

1 The sky is falling! The sky is falling! No, really, the sky is falling. Every year our sky is filled with meteors, meteoroids, and meteorites. The good news is that most of these objects burn up in our atmosphere, and by the time they strike the earth, most meteorites are very small, like the size of a small pebble on the beach. On the other hand, sometimes very large meteoroids explode over land, objects that are more like the size of a large boulder. One of these larger meteoroids exploded over Chelyabinsk, Russia in 2013. You should watch some of the video on You-Tube. As it tore through our atmosphere, it burned brighter than the sun and produced a sonic shock wave. Over 1,500 people were injured when it exploded, mostly by flying debris such as glass, and over 7,000 buildings were damaged.¹ And that was nothing, relative to the destructive power of the Tunguska meteoroid in 1908 that flattened over 700 square miles of forest in Siberia, or the object that is thought to have detonated in prehistoric times, ushering in a nuclear winter and causing a mass extinction event, including the dinosaurs. So yes, the sky really is falling, and all that stands between us and the end of life on this planet is the unfortunate arrival of one errant piece of space rock. Aren't you glad you came this morning?

Living in the shadow of a catastrophic future is nothing new, although most of the worst-case scenarios we live with today have been created by our own folly. Global warming, the result of our careless use of fossil fuels, threatens rising sea levels and extreme weather patterns. The threat of nuclear attack, whether through conventional warfare or terrorism, continues to loom over us. Epidemics and pandemics could kill hundreds of millions of people world-wide as our reliance on antibiotics and the unprecedented ease of world travel threatens new levels of vulnerability. Name your disaster. If you can imagine it, there's someone out there telling you that the sky is falling and the very best thing that you can do is to drop what you're doing and join them in warning everyone else.

Please hear me: All those things I mentioned are real issues that have real implications for the way we choose to live our lives. But none of those issues are worth a shipwreck of our soul or a panicked, Chicken-Little marathon through the days of our lives. Have you

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chelyabinsk_meteor

been there? Are you there now? Are you so frightened about something that might happen tomorrow that you just can't fully embrace living in today? That's not the way God wants us to live. We were made for more than living in fear. We were made to live with courageous, hopeful faith. So let's take another step forward today as we continue to learn to live unafraid.

2 Last week I said that one of the most encouraging things about our Bible is that it offers an extremely honest record of humanity, giving us the chance to learn from the mistakes of our forbearers and put our own failures in historical context. Today, I'm inviting you to appreciate another great virtue of the Holy Scriptures: We know the ending, which actually has no end at all. We can read ahead to the part of the story where we learn that the supernatural battle for control of God's creation does eventually come to completion, and as long as we're following Jesus, we can be sure that we're on the winning side, not just for one season, but for eternity. Here's just a small taste of that eternal victory, as seen in the vision given to John in the book of Revelation. I'm reading from chapter 11, starting with verse 15 in the New Living translation.

{Read Revelation, NLT}

3 The book of Revelation has had one of the most widely divergent histories of interpretation of all the books in the Bible. The interpretive camp I tend to follow is that Revelation is less about detailing a frightening picture of judgment and destruction and much more about conveying a sense of hope to a church that has always had times of persecution and trouble. A vision is a lot like a dream, so when we read Revelation, we need to be dialed into that kind of thinking. We should look for hopeful signs of God's presence, God's holiness, God's worship, and God's sovereignty. Revelation conveys, in deep, visceral ways, things about the mystery of God that we just can't capture and convey with ordinary words. It's intensely symbolic, and there is no end of debate about the meaning of various symbolic details. So I encourage you to avoid pressing the details. The images used are meant to evoke powerful thoughts and feelings, without conveying a precise blueprint and schedule. It's also absolutely essential to study the Old Testament, from which most of the symbols were borrowed.

It's no accident that the very first thing John reports seeing in his vision of heaven, in

Revelation 4, is a throne with someone sitting on it, and that in this portion of Revelation 11, the elders are bowed in worship before that throne. In the ancient world, a throne symbolized authority and power. We know from what we read in Isaiah and the Psalms that a throne in heaven specifically represents the authority and power of God. How is this a symbol of hope? Remember that at the time Revelation was written, Christians were being rounded up and killed for their faith. That was no exaggeration, no Chicken Little fatalistic fantasy. A vision of someone seated on the heavenly throne meant that the holy office was occupied—that God was alive and well and in power. God on the throne in heaven stood in direct contrast with a Caesar sitting on his throne in Rome.

