

TGC

COMING HOME

— ESSAYS ON THE —
NEW HEAVEN & NEW EARTH

TIMOTHY KELLER • JOHN PIPER • D. A. CARSON • AUGUSTUS NICODEMUS LOPES
MARK DEVER • VODDIE BAUCHAM JR. • J. LIGON DUNCAN III • PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN

EDITED BY

D. A. CARSON & JEFF ROBINSON SR.

xx

COMING HOME

Other Gospel Coalition Books

Don't Call It a Comeback: The Old Faith for a New Day, edited by Kevin DeYoung

Entrusted with the Gospel: Pastoral Expositions of 2 Timothy, edited by D. A. Carson

God's Love Compels Us: Taking the Gospel to the World, edited by D. A. Carson and Kathleen B. Nielson

God's Word, Our Story: Learning from the Book of Nehemiah, edited by D. A. Carson and Kathleen B. Nielson

The Gospel as Center: Renewing Our Faith and Reforming Our Ministry Practices, edited by D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller

Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry: A Practical Guide, edited by Cameron Cole and Jon Nielson

Here Is Our God: God's Revelation of Himself in Scripture, edited by Kathleen B. Nielson and D. A. Carson

His Mission: Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, edited by D. A. Carson and Kathleen B. Nielson

The Pastor as Scholar and the Scholar as Pastor: Reflections on Life and Ministry, by John Piper and D. A. Carson, edited by David Mathis and Owen Strachan

The Scriptures Testify about Me: Jesus and the Gospel in the Old Testament, edited by D. A. Carson

Seasons of Waiting: Walking by Faith When Dreams Are Delayed, by Betsy Childs Howard

Word-Filled Women's Ministry: Loving and Serving the Church, edited by Gloria Furman and Kathleen B. Nielson

The Gospel Coalition Booklet Series

Edited by D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller

Baptism and the Lord's Supper, by Thabiti M. Anyabwile and J. Ligon Duncan III

Can We Know the Truth?, by Richard D. Phillips

Christ's Redemption, by Sandy Willson

The Church: God's New People, by Timothy Savage

Creation, by Andrew M. Davis

The Gospel and Scripture: How to Read the Bible, by Mike Bullmore

Gospel-Centered Ministry, by D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller

The Holy Spirit, by Kevin L. DeYoung

Justification, by Philip Graham Ryken

The Kingdom of God, by Stephen T. Um

The Plan, by Colin S. Smith

The Restoration of All Things, by Sam Storms

Sin and the Fall, by Reddit Andrews III

What Is the Gospel?, by Bryan Chapell

COMING HOME

Essays on the
New Heaven and New Earth

EDITED BY

D. A. CARSON
and
JEFF ROBINSON SR.

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Coming Home: Essays on the New Heaven and New Earth

Copyright © 2017 by the Gospel Coalition

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

First printing 2017

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-5397-4

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-5400-1

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-5398-1

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-5399-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Carson, D. A., editor.

Title: Coming home: essays on the new heaven and new earth / edited by D. A. Carson and Jeff Robinson Sr.

Description: Wheaton: Crossway, 2017. | Series: The gospel coalition | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016040231 (print) | LCCN 2017001776 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433553974 (tp) | ISBN 9781433553981 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433553998 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433554001 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Redemption—Biblical teaching.

Classification: LCC BT775 .C66 2017 (print) | LCC BT775 (ebook) | DDC 234/.3—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016040231>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

CH 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To the members of
the council of the Gospel Coalition
whose Christ-centeredness and love provide
an intimation of the glory yet to come*

CONTENTS

Preface by D. A. Carson	9
1 Life and Prosperity, Death and Destruction	13
<i>Deuteronomy 30:1–20</i>	
TIMOTHY KELLER	
2 The Shoot from Jesse, the Nations, and Israel	29
<i>Isaiah 11</i>	
JOHN PIPER	
3 The Lord Is There	43
<i>Ezekiel 40–48</i>	
D. A. CARSON	
4 The Father’s Home, and the Way There	63
<i>John 14:1–14</i>	
AUGUSTUS NICODEMUS LOPES	
5 The Day of the Lord	79
<i>1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11</i>	
MARK DEVER	
6 The Resurrection and the Life	93
<i>1 Corinthians 15:35–58</i>	
VODDIE BAUCHAM JR.	
7 Living in the Hope of Liberation from Bondage	107
<i>Romans 8:16–25</i>	
J. LIGON DUNCAN III	

