

John Owen on the New Heavens and the New Earth: To the Eschaton and Beyond!

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Introduction

It goes without saying that there is little that connects John Owen—often called the greatest British theologian of all time—and Buzz Lightyear. Yet, hear me out. When the Toy Story character Buzz Lightyear activates and declares boldly, “To infinity and beyond!”, we all know that an adventure is about to take place. We typically do not scrutinize his motto; we just go with it. Yet the mathematician in me kicks in when I hear it. For, how can you even go to infinity? Then, if you miraculously did reach infinity, how do you go beyond it? It’s a nonsensical statement. It truly is cartoonish.

Sadly, Biblical concept of immense importance can also get tossed around without understanding its true meaning. One such concept is the “new heavens and the new earth,” found in Isaiah, Peter, and Revelation.¹ In preaching these books over the years, I wrestled with the sense of what this phrase was truly communicating. I found that schools of interpretation regarding the new heavens and the new earth, as we will see briefly, can make this concept confusing and nonsensical. John Owen provides us not only with crystalline exegesis to help us understand the new heavens and the new earth, but in the process provides us with a beautiful eschatology of creation—what the created order redeemed by Christ is headed toward.

Though “To infinity and beyond!” is just a childish motto, Owen would teach us to say, “To the eschaton and beyond!” with a depth of meaning expressed in great faith and expectation.

John Owen to the Rescue in Clarifying Terminology

In Isaiah 65:17-19, we read the Lord declaring the following:

¹⁷ For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth;

And the former shall not be remembered or come to mind.

¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create;

For behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing,

And her people a joy.

¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem,

¹ See Isaiah 65:17, 66:2; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1 (note that the Revelation reference uses this phrase in the singular for heaven: “new heaven and new earth.”).

And joy in My people;
The voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her,
Nor the voice of crying (NKJV).

“I create new heavens and a new earth.” What are the new heavens and new earth the Lord is creating? Different schools of interpretation seek to answer that question.

The ancient Jews thought that this phrase was about the rebuilding of the ancient city of Jerusalem after the captivity. While the rebuilding of Jerusalem forms a helpful backdrop, limiting the phrase to the work done in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah falls far short of drawing out its full meaning. Further, the text itself would contradict that understanding. Verse 19, describes a lack of weeping, whereas Ezra 3:12 tells us, “Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy.”

Dispensationalists think the new heavens and the new earth refer to establishing a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. Scofield taught that “vv. 18-25 (of this chapter in Isaiah) describe the Kingdom Age (when Christ will establish a political rule on earth). Longevity will be restored, but death, the ‘last enemy,’ will not be destroyed until after Satan’s rebellion at the end of the thousand years.”² Though pointing to a different era of time than the Jewish school of thought, this interpretive method locates the new heavens and the new earth in the same location with a rebuilt city of Jerusalem. However, I will not spend further time debunking a view that has Christ re-entering his humiliation by coming to this sin-cursed, Satan-ruled earth.

In circles of interpretation closer to covenant theology, many commentators believe that this passage speaks of Christ's final coming. Though the same phrase in Revelation 21:1 certainly points to the coming age, limiting this phrase to the glory of the final state does not capture the full sense of what the Lord means here in Isaiah 65:17. His final coming will bring forth the *consummation* of the new heavens and new earth, yet these words are pointing to events that precede the end of time as we know it. In the very next verse not quoted, we hear of birth and death happening during this time, yet those things are not a part of the final age:

“No more shall an infant from there live but a few days,
Nor an old man who has not fulfilled his days;
For the child shall die one hundred years old,
But the sinner being one hundred years old shall be accursed.

All of these methods of interpretation, in one way or another, fall short of expositing the prophetic terminology. Here is where John Owen comes to the rescue.

John Owen was a larger-than-life figure as the Reformation spread throughout the British Isles in the seventeenth century. Owen was a Puritan—an Independent minister outside the national church. He was a prolific author who famously preached in Parliament the day after King Charles I's execution and later served as Cromwell's chaplain. John Owen guides the reader into a wonderful understanding of what is meant by the phrase “the new heavens and the new earth.” Owen says,

² C.I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible: The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments. Authorized Version, with a New System of Connected Topical References...* (New York: Oxford Press, 1909), 769.

It is evident then, that, in the prophetical idiom and manner of speech, by “heavens” and “earth,” the civil and religious state and combination of men in the world, and the men of them, are often understood.³

Owen helps us understand that the prophets had their own language of imagery and idioms. When we read the prophets, we must realize they had their own terminology and vocabulary, which we must grasp to understand the riches of what they are communicating.

The Prophetical Idiom of “Heavens and Earth”

The prophets took creation imagery and used it idiomatically to describe catastrophic circumstances. When stars are falling from the sky, when the sun and moon are darkening, or when the skies are rolling up like scrolls, the prophets are telling you that apocalyptic events in a nation are unfolding.

Specifically, the figure of the heavens and the earth being removed speaks of the destruction of a nation. Isaiah, in speaking about God destroying the nation of Edom, described it in this way:

All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom, upon the people I have devoted to destruction (Is. 34:4-5).