John’s vision of someone seated on the heavenly throne is a way of saying that not only is God going to win in the end, but God is still in charge right now, even in the midst of something as horrific as the Roman persecution of Christians. Are there things happening in the world and your life that lead you to wonder if anyone responsible is still minding the store? John’s vision of heaven answers with a resounding “yes!” In this world we do have troubles, but aside from the occasional meteoroid and meteorite, the sky really isn’t falling.

4 Notice that the Temple of God was opened in John’s vision. While God made the Tabernacle his dwelling place in the days following the Exodus, basically a portable tent in the wilderness, his true and ultimate dwelling place is in heaven. And while a high priest was necessary in the days of the Tabernacle, when we approach God in his ultimate dwelling place, heaven, God himself will be our high priest. This was especially good news for Jewish converts to Christianity in the time of the Roman persecution because the Temple in Jerusalem, God’s dwelling place after the days of the Tabernacle, was razed to the ground by the Romans in 70 AD and the Jewish priesthood was scattered. It’s good news for us today as well, because it assures us that no matter what happens to our human church buildings, committees, pastors, or denominations, we will always be able to approach the throne of God and experience the joy of being in God’s presence. Is there something in your life that’s separating you from God? It doesn’t have to be that way. Jesus gave his life so that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God.

5 What about all that thunder and lightning? In John’s vision, worship is accompanied by a true multi-sensory bombardment of lightening, rumblings, and peals of thunder. Does

that mean that Revelation is demonstrating that heaven will be a noisy, frightening place? Not really. This image is supposed to bring us comfort by reinforcing the assurance of God's sovereignty and almighty power, in the same way that the thunder and lightning of Exodus 19:16 communicated God's powerful presence on the top of the Mountain when the Ten Commandments were given. *Lightening flashed, thunder crashed and roared, and there was an earthquake and a terrible hailstorm.*² Doesn't sound like a place you'd want to visit, much less spend an eternity, right? But read between the lines: *The Lord God, the Almighty, the one who is and who always was, has begun to reign.*³ And we know that God is good!

Don't get me wrong. I'm not a Calvinist, someone who believes that God's reign means that God has micromanaged every detail of our future. But that doesn't take away from the hope I find in God's reign. Because God is in charge, I know that I can trust what Jesus said. I know that I can trust the leading of the Holy Spirit. And I know that if I believe with my heart, confess with my tongue, and bear fruit in my life that Jesus Christ is Lord, then everything else on earth and in heaven will be sorted out by the only one who truly can.

6 Revelation paints strange pictures of heaven, like this image of the new Jerusalem from Revelation 21. But revelation was intended to be a hopeful vision of God's present and future reign. God's reign is one more reason for us to take to heart the admonition of Jesus to not be afraid. We know that one day we will be directly in God's powerful presence in some new way that we have yet to experience in this life. We know that heaven is holy, because God's presence makes it so. Because of God's presence and God's holiness, we know that we will be made holy and we will worship God in heaven, more completely and joyfully than we can possibly imagine today. We know that the one we put our faith in will stand there with us. And we know that heaven will clearly demonstrate, once and for all, that God is the sovereign ruler of all space and time, past, present, and future.

Now that's a headline that you'll never see in the news, whether you read a newspaper, listen to NPR, or watch Fox News. Yes, in many ways the sky is falling. There are serious gaps between the way this planet was created and the harm we've done to it. There are social evils such as slavery and sex trafficking that are still inflicted on God's

² Revelation 11:19, New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

³ Revelation 11:16, Ibid

children, and new forms of substance abuse that are destroying individuals, families, and entire communities. But there is no situation that you find yourself in today that can steal your hope, because nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. Nothing. So the next time you think you see the sky falling, pause and reflect on the reality of the reign of God. Don't get in line behind Chicken Little and lose your perspective. The one you really need to follow is with you in every scary situation. All you have to do is follow.



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