

## Reimagining Heaven

Jonathan K. Dodson | 1 Peter 1:3-9 | January 28, 2016

Our passage is a doxology, a word or meditation on glory. It's so marvelous, Peter doesn't lift his pen for six verses; they form a single sentence. It's as if he's desperately reaching for words, piling up adjectives and heavenly concepts to reach for the divine hope, and then suddenly switches to mundane difficulty and trials. What's the hope? Where's the glory? How does it connect?

### Living Hope

In his play, *No Exit*, Jean-Paul Sartre gives us a vision of hell. Three people are introduced into a windowless room. There are no beds and no exits. There they must remain forever. As they begin to talk, they realize they have no eyelids. No momentary relief, no possible way to sleep. And so they talk. Each one pretending to be someone they are not, someone more noble, a hero. But in time, their masks are removed. Their guilty secrets emerge. Nothing can be hidden; nothing can be changed. The play concludes with a haunting line: **"You are—your life, and nothing else."** (HT: Clowney, *1 Peter*) Who wants to admit that you are merely what you *have been* and not what you *hoped* you could be? Sartre, no advocate of Christianity, is saying hell begins where hope ends. What is your hope? We are not what we would like to be. We know that death is inevitable, and are *keenly aware* that politicians can't remake the world. Should we even hope? Peter comes along and says to exiles, "Hope is alive!" More than that, there's a *living* hope. How can he make such a claim? Let's see: **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead"** (3). Where does the living hope come from? Notice the order of the sentence. We are *born again* to a living hope, not hope to be born again. It reverses the natural way of thinking. **We don't hope our way into new life; new life issues living hope.** So, the question becomes, *how do you get new life, if indeed you want hope?* You have to be **reborn**. Oh, naturally! It's a bit strange, I admit, but many religions have used rebirth to connote enlightenment or escape to another world. **But here the new birth is firmly ensconced within the world.** Something reaches into our world to bestow life, and with it, a new identity as the welcomed children of God. Those who are reborn gain the ability to not be determined by who they were, but to become even more than they ever hoped to be. To see the world and themselves as they really are—*more broken than they dare admit but in Christ more loved than they could ever imagine*. But it does more than this. New birth also shows how things will eventually be, which we will get to. Now this may sound arrogant, that Christianity gives you the ability to resee everything, until you consider the *how* one is reborn. New birth doesn't arrive at your door because you endear God with exceptional morality or fervent spiritual practice. Oh, no, remember it gives you a *realistic* assessment of yourself. The fact that you have to be reborn says you are not in a good spot! New creation, new birth is a *gift*. Think about it. No one chooses to be born, you just are. It's a pure grace. It is "according to his *mercy*." That's the new birth. How do you get the hope? Verse 3: **"he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."** New birth and hope come through the channel of *the resurrection* of Jesus Christ. Witnessed by hundreds, testified in public with little objection, circulated in documents, only to be contested much later. The resurrection, secular

historians and theologians admit, is a historical event that changed the course of history. It is, in a sense, the first new birth (firstborn from among the dead) and as Jesus Christ climbs out of death, *living hope springs forth with him*. Death, and all her sinful causes, undone. The resurrection bends history/time/space/physics. Picture Neo getting back up after being shot by agents and then flexing and the whole matrix goes, vmmmp. Jesus enters our world to establish a beachhead of new creation. He does it by resurrection. Life replaces death, joy swallows grief, hope beats in hearts because, to paraphrase N.T. Wright, **hope is planted in a resurrection body**. Hope that you are *not* “your life & nothing else.” There is much more.

### Startling Inheritance

That’s the nature of hope, now the object of hope: “to an [inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you](#)” (4). Living hope is resurrection shaped *and* inheritance oriented. What is the inheritance? This word is used in the OT to refer to the land promised to Israel, a land flowing with milk and honey, where God *dwelt*. In the NT, this land idea is expanded to include the whole world (Rom 4:13). The inherited world is described as imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. Paul describes the resurrection body like this, using the same word, *imperishable*, a body that never breaks down. An imperishable world that is *undefiled*; it doesn’t spoil and is *unfading*; it doesn’t pass away. Peter is saying we hope toward a world where entropy has no sway, corruption never enters in, and nothing ever wears out. Your hope is for *that* inheritance, no wonder it’s alive! A place in God’s renewed creation (2 Pet 3:13). Now, where is it?—“[kept in heaven for you](#).” Now how does that happen? How does a new creation fit into heaven? Especially when heaven is often misunderstood as a place of disembodied bliss, where spirits circulate God. Contrary to popular opinion, we do not die and go to heaven. Heaven comes to us. Let’s look at some familiar passages. John 14:1-3 where Jesus tells us that if we believe in him, he will go and prepare a place for us. Many people take this to mean he will fluff up the clouds of heaven, but how would that take any preparation? He is preparing a *place*. Also, notice that we don’t go to the place, but that the place comes to us, “[I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also](#).” Heaven is a physical place in the presence of Jesus. Or Philippians 3:20-1, “[But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body](#).” Heaven has a citizenship where transformed, glorious bodies, like Jesus’ body, walk around, exist. And we await his appearing for that to happen, for it to be rolled up like a scroll and rolled back out as a new creation. Heaven is *not* a holding tank for disembodied spirits. Heaven is marked by the appearing of Jesus Christ *and* his inheritance. Or take the thief on the cross in Luke 23, who pleads with Jesus to remember him when he comes in his kingdom. Jesus responds, “[Today you will be with me in Paradise](#).” This is often taken to mean when we die we go to an mystical oasis. But the word paradise means garden, an echo of the original pristine creation in the garden of Eden. It’s physical *and* look who is there again, Jesus! You will be with *me*. So our new creation inheritance is bound up, kept, [in heaven means it is sustained, preserved, guaranteed by the perfect rule and presence of Jesus Christ in his perfected body](#). Heaven is a place of supreme, embodied joy in God’s new world *because the Resurrector* makes it so, because he’s there. Our inheritance is a place with Jesus in his physically renewed earth. And this world is closer than we think. It is around the corner, at hand, perhaps even parallel to our current world. It is possible that upon death we are resurrected into this