8	A New Heaven and a New Earth	119
	<i>Revelation 21:1–22:5</i>	
	PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN	
	Appendix: Biblical Foundations for Seeking God’s Justice in a Sinful World	139
	<i>A Panel Discussion</i>	
	THABITI ANYABWILE, VODDIE BAUCHAM JR., D. A. CARSON, TIMOTHY KELLER, MIGUEL NÚÑEZ, AND JOHN PIPER	
	Contributors	161
	General Index	163
	Scripture Index	169

PREFACE

The manner in which Christians have thought about life after death, or about the world to come, has varied considerably from century to century and from place to place. It is easy enough to understand why. Christians who have few of this world's goods or who face the stress of perennially threatening persecution are more likely to long for the "home" of the new heaven and the new earth than are Christians who live remarkably secure and comfortable lives. Christians who think about these things at a period in history when talk about "end times" is all the rage are more likely to stretch their imaginations into eternity (though how accurately is another question) than are those who focus on other doctrines. And Christians who faithfully read their Bibles right through, again and again, will inevitably be drawn to ponder the return of Jesus more faithfully and more fruitfully than will those who rarely take pains to hide God's Word in their hearts.

Among the grand themes uncovered by focused Bible reading are these five (and this list is representative, not exhaustive):

First, Jesus teaches that our hearts pursue what we treasure (Matt. 6:21). So if we are to pursue the supreme good of knowing and seeing God in the new heaven and the new earth, we will have to *treasure* it as the supreme good. This is more than a confessional point of the sort that says, "I believe in the reality of the new heaven and the new earth, and in the life everlasting." Rather, that supreme good must be *treasured*, for that is what will make our hearts pursue it. Otherwise we will devote all our energy to pursuing lesser things, things that may in many cases be good,

but that are squeezing out the supreme good precisely because the supreme good is not treasured. That means that one of the goals of the preacher must be so to disclose and promote the supreme good that Christians hungrily pursue it.

Second, although Christians have good reasons to believe that when they die they enjoy disembodied existence in the presence of Christ, their ultimate hope is not death, not what has traditionally been called “the intermediate state.” Rather, it is the return of Christ, the dawning of the new heaven and the new earth, which is the home of righteous, embodied existence—resurrection existence.

Third, Christians who are hungry to understand their Bibles are eager to discover how various important trajectories “work” in Scripture. In other words, how do we run from the garden of Eden to the new heaven and the new earth? Where do themes like justice, priesthood, life, Trinity, incarnation, justification, sanctification, resurrection, temple, grace, covenant, people of God, and much more, fit into the patterned mosaic that takes us to Revelation 21–22?

Fourth, a variety of biblical depictions of the new heaven and the new earth insist, in colorful terms, that neither sin nor sin’s entailments are there: there is no greed, no hate, no lust, no death, no sorrow, no tears. Conversely, we will love God with heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. There will be no more struggle for justice, for all of us will be just before God, and practitioners of justice in every way. So what are the relationships between the sinless state of Eden and the sinless existence of the new heaven and the new earth? The storyline of the entire Bible turns on how human beings, made in the image of God, fell into sin and were graciously redeemed by the God who made them. What does that tell us about the significance of our struggle against sin now?

Fifth, that storyline turns on Jesus the Messiah. The gospel is first and foremost the good news of what God has done through

his Son, supremely in his death and resurrection, to redeem his chosen and blood-bought people back to himself. Those who enjoy the new heaven and the new earth join the choir around the One who sits on the throne, *and the Lamb*. It is impossible to think richly and faithfully about eschatology without thinking richly and faithfully about Jesus Christ; it is impossible to focus on him without reflecting on eschatology.

The eight chapters of this book expound select passages from the Old and New Testaments that deal with these themes. They are the written forms of eight plenary addresses of the 2015 national conference of the Gospel Coalition. Our hope is that circulating them in this form will help many more people revel in the richness of God's Word—not only of these discrete passages but also of some of the ways these passages unfold the developing lines of Scripture and call our minds and imaginations home to the new heaven and the new earth. The final plenary session of the conference, preserved as an appendix in this book, preserves the probing and sometimes moving panel discussion titled “Biblical Foundations for Seeing God's Justice in a Sinful World.” And in the end, we face the call of God for more than mere justice—the call of God to respond with the grace of the gospel.