On the other side of the coin, the prophets use the imagery of establishing a new heavens and earth as the forming of a nation or kingdom. The God who created the original heavens and earth is still active in this world, raising up one kingdom and bringing down another. In Isaiah 51:15-16, the Lord says,

I am the Lord your God, who stirs up the sea and its waves roar (the Lord of hosts is His name). I have put My words in your mouth and have covered you with the shadow of My hand, to establish the heavens, to found the earth, and to say to Zion, ‘You are My people.’

Regarding this passage in Isaiah, John Owen says it speaks of God forming Israel as a nation upon her deliverance from Egypt.

The time when the work here mentioned, of planting the heavens, and laying the foundation of the earth, was performed by God, was when he “divided the sea” (v. 15), and gave the law (v. 16), and said to Zion, “Thou art my people”—that is, when he took the children of Israel out of Egypt, and formed them in the wilderness into a congregation of believers and a civil state. Then he planted the heavens, and laid the foundation of the earth—made the new world; that is, brought forth order, and government, and beauty, from the confusion wherein before they were. This is the planting of the heavens, and laying the foundation of the earth in the world. And hence it is that when mention is made of the destruction of a state and its government, it is in that language that seems to set forth the end of the world.⁴

This idiomatic language is also used in the New Testament. Jesus said in Matthew 24:29, “Immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not

³ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965), 9:134.

⁴ John Owen, “Sermon XXV: Providential Changes, An Argument for Universal Holiness,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. by Thomas Russell (London: 1826), 16:223-224.

give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” Again, Owen comments on this text.

And in our Saviour Christ’s prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem, Matthew 24, he sets it out by expressions of the same importance. It is evident then, that, in the prophetical idiom and manner of speech, by “heavens” and “earth,” the civil and religious state and combination of men in the world, and the men of them, are often understood.⁵

With the understanding that the constitution or destruction of a nation can be described using heaven and earth language, let us now look more closely at “the new heavens and new earth.”

A Biblical View of the “New Heavens and New Earth”

John Owen clarifies that when the prophets use the phrase “new heavens and new earth” or other directly related imagery, the Spirit of God, speaking through the prophets is revealing to us particular events and times. Speaking of the use of new heavens and new earth in Isaiah 65, Owen says, “But now it is evident, from this place of Isaiah, with chapter 66:21-22, that this is a prophecy of *gospel times only*; and that the planting of these new heavens is nothing but the creation of gospel ordinances, to endure forever.”⁶ Owen taught that the new heavens and new earth referred to the time of Christ’s coming, the establishment of His church, and these last days in which we now reside.

That means that we are living in the eschaton of a whole new world, a new heaven and new earth the Lord is creating. The author of Hebrews said, “but in these last [ἐσχάτου] days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb. 1:2, ESV). At Pentecost, Peter quoting the prophet Joel said to the gathered Jews in Jerusalem, “And in the last [ἐσχάταις] days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh” (Acts 2:17). Speaking of Christ, Peter wrote in his first epistle, “He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times (ἐσχάτου) for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God” (1 Pet. 1:20-21).

John Calvin, writing a century before Owen, explains the new heavens and new earth similarly:

By these metaphors he promises a remarkable change of affairs; as if God had said that he has both the inclination and the power not only to restore his Church, but to restore it in such a manner that it shall appear to gain new life and to dwell in a new world. These are exaggerated modes of expression; but the greatness of such a blessing, which was to be manifested at the coming of Christ, could not be described in any other way.⁷

This interpretation is consistent with the way the word “new” is used throughout the Bible, often to refer to something old that is renewed and infused with new meaning and significance, rather than something that is entirely new. For example, the “New Testament” itself (ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη) is in continuity, rather than discontinuity, with the Old Testament (Heb. 8:8-13). The “new

⁵ Ibid., 16:224.

⁶ Ibid., 16:225.

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, trans. by William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 8:397.

commandment” which Christ gives is the fulfillment of the law (John 13:34). We have become a “new creation” through Christ’s redemptive work, but it is still the same “we” (2 Cor. 5:17).

We celebrate this new covenant in the Lord’s Supper, where Jesus said that the cup “that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). Consequently, “we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh” (Heb. 10:19-20). We are now citizens of the new, heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22; Rev 21:2), who have been given a new name (Rev. 2:17) and have new, redemptive songs placed in our mouths (Rev. 5:9).

In summary, the new heavens and new earth were ushered in when the Lord died, rose again, ascended, and sent forth His Spirit into this world. Through the preaching of the gospel, the Triune God has established a new creation. As those made alive by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit enter into the kingdom of God, they gather into the visible expression on the earth of that creation in the church. The church is the Jerusalem that the Lord declares He is rejoicing over in Isaiah 65, as we are restored from Adam’s fall through the Second Adam, Jesus Christ.

Looking at the Further Glory Beyond the Eschaton

Yet, though the formation of the church is essential to the concept of the new heavens and new earth, for Owen there is more than just this initial expression of the eschaton. There is a greater glory that we must see.

