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Let there be lights in the sky (Genesis 1.14–19)

¹⁴And God said, 'Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, ¹⁵and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.' And it was so. ¹⁶God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. ¹⁷God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, ¹⁸to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. ¹⁹And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

Bardsey Island is a special place, known as the island of 20,000 saints. A tiny place (just over a mile and a half long) off the north-west coast of Wales, it has been inhabited from at least the sixth century, when it was a monastic site, and holds the ruins of a thirteenth-century Augustinian monastery. In the 1800s it was a farming and fishing community, and you can now stay in the farmhouses that are dotted around the island. It is outstandingly beautiful, with views across to Ireland from one side and back to Wales and the mountains of Snowdonia from the other.¹

One of the highlights is looking at the sky on a clear night. With no electricity on Bardsey and no nearby towns or cities to produce light pollution, the skies are truly dark, making for a majestic view. Even with the naked eye the Milky Way is beautifully clear and I remember one night lying out on the grass looking up at the multitude of stars and watching the Hubble Space Telescope and satellites going by, along with the occasional shooting star.

Take out Hubble and the satellites, and it would have been a similarly full sky that Abram gazed up at in wonder as the word of

Let there be lights in the sky

the Lord came to him and said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be' (Gen. 15.5). What an amazing promise to be given to a childless man! At that point having even a single star in the sky would not have represented Abram's situation, but God tells him that his offspring shall be countless in number. The knowledge that we have now of the stars, planets, galaxies and other celestial objects in the universe is way beyond anything Abram was aware of – and we will come back to explore some of that further in this chapter – but he knew the stars in the night sky were impossible to count, and he recognized the word of God when it came to him, and so 'Abram believed in the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness' (vv. 6).

In this chapter, our gaze turns to the sun, moon and stars made by God. We will consider the rhythm of the seasons and festivals that they were created to mark, as well as the problem of unnatural light – 'light pollution'. This chapter will feel different to other chapters as we consider eschatology (the end of the world/universe, sometimes referred to as the 'end times'), something that, in the Scriptures, is often associated with the cosmic objects created on Day Four.

Let there be lights

We have already seen God create light on Day One, but now we move into the days in which God makes the things that will populate the spaces that have been opened up – of sky, sea and land. Here on Day Four God creates the celestial objects to populate the sky and the 'spaces' of day and night.

There is a distinction between Day Four and Day One. On that First Day, God separated the light from the darkness and declared the light to be good. Hence, in Chapter One we focused on the contrast between light and dark in the Scriptures, seeing light as a symbol of God and his presence, and Jesus as the light of the world who calls us out of darkness to live in the light.

On Day Four, however, God declares both the night and the day to be good. Darkness too is important. It is a time for rest; for cool in a hot climate; for sleep. Some creatures actively thrive in the darkness,

and those that do not, need the dark to sleep and recuperate in its safety. The creation poem of Psalm 104 declares:

He made the moon to mark the seasons,
and the sun knows when to go down.
You bring darkness, it becomes night,
and all the beasts of the forest prowl (vv. 19–20).

On Day Four, therefore, we have a different perspective on light and dark and one that declares even the dark to be good and part of God's loving creativity.

There is an important theological point being made in these verses that takes us back to our initial discussion at the start of Chapter One. We saw there that the creation narratives found their final form in the context of exile, when the Israelites were living in a strange land with a pagan religion. That religion was polytheistic, consisting of many gods who represented different aspects of the natural world. From that belief system arose the dominant creation narrative, *Enuma Elish*, which portrayed the victory of the chief god, Marduk, and the creation of the world from the body of the slain Tiamat. Having been duly praised for his victory, he assigned various jobs to the other gods to keep the created world in order. Marduk then 'fashioned heavenly stations for the great gods' Anu, Enlil and Ea, and the constellations became their astral likenesses.² The gods are given control of the stars and a god called Nannar is entrusted with the night and ensuring that the moon carries out its full cycle each month.³ For Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbours, the stars therefore represented and were ruled by deities and, as such, were thought to control human destinies. People were at the mercy of the gods in the stars.

It should be immediately obvious that this is quite different to what is being portrayed in Genesis 1.14–19. As we saw in Chapter One, there is only one God, the supreme God, who speaks the world into existence. It is noticeable that in the days we have looked at already, God names the things he has created, and yet here the author does not give the names of the sun and moon, but calls them 'the greater light' and 'the lesser light'. The ordinary names for the sun and the moon were also the names of

the deities who corresponded to them, and so the author is showing that God has not created demi-gods but elements that serve a particular function. Even the line, 'He also made the stars' seems designed to counteract the prevailing narrative around the divine nature of stars. It is such a throw-away line, giving little importance to them: 'Oh yes, and he also made the stars while he was at it!'

As the *South Asia Bible Commentary* says, 'The wording makes it clear that the stars and the planets do not have power in themselves, as astrology would have us believe. They do not determine auspicious days or times. They are not to be worshipped. Like us, these planets are only creations under God's control.'⁴ So our lives are not determined by the movements of the stars; rather we live our lives in communion with and within the movement of God.

Worship of the sun, moon and stars was clearly a problem for the Israelites, right from their earliest days in the desert, through the time of the monarchy (e.g. 2 Kings 21.3–5) and into the period of exile. It was such a well-known feature that even Stephen, in his speech to the Sanhedrin before being martyred, says how 'God gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars' in the wilderness when they turned against him and made the golden calf (Acts 7.42–43). Such worship was punishable by death by stoning (Deut. 17.2–7), and yet even in Ezekiel's day people were 'bowing down to the sun in the east' (Ezek. 8.16).