It is a great privilege to work with those whose conference voices are preserved in these pages. Thanks, too, to Jeff Robinson, who undertook the initial editing of these chapters, and to the visionary folk at Crossway, who live out what it means to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

D. A. Carson
Soli Deo gloria

LIFE AND PROSPERITY, DEATH AND DESTRUCTION

Deuteronomy 30:1–20

TIMOTHY KELLER

Deuteronomy 30, which comes at the end of Moses’s life, describes how Moses hands off Israel to new leaders. The people have entered into a covenant relationship with God at Mount Sinai, where God in essence said, “I will be your God, and you will be my people. This is how I want you to live. Here are the stipulations of the covenant.”

Now that Moses is about to pass off the scene, the Israelites are renewing the covenant, and Moses writes Deuteronomy as a documentation of that covenant renewal. All the things that the children of Israel are supposed to do in order to live as the people of God are laid out. It’s a wonderful exposition of the Ten Commandments and of what it means to lead lives of integrity and justice. Near the end of the covenant renewal document, in Deuteronomy 27–28, God through Moses lays out what is referred to twice in Deuteronomy 30:1–20 as “blessings and curses.”¹ God in

1. Unless otherwise indicated in the text, Scripture references in this chapter are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

effect says, “If you obey the covenant and are faithful to what you say you are going to do for me, I will bless you.” The beginning of chapter 28 is filled with all the ways in which God will bless the people for obedience. But then, in the last three-quarters of chapter 28, God essentially says, “If you disobey the covenant, all these terrible curses will come upon you,” as he said above in 30:18, “I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed” if you disobey the covenant. The curses will come upon you.

These curses are truly ferocious, and yet the blessings are equally astounding. The blessings always come along with the promise that God is gracious, that he is forgiving, and that he overlooks sin. Since the blessings are so gracious and seemingly so unconditional, and the curses are so ferocious and so obviously conditional (“If you do this, you will be destroyed”), many scholars believe Deuteronomy was written by more than one person. In their *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman III cite one of the classic Old Testament professors, F. M. Cross, as having read the book of Deuteronomy and concluded as much.

Cross believed that Deuteronomy was written in two stages, with the first probably at the time of King Josiah, when there was a lot of hope. On this assumption, the first copy of Deuteronomy would have contained these gracious promises of blessing, where God was portrayed as a gracious, forgiving, and faithful God who overlooks sin and pardons iniquity. But then, Cross claimed, after the disaster of the Babylonian exile, the Israelites found Deuteronomy too optimistic and somebody else wrote another edition of the book and added all the curses. Cross could not believe that any one person could have held together both these amazing blessings and these horrific curses, and therefore no one person could have written Deuteronomy. In fact, Cross could not even fathom a God who could be both so gracious and so deadly, so loving and so holy.

Dillard and Longman do a wonderful job of completely de-

stroying that idea. They're almost comical about it, as if to say, "Can you imagine an editor so incredibly incompetent that he takes a document that's too optimistic about God's love, adds these verses on holiness, judgment, and justice, and then also leaves in everything he disagreed with in the first place, so that it's just a mishmash of contradictions?" Frankly, that would be a pretty stupid editor.²

Tension between His Mercy and Holiness

Although Cross was wrong in that point, he saw rightly the tension displayed in Deuteronomy's blessings and curses. The book of Deuteronomy, possibly for the first time in the biblical narrative, makes it extremely clear that there is such a tension, and we humans brought it about. We have a holy God of justice who must punish sin and who cannot clear the guilty. He basically says to Moses in Exodus 34, "I can't let any sin go unpunished!" Yet at the same time, he is a God of endless love, endless faithfulness, and endless forgiveness, and he desires a relationship with us. But because of our flawed and sinful nature, there is an unresolved tension at this point in Deuteronomy. One might ask, How can God be both faithful to who he is in terms of his mercy, and faithful to who he is in terms of his holiness?

