

TRANSCRIPT

An Undeceptions Podcast

TAPE: ABC13 Houston local news

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2skFUMO3CVQ>

Highway 105 near Lake Conroe is a good place to see cloud formations at sunset. On Monday evening, Danny Feraro and his wife were on their way to a meeting. "We were not looking forward to it. We were like, OK, what is this about?" Perhaps it was about putting them in the right place at the right time to see this. "Look at that!" And she looked up and was like, 'Wow! That's an angel'. He took out his cell phone and took a picture through the windshield as he was driving, posted it on Facebook and his cell phone photo has taken on a life of its own.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

We're listening to a 2018 clip from ABC13, local television news from Houston, Texas. Daniel Ferara took a picture of a huge cloud formation in the shape of an angel, with rays of light reaching out from behind, creating an ethereal, heavenly glow.

TAPE: ABC13 Houston local news

"Ferera: "I never dreamed I'd get something like 1000 shares. But now that I reflect on it, it was a moment I'll probably never forget."

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

The scientific explanation for what Daniel saw is 'crepuscular rays' - columns of light that appear to radiate from the sky and stream through the clouds.

We'll post a photo in the show notes of what Daniel Ferara and his wife saw along the highway that evening. It's pretty cool. You've probably seen something similar - though perhaps not quite in angel form. They're sometimes called "God rays" because, I guess, it looks like a message from heaven.

If I asked: What do you think Heaven is like? I'm sure some of us will have a related picture in mind. Angels floating on clouds, with the radiating divine glory shining all around. And maybe a bit of harp music to go with it.

But what is heaven, really? If there is life after death, is this heavenly cliche all we've got to look forward to? And what will we be *doing* floating around in the middle of the air in our see-through form for all eternity?

I'm John Dickson and this is Undeceptions.

Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book *Recovering Our Sanity: How the Fear of God Conquers the Fears that Divide Us* by Michael Horton.

Each episode we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, science, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we're trying to 'undeceive ourselves', and let the truth 'out'.

What happens beyond death is one of those areas—like the idea of a Rapture prior to a Second Coming—where myths have crept into popular Christian thought which have little connection either with the Bible or with what the church has taught throughout the centuries.

The modern myth is: When Christians die, their bodies decay once and for all, while their spirits (whatever they are) go eternally into God's presence in heaven.

The Bible's claim is: When Christians die, they rest safe in God's presence, until they are bodily raised to life to enjoy forever a new creation.

So, there's life after death, and there's life *after* life-after-death.

Our first guest points out that the popular conception of 'heaven' is based on the first bit - the *temporary* state of 'resting with God in heaven' before the resurrection.

INTERVIEW BEGINS

John Dickson

The typical cliche of heaven, maybe in the media, or even in Christian pop culture, is spirits floating on the clouds, playing harp music in the light. What do you make of that impression, and where did it come from?

Michael Allen

Sure. I think we, probably, would likely say that it comes from a notion of the intermediate state, the idea that we are spiritually present to God as the soul and body are separated at death and prior to the return of Christ and the resurrection of the body. There's an understandable sourcing of it.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

That's Michael Allen, professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. He is one of the contributors of a great new book titled *Four Views of Heaven*. We'll be hearing from a couple of the other contributors throughout the episode. Michael describes his view of the afterlife as 'Heaven on Earth'.

Michael Allen

But as you describe it, of course, that kind of biblical idea, that's classically heralded by Christians, it doesn't tend to involve things like the harp, for instance. I take my friend, Hans Boersma, pointing out we ought to be careful about mocking it too much because the Bible doesn't say that many things about instruments. I certainly don't want to mock the idea that's part of the vision.

John Dickson

Well, I'm glad there's music. That's reassuring.

Michael Allen
That's right.

John Dickson
But I guess it's the ethereal cliche, the cliche of it being in ethereal existence, non-corporeal. I'm just curious to know, do we know when that popped up in the church as the dominant motif?

Michael Allen
Well, so, in classical Christianity, you've got the idea where, for a time, until Christ returns, and there is a final resurrection of the dead, as foretold in texts like John 5, our spirits shall exist with Christ, but that's not the end game. That's not the final goal. That's a small incremental good, but not yet fully glorious step to the new heavens and the new earth, the resurrected body, and God coming down and making his home here with us.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

The Bible actually says very little about this 'intermediary state', as it's called - the bit between death and resurrection. The Bible is much more focused on bodily resurrection, which is understandable because that's the state that is eternal.

But first, a few thoughts about this temporary stage – what happens as soon as we die?

Numerous theologians and Bible teachers over the centuries have taught a doctrine known as 'soul-sleep'. This is the idea that those who die with faith in Christ 'sleep', unconscious, in the protective care of God until the day of resurrection. Think of it as a really deep, beautiful sleep - perhaps with sweet dreams.

In putting forward this view, they are trying to do justice to the frequent New Testament insistence that eternal life is resurrection life and that the period in between death and resurrection is to be thought of as a kind of 'sleep'.

But soul-sleep is not the majority view. Most theologians (East and West) insist that believers who die are consciously at rest - as spirits - in the presence of God in heaven.

But, regardless of whether you prefer the soul-sleep theory or the mainstream conscious-rest theory, the idea of floating around as spirits in the clouds with God is not the eternal afterlife at all. It's temporary (assuming temporal language is even appropriate here). So, frankly, this 'intermediate state' doesn't matter that much. It certainly can't be the model for eternal life.

