

The Future

The story so far

So far we have seen how Abraham was promised that through his family God would reverse all the curses of the garden of Eden. This was encapsulated in the three elements of **land**, **offspring** and **enjoying the presence of God**, with these blessings extending to **all nations**. These promises were almost fulfilled in David, almost lost in the exile, and reaffirmed in a miraculous new form by the prophets.

Jesus demonstrated by his life that their fulfilment was near, and in his death took the curse of Eden on himself; enduring the complete loss of all the promises. But by his resurrection Jesus demonstrates he is the eternal **offspring** and inherits the promises extended to all creation and all people. The church now enjoys the promises in germinal, primarily spiritual form, but still looks forward to their final consummation in the new heaven and new earth. It is that final fulfilment to which we now turn.

The Letters

New Testament hope is resurrection hope. That is the physical resurrection of Jesus, attested by the gospels, has become the paradigm for our future expectation.¹ In a number of places the expectation of human resurrection is extended to all of creation. In Romans 8 Paul extends his discussion of our future resurrection hope² to finally include the whole of creation “which will be liberated from its bondage to decay.”³ Thus the New Testament hope is a restored creation, the ultimate fulfilment of the promise of **land**. That new creation will have an innumerable resurrected throng of adopted **offspring**, from **all nations** who **enjoy the presence of God and Christ** forever.

This basic picture is repeated in numerous places throughout the letters. As already mentioned in Romans it is the final completion of the promise of “life.”⁴ In 1 Corinthians 15 our resurrection hope is declared to be central and essential, otherwise “we are to be pitied more than all men.”⁵ Indeed it is a primary motivator to help us stand firm, and give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord.⁶ In 2 Peter the promise of a “new heaven and a new earth” are also considered central to our hope.⁷

¹ See N Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003). For an excellent summary of the NT evidence.

² Romans 8:11

³ Romans 8:21

⁴ See also section 7.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:19

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:58

⁷ See 2 Peter 3:3ff. Many commentators suggest that this passage envisages a total destruction of the present universe, and the creation of something new. Although this is possible, it seems more likely that Peter is describing a *cleansing* of the universe, so that its original goodness is “laid bare” (2 Peter 3:10).

The return of Christ and the final judgment which will both precede this final state are both mentioned often⁸ but they are not to be the focus of our hope. Our hope is that as a result of Christ's return and judgment, there will be a new and perfect eternal era in which God's people "inherit the kingdom."⁹ This is "the hope of glory."¹⁰ The promises to Abraham which are now manifested primarily internally in the hearts of God's people, will then be finally and completely fulfilled as we live in this new creation, and see God face to face.

Revelation

The book of Revelation sets out to portray the present and the future in vivid cartoon-like images which draw extensively on Old Testament prophecies. The richness of John's allusions makes a single theme seem reductionistic, however, the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham, set in the larger framework of renewal of all of creation is a central theme.

The throne room scene of Revelation 4-5 establishes God and Jesus as rulers of the whole of creation. Jesus is described as "the lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David"¹¹ which confirms him as the fulfilment of the Abraham promise of **one offspring**. The opening of the seven seals¹² – symbolising the fulfilment of God's promises and plans for his creation – includes an important interlude in which a faithful army of 144,000 is heard, but when it is seen it has become "a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language"¹³ thus clearly fulfilling the promise of **innumerable offspring from all nations**.

The plagues unleashed with the sounding of the trumpets¹⁴ echo the plagues of the Exodus¹⁵ though each is magnified to terrifying proportions. This is repeated when the seven bowls of God's wrath are poured out.¹⁶ In Revelation 16:12, the Euphrates is dried up to prepare the way for "the kings from the East." This seems to an allusion to Isaiah 11:15-16, one of the key Isaianic passages about the New Exodus. This New Exodus theme, introduces the reality of judgment both within and at the end of the history, and

This fits with Jesus' promise that the meek will inherit *the earth* (Matthew 5:5) and also the Pauline language of *setting the creation free* (Romans 8:21). Thus in the same way that the disciples were astonished at the ordinariness, and physicality of the risen Jesus, so it seems that our childish notions of the Christian hope need to be modified to this more earthy, this-worldly, but much exciting biblical picture.