new creation in some time-defying way. The point is that it is close and it is so real that sometimes you can feel it, “heaven” overlapping with earth. The realm of God’s glorious abode intersecting with this old creation. And here, in the thin places of this world, our inheritance can be felt in *prayer* as we pull heaven down to earth (and it brushes up against us). In *worship*, as you extol the greatness of the resurrected Son of God. In *culture*, where we sink our teeth into a marvelous steak, marvel at a great piece of art, are moved by an symphony, are stunned by a breathtaking sunset, soak in rich fellowship, places where the glory of God bursting into our world. This is living hope of the new birth inside old world. And it is kept, by God for you, *through faith*. But you have to trust his promise; hope in the inheritance.

### Various Trials

So, living hope, startling inheritance—trial. How does all this have any affect on how we live? Peter says, it affects how you suffer: [In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials](#) (1:6). “In this (new creation hope) you rejoice” in various trials. The word various means “many colored, diverse.” All shades of suffering from the difficulty of childrearing to the pains of singleness, from challenges of reproduction to the horrors of the holocaust. **This new creation reality frames your suffering.** So, **when you encounter trials, feel free to grieve but don’t get stuck there.** Don’t walk around with your eyes locked on your pain. Remember your inheritance. A friend told me about a couple in his church who lost a child, and they grieved and grieved and grieved. As you should. But they did not remember their inheritance. The grief began to define them until someone loved them enough to tell them that they were hanging onto the grief like a little purse, carrying it with them wherever they went. Their hope got lodged in the wrong place, in present world, not the world to come. They were defined by suffering and not by Christ. Peter says trials are meant to test the genuineness of your faith, to show where your hope is. He compares them to the **smelting** process. This is not glib image. What happens when you refine gold? The rough ore is passed through intense heat to burn away the impurities and reveal the actual gold or silver. It’s searing but only afterwards do you get what is precious. Only then do you have a tested genuine faith, more precious than pure gold. Suffering has a way of showing us where our hope is. Perhaps your hope is in **comparing** your trial to others to see who has it worse. Don’t compare. This is your trial; this is your joy. Others try to **control** the trial by fixing the problem. Don’t obsess with its solution. Yield to it’s Designer. There is greater reward than your solution. Another way is to **escape** your trial through denial not talking about it, entertainment, overworking, overeating. All of these approaches to trials don’t really work because the trial is meant to burn away the dross and the junk, to drill through the ore to show us something precious—*pure gold of godly joy, happiness of being close to Jesus, the hope of being in his new creation.* Don’t you see? Your resurrected King is trying to recover you, to bring you back to your new creation senses, to get you down to the rock bottom joy of the Christian life. What good is your faith if it can’t stand up to a test? It may be painful but it’s good. *That’s what suffering is for, to get you beyond mere belief, to something that’s precious, to something real, joy inexpressible and filled with glory.* I’ve seen people whom I thought would come out with 24 karat walk away from the faith, and people I suspected would bail, come out with pure gold. The only way you know is to go through the fire. It will show your hope; it will glorify your Joy as you realize what your Savior did to get you, as you consider the fire he went

through to give you an inheritance you could never earn. When we suffer with living hope in this kind of inheritance, how can you not gloat in his grace? Even if you don't see him, your heart burns with love for him. Perhaps you thinking, I could never suffer like that. I could never hope like that or get that kind of Joy. That's the devil talking, and its what he wants you to think—to imprison and isolate you from the hope of your inheritance—a place next to Jesus in his new Garden. Don't believe the lies; hope in the promises. Live this way, with new creation hope, and it will result in praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus, the crescendo when Christ returns, and the sons and daughters of the earth are glorified, and his creation along with it. Where you are not your life and nothing else, but shot through with his resurrection life, suffusing all creation at our Savior's return.