Our next guest says that the fluffy cliche of Heaven is also influenced by earlier views of the afterlife, before the rise of Christianity.

Richard Middleton:
This cliche developed over a long period of time. As Christianity in the first few centuries try to make itself understood to the Greco-Roman Empire, the world outside of Judaism, they started to use categories from the Greco Roman world. Particularly the philosophy of Plato.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

That's J Richard Middleton - though he goes by Richard. He's Professor of Biblical Worldview and Exegesis at North-eastern Seminary. Like Michael, Richard contributed an essay in the book *Four Views of Heaven*.

He calls his view the 'New Earth' perspective.

To be honest, there's not a huge difference between Richard's approach and that of Michael Allen. Although you might say Richard's view is more earthy - but no less biblical.

Richard Middleton:

Now Plato had this idea that this world is fallible and corrupt, we must transcend it to a higher realm. He never called that heaven. It was a realm of rationality, which is immutable ideas, but Christians took this together and took the idea of heaven, which in the Bible is simply the universe beyond the earth, which is transcendent from where we are. And they made this into this immaterial realm.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

So, it seems then that our picture of the Kingdom Come derives partly from ancient Greek philosophy.

Plato taught that the physical world is a kind of grubby reflection of the ultimate non-physical reality to which everything is headed.

Incidentally, Buddhism and Hinduism share a similar outlook. 'Nirvana' in Buddhism involves the complete cessation of all matter and sensation (as well as consciousness as we usually define it). Hinduism's 'Moksha' is the escape of the atman (soul) from the burden of being reborn into the physical world.

It sounds similar to the Hollywood version, doesn't it? The afterlife is airy-fairy, fourth-dimension, with clouds, bright lights, and those harps again.

But Westerns forget how earthy the Bible is, how firm the Bible is in its insistence that this creation is 'good'. It's not an afterthought, as in pagan philosophy. It's not a deceitful trap, as in much Eastern religion. It's a precious work of an Eternal Artist.

And that affects the way the Bible speaks about the afterlife - it's not the abandonment of creation; it's the rescue, the resurrection, of creation.

The Kingdom Come is not an ethereal place of clouds and ghosts but a real place of tangible existence.

The Bible *does* say there are angels in heaven, and they *are* singing. And the Bible even mentions harps!!

Revelation 5: "The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense ... And they sang a new song ..."

The thing is: images like this are describing visions of where God and the angels dwell now - in the heavens, as it were - not where we will dwell for all eternity.

This episode is about what we'll be doing in eternity.

John Dickson:

So, I think it's important for listeners. Especially listeners who aren't Christian believers to just pause on this thought. You are saying, indeed, the Bible does say that what we think of as heaven, the afterlife, is actually a creation. It is actually material.

Richard Middleton:

Yes. So, there's this interesting parallel between these two verses in the Bible. In the Revelation 21, it says I saw a new heaven and a new earth. It was the first heaven and first earth had passed away. Now, does that mean that one gets obliterated and there's something totally new put in his place? But God-

John Dickson:

This was my next question.

Richard Middleton:

Right. So, you go to 2 Corinthians 5 where Apostle Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, new creation, the old has passed away. The new has come." So, if a person becomes a Christian, they're made new, renewed by God's spirit. Does that mean that we're obliterated and a doppelganger is put in our place? No, it's the transformation of the person, but it's meant to be such a radical change that you can say the old is gone the new has come, and that's the same language used for the new creation in Revelation 21.

John Dickson:

Yeah. To be clear, you are saying that the kingdom come, is this creation we are living in renewed, transposed, to the eternal melody?...

Richard Middleton:

Yes. Yes.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

The Bible does not envisage us going eternally to 'heaven' at all. The intermediate state might be heavenly and spiritual. But that's just temporary. We don't go to heaven forever.

Actually, heaven comes to earth.

Here's the climactic vision of the book of Revelation. It's not about what's happening now in heaven but what happens on earth when heaven descends. Here's the newest member of the Undeceptions team, Socials Sophie:

Revelation 21:1-4

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will live with them."

The direction is deliberate. The new city comes down out of ‘heaven’ and lands on a new earth. It’s *on earth* that God himself will dwell with us.

But what does it mean, this idea of a ‘new heaven and a new earth’?

John Dickson:

The Bible speaks of a new heavens and earth as you just quoted, but what's the point of an earth if there's a heaven, or conversely what's the point of heaven if there's a new earth?

Michael Allen:

Sure. Well, I mean, the idea being that heaven comes down, and God makes his home here. That earth has become a fully heavenly reality in the sense of God's presence being there. For instance, Revelation, at its conclusion, tells of many things that are absent from the glorious state, no sin, no sorrow, no death. Also, and rather different from the others, no temple. What we observe there is that the temple has become complete and total such that it doesn't have to exist as a discrete segment of that space. It is the totality of that space that God is present there in a way that is not to be walled off, not to be curtained off, is to allow us to have unhindered communion with him.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

This is actually a cool idea that Richard expanded on at length in the offcuts of this episode. In the Old Testament the temple was simply God's dwelling place on earth. The very word temple is just the Hebrew ***beit*** or house/home. And the Old Testament has stacks of rules and rituals about how to approach the house of God, and only a few of the holiest people could gain access to the inner rooms. But in the Bible's final vision of heaven on earth, there is no Temple, for the simple reason that the entire creation has become God's temple, and access has been granted to all.