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones addressed this tension in one of his sermons on revival. He pointed out that in Exodus 33, Moses asks to see God's glory and God replies, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live'" (Ex. 33:19–20). Just a few verses later God comes down, Moses is shielded, and

2. See Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), chap. 6.

he [God] passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.” (Ex. 34:6–7)

Lloyd-Jones explains the apparent contradiction. God says his “goodness” will pass in front of Moses, and when this happens, the first thing he says is, basically, “I am forgiving, and yet every sin has to be punished.” While this may seem like a paradox, Lloyd-Jones answers by posing the question Why is it that God must punish every sin? God must punish every sin because he is so good! If a judge saw that somebody committed a crime and said, “Oh well, let it go,” then he wouldn’t be a good judge. Likewise, the reason why God must punish every sin is that he’s so good.

On the other hand, why would God want to forgive us, love us, and never let us go? You guessed it—because he’s so good. “But,” you say, “how in the world can there be a God who is that comprehensively good?” He must either be fully good in terms of his holiness and justice but not in terms of his love (meaning you better obey, because his patience is short and only obedience will get you into heaven), or be fully good in terms of his love but not in terms of his holiness and justice (meaning God would say, “Well, I’d *like* you to obey, but in the end I’ll accept you no matter what you do”). But either way, there’s no God who is completely and comprehensively good. Having it both ways seems impossible. As we saw earlier, that’s exactly what F. M. Cross and many other Old Testament scholars believed. When they read Deuteronomy and saw the blessings and curses, they concluded that there’s no God who could be both so gracious and so ferocious. Instead, they claimed Deuteronomy must be the product of two editors, one with a more benign view of God and a second with a more ferocious view.

But contrary to what those scholars believed, the Old Testament purposefully has an unresolved narrative tension in it, and this very tension is the whole basis of the gospel. Narrative tension means you don't know what's going to happen and there are opposing forces at work. In other words, "Little Red Riding Hood took her grandmother some goodies" is not a narrative. It's just a report. "Little Red Riding Hood took her grandmother some goodies, but the Big Bad Wolf was waiting to eat her up" is a narrative, because we've got tension. We're led to ask, What's going to happen? The narrative tension that drives the whole book of Deuteronomy is the same narrative tension that drives the whole narrative arc of the Bible, all the way up to the cross.

"But," you reply, "I guess it doesn't get resolved in Deuteronomy." Yes and no. What is beautiful about the Bible is the wonderful foreshadowing we see throughout it of how the resolution is going to happen, and there is foreshadowing here in Deuteronomy 30.

Deuteronomy 30 and the Future

Deuteronomy 30 says much about the future, and although in one place it looks like Moses is speaking about the present, we will see how Paul explains in Romans 10 that Moses is still talking about the future. Let's look at three things Moses says.

First, in the future, we will all fail to live as we ought. Second, God will fix our hearts. Third, the message of the gospel will go out.

YOU CANNOT BE GOOD

The first thing Deuteronomy says about the future is that we will all fail to live as we ought. This is one of the most important things about Deuteronomy 30. In fact, if you don't keep this in mind, you'll misread the last part of the chapter. Look at verse 1: "When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come on you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses

you among the nations . . .” Moses says that the Israelites will be dispersed. If you go back into Deuteronomy 28, where you see a list of terrible curses, the ultimate curse is exile and dispersion. And so verse 1 is essentially saying, “You will fail. You will bring all the curses of the covenant down on you. The worst that God says will happen to you if you disobey the covenant will in fact happen.”

American readers of Deuteronomy will know how our culture loves motivational speakers. We enjoy having people tell us what we can do and how we can live. In some ways, the whole book of Deuteronomy is like a motivational speech. It’s a wonderful ethical treatise. It’s a vision for integrity, justice, and human life at the highest. Moses is preaching the first sermon series in history, as some have described Deuteronomy, and he’s basically saying, “I want you to live like this,” much as a motivational speaker would speak today.

But how does Moses’s motivational speech end? After he tells the Israelites to live according to the ethical standards of Deuteronomy 1–29, he effectively concludes, “Let me point this out. You’re going to fail! You’re not going to do any of this stuff I’m talking about! You’re going to fail miserably! I am wasting my breath!”

