

IMAGINE HEAVEN

New Heaven and New Earth: Will the Circle Be Unbroken? 3rd Talk on Heaven

Five questions about the new heavens and the new earth

SPEAKER	Geno Hildebrandt
DATE	Sunday, September 20, 2020
PASSAGES	2 Peter 3:5-13; Matthew 19:28; Romans 8:19-22; Acts 3:19-21; Revelation 21:1-5; Revelation 21:22-27; Revelation 1:4-7; Luke 21:33; John 14:1-3; John 1:29; 2 Corinthians 5:17; John 1:14; Revelation 20:6; Revelation 5; Haggai 1:13; Hebrews 12:1-2; Romans 12:1-2
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:57:02 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Yes, the circle will be unbroken. The Bible's fiery end is a judgment that cleanses the earth, not one that annihilates it, and the "renewal of all things" is a real renewal of this world, not a metaphor. At its center is God himself, finally dwelling with his people, and the Lamb whose reign will at last be uncontested.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ As the flood judged the world without annihilating it, the coming fire will judge and refine the earth so that only righteousness remains.
- ◆ A word picture is not the same as an unreal thing. Lambs are real; thrones are real. Treating heaven as merely spiritual is more Plato than Bible.
- ◆ *Palingenesia* means "genesis over again," and Peter's "restoring all things" means returning something to its original, mint condition.

- ◆ Heaven is the renewal of familiar things, not the creation of unfamiliar ones. We will wake up there and feel at home.
- ◆ The new Jerusalem descending to earth is the incarnation writ large: God making space and time his eternal home.
- ◆ When sin is vanquished, Christ's rule does not end. His contested rule ends, and his eternally uncontested rule begins.

► 0:57:02

Geno began by inviting Joyce Tate, one of Hope's early leaders, to repeat a word she had spoken during worship while the band sang "Resting Place" – God asking, "Where will my resting place be?" and his people answering. Her morning reading had been Haggai, where God tells a people slow to rebuild his house, "I am with you, declares the Lord." Having come home after twenty-two years in Arizona, she sensed God saying that to Hope Chapel. "The reason there's so much anger and so many riots and so much hatred," she said, "is because there's no rest."

Will the circle be unbroken?

► 1:01:57

Then Geno sang a little of "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," the 1907 English hymn that A.P. Carter turned into a country standard and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band made famous in the 1970s. Sung upbeat, it is a sad song about a man at a window watching a horse-drawn hearse carry his mother away. Its question is rhetorical: will I see her again? Is the promise of being reunited with those we love real? "This morning I want to answer yes."

► 1:04:28

This third talk on heaven was built on five questions. He admitted he had only gotten through three at the outdoor service before his timekeeper stopped him.

1. Doesn't the Bible teach a fiery end?

► 1:06:28

Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Luke 21:33). The same Jesus promised to prepare a place for us and come back to take us there (John 14:1-3). People call that pie in the sky, "but I believe it's a real place, and that we will really be in the presence of a real Jesus."

► 1:07:38

The fiery judgment is mostly in Peter's second letter. Follow Peter's logic, Geno said: the scoffers forget that by the word of God the heavens and earth were formed, and by water that world was deluged and perished – "but by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire" (2 Peter 3:5–7). The flood was a judgment and a destruction, but it did not annihilate the world. The fire will be the same, because God's intention is renewal.

► 1:09:57

"But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God... But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."

2 PETER 3:10–13 ↗

► 1:10:26

The point of the fire is the point of the flood: to destroy ungodliness from the face of the earth. Geno heard it as cleansing – "a lot like metal is refined by fire." So, a fiery end? "Yes and no. Yes, there will be a fiery judgment. Is the earth totally destroyed? No."

2. Is the renewal real, or just a word picture?

► 1:12:08

The Bible is full of metaphor, but "just because something is a word picture or an analogy doesn't mean it's unreal." When John the Baptist said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), he meant Jesus' life would be given as a sacrifice. It was an analogy – and lambs are real.