John Dickson:

Is it this creation restored, or is it a brand new creation or do we not know?

Michael Allen:

That's a great question. I think the answer that the Bible suggests is that there's an element of both. So many passages will pair language of restoration on the one hand and utter newness on the other hand. We see this in that there are images of new creation, but there's also language of Romans 8 and creation itself crying out for renewal and restoration. Holding onto those two is important.

It's not new to the New Testament either. If you look back, even as far back as Psalm 51, creating me a clean heart is language of utter newness and creation, renew or restore right spirit in me is language of rehab and taking things back to the way in which they were. Both are right there in an unembarrassed presentation in the space of one verse from David. I think we take something from each of them, the language of new creation speaks of how this isn't humanity finally reaching sort of the next stage of our growing up. It's not forward progress. It's not eventually we'd get it there, no. It demands nothing less than God coming down and intervening on our behalf. It's utterly of grace, but it is restoration. It's us that are saved. It's this place that is restored.

Richard Middleton:

The destiny of humanity in the Bible is actually the culmination of a narrative. And this narrative starts with God creating a world that is good, that God wants to indwell with us as a temple. That's what a temple is for.

And it goes terribly wrong. But the end, the eschaton is God coming to remake the world good again, evil being transformed, human beings being redeemed, and we live with God in a new creation. So, I think that if you don't understand the beginning, you mess up the end. If I may quote to you from the Princess Bride, there is this line in this movie where Inigo Montoya says, When the job goes wrong, you got to go back to the beginning." That's my philosophy here. We've messed up where the story is going. So, let's start at the beginning. What's it really all about? It's about God so loving the world.

John Dickson:

There's also a line in that movie that says, "I think that word does not mean what you think it means."

Richard Middleton:

Yes, yes. What you've been using. Yeah. Yeah.

John Dickson:

Yes. And we could apply that to heaven, I think that word does not mean what you think it means.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

The idea of God dwelling on earth comes straight out of Genesis 2 and its description of the Garden of Eden. In fact, as the vision of Revelation unfolds about this new heaven and new earth, references to the Garden of Eden, with its rivers and trees, come thick and fast.

Now, it's obvious this is picture language.

We have to let the imagery do its work, and spark in us ideas, concepts, feelings and hopes about what the New Creation will be like, rather than selecting snapshots from the future to carry in our mental pockets until we get there.

The picture language was never meant to depict exactly the way things will be.

Take the sea, for example. If you remember, that passage from Revelation about the New Heaven and the New Earth also says that there will be no sea.

John Dickson:

Now, when the book of Revelation says, behold, I saw a new heavens and a new earth, it says, and there will no longer be any sea. Now, Richard, you're talking to someone who grew up by a Sydney beach. And so that doesn't sound very good.

Richard Middleton:

And you're talking to a Jamaican who will be back in Runaway Bay, Jamaica in three days. And I'm looking forward to walking on that sandy beach barefoot, I tell you, more than anything else, because right now there's a snowstorm outside. So, I'm looking forward to that. Well, there are at least two important ways to think about that statement, there'll no longer be any sea. The first is, in the mythology of the ancient world the sea is a symbol for the forces of chaos. Imagine standing at the edge of a sea during a hurricane or a tsunami, it's devastating. So, the sea becomes a metaphor for that which destroys. And in the book of Revelation, you have the beast coming out of the sea.

There's no more sea means at one level, no more evil, evil is eradicated. But it's all this other interesting thing in Revelation that the merchants of the world who control people, they control people through the sea trade. And you find that in the book of Revelation. So, if no more sea means God will no longer enable corrupt trade practices in the world that will oppress people. So, it's really about the eradication of evil. It's a metaphor, but I'm looking forward to the ocean and the new creation.

John Dickson:

All right. Yeah. Well, same. And ski slopes would be good. But if that's a symbol, a pure metaphor, some might say, "Well, so is all this stuff about new creation? It's just a metaphor. It won't actually be a new creation."

Richard Middleton:

So, if you just go to what is symbolic or metaphorical and say it's just a metaphor, then you can say that about almost anything. But if you ask about the coherent theology of the Bible, the Bible assumes that God wants to renew the world. And it goes back long before eschatology as a doctrine ever arises that God cares about this world and God wants us to live in this world to his glory and honour. And so, materiality is important. And this is one of the points that a lot of people who study history of religions will say the Jewish Christian tradition is rather unique in the world in affirming the value of materiality, the value of earthly mundane life.

And so, it's not just about imagery and symbolism. The question always is, what's the point of the imagery or symbolism? The point of a new heaven and new earth is that the world will be renewed. It doesn't specify how that will be. I have no idea what it will really be like, except that evil will be eradicated. But I don't know what that's going to be like, I've never lived in a world with no evil. I've never lived a life with no evil within me. So, it's going to be a radically new world.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

What about our bodies?

What does the resurrection mean for us in the Kingdom Come?

What will we look like, who will we be? What will we know?

After the break...