⁸ E.g. Romans 14:10, 1 Corinthians 1:7, 4:5, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Philippians 3:20, Colossians 3:4, 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 2 Timothy 4:1, 8, Titus 2:13, Hebrews 10:30, James 5:8, 1 Peter 4:5, Jude 15

⁹ 1 Corinthians 6:9, 15:50, Galatians 5:21, Ephesians 5:5, James 2:5

¹⁰ Colossians 1:27

¹¹ Revelation 5:5

¹² Revelation 6:1-8:3

¹³ Revelation 7:9

¹⁴ Revelation 8:4-9:19

¹⁵ E.g. Hail 8:7, Blood 8:7, 8, Darkness 8:12, 9:2, Locusts 9:3.

¹⁶ Revelation 16:1-20. E.g. painful sores 16:2, blood 16:3, 4, darkness 16:10 etc.

also of deliverance and salvation for God's people. As in the first Exodus, however, the end point is the fulfilment of God's intentions as promised to Abraham. Revelation 21-22 therefore provides the climax, not only to the book, but indeed to the whole bible.

The theme of **land** reaches a great climax as "a new heaven and a new earth" is revealed.¹⁷ The focus of this new creation is "the new Jerusalem"¹⁸ but this city is now expanded to a cube 12,000 stadia, or 1,400 miles in each direction. This symbolises the perfection of Israel, but is also about the size of John's known world.¹⁹ Revelation 22:1-5 portrays this global city as a garden city, with similarities to the Garden of Eden. Thus every aspect of the Old Testament hope of restored **land** is found in the new creation.

The new creation is also a place where **God's presence is fully enjoyed**. The city itself is a bride united with God, her husband and a voice declares

"Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.²⁰ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."
(Revelation 21:3-4)

In the Old Testament God dwelt in the Most Holy Place in the temple, which was cubic. Now, however, the whole New Jerusalem is cubic, and there is no temple because "the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple."²¹ So we "will see his face."²² The absence of the sea²³ is also deeply important because the sea had come to be associated with forces which oppose God, and separate his people from him.²⁴ In Revelation 4:6 there was a sea, separating the throne room of heaven from the rest of creation. However, here that separation has disappeared, and heaven is united with the earth.

The theme of **innumerable offspring** is hinted at by the enormous size of the city, but the related theme of **all nations** is much clearer. The nations walk by the light of the Lamb and the kings of the earth bring their splendour into the city.²⁵ The tree of life bears leaves which are for the healing of the nations.²⁶

¹⁷ Revelation 21:1

¹⁸ Revelation 21:2, 9-21

¹⁹ Revelation 21:16. See G. K. Beale, *The book of Revelation : a commentary on the Greek text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich. Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans ; Paternoster, 1999), 1074.

²⁰ Note especially this promise to "be their God", since this was the phraseology of the promises to Abraham (Genesis 17:8) This is also echoed throughout the OT Exodus 6:7, Leviticus 25:38, 26:12, Numbers 15:41, Deuteronomy 29:13, Jeremiah 7:23, 11:4, 24:7, 30:22, 31:33, 32:38, Ezekiel 11:20, 14:11, 36:28, 37:23, 27. See also 2 Corinthians 6:16.

²¹ Revelation 21:22

²² Revelation 22:4

²³ Revelation 21:1

²⁴ Leland; Wilhoit Ryken, *Dictionary of biblical imagery*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), "Sea" p. 765.

²⁵ Revelation 21:24

²⁶ Revelation 22:2

The final completion of God's eternal purposes could be summed up by one little phrase which takes us back to Genesis 3 - "there was no longer any curse."²⁷ The curse of Adam's sin, which now hangs over all of creation will, on that day be finally abolished, and all the hopes of every saint throughout all generations will finally be fulfilled.

Our voyage through scripture is finally complete. Of course there are innumerable highways and byways not explored, but it is my hope that in tracing this main thoroughfare of the promises to Abraham you will have a secure map by which to navigate through the vast, and endlessly exciting forest of God's word.

Exercise

Examine Revelation 21-22 and try to think of any elements of the Christian hope which are not represented here. Are their broader hopes that people express that would not be satisfied by this picture?

Questions

1. How does the resurrection of Jesus help us to understand our future hope? What questions does this throw up?
2. Consider how our future hope is presented in a few of the New Testament passages mentioned in this section. How coherent is the picture?
3. How does Revelation help us to visualise the future, and how might it hinder us?
4. Does the Christian hope motivate you to a more faithful Christian life or not? Why might this be?

²⁷ Revelation 22:3, cf Genesis 3:14-19.