You might say that’s not good motivational speaking, and you’d be right. But it is great gospel preaching. Of course, that’s not all there is to gospel preaching (praise God!), but unless you’re willing to affirm this, you’re not able to do any gospel preaching. What is Moses saying? He looks at the Israelites, who here represent the whole human race, and he pretty much says, “You know what you ought to do. This isn’t rocket science. If there is a God, you owe him this: love your neighbor as yourself, and love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind. You know what you should do, but you’re not going to do it.”

Jacob Needleman has been a secular philosopher and a professor of philosophy of religion for many years at San Francisco State

University. Some years ago he wrote a remarkable book called *Why Can't We Be Good?* His thesis is that even though social theorists, therapists, politicians, and everybody else are working like crazy to write books about how people should live, there's just one thing they're forgetting: everybody basically knows how he or she ought to live, and we just can't do it. Nobody's got the strength to do what we know we should. This, says Needleman, is the biggest mystery and problem of the human race. Why are we writing all these books telling people how they ought to live? People know what they ought to do, but they just won't and can't do it. It's impossible. And people know they should *not* do certain things, but they do them anyway. That's our problem, Needleman says. Human beings know how they should live but they can't and they won't, and he has no idea why.

There's a great story related to this problem in Rebecca Pippert's book *Hope Has Its Reasons*.³ Pippert writes of when she once audited a class in counseling psychology at Harvard University; the professor gave a case study of a man who was very angry at his mother. The man didn't realize how angry he was, so his anger was distorting his life. Through counseling, this man came to see how much his life was being dominated by his anger, and that seemed to help. But as the professor was moving on to another case study, Pippert raised her hand and asked, "Well, that's great, but how do you help the person?"

"What do you mean?" replied the professor.

"Well, how do you help him forgive his mother?" Pippert asked. "If his life is being distorted by his resentment toward his mother, how do you help him forgive his mother?"

The professor's first response was basically to say, "There isn't anything I can do. Hopefully now he will understand his anger and hopefully not be as driven by it." Most of the other students in the class were a little surprised and discontented with this answer,

3. Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Hope Has Its Reasons: The Search to Satisfy Our Deepest Longings*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001).

so the professor concluded the discussion by saying nearly the same thing as Needleman: “If you guys are looking for a changed heart, you are looking in the wrong department.”

As the professor had to admit, psychology can’t help you do what you ought to do. Even if it can show us what to do, we don’t do it. We *can’t* do it. For this reason, I often have used Francis Schaeffer’s illustration to explain Romans 2 whenever I have spoken to an unbelieving audience. Romans 2 says the Gentiles—the pagans who don’t know the law of God and don’t know the Bible—still have in their conscience a certain knowledge of how they should live, and God holds them responsible for what the conscience tells them. Schaeffer used to tell the following story to prove this point.

Imagine you have an invisible recorder around your neck that, for all your life, records every time you say to somebody else, “You ought.” It only turns on when you tell somebody else how to live. In other words, it only records your own moral standards as you seek to impose them on other people. It records nothing except what you believe is right or wrong. And what if God, on judgment day, stands in front of people and says, “You never heard about Jesus Christ and you never read the Bible, but I’m a fair-minded God. Let me show you what I’m going to use to judge you.” Then he takes that invisible recorder from around your neck and says, “I’m going to judge you by your own moral standards.” And God plays the recording.

There’s not a person on the face of the earth who will be able to pass that test. I’ve used that illustration for years now and nobody ever wants to challenge it. Nobody ever says, “I live according to my standards!” This is the biggest problem of the human race. We don’t need more books telling people how to live; people need the power to do what they don’t have the power to do.

Just as Moses begins by telling the Israelites, “You’re going to fail,” gospel preachers have to constantly remind people what they already know in their hearts but won’t admit: “You know what to

do, and you never will do it unless you get some kind of outside help. You will never pull yourself together.”

GOD FIXES HEARTS

But the second thing Deuteronomy says about the future is that God has a plan to fix hearts. In Deuteronomy 30:2–5, Moses predicts that the Israelites will be put into exile and that God will bring them back. But when Moses gets to verse 6, he says, “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.” He’s talking about something that the rest of the Bible brings out. Jeremiah and Ezekiel call it the new covenant. Paul in Romans 2:29 says that our hearts are circumcised, and in Philippians 3:3 he says we are the true circumcision. So this is the gospel, and this is looking far beyond anything that actually happens in the lives of the Israelites at that time.