ZONDERVAN AD BREAK

ANGLICAN AID AD BREAK

TAPE - Heaven is for Real trailer

Dad: "I don't think we've been here before, pal."
Colton: You had a grandfather named Paul, right?
Dad: He died when I was about your age.
Colton: He's very nice.
Dad: You saw my grandfather?
Colton: Mmm,hmm.
Dad: Where did you see him?
Colton: In heaven.
Dad: Is this him, is this the man you saw?
Colton: No, in heaven, everybody's young.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

That's from the 2014 movie 'Heaven is for real', based on the book of the same name in which 4-year-old Colton Burpo claims he visited Heaven while having an emergency appendectomy where he almost died on the operating table.

You can still believe in Heaven, by the way, and be sceptical of Colton Burpo's claims. A stream of books just like 'Heaven is for real' were published following the huge sales of this one. *The Washington Post* called it 'heaven tourism', and described it like this: "a person dies, experiences a heavenly experience, then returns to the realm of mortals to spread the good news and reap the profits." Ouch!

Regardless of what we think of Colton Burpo's claims - and the claims of others like him - it is understandable that we might want to know more about what the afterlife - if it exists - is like.

The discussion has been going on for centuries.

Take a question like: what age will we be in God's kingdom? If I die at 99, will I have to spend my eternity being super old? What about kids - will they be eternally in the terrible twos or, perhaps worse, teenagers?

Thomas Aquinas, for example, (the 13th century theologian) suggested that since Jesus was around 30 when he died, we'll all be around 30 in the resurrection. Peter Lombard, another medieval theologian, and the Bishop of Paris in the 11th century, also argued that there would be a multitude of 30-somethings in the Resurrection. Sounds good to me - though perhaps some of my listeners are thinking *that old!!!*

Lombard, by the way, also argued that we wouldn't need to eat or drink in heaven. I don't know how that squares with the Bible passages describing a feast in God's kingdom, or Jesus' statement that he wouldn't taste wine again "until I drink it anew in the kingdom of God." But plenty of ink has been spilled on this one.

In a way, it is the right question. After all, the Bible speaks about us having a body.

John Dickson:

Christians have, for a pretty long time, said stuff like I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. I think a few Christians have said that once or twice. Does it really mean a body?

Michael Allen:

Well, I think it plainly really does mean a body, but understanding what sort of body is right where things get really complicated. Of course, we've got a snapshot. It's admittedly not described in all the detail we might want, but it's rather remarkable that the body of Jesus is depicted in a range of ways. On the one hand, he has a body like what we encounter and what we experience. As a Floridian, I should point out he eats fish, right?

John Dickson:

Yep.

Michael Allen:

I take it that seafood makes it, and it's ...

John Dickson:

All right. ... will be happy about that.

Michael Allen:

There you go. We can share that hope. He has a digestive system. He can eat food. He can be and perceived. He can be touched. In fact, not only that, but he can invite folks to touch wounds, which would've been marked by his experience of torture and death. There's continuity. At the same time, there's remarkable discontinuity in all sorts of ways. It seems, in Luke 24, is capable of moving through a wall, which seems to be the most likely reading of an admittedly challenging text. He's not perceived immediately by some of his closest disciples even as they talk to him about him. Admittedly, there's some things that are strange. Of course, he's capable of ascending on high out of their sight as Acts 1 describes it. We see notions of continuity and discontinuity, and, again, I think each discipline our thought about what little, but what, really, we can know. We can know little, but we can know really.

Richard Middleton:

Resurrection of the body derives from Judaism. And it comes between the Old and New Testaments. You don't really have the doctrine clearly in the Old Testament. But the idea is that God has promised good things for humanity. We have messed it up terribly. And there's a lot of oppression in the world. And given where we are right now with Russia and Ukraine, you see that so clearly. And the resurrection of the body says, "No matter what people do to you in their unrighteous, evil oppression, God will win out because he will make a new world and you'll get a second chance at it in a real body, in a real world, with genuine blessing, peace and Shalom, where there will be no more evil." So, it is meant to be a revolutionary doctrine countering the notion of oppression. Oppression is not the last word.

FIVE MINUTE JESUS – JOHN DICKSON

Let's press pause. I have a five-minute Jesus for you.

The Apostles' Creed has been a standard summary of Christian belief since its origins in the second century.

To this day, it is affirmed by both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. Now, there are two references in this creed to the ‘afterlife’. One relates to Jesus. In the middle stanza it says: “On the third day he rose again from the dead.” That’s the heart of Easter, the heart of the Faith. The other reference is about believers in general. It comes in the third stanza: “I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”

Sometimes even long-term church goers assume that the reference at the end of the creed to “the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting” reiterates what is said earlier about Jesus’ resurrection (“on the third day he rose again”).

But the third stanza of the creed is about believers, not Jesus. Following the teaching of the New Testament, the Apostles’ Creed states that just as “on the third day (Jesus) rose again”, so at the end of history men and women will experience their own “resurrection of the body”, and it is in this bodily mode that we will enjoy “the life everlasting.”

Historically, in other words, the Christian view of the afterlife has always envisaged resurrected bodies in a revived creation, not immortal spirits in an eternal heaven. That is what the Kingdom of God is all about—the Lord’s reign over creation.

Jesus himself frequently spoke of the resurrection—ours not his. In Luke 14:13–14 he said, “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” In John 5:28–29 Jesus says, “Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear my voice and will come out—some, to the resurrection of life, some, to the resurrection of condemnation.”

