

Ups and Downs

In the name of him who makes all things new, dear friends in Christ: It's interesting the way the Bible is laid out. The first two chapters describe the creation as God originally made it: good, perfect, everything in order – as it was before the fall into sin. And the last two chapters describe how things will be when the Lord has restored his creation to perfection, when sin and all its corrupting effects have been forever removed. Everything in between these first two and the last two chapters describes how we humans mess things up with our sin and unbelief and what the Lord does to take care of it – chiefly, sending his Son to be our Savior by taking on our fallen flesh, suffering and dying on the cross for our sins, and then rising again as the first fruit of his new creation. This restorative work of God continues now through the church as the Lord claims us as his own, breathes life into us through faith in Jesus, and by his Word and Spirit preserves us in this saving faith our whole lives through, ultimately raising us from the dead or, if we're alive at Christ's second coming, transforming these corrupt frames into glorious bodies fit for eternity. It's this eternal state I'd like to talk about this morning.

That's because today's reading from Revelation is from one of the last two chapters of the Bible. In it we are given a brief look at the final state when the Lord has finished his work of making all things new. But what's amazing is how much confusion there is about it. I mean, if I were to ask how many of you are looking forward to ascending into heaven and there spending eternity in the great mansions God has prepared for us in that glorious land high above the sky, I'm guessing that most would say, "Yes, of course!" Am I wrong? Is there anyone here not looking forward to that?

You know, it's funny the way we speak and think of things. It often happens that we overlook what the Bible actually says and hold instead to a lot of popular notions which come from other sources – most notably, pagan mythology. For example, we often think of Satan as the lord of the underworld. We imagine him as king of hell; but that's not right at all. The Bible clearly teaches that for the time being Satan is the lord of *this* world – this corrupt and failing world doomed to destruction. He won't be sent to hell until the time of Christ's return; and when he is, he's put there not as its ruler, but as its most infamous prisoner. He goes there to suffer, not to rule. The idea that he's the lord of hell actually comes from Greek and Roman mythology, in which you've got three chief gods: one who rules the sky, one who rules the sea, and one who rules the underworld. Satan is confused with the last one.

Similarly, the popular idea that we'll spend eternity in some wondrous heavenly land on high, up above the clouds and "way beyond the blue" (as the song goes) is simply wrong. This notion was probably imported into Christian thinking from some ancient philosophies which held that the material, physical order that we know here on earth is inherently inferior to the purely spiritual world high above us. According to this way of thinking, the goal is to escape the flawed physical world and rise above it, there to exist in the perfect realm of pure spirit. And so it is that in popular images of eternity the gates of heaven are shown high up in the sky, and people sit around on clouds strumming harps or worse (and I hate this) flying around with angels' wings and having halos on their heads. Listen: people are people and angels are angels. They are two entirely different creatures. People never become angels, not now, not ever.

And our eternal home is not a way up there in the sky; no, it's right here on good old terra firma – solid Earth. That's what the Bible teaches. "We are looking forward to a new heaven and a *new earth*"—this earth restored and renewed, with rocks and rivers and plants

and trees – like the original garden of paradise. Adam and Eve in their state of perfection didn't live up in the sky; what makes us think we will? In the end the Bible doesn't have us ascending to go away to be with God in some distant heaven, rather it has the Lord and the heavenly Jerusalem coming down to be with us here on earth. That's what today's text says. And really, this is one of the Bible's most consistent themes.

Consider how it was in the beginning. We read that the Lord used to *come down* to the garden and walk with our first parents in the cool of the day. On the day they fell into sin, they heard him approaching and ran away in fear; but the point is that they knew the sound of his footsteps because they were used to hearing it. But because they'd transgressed and become sinners what used to be the high point of the day, a walk with the Lord, had turned for them into something terrifying. Thus they tried to hide: both their naked shame from one another and their whole selves from God. But the Lord called them back to himself. And after telling them how things were going to be from here on out, he also promised them a Savior and ultimate redemption and restoration.

Likewise, we have the Lord *coming down* to deal mercifully with Noah at the time of the flood. Then he gave us a picture of how things would be in the future, when the wicked will be destroyed and the faithful saved – save to inherit a world washed clean from sin and its stain. After that, we have the Lord *coming down* to call Abraham with whom he made a covenant and through whom he promised to bring the Savior into the world.

At the time of the Exodus, the Lord appears to Moses in the burning bush. He tells Moses, "I have seen the suffering of my people in Egypt, and I have *come down* to rescue them." Then, after he successfully brings them out of Egypt with great signs and wonders, he leads them to Mount Sinai where again he *comes down* to speak to them and give them his holy Law. We usually think of this in terms of the Ten Commandments; but there was so much more. And a huge part of it was the Lord's instructions for setting up the Tabernacle – a tent in which the Lord dwelt with and among his people right here on earth. In time, the Tabernacle was replaced by the Temple in Jerusalem; but the basic notion was the same: it was God's house on earth. While pagans thought of their gods as being way up in the sky or in the depths of the sea or in the underworld or on far away Mount Olympus, the nation of Israel made the bold assertion that our God lives down here with us. They could point to the Temple and say, "He's right in there."

Even then, the Tabernacle and Temple were prophetic images that foretold of an even greater manifestation of the Lord coming down to dwell on earth. They pointed ahead to the time that God came down in the person of Jesus. Then God lived among his people in a tent of human flesh, walking, talking, teaching, healing, serving, ultimately giving himself as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. And don't imagine for a moment he's done with his human body. Remember the tomb was empty on Easter morning. The body of Jesus was raised from the dead. He showed it to his disciples, "Behold my hands and side. See that it's really me." And even though that visible body has since ascended into the clouds, it's not like Jesus has discarded it. He remains true God and true man for all eternity. And in his body he shall return: he's coming back down.

But it's important to understand that even though we don't see him, he still does come down to deal with us. That's what the ministry of the church is all about: Christ coming down to us in his Word and in his Sacraments, filling his new Temple which is comprised of the bodies of all who trust in him – filling this Temple with himself and his love, his forgiveness, and his grace in order to make us part of his new creation. You see, the whole story of the Bible is about God coming down to dwell with us.

So you might you might think that with this being such a major theme of Scripture and of our Christian faith, we'd get it right. But so often we get it wrong. I'll admit that I'm probably as guilty as anyone of slipping into ways of speaking that suggest that our eternal home is a way beyond the blue. Sadly, even our hymnal betrays us in this regard. I looked over the hymns in the section on the church triumphant. Every single one of them in one way or another speaks of our home above. Let me suggest that it's time to pay closer attention to what the Bible actually says. We need to stop thinking in terms of going away to live in a home beyond the stars. Heaven is not our home. Earth is. We must reject the silly slogan I've heard from people who say that the letters which form the word *Bible* are best understood as an acronym for "**b**asic **i**nstructions **b**efore **l**eaving **e**arth". We're not going anywhere. God is coming down to dwell with us here. And when he does, he's going to make us and everything else new.

Now, to head off any confusion there may be, let me make one thing clear. The Bible does speak of the spirits of the dead going to a place of bliss or torment, depending upon their faith (or lack of it) in the Word and promises of God in Christ Jesus. But we need to understand that that's only for the time being. It's a temporary state and condition. In the resurrection, when Christ returns visibly to judge, these spirits will be reunited with their bodies here on earth. At that time the unbelievers will be taken away. The saved, the redeemed, will remain here to inherit the new wondrously restored and reordered creation. That's our ultimate hope and goal. And then the words of today's text will be fulfilled: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

May the Lord in his mercy hasten the coming of that day, and keep us faithful until the end. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!