and Earth overlap. He's the place where Heaven is going to start its invasion of earth—the Kingdom of God, Jesus called it.

And how, exactly, is he going to meet human evil head-on? He's going to conquer it, he says. He's going—how is Jesus going to conquer? How is God going to win and conquer human evil? John 1:29, “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, it's the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.’” How do lambs deal with sin and death? Lambs die. They die.

And so, what we are asked to consider in the story of the Gospels is that this is how God is solving the problem. This is how God is dealing with the long, horrible history of human sin and brokenness and death. He enters into His own creation, and He absorbs it into Himself on the cross.

But of course, the story doesn't end here. The story ends with resurrection. I'll just put an “r” right here—resurrection—for that. And resurrection is God's passionate love for, even screwed-up, sinful human beings. Stronger than their own sin, so that in conquering death and sin on the cross, it's like Jesus unleashes the life of Heaven in, like, a wave. It's like shockwaves going out into the world.

And the power and the presence of Jesus, through the Spirit, and these communities of Jesus, who begin spreading—and the work of Jesus's Spirit, it's, like—it begins this slow invasion, one human at a time, into the world of sin and death. And this is really good news because Heaven is all about life, relationship, and connection. Sin isolates us from one another until death, but God's love and grace, through the cross and the resurrection, bring us life and reconciliation and wholeness and relationship.

And so really, what it means to become a Christian, then, is to, then, live in two worlds. If I'm Joe Christian—right here, this is me—and I live in the world of sin and death. But at some moment, the story of Jesus becomes real and compelling—it clicks that this is not like fairy tales. Like, Jesus actually existed. And the claim is that he actually died and that he actually was raised from the dead. And this is real. And that God is confronting us—both to confront our own sin and to judge it, at the same time as he reveals his self-giving love for us, inviting us into forgiveness and life, into life. This is the story that the Bible is telling. The slow takeover.

Now, we'll just pause right here. If this is your view of Heaven and Earth—and I would argue this is the biblical view of Heaven and Earth—then your idea of Heaven should be completely reshaped in three ways. First of all, what it means is that Heaven is not simply something that I experience after I die. Heaven is an experience that's available here in the present.

What do I mean? Well, let's listen to Jesus in John, chapter seventeen. Jesus says, “This is eternal life.” Now just stop right there. This is the same gospel—chapter three, famous verse: “God so loved the world gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.” Most people impose the standard view of Heaven and Earth onto that verse and say, “Exactly, evacuation out into . . . right? I've become the disembodied spirit in Heaven forever and ever and ever.”

In the very same gospel, Jesus defines what eternal life means—at least one aspect of eternal life. And he says, “This is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God. And that they know

Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” Is Jesus saying you have to wait until you die to know God? No, of course not.

He's saying true, relational connection with the one who made you is fully available in the present, now, through Jesus, who invaded—is Heaven come to earth through an encounter with Jesus, in the spirit, a community of his people, encountering Jesus through the Scriptures, through prayer. This is eternal life. It's an experience that begins in the present—it's not limited to the present—it goes on into eternity, but it's available now. That's what Jesus says in the Gospel of John.

This is how the Apostle Paul says it in Second Corinthians, chapter five. He says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ—new creation. The old has passed away, and the new has come.” Now, this is a well-known verse to many people. Most people are familiar with this verse in a different translation: “If anyone is in Christ, *he is* a new creation.” That's how many English translations read.

The only problem with that is, Paul doesn't say “he is.” It's—literally, what he says in Greek is, “If anyone is in Christ”—and by “in Christ,” here's what he means: to be “in Christ” means I hear the story of Jesus' self-giving love for me on the cross and his conquering of death, that life is available to me. To be “in Christ” is to respond to that story—to respond to Jesus with a cry, with a prayer, with a day-to-day kind of, just, “What does this mean? Following Jesus, immersing myself in the community of his people, in the Scriptures. Reminding myself of the truth of the Gospel. Redefining who I am in light of Jesus.” That's what he means. Instead of saying all that, he just says “in Christ,” right?