Paul taught the same thing. He described Jesus’ resurrection as the ‘first fruits’ (1 Cor 15). This is an agricultural term for the initial produce of a coming harvest. Jesus is the first indication—the inauguration—of God’s great future harvest when he revives the dead and renews the creation.

When I first became a Christian, I assumed—I feared—that the Bible taught the ethereal, clouds, and angels view of heaven. I thought God’s kingdom was a bodiless spirit world.

But I loved the taste, smell, sight, sound, and touch of this world, and now I was meant to look forward to losing those five senses and having them replaced by a spiritual sixth sense. I was not terribly excited about it.

Fortunately, someone pointed out to me that the Bible says nothing of the sort. The Bible’s ‘kingdom come’ is not an ethereal place of clouds and spirits—that’s pagan theology, Hindu theology, Hollywood theology.

The ‘kingdom come’ is a new creation with resurrected bodies. It is a place where the frailties and disappointments of this natural order are resolved through an extraordinary act of divine re-creation.

The resurrection of Jesus is so central to the Christian faith, not just because it marks out his life as a unique historical moment, but because it's the 'first fruits'. In Christ's resurrection God shows he is willing and able to breathe new life where there is currently death and decay.

The resurrection of Jesus is God's tangible guarantee *within* history that he will do the same for us, and the whole creation, at the climax of history.

You can press play now.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

John Dickson:

What does the resurrection of the body and a new creation mean for personal identity for my, your personal identity? Will we remember this world, recognize each other, that sort of thing?

Michael Allen:

It certainly seems to be the case. There are a few things that are revealed, and then there's a lot where we're left to simply either speculate or to say we don't have the room or the freedom to speculate with any knowing sense. I think there's some basic elements we can identify. Jesus can be recognized. That seems to suggest that personal identity is such that while it may not be exactly as we experience it now, that, nonetheless, individuals can be identified in some way and their history can be experienced and remembered in some fashion.

At the same time, we got to acknowledge, and a lot of folks working in what we call disability theology will point this out, there are real questions about things related to suffering, to, we could say, the experience of trauma. What would it be like to know someone and to remember some history that, inevitably, in small and great ways involves sin and struggle and suffering in this life in a world where there's no sin, there's no shame, there are no tears, there's no death, what it means for us to know things has to be healed in some fashion?

Richard Middleton:

There is a whole lot of stuff that we're just not told about the future in the Bible. And in the book Four Views on Heaven, we were asked to answer a series of questions. I just admitted the last four because I have no idea what really is going to happen. The way I think of it is eschatology can get you tied up in the nuts if you read the Bible literally taking all the imagery, beasts and horns and all weird stuff. And Christians have got really tied up in knots over this. But if you are asked in each case, what's the point of the imagery? The point is that we might conform our lives to the coming expectation of God's kingdom that we might begin to live today towards that vision, not accepting the present order of the world as normative because it's fallen and it's corrupt.

We must in some sense, resist the status quo and live towards a vision of wholeness and act differently from the corruption in the world. And so, for me, that's the point of eschatology. That's the difference it makes. My identity is not precisely who I am as a socio-cultural being in this particular world. My identity is in Christ. It is hidden in Christ, to use language from the New Testament, and it'll be revealed at the last day fully, but I can now begin to live out my identity in Christ.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

But what if, after the last day is done, and we've made it into Heaven - or heaven on earth - it's actually kinda boring? Eternity is a really long time. Just the other day during question time following my Sunday sermon, someone asked: "Why would I want to go on forever and ever—it sounds so tiring?"

TAPE The Good Place, Season 4, Ep12 (Patty)

Chidi: Hi, are you Hypatia of Alexandria?

Hypatia: Yup! How's it hanging.

Chidi: It's hanging really well... I was expecting you to be more, Ancient Greek.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

That's Chidi from the Netflix series *The Good Place*—a show about 'heaven', sort of.

This scene comes near the close of the whole series. So, we're about to give you a spoiler. Producer Kaley convinced me to watch the show, and Buff and I quite liked the five episodes we saw.

Anyway, Chidi and Eleanor have apparently finally made it to 'The Good Place' - the part of the afterlife where all your dreams come true. There are doors to take you to wherever you want to go. Parties are thrown to reflect your personality and desires. You name it, it's yours.

Chidi, who was a philosopher during his life on Earth, has just realised that one of his idols - Hypatia of Alexandria, the early 5th century mathematician and philosopher, is there in *The Good Place*. He's fanboying around her - which is perfectly understandable. I'd do the same. She was terrific. One of our Christian sources from the time says she "surpassed all the philosophers of her own time." Sadly, it was also a Christian – a mob of them, actually – who murdered Hypatia. I'll tell that grim story in a future episode on this remarkable woman.

Anyway, back to Producer Kaley's favourite show ...

TAPE The Good Place, Season 4, Ep12 (Patty)

Chidi: Can I ask you a few questions first? You were a follower of Plotinus, who claimed that...

Hypatia: Wait, wait, wait. Are you a... what's it called? I think man? Wait, a think book man? No, a think read book man?

Chidi: A philosopher! Yes.

Hypatia: Sorry, it's been so long my brain is so foggy! Listen carefully before I forget how to say this. You've got to help us, we are so screwed!