The wider biblical material also affirms clearly that the astral objects have been created by God. Notwithstanding the rather plain description of God's creation of the stars in Genesis 1, in the psalms we are almost overwhelmed with the beautiful language used of God's creation of the heavenly bodies: 'In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth' (Ps. 19.4–6); 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth' (Ps. 33.6); 'He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name' (Ps. 147.4), and 'The Mighty One, God, the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to where it sets' (Ps. 50.1).

In his mighty words to Job, God asks:

Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades?
can you loosen Orion's belt?

Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons
or lead out the Bear with its cubs?

Do you know the laws of the heavens? (Job 38.31–33)

The description of God's creation of the heavenly bodies in Genesis 1 reinforces the discussion we had in Chapter Two around creation and its relation to God. We have seen that creation comes from the space that God makes in Godself, and is therefore intimately connected to God, coming from the eternal self-giving love that circulates between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁵ Psalm 136 picks this up, highlighting how God's act of creation is a reflection of his love: '[He] made the great lights—his love endures forever. The sun to govern the day, his love endures forever. The moon and stars to govern the night; his love endures forever' (vv. 7–9). And yet all the biblical statements around the creation of the sun, moon and stars make clear that they are separate from God as well as deeply connected to him. The creation comes from the word of God – from the eternal Son through the brooding action of the Spirit (Gen. 1.2) – but the creation is not God, and therefore is not to be worshipped.

To everything there is a season

In Chapter One we noted the symmetry and order that the author demonstrates through how he has set out his creation account, and we get this sense here too. The main reason given for the creation of the sun, moon and stars is to separate day and night and to be 'signs to mark sacred times, and days and years' (Gen. 1.14). The sense of rhythm is clear and is engrained into the patterns of the natural world and therefore into our patterns too. We live by a natural rhythm of day and night, which is encoded in our DNA, and we know how it feels when that pattern is disrupted. We shall consider Sabbath when we look at Day Seven in the Conclusion, but that is another pattern

given to us: a rhythm of resting every seven days. As human beings, we have naturally sought to understand time and give it shape. We have divided time into segments that we can comprehend, some of which are determined by physical factors (such as the time it takes for the moon to rotate around the earth), some of which we have devised (such as dividing hours and minutes into segments of sixty). Every culture has their way of capturing and expressing time. For example, the current epoch of the Islamic calendar, the Hijri era, began in 622AD, the year that Muhammad and his followers migrated from Mecca to set up the first Muslim community at Yathrib (now Medina). Each year is 354 or 355 days, making this year 1441, according to Muslim calendars, rather than 2020.

The seasons provide a basic rhythm for our lives, whether through the pattern of the monsoon and dry periods; the long and the shorter rains, or the framing of spring, summer, autumn and winter. We spend a lot of energy either trying to enjoy and get the most out of those seasons or protecting ourselves against them.

After the flood, God promises, 'As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, will never cease' (Gen. 8.22). Following what we saw in the previous chapter about the significance of land, it is no surprise that the regularity of the seasons is of such importance to the Israelite people. It also functions as a metaphor. The Lord says through Jeremiah, 'Even the stork in the sky knows her appointed seasons, and the dove, the swift and the thrush observe the time of their migration. But my people do not know the requirements of the Lord' (8.7). Knowing the requirements of the Lord should be as built-in to his people as the natural seasonal callings are to the birds.

Many of us reading this now live lives that bear little relation to the seasons and we can go through the years disconnected from the changing world around us. Living in the UK, I am forever grateful for central heating and I am not advocating being so in tune with the seasons that I wake up in the winter with frost on the inside of the windows! But, finding ways to be alert to the patterns of the natural world as they change through the year can help link us to our own patterns and seasons. One of the habits I have developed working at

the Tearfund office in southwest London is to take a 45-minute walk at the end of the day through the nearby park. The second largest royal park in London, it is beautiful with many mature trees and deer (and now flocks of green parakeet too). One of the pleasures of this practice is seeing the park and its inhabitants grow and change as the months go by – a regular cycle of the seasons, of death and new life – and I walk with God there in the evenings as a reflection of my whole life's walk with God, and the seasons of death and life that brings too.

This finds resonance with the words of the Teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes: 'There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens' (Ecc. 3.1). The Teacher's words are set in the midst of his reflection on the futility of life and the pointlessness of doing anything more than enjoying food and drink. Underlying the gloomy reality though is the theme of wisdom and the benefit of seeking it rather than riches. One of the characteristics of the wise is the simple acknowledgement that there is a time for everything. Life can be long. Circumstances change. What is now is not what will be in the future. We cannot hold on; we must let go and allow life to unfold. So the recognition that all things have their seasons can bring comfort and stability to our lives though they often feel anything but stable.

The Celtic Christians are well known for being a people strongly rooted in the natural seasons, and many aspects of their faith arose from that. The *Carmena Gadelica* is a collection of pre-Christian and Christian prayers, blessings, invocations and other folklore gathered by Alexander Carmichael in the nineteenth century, reflecting the oral traditions of the Scottish highlands.⁶ There are prayers and blessings for many aspects of daily life, for different elements of the natural world, and for the rhythms of day and night, waking and sleeping. The sun and the moon are a part of these traditions, and of course the classic Celtic cross has the round circle of the sun in the middle, 'held in the arms of the cross'. As Newell says, this was not nature worship, this was 'Christ-mysticism that revered nature'.⁷ Let us hear one of these sun prayers:

The eye of the great God,
The eye of the God of glory,

The eye of the King of hosts,
The eye of the King of the living,
Pouring upon us
At each time and season,
Pouring upon us
Gently and generously,
Glory to thee
Thou glorious sun.
Glory to thee, thou sun,
Face of the God of life.⁸

Tess Ward, in the prayer book