So if anyone is “in Christ,” new creation is happening. When someone realizes who they are in Christ, it's a little taste of Heaven, of new creation. “The old is passed away,” by which your physical body is starting to dissolve or become see-through, or something like that? What he means is your old identity, the old habits and patterns of thinking, as you confront them with the Gospel, you begin, and you actually try to obey the teachings of Jesus.

And you fail a whole bunch, but sometimes you actually do it. And you find that there's life there, in forgiving your enemies. And there's life in being generous and not spending all of my money on my . . . and actually giving it away. And so when you obey the teachings of Jesus that lead to a true experience of life, you begin to feel this presence with you—Jesus's personal presence. He's helping me become more human. And Paul says that's a taste of Heaven, when I begin to experience that “passing of the old me” and the “coming of the new me.” That's just a gift of God's grace through Jesus.

Heaven—one piece of Heaven, in light of this story that the Bible is telling, is that we have one foot in the old me, in the old you. But if I'm in Christ, I have one foot planted in the life of the new creation. And that's what I'm experiencing in the healing of my mind and my heart and of my relationships, because of the Gospel. It's just right there. It's eternal life to know God. It's new creation to have my life slowly being transformed by the Gospel. There's one aspect of Heaven in the New Testament.

There's another aspect of Heaven, and that is the hope of believers when they do die. If you and I die before the return and the coming of Jesus, Heaven is Jesus's presence to which I go after dying. Now what's interesting is, this is most people's view of the end of the story—like, how the story ends. The reality is: there's actually only four verses in the entire Bible that

describe this experience, and they do so with very, very little description at all. Let's look at two of them, real quick, here.

In Luke chapter twenty-three, to one of the criminals hanging beside Jesus on the cross. The criminal said to him, “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom.” And Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Now, Jesus is very intense. “Paradise”—the word that Jesus uses—is the word in his vocabulary for garden of Eden. “Paradise” is a reference to the garden of Eden. “Today you’ll be with me in the garden.” Is this the conception that the garden was the idyllic place of Heaven and Earth overlapping. And so “You’ll be with me there. You’ll be with me there.” *With* Jesus.

Paul the Apostle, in his letter to the Philippians, he says it this way. He says, “To me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I’m to live in the flesh, that is, in my physical body, that means fruitful labor for me. But I don’t know which one I prefer. I’m hard-pressed between the two, because my desire is to depart and be with Christ. That’s far better. But to remain here in the flesh, in the body, that’s more necessary for you.” And so Paul has this, just, bedrock conviction that even death, physical death, cannot overpower Jesus’s hold and love on him.

“To die” means “to be with Christ.” And “with Christ” is actually the language that the Bible uses. You’ll never find the phrase, “Go to Heaven when I die.” You actually can’t find that in the Bible anywhere. What you do find is this phrase: “To be *with* Christ after death.” And this, my friends, is a profound hope. Amen? This is a profound hope: that Jesus’s hold on me cannot be broken even by physical death.

And if you are—pun intended—if you’re dead-convinced of that—if you know that, in your bones, you know there’s—Josh has said this before too—there’s the, kind of, this parable of, you know, “there are people that are so heavenly minded, they’re no earthly good.” I have yet to meet that person. Because somebody whose full identity is, just, rooted in the love of Jesus for me—that’s stronger than death, that forms in me a courage and a power, not—to be patient, yes, but to be passive? No. To be patient, yes. But to disengage? No. It gives you a source of courage and strength to follow Jesus in ways that, maybe, you have never done before because you were always scared.

That’s the second way. Heaven is a present experience, and we might say that physical death—being present with Christ after I die. But that’s not how the story of the Bible ends. And here we come back around to Revelation, chapter twenty-one. This is the ending of the story right here. And what is the ending of the story? It’s of God’s space, which is called “God’s dwelling”—did you see it there, verse three—the dwelling place of God is now coming here. Heaven fully invades and overlaps with earth. And so this is the view of how the book of Revelation ends. It’s right here—of Heaven and Earth completely overlapping.