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

While drinking her bottomless milkshake - another perk of *The Good Place* - Hypatia tells Chidi that on paper *The Good Place* is good, but perfection forever makes you a "glassy-eyed mush person," she says.

Hypatia has been in The Good Place for 16 centuries. She's so bored, she's losing her mind.

There's nothing more to *do*. It's just endless parties and milkshakes and every other thing they've done twice already!!

It raises the question: What on earth—or heaven—will we *do* for all eternity?
So, I put some further questions to Richard Middleton.

John Dickson:
What about work, productive work?

Richard Middleton:
So, I think productive work will be continuing. It's going to be different of course. It won't be toil. It won't be denigrated; it won't be dehumanizing. But it may have to be different because what does it mean to have a society of people with innovation, with technology, with new discoveries and so forth without sin, without evil corruption? What would that be like? How can we all participate in meaningful activity in this world? Will it be paid work? I don't know if we're going to have an economy in this sense in the new creation. Again, we don't know questions like that, we don't know the answers, but we do know that all that is wrong with the world will get fixed.

John Dickson:
What about animals, Richard? Animals in the kingdom.

Richard Middleton:
Yeah. I'm assuming that there's going to be animals in the kingdom, but the Bible doesn't specify that exactly. Some years ago, eight years now I've written this book on new creation called New Heaven and New Earth, that this article is a summary of in some ways. And I got a lot of emails from people asking about animals in the resurrection. And I may have to say, I assume there's going to be animals in the new creation. Well then, the question is, will there be all animals? Will every animal that ever died be in the new creation? Well, okay. That's a lot of animals. That's millions of years of animals. Technically corals are animals. Will corals be resurrected? I can't answer questions like that. I don't really know. I don't really know.

Michael Allen:
This is one of those areas where we do have certain suggestions, language of lion and lamb lying down suggests that lion and lamb would be there, but also that they would be there in ways that aren't perhaps naturally how we would expect to experience them in the here and now, lion and lamb not being natural bedfellows in this life. I don't want to make too much of about exactly the kind of specificity we could claim. Does this mean that, literally, every species as has ever been known will be present, that sort...? I don't begin to understand that, but it certainly does suggest that animal life is a significant part and, actually, a sign of glory having come, of transformation having occurred. I expect I'll be able, perhaps, to be around that alligator without feeling threatened, as I presently would, right.

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One of the glorious passages about the eternal kingdom is in the Old Testament, the book of Isaiah, written hundreds of years before Christ. The passage simultaneously recalls the opening line of the Bible

("In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth") and it pre-empts the final vision of the Bible in Revelation 21-22, all that stuff about the heavenly city coming down to earth and renewing everything.

Isaiah 61 is poetry—it is formal Hebrew poetry—but it gives us every reason to expect joyful activity in the Kingdom Come. Thanks, Socials Sophie.

Isaiah 65:17–25. Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. 19 I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. 20 “Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed.

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Just for the record—sorry to interrupt, Sophie—but this stuff about dying at a hundred is what's called a litotes, a poetic understatement designed to imply its opposite. It's not saying there will be death in the new creation—we've already heard back in Isaiah 25:8 that God "will swallow up death forever." The litotes "he who dies at a hundred will be considered a mere youth" conveys the overthrow of death itself. Sorry, Sophie - no more interruptions.

21 They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. 23 They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the Lord, they and their descendants with them. 24 Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

These verses give us a poetic snapshot of the *physicality and activity* of the new creation. But there's another aspect of heaven or the Kingdom Come that we haven't touched on. It's strongly emphasized in Catholic thought on heaven but all forms of Christianity have something to say about it. We will 'see' God. This is known as the beatific vision.

John Dickson:

The Catholic outlook emphasizes the so-called FIC vision gazing on the beauty of God. Can you explain what this means? And will you perhaps bear a thought for my sceptical listeners who think that sounds internally boring?

Peter Kreeft:

Oh, it does. If you interpret it in earthly terms, even the most beautiful work of art bores you after a while
...

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

That's Peter Kreeft, professor of philosophy at Boston College, one of the top-rated research universities in the US. Peter wrote about the Catholic vision of Heaven for the book *Four Views of Heaven*, and I couldn't resist asking him for a quick 'phone a friend' on the beatific vision.

Peter Kreeft:

... in fact, that's one of the arguments for heaven, everything on earth ultimately gets boring and nature makes nothing in vain. So that dissatisfaction with earthly, beauty, and truth and goodness, and that desire for something that we can't define. And can't attain in this life that is not simply meaningless. That has to mean something.

The beatific vision is not just vision of the eye, but of the soul. The whole self sees the whole God. It's the deepest kind of knowledge in, in scripture, Christ defines eternal life. As this is eternal life to know you, the only true God. And that knowledge is not simply a kind of external seeing of an object, nor is it simply a thinking of a concept. It's a person-to-person relationship. In fact, the word no in the Bible often means sex. God obviously doesn't have a body. Nevertheless, sex is an image of the spiritual marriage that is going to totally fulfill us in heaven. The Eastern church calls this theosis divinization. We actually participate in the divine nature. We are enjoined in a finite and dependent way to the very nature of God. That's that's as intimate as it gets.

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I realise this idea of intimacy with God—our soul gazing on his inner being—might sound a bit creepy. But it's actually a big deal in the history of Christianity.