► 1:13:35

Jesus himself said:

"Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me – are thrones real? Is Israel real? Is judgment real? "The word picture uses the familiar to teach us the unfamiliar, but it doesn't mean that the unfamiliar is unreal." When we make everything merely spiritual, "we become more Greek than biblical" – it was Plato who taught that what is truly real is not concrete.

► 1:15:01

The phrase “renewal of all things” translates *palingenesia*, which Jesus uses only here: essentially, genesis over again, Eden restored. The NLT renders it “when the world is made new”; Eugene Peterson, “in the re-creation of the world.” “The world that’s going to be made new is this world,” Geno insisted. “It’s a real thing.”

► 1:16:17

Peter preached the same in the temple, after the lame man at the Beautiful Gate went walking and leaping and praising God:

“Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.”

ACTS 3:19–21 ↗

► 1:17:24

“Restoring” is *apokatastasis* – returning something to its original condition. Geno drives a twenty-year-old Honda Accord: spongy brakes, failing AC, windows that roll up slowly, wipers that stop mid-swipe. In factory condition, “it would be like driving a stick of butter.” And, he added, there are enough of us with some age on us to wonder what that would be like.

► 1:18:29

Randy Alcorn, whose book *Heaven* Geno called perhaps the best non-technical work on the subject, compares the restoration to an artist wiping old, stained, cracking paint off a canvas and painting a new and better picture, with the same images on the same canvas. Artists at Hope told Geno that is common practice. God does not make mistakes and start over. Resurrected people in a resurrected environment, in the presence of a resurrected Jesus, “that was his intent from the beginning” – and “be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth” is still in his heart, only now with righteousness alone.

3. What will the new heavens and earth be like?

► 1:21:07

Almost impossible to describe. But it is the renewal of familiar things, “not the creation of new things of which we are unfamiliar. Heaven is not going to be a place where we wake up, open our eyes and go, what? There’s a steep learning curve here. No, sir. We’re going to wake up in heaven and we’re going to feel at home.”

► 1:22:17

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The word for new, *kainos*, means new in quality and superior in character, and it is the same word in “Behold, I am making all things new.” When Alcorn came home after becoming a Christian as an adult, he was glad his dog still recognized him. Continuity again: what is made new continues what was made before, “just better, cleaned up, what it’s supposed to be.” And if you are still a bit cranky after years as a Christian, the full transformation is still coming.

► 1:24:54

Some Christian teachers say it is all spiritual language, disembodied spirits around Christ. “I think hogwash. That’s not in the least bit interesting to me.” New wine goes into fresh wineskins.

► 1:26:04

The key text is Peter’s promise of a new earth “in which righteousness dwells.” Surely that means righteous people, but also a righteous, restored environment – the creation that Romans 8 says has been groaning under sin. No one but Adam and Eve has seen the earth in mint condition, so imagine: no thorns or thistles, maybe no desert, “maybe garden everywhere,” perfect weather like that crisp morning, no allergies. No fire ants – though someone outside suggested maybe they just will not sting. Water you can drink straight from a stream. “We have polluted the earth in unimaginable ways. All of that’s going to be reversed.”

4. What will it be like to abide in God’s presence?

► 1:28:51

Some people dread the idea: when they have been near God, they felt judged and exposed. But every book Geno read, the Bible included, says the center of the new heavens and earth is God himself. He walked with Adam and Eve in the garden; in Jesus he “tabernacled among us” (John 1:14). Today his presence would destroy us because of our sin, but a day is coming when only righteousness dwells there.

► 1:30:31

“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, 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 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.’”

REVELATION 21:1-4 ↗

► 1:31:32

God’s plan was never to take us out of the environment he made for us. We will not be floating around with harps; there will be work to do, and Geno promised to talk about culture-making in heaven the next week. Alister McGrath calls the descent of the new Jerusalem a clear parallel to the incarnation – the incarnation writ large. Alcorn puts it this way: “The incarnation is about God inhabiting space and time as a human being. The new heavens and the new earth are about God making space and time his eternal home.” There will be no more gulf between the spiritual and physical worlds, “one cosmos, one universe united under one Lord forever.”