Speaking of the original creation, Owen remarks about the glory it possessed: “In the first creation, infinite wisdom was the inseparable companion of infinite power: ‘How marvellous (sic) are thy works, O Lord! in wisdom hast thou made them all.’”⁸ Yet Owen saw what the impact of Adam’s fall would require for the creation to be restored. He states, “But when the effects of this divine wisdom, in their principal beauty and glory, were defaced, greater treasures of wisdom were required unto their reparation.”⁹

Where were these “greater treasures of wisdom” to be found for creation’s restoration? In the Lord Jesus Christ.

Again, Owen says beautifully,

In particular, the Lord Christ is glorious herein, in that the whole breach made on the glory of God in the creation, by the entrance of sin, is hereby repaired and made up. The beauty and order of the whole creation consisted in its dependence on God, by the obedience of the rational part of it, angels and men. Thereby were the being, the goodness, the wisdom, and power of God made manifest. But the beauty of this order was defaced, and the manifestation of the divine perfections unto the glory of God eclipsed, by the entrance of sin. But all is restored, repaired, and made up, in this recapitulation of all things in one new head, — Christ Jesus...¹⁰

Yet, Christ is doing more than merely restoring creation to its form in Eden. In using this phrase “new heavens and a new earth,” Owen saw that the transformative work of the gospel would emanate from the redeemed in the church and impact the whole of creation. This restoration of the cosmos would return it to a greater state than what existed in Eden. Owen said,

yea, the whole curious frame of the divine creation is rendered more beautiful than it was before. Hence the whole of it groaneth for the interest of each part in this

⁸ John Owen, “Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. by Thomas Russell (London: 1826), 12:474.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

restoration of all things. Whatever there is of order, of beauty, of glory, in heaven above, or in earth beneath, it all ariseth from this new relation of the creation unto the Son of God.¹¹

Simply put, just as Christ as the Second Adam is far more glorious than the first Adam, so the new heavens and new earth are far more glorious than even the original. Because—and this is a preeminent thought in the mind of Owen—in Christ we have been brought into full communion with the Triune God. His redeeming love transforms all.

He loves us and chastiseth us. A love like that of the heavens to the earth, when being full of rain, they pour forth showers to make it fruitful; as the sea communicates his waters to the rivers ; by the way of bounty, out of its own fulness: they return unto it only what they receive from it. It is the love of a spring, of a fountain, always communicating. A love from whence proceeds everything that is lovely in its object.¹²

The manifestation of the new heavens and new earth in the church is to emanate into all creation, preparing it for the return of Christ. For eternity we will live in communion with the Triune God on a glorified earth united with heaven.

Several Practical Uses of this Aspect of the Doctrine of Creation

Be Glad and Rejoice Forever in God's Creation of the New Heavens and New Earth.

If the Lord does, we should. The Lord's Day is that one day in seven set apart to remember the creation and praise him for redemption. We should come to the Lord's house glad to rejoice in the salvation the Lord is bringing to earth.

Have Confidence in the Unfolding Plan of God to Redeem the Whole of Creation through His Son and by His Spirit.

As Paul states in Romans 8,

The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:21-23).

In an age of power-hungry dictators, terrorist threats, and nuclear weaponry, we can fall into false fears that the world is out of control and in danger of ending. Yet beyond even the promise of the earth's preservation through the Noahic covenant, we have confidence that the Lord is on His throne exercising all the authority He has been given, to free His people and the creation itself from its bondage.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² John Owen, "Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. by Thomas Russell (London: 1826), 10:35.

Labor Diligently to Make the Nations Know of the Glories of the New Creation.

One reason the Lord calls it a new heavens and earth is that those that follow Christ leave their old world with its old order behind. They find the joys of salvation. The church must continue to take the message of the gospel to the nations. The church should expect transformation as it does.

Wycliffe Bible Translators produced a video of the Kimyal Tribe of Papua, Indonesia as they celebrate the arrival by plane in their village of Bibles in their own language. As the airplane arrives, the community is dancing as the elders lead a procession to receive the Bibles. One participant commented, “Our hearts are no longer heavy. They are light.” As an elder receives the first bundle of Bibles, he calls everyone to bow, places his hands on the bundle of Bibles, and through weeping prays,

O God, the plan which you had from the beginning, regarding your Kimyals, which already existed in your Spirit, the month you had set, the day you had set, has come to pass today. O my Father, my Father, the promise that you gave to Simeon that he would see Jesus Christ and hold him in his arms before he died. I have also been waiting under that same promise, O God. You looked at all the different languages and chose the ones that will be put into Your Word. You thought we should see your word put into our language. Today, the day that you had chosen, has come to pass. O God, today, you have placed your word into my hands just like you promised. You have placed it here in our land. For this O God, I give you praise.

The older generation hands the printed Bibles out to the younger ones, weeping and holding each other as they do, saying, “Today is not like another day. Today, God’s Son, Jesus Christ, has brought us His Word. So today, we are living in the light.” As the gospel goes forth, it produces a new creation.

Prepare to Live in the Eternal New Heavens and New Earth.

Each day is a step closer to the coming of our Lord who will bring the consummation. Each week as we worship in church, we are a step closer to that time. We should live each day in the light of that glory. To the eschaton and beyond!