It's in the Bible, of course: Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." But it also features heavily in St Augustine and many other great figures in church history.

It reminds us that heaven is not all about us. It's about God. His infinite creativity, intellect, justice, and love will be on full display, and our gaze will be captivated, as when we see something stunningly beautiful, and our hearts will leap for joy.

Actually, I spoke to Peter Kreeft for a bit longer than this brief cameo. I asked him about a bunch of Catholic things. What does he reckon proud Protestants like me get wrong. What on earth is Purgatory all about. And a bunch of other things.

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Anyway, the happy Protestant theologian Prof Richard Middleton also had something to say about the Beatific vision.

John Dickson:

What place is there in the vision of the kingdom that you're describing for seeing God? This is a theme particularly emphasized in the Catholic tradition. So, it's a venerable tradition, the beatific vision, the vision of the beautiful and blessed divine one that satisfies every longing of the soul. Do you have any place for that?

Richard Middleton:

So, the beatific vision, the notion there's this singular doctrine of seeing God face to face, which is mentioned in the Bible many times, right?

Richard Middleton:

Now I don't buy that distinction. And the first thing to say about the beatific vision is you can find a lot of references in the New Testament to the fact that God is invisible and can't be seen, has never been seen. But you can find a lot of references in the Old Testament and a few in the New that we will see God and many people have seen God. Isaiah said, I saw the Lord high and lifted up. And the elders went with Moses to top of Mount Sinai and there they saw God seated on a throne upon a blue surface, which is the sky. They're seeing God in heaven. It's visual.

So, I think the whole notion of seeing God is really a metaphor for coming into the throne room of God, approaching the king of creation and being able to have eye contact with the king rather than such a worm's eye and I cannot see you face to face. It's about fellowship. It's about intimacy. So that the pure in heart will see God in the beatitudes means I think, that we will be intimately related, intimately connected with God. Yet, one of the beatitudes also says, blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. And I like to connect those two, that in the new creation we will have intimacy with God, but we will not just be standing on a fire singing Kumbaya, we'll be engaging in activity as we inherit the world which we're meant to have, to engage in earthly life and all its pursuits.

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So, what's at stake here? Does our view of heaven—of the new creation—matter here and now? Does how we think about the Kingdom Come change how we live in this one life we experience now? There are few criticisms of afterlife theology that are worth airing ... like, perhaps this Christian focus on future life dulls us to the realities and joys of this life. So, I put this first to Richard Middleton, then to Michael Allen.

John Dickson:

So, what's at stake here in thinking of the kingdom come in this way as opposed to thinking of it as airy-fairy clouds? What does it matter to my life now what I think of the afterlife?

Richard Middleton:

Yeah. There's lots of ways it matters. Let me give you two. The first is the affirmation of ordinary life. As a young person, I went to another graduate seminary and did a bachelor of theology degree. And I was the only person in my class who's not going to work in the church and be a pastor. And nobody said it explicitly but I felt like a second-class citizen, because I was going to do a secular profession. But in this vision, there are no secular professions and no sacred professions. All of life is sacred. This world is not a secular place. This is a sacred world, a holy world. It can be desecrated by our evil actions, but it can never just be secular. So, there is an affirmation of all people. You can engage in ordinary activities in this world to the honour and glory of God, that's the first.

The second application is almost the opposite, is that you get a critique of this world, nothing in this world at the moment lives up fully to God's purposes. And so, anything can be called into question and improved. So that's why we are not internationalism in that sense of... I want to be patriotic to my three countries that I'm a citizen of at the moment, but I'm not nationalistic, I don't absolutely ties that country. Because even my wonderful country, Jamaica, with this Bobsled team and all that stuff, and I love it. And Bob Marley and Usain Bolt, it's I got critiques of this country and the way it operates in all kind of ways.

So, the coming of the kingdom and the new creation calls into question our social formations in this world. They can all be critiqued, they can all be improved. They can all be lamented because we're not there yet.

John Dickson:

Yes. And the two things you just said in a way seem to dodge a very common criticism of our secular friends, that Christians are so heavenly minded they're of no earthly use. You're affirming on the one hand and critique on the other.

John Dickson:

I guess some of my listeners might be thinking, does all this stuff about the future dull Christians to the problems of the world as Marx claimed, or, on the other hand, does it cause Christians to deny their temporal pleasures as Nietzsche claimed?

Michael Allen:

I think Christians ought to go the route of Augustine in the first part of the City of God and not just defend Christianity here, but, actually, take the fight to the naturalist, the materialist, the secular person, each in their own ways. If you look at human history, folks who are making a difference are more often than not folks who are heavenly minded, precisely because of a resolute hope, they're willing to sacrifice themselves and to put themselves on the line, even to the point of death, for the sake of others. It's a profoundly motivating effort and all sorts of things that my secular neighbours would want to celebrate, so many of them come because Christian women and men have, out of that living hope, given of themselves who lead the cause of human rights, the abolition of slavery, sort of the expansion of healthcare, or of education and so forth.

I would want to press further and say, Augustine and others, looking at other human communities, cities of man, not of God, would point out Rome knows that sort of to keep the status quo going, they need to offer spectacles. The coliseums got to exist because people will care about changing the status quo unless they're distracted and entertained. What do you know? But, most people who don't have a heavenly hope, they don't wind up actually changing the world all that much. Well, why because they're watching Netflix, or they're going about daily entertainments that distract them from the kind of real costly service that would be involved in love and good works.