And what is a circumcised heart? As frequently noted by many expositors, “heart” in English means the seat of the emotions, but “heart” in the Bible means the control center of the whole being. Proverbs 3:5 says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart,” because that’s what hearts do. Genesis 6:5 speaks of the “inclination . . . of the human heart” because that’s what hearts do. In Matthew 6:21, Jesus says “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Your heart is the place where you decide what you’re going to trust, take inclination to, and treasure; it’s where you decide what your supreme good is, what your ultimate hope is, and what you’re going to think about all day.

A good test of this is seen in the much-cited saying “Your religion is what you do with your solitude.” Think about that. What is it that your heart most cherishes, most adores, most trusts in, and most hopes in? What is the thing you most look to for your salvation? What is the thing your mind automatically goes to when you have nothing else to think about? That may be hard for us to imagine because social media and cell phones have made

solitude hard to obtain, but at my age, I can remember a time when I would stand waiting for a bus with nothing to do and nothing to think about. I never took those five minutes to praise God or think about his glories, his attributes, and what he'd done for me. My heart tended to fantasize about other things, like "If only the church could get to this number, then maybe we could build a wing."

What do you think about at the bus stop? The heart is the indicator of what you love most. Whatever the heart most wants, that is the thing that the mind finds reasonable, the emotions find desirable, and the will finds doable. In other words, what the heart is set upon affects your mind, your will, and your emotions.

Now that we've examined what Scripture means by "heart," what does it mean to have a "circumcised" heart? It sounds like a scary idea, doesn't it? Peter Craigie, in his commentary on the book of Deuteronomy, says that when Deuteronomy speaks of God circumcising the heart, it's a metaphor (strange though it may be) for God doing surgery on your heart. It could also be said that whereas circumcision was a sign of external obedience, entry into the covenantal community, and submission to the law of God, heart circumcision is the motivation of inner love to obey. In fact the text says, "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (Deut. 30:6).

To use another metaphor, think about marriage. Over the years there have been many political and business marriages where the proverbial knot was tied, but there was no love. But when I was falling in love with my wife, and she asked me to make a change in my life—the sort of thing that my mother or father used to ask me to do and I would say, "Mind your own business"—Kathy's wish was my command. I was in love, so I didn't think of it as obeying her or submitting to her will, though in a sense I was. She wasn't demanding anything, but out of love I was changing that thing in my life.

That's what it's like to have a circumcised heart: what you ought to do and what you want to do become the same thing. Or as John Newton said in one of his hymns,

Our pleasure and our duty,
Though opposite before,
Since we have seen his beauty,
Are join'd to part no more.⁴

Our pleasure and our duty are the same. That's a circumcised heart.

If you grew up attending church, you probably heard the word *circumcision* in Sunday school. Of course, when you were little, you asked a lot of questions. But when you asked, "What is circumcision?" nobody ever told you what it means! It wasn't until you were older that the topic came up again, and you were taught that circumcision was the sign that someone had entered into a covenant relationship with God. Once the teacher explained circumcision, if you were like most people, you said, "You're kidding! Why in the world would God ask anyone to do that? What was that about?"

Yes, circumcision was gross and bloody, but that was the point. In the days of the Old Testament, you didn't just sign a paper contract when you wanted to make a covenant. Instead, you acted out the curses of failing to keep that covenant. You would cut an animal in half, walk between the pieces, and say something like "Oh great king, the one to whom I make my vow today, if I do not do all the words of the promise which I am making today, may I be cut to pieces like this animal." That's how you would act out the curse of not keeping the covenant. In my opinion, that was a lot better way of doing contracts than we have today. People would be more likely to follow through on promises that way!

If you understand the way people made covenants in that era,

4. John Newton, "Shall Men Pretend to Pleasure."

then you begin to see what circumcision represents. Circumcision is gory, bloody, gross, and intimate; it's downright creepy! Why not some other part of the body? Why not something less disturbing? It's a way of showing people the penalty of sin. Sin is so dire, so intimate, and so gross, it could only be represented by something like circumcision. So why do we still talk about the circumcised heart?