► 1:34:56

“And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk... and its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there... But nothing unclean will ever enter it... but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

REVELATION 21:22-27 ↗

► 1:35:30

“Jesus lights up the joint. It won’t be hard to find Jesus.” Gates never shut means no insecurity – no locks, no jails, no courtrooms. To abide in God’s presence is to be free forever from fear, discouragement, shame, guilt, oppression and addiction, as a loving father wipes the tears from a child’s eyes. And it is to walk in true community with “this vast, rich, deep network of humanity” – asking what language we are speaking and what everyone had for breakfast, or sitting down with Newton and Galileo. “I don’t know who’s going to be there,” Geno added carefully.

5. What will it mean to reign with Christ?

► 1:40:07

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him.”

REVELATION 1:5-7 ↗

► 1:40:42

“Dearly beloved, that’s enough, actually.” We experience that freedom now, imperfectly; one day it will be perfect in body, soul, spirit and environment, with no glass darkly between us and God. And he has made us a kingdom – a royal community – and priests, mediators for others. Those who share in the first resurrection “will reign with him” ([Revelation 20:6](#)).

► 1:42:29

Alcorn again: “The vanquishing of sin doesn’t mean the end of Christ’s rule. It means the end of his contested rule.” The essence of sin is rebellion against God and his Christ. No longer will Jesus be dismissed as a seditious usurper, the charge he was crucified on; he will be honored as the Lamb slain, the only one worthy to take the scroll from the Father’s hand and open it ([Revelation 5](#)).

► 1:44:11

Then a little truth-telling. “I don’t really know what it means to reign with Christ eternally. My imagination has run out of steam.” Not power, he said – he hoped no one was after that – but being with Jesus when he is finally and fully acknowledged as the glorious one, “and to say, yes, that’s my guy, I’m with him.” A resurrected Christ in a resurrected world, with resurrected bodies on a resurrected earth: God’s eternal plan from the beginning.

► 1:46:10

He hoped the morning had whetted the church’s appetite for heaven, invited questions for his last talk in the series, and prayed for hearts inflamed by a vision of heaven “literally mind-blowing,” freed from the sins that so easily entangle ([Hebrews 12:1-2](#)), transformed ([Romans 12:1-2](#)), and given now to bearing witness unafraid, “that you might be glorified in heaven, populated by those we love and care about, and well beyond us.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [Haggai 1:13](#)
- [Luke 21:33](#)
- [John 14:1–3](#)
- [2 Peter 3:5–7](#)
- [2 Peter 3:10–13](#)
- [John 1:29](#)
- [Matthew 19:28 \(NIV\)](#)
- [Acts 3:19–21](#)
- [2 Corinthians 5:17](#)
- [Romans 8:19–22](#)
- [John 1:14](#)
- [Revelation 21:1–4](#)
- [Revelation 21:22–27](#)
- [Revelation 1:5–7](#)
- [Revelation 20:6](#)
- [Revelation 5](#)
- [Hebrews 12:1–2](#)
- [Romans 12:1–2](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. “Will the circle be unbroken?” Whom do you long to see again, and how does the promise of a real, renewed world speak to that longing?
2. Geno compared the coming fire to the flood – judgment that cleanses rather than annihilates. How does that change the way you hear 2 Peter 3?
3. Why do you think so many Christians drift toward a “merely spiritual” heaven, and what is lost when we do?
4. If some people dread God’s presence because they have felt judged by him, how would you describe to them what Revelation 21 promises?
5. Peter asks, “What sort of people ought you to be?” as we wait for a world in which righteousness dwells. What is one way you will answer that question this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Geno Hildebrandt introduced himself at this service as Hope Chapel's senior leader and senior pastor – “it's a good gig.” This was his third talk in a September 2020 series on heaven, preached at both the outdoor and indoor services. He leans heavily on Randy Alcorn's book *Heaven*, and he drives, by his own account, a twenty-year-old Honda Accord.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BlpGaXpvzM&t=3422s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.