Christians sure don't do it perfect, but I think our track record on that front actually stands up remarkably well and our principles have much greater explanatory power for challenging the status quo for selflessly, giving ourselves in service, for trying, ultimately, to embody the witness of Jesus who was heavenly minded, Hebrews 12 tells us, for the joy set before him, he endured the cross despising its shame. One way or another, Christian or not, you got to say he did change the world in some fashion. It's precisely because he was fixed on something beyond his last gasping breath there on that Roman cross.

John Dickson:

I'm pleased that you've kept up the Undeceptions average of mentioning Augustine every second episode. Thank you. Thank you, very much.

Michael Allen:

Is that on Undeceptions bingo cards everywhere, I suppose?

John Dickson:

It is. It is. Yes. But, what about the other side of the ledger, the Nietzschean critique that this future orientation of Christians causes them to deny the life power of now, the pleasure?

Michael Allen:

Sure. I think the way in which I'd want to respond to that would be to, well, look at it in a couple different ways, one of which would be Christianity has not sought to somehow suggest that this world is bad, that this world is anything but good, albeit fallen, but that's very different from saying this world is the greatest or the most glorious. What we see again and again in the pages of scripture is the argument from good to great or, more specifically, from grace to glory. It can be the picture of marriage where the love of the couple, the delight of man and woman together is going to be a great good, a delight, a pleasure, a caring for one another, a cleaving together, a real kind of knowing of one another that is such an innate good.

Yet, the Bible again, and again, says that points to something eschatological. That points to something that's even greater that's symbolized in marriage, but exceeds it, hard as that might be for us to fathom, that there's this oneness with God. That doesn't lead me to, somehow, feel bad about being a married man, about delighting in time with my spouse, about enjoying the good things of this world or of that relationship. But, it gives me a set of lenses to sort of experience that gratefully, and in anticipation of the fuller satisfaction yet to come as opposed to the kind of Nietzschean view, which, ultimately, is going to be sort of a narrative of declining satisfactions. The idea that you're always going to get less of a delight the second time, the third time, the fourth time you experience that, and you have no hope of it ever getting any better, which is why Nietzsche is aggressive.

John Dickson:

Our pleasures can't bear the weight

TAPE - STEPHEN HAWKINGS 2011

"I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken-down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark."

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

That's Director Mark reading something the physicist Stephen Hawking said in an interview with the UK Guardian.

John Dickson:

Michael, what do you say to doubting listeners, sceptical listeners who think all this heaven stuff is just wishful thinking? I mean sure, they can see that it's lovely. It probably does help you in life, but it's just wishful thinking.

Michael Allen:

Sure. I mean, I think this where, ultimately, it hinges on two things. First, whether or not one's convinced by the resurrection claims of Jesus Christ, but, secondly, whether or not one, also, observes that his apostles and disciples plainly realize that has impinging pertinence for their own lives, such that they, too, are, are willing to go get themselves killed when they could very easily otherwise tap out. It seems to me that, on both those fronts, the historical arguments are remarkably overwhelming. They require care. They require study. They ought not be rushed, but Christians have every reason to enter into that process

precisely because it strikes me, as it has struck so many, that they are remarkably consistent in what we observe.

Therefore, I can see that Jesus, himself, selflessly gave himself up to the point of death, and he did so precisely because he knew he had the promise of God raising him from the dead and bringing him into his eternal glory. His disciples knew, right off the bat, in the midst of their despair as he addressed them, that that, too, is going to be their story as well, suffering and then glory. They, nonetheless, poured into it. The fact that continues wave after wave there, it strikes me as is a remarkable apologetic.

Richard Middleton:

Everyone lives their life or there's some implicit vision of the meaning of the world. It may not be a clearly articulated philosophical position. In fact, usually it's not. But it is a vision of the meaning of life. So, what's life all about? And let's move away from eschatology per se and the vision of what the end will be and just say, what's the meaning of life?

The Bible tells a story, and all articulations of the meaning of life can be understood in terms of a narrative, a story of meaning that stretches through time that we participate in. We never invent our own meaning, we become part of a larger story. And that story can just be living in a particular society and imbibing the implicit narrative of that society, the meaning of life that you get there. Or it can be part of a conscious group like say Christians or Jews or other religious traditions, or even some philosophical sceptics have a very conscious articulate tradition. And there you're trying to articulate a version of life. That's different from the society you live in.

What I want to say that I have learned by indwelling this biblical narrative of God's love for the world and God's elevation of humans, the dignity of being in his image and giving us a purpose in this world that this has made great meaning for my life. And everybody needs to reflect on what's the meaning of their life. So, I know that you cannot argue someone into a position, a world view, a philosophical position. It doesn't work. I have a degree in philosophy. I know that doesn't work. I've never thought it worked.

All of life is about faith seeking understanding, here's Anselm's term. We start with some commitment to something and we work through life and we try to understand more. And as we understand more, we may change our initial point of view or deepen it. And I found I've changed all kind of details about my own faith, but ultimately my faith has been deepened because it makes sense of this complex broken world that I live in and gives me hope for living in it.

JOHN DICKSON EDITORIAL

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See ya ...