There's a strange phrase in Colossians 2:11 that could be literally translated, "In Christ, you [Christians] have been circumcised in the circumcision of Christ." Paul is teaching that you receive not only a new heart when you become a Christian, but a circumcised heart because of the circumcision of Christ. And what is the circumcision of Christ? On the cross, Jesus Christ was experiencing the curse of the covenant: to be cut off. If you lie, cheat, or wrong someone else, being cut off from the congregation is the penalty that Deuteronomy gives again and again. But the penalty for disobeying God is to be cut off from him. To be cut off from God is to be cut off from life, light, and every good thing. On the cross, Jesus was suffering that penalty. He was suffering the cosmic experience that we deserve, the punishment for our sin.

Think back to the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were forced out—or cut off—because of their sin, and an angel with a sword was stationed to guard the way to the tree of life. The only way back to the tree of life was to go under the sword, and on the cross, Jesus Christ went under the sword. In that sense, he was circumcised.

Because Jesus Christ experienced that circumcision for you and me, when we put our faith in him, not only do we objectively have a relationship with him, but subjectively that image of Christ suffering the curse for us on the cross makes our pleasure and our duty the same. As quoted before, John Newton said it best:

Our pleasure and our duty,
Though opposite before,

Since we have seen his beauty,
Are join'd to part no more.

And what is that beauty of which Newton speaks? In the words of William Cowper:

To see the Law by Christ fulfilled
And hear His pardoning voice,
Changes a slave into a child,
And duty into choice.⁵

If seeing what Jesus Christ did on the cross for you—taking your cosmic “cutting off” for you—moves you and you say to yourself, “I do deserve to be cut off and Jesus did that for me,” then you know you’re experiencing the circumcision of the heart.

JESUS HAS DONE THAT FOR YOU

The third and final thing Deuteronomy says about the future comes at the end of the passage, where we noted earlier that it seems to speak only about the present. So far, Deuteronomy 30:1–6 has been looking down the corridors of time, saying in effect, “First, you’re going to fail, all the curses are going to come upon you, and you will go into exile, but then God will bring you back and circumcise your heart.” That’s the promise of the new covenant and the new birth. But then Deuteronomy 30:11–15 reads:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.

5. William Cowper, “Love Constraining to Obedience,” 1772.

It may seem like Moses is coming back to the present when he describes what he is commanding the Israelites “today.” He says his law is not too difficult but is very near to them, even in their mouth and heart. What does that mean? On the one hand, it means that the Israelites have no excuse. The law of God is very clear. They don’t have to go over the sea to talk to sages or to mystics to figure out what God’s will is; instead, it’s come to them. “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Luke 10:27). The law is laid out plainly, so they have no excuse. And yet, as Thomas Schreiner points out in his commentary on Romans,⁶ Paul would later quote this passage in Romans 10 knowing that Moses has already said that the Israelites cannot and will not keep this covenant. Therefore, Paul is absolutely right in interpreting what Moses means when the apostle says in Romans 10:4, 6–9:

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

. . . But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (ESV)

Schreiner says Paul is applying Moses’s words to show that in the end the only word that will not crush you, that is not too difficult for you, and that you don’t have to go over the sea to get is the gospel. Jesus has already done the impossible for you. Don’t try to earn your salvation, Paul says. To do that is to bring Jesus up

6. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998).

from the abyss or keep Jesus back in heaven. He came from heaven and went into the abyss to save you. If you try to save yourself, it's like telling Jesus that what he did doesn't matter. Only the gospel is the word that is not too difficult for you, and only the gospel will not crush you. Any other word will. Therefore, Moses is basically saying, "Someday the gospel will go forth."

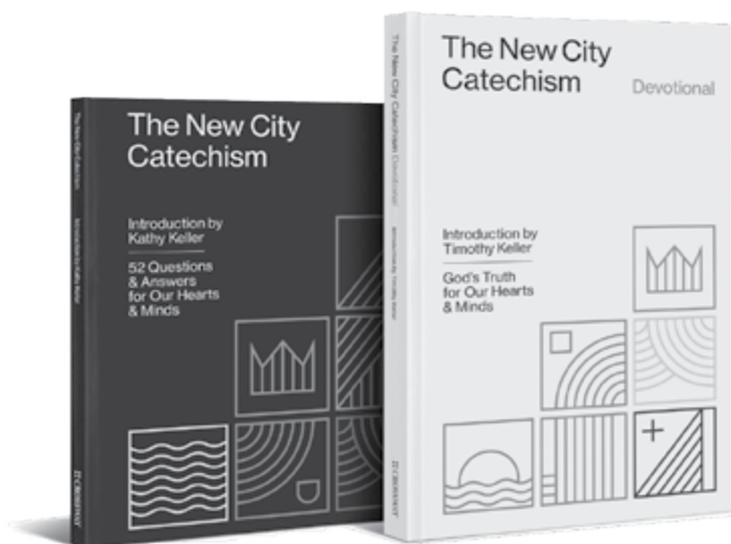
Heaven and Hell Are Not Parallel

Without a doubt, the blessings and the curses point forward to heaven and hell. But did you notice they're not parallel? In other words, if you go to hell, it's your fault. You deserve it. Deuteronomy 30 makes that clear. But if you get the blessings of God, there's no way you deserve that. That has been accomplished and given to you freely. We must never give anybody the impression that hell is deserved *and* heaven is deserved. Hell is deserved, and heaven is not.

You can see it clearly in the way blessings and curses are discussed in Deuteronomy. The prosperity gospel says they're equal: if you do this, you'll be blessed, but if you do that, you'll be cursed. But as Christopher Wright notes in his commentary on Deuteronomy,⁷ if you do wrong, you deserve the cursing. If you do right, that only appropriates the blessing; it doesn't deserve it. Obedience is simply a way for you to appropriate the blessing that Jesus Christ has deserved for you. That difference is very clear in the book of Deuteronomy and must be maintained as we think about the afterlife and in all of our preaching on it.

7. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996).

52 Questions & Answers for Your Heart & Mind



The New City Catechism is a gospel-centered resource that sets forth a summary of important Christian doctrine in the form of fifty-two questions and answers meant to be memorized and recited over the course of a year.

The New City Catechism Devotional features the same questions and answers as well as commentary written by leading contemporary and historical theologians that will help children and adults alike gain a deeper understanding of foundational Christian beliefs.



THE GOSPEL COALITION

The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We desire to champion the gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines. We yearn to work with all who, in addition to embracing our confession and theological vision for ministry, seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures.

Through its women's initiatives, The Gospel Coalition aims to support the growth of women in faithfully studying and sharing the Scriptures; in actively loving and serving the church; and in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ in all their callings.

Join the cause and visit [TGC.org](https://www.tgc.org) for fresh resources that will equip you to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

[TGC.org](https://www.tgc.org)

Do Christians overemphasize the hope of the future to the neglect of needs in the present?

Are discussions about the end times unimportant so long as we all “get to heaven” in the end?

In *Coming Home*, a team of eight leading Bible teachers offers us a vision of the new heaven and new earth that doesn't just impact our view of the future—it also has the potential to change how we live today. These eight essays will stir up within us a longing for our future home as we eagerly await Jesus's glorious return.

TIMOTHY KELLER—Life and Prosperity, Death and Destruction (Deuteronomy 30:1–20)

JOHN PIPER—The Shoot from Jesse, the Nations, and Israel (Isaiah 11)

D. A. CARSON—The Lord Is There (Ezekiel 40–48)

AUGUSTUS NICODEMUS LOPES—The Father's Home, and the Way There (John 14:1–14)

MARK DEVER—The Day of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11)

VODDIE BAUCHAM JR.—The Resurrection and the Life (1 Corinthians 15:35–58)

J. LIGON DUNCAN III—Living in the Hope of Liberation from Bondage (Romans 8:16–25)

PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN—A New Heaven and a New Earth (Revelation 21:1–22:5)

D. A. CARSON (PhD, Cambridge University) is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He is president of the Gospel Coalition and has written or edited nearly sixty books.

JEFF ROBINSON SR. (PhD, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is a senior editor for the Gospel Coalition and serves as lead pastor for New City Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He also serves as senior research and teaching associate for the Andrew Fuller Center for Baptist Studies and adjunct professor of church history at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

CHRISTIAN LIVING / END TIMES