And this is not a cheap ending, as Lenin would critique. This is actually an ending that does full justice to the pain and the horror of human history. We’re going to read a number of biblical passages here, and then dive back into Revelation. This is how Peter puts it in Acts chapter three. He’s speaking to an audience, and he says, “Repent, therefore, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”

So just pause. What he’s saying there is that, when I turn from false gods and false things that cannot bring me life, and when I turn to the one true God who can bring me life, the taste of

Heaven is a taste of new creation. Here he calls this “times of refreshing.” It’s like your life becomes refreshed with the life and presence of Jesus, the life of Heaven.

But that’s not the end of the story. He says, “And that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is Jesus, who must remain in Heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets.” In other words, the story of the Bible—it *has* to involve some—if God is a God of justice and of love, He can’t just, like, brush it under the carpet, like a romantic comedy: “Oh well, you know, they’re just happy, and they live forever . . . until they go through their fourth, fifth, and sixth marriages.” He doesn’t brush it under the carpet.

Somehow, what God is doing in the Gospel fully deals with the pain and the tragedy of the human story. Restoration. Restoration. Paul the Apostle—he put it this way in the next passage that I forget what it is, but I’ll remember once I see it. Oh yeah, Philippians three. Paul says, “Our citizenship is in Heaven.” Now this is a great one. This is one of those passages that’s often misunderstood. Taken to mean that, “Oh, because Heaven is my home.” No, that’s not what Paul’s saying. Heaven’s not your home. Earth is your home. We’re humans. We’re made to live here. We’re made to live here. It’s what we’re made for.

My true identity—who defines who I am? What is it that defines me as a human? It’s in Heaven. And who is in Heaven right now? Jesus. And it’s not about me going to where he is forever and ever and ever. The ultimate end of the story is about him coming *here*, which is what he says. “We eagerly await a Savior from there to come here, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control”—the power that he has to come and heal and reshape the whole creation and restore it—he’s also going to do a mini-version of that for me, of my body, “transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”

We believe in the hope of Heaven because [we] believe in the resurrection of Jesus. That what happened to Jesus in the empty tomb, in those mysterious moments that we’ll just have to hear from him what it was like, to go from a state of death and decomposition to a state—not just of, like, resuscitation, but a new mode of physical existence—where all of a sudden, like, things that are solid don’t really matter to you anymore, right? Because he just, like, appears inside of rooms and then disappears and so on. It’s a new mode of human existence, and that’s the hope.

That’s why I believe in Heaven. Because I believe in the testimony—the historical testimony of the apostles—that Jesus was raised from the dead. The world is a bit stranger than perhaps you thought when you woke up this morning. And if resurrection is possible, then perhaps the rich, robust, profound view of the new creation is possible too.

Which Paul the apostle puts this way in Romans chapter eight. This is the last biblical passage. He puts it this way, he says, “All creation is waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. For creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay, and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

The story of the Gospel is the story of you and I, personally, and of the whole universe experiencing resurrection—to experience life and humanness the way God intended it to be, which is how it’s depicted in Revelation twenty-two. We’ll conclude here. “Then the angel

showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and”—who's also on the throne?—“the Lamb, through the middle of the street of the city.”

I thought . . . this is a new creation. It's a city, but now it's a garden. Which is it? “Through the middle of the street of the city, also on either side of that river” . . . what? What's there—what? It's the tree of life. And where's the last time we saw that? It's in the garden, in paradise, in the Garden of Eden. It's the tree of life, “with twelve kinds of fruit yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree are for the *healing*, the *healing* of the nations.”

It's like the healing love of Jesus now works itself backwards as Heaven completely overlaps sin and death. And all of the cries that were never heard, all of the innocent lives that have been taken, the heartache, the violence, the oppression, it's all addressed and dealt with and healed. Keep reading.

“No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They'll see his face. His name will be on their foreheads”—an image of God's very personal presence, it's like it's emblazoned on my mind. “Night will be no more,” which, of course, cannot possibly be a physical description. Of course, if it's going to be a planet, it has to be warmed by some kind of energy source that's light and so on.

Again, you go back—the same with the sea. Why is there no sea in the new creation? Why is there no night? You read the Hebrew Bible—the poetry of the Hebrew Bible is: the chaotic sea and dark night time—are these ever good things for humans? No, they're usually sources of death—at least 2,000 years ago, right? And so the things that are the most frightening, and the most scary in the human experience, at least in the culture in which he was living, these things will be removed. There'll be all light, all life. “There'll be no more night. They'll need no lamp for the sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.”

How does this depiction avoid becoming the cheap ending of a romantic comedy? Look up at verse one. All of this life, this water-giving life, of the new creation, it's flowing out of the presence of God. And why is Jesus called “the Lamb” all over the book of Revelation? Because the central *apocalypsis* in the New Testament: How do I know who God is? How do I know what God is like? The central claim of the New Testament is: you look at the cross. You look at the slain lamb, whose death was for you.

In this moment, the Creator God—he doesn't ignore. He doesn't bring a cheap ending. In this moment, the Creator God becomes God-forsaken. Every innocent cry, every time you felt lonely and hurt, every act of violence and injustice—in this moment of the cross, the Creator's love is revealed so powerfully that Jesus cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” God becomes God-forsaken, to identify with all of the horror of human evil and injustice—but to conquer it with his life gift, which is this—right?—resurrection and new creation. This is the story that the Bible is telling.

In 2005, there was a collection of Christian artists in the country of Mozambique, which is on the eastern coast of Africa. Do you know anything about African history? I don't know a ton, but enough about Mozambique—that it was embroiled in a fifteen-year civil war—tens and tens of thousands of people murdered, and so on. It was one of these civil wars—people just mindlessly killed, and so on. It ended in the mid-nineties.

So as the country began to, kind of, rebuild and so on, there was a group of Christians that formed a collective of artists. Imagine Christians doing such a thing, right? Forming an artist collective. And what they wanted to do was create art that would tell the story of their people, but that would tell the story of this hope, but somehow weave it into the story of, just, the tragedy and the loss of the civil war.

And so one of the pieces this group of artists made has gained international attention. It's standing in the British Museum right now. And it's called the *Tree of Life*. Let me show it to you here. It's about ten feet tall, and it's an image of the tree of life that we just read about from Genesis and Revelation.

And it's this huge, huge thing, when you stand underneath it, and there's all these little creatures, as you can perhaps see down below, like little chickens and turtles and so on. And it's this scene, it's this image of hope and healing and life as God meant it to be. It's made entirely out of decommissioned machine gun parts that were used in the civil war to murder people. I have yet to come across a more profound symbol of Heaven than this piece of art right here.

Jesus, in his resurrected, transformed body, still had the marks and the pain of sin and death on his body, did he not? It may be that the effects of sin and death are such that it can say, it's like the old, "won't be remembered anymore," but that doesn't address the fact that Jesus still had nail marks in his hands and his feet.

And so somehow, whatever the biblical view of Heaven is, it's not ignoring all that came before. It's not ignoring the pain that you've experienced in your life. It is saying somehow the creator God's love for you is so great that what seems like sin, and what is, in reality, sin and death and tragedy now, in the light of, just, his overwhelming creative love, the pain becomes the raw materials of the making of new and eternal life.

And that's the power of the love that the Gospel reveals to us in Jesus. It's the taste of Heaven. This is not about pie in the sky. This is about Jesus coming to deal with the reality of the pain and the sin of our world, and revealing his self-giving love. Amen? This is hope that our world desperately needs.

[EMSB theme fades in]

You guys, I hope this whole six-part series was helpful for you, summarizing key themes in the whole New Testament that unify the whole New Testament story. We're going to dive into more series in the episodes to follow. So thanks for listening to the "Strange Bible" podcast, and we'll see you in the next episode. Cheers.

[EMSB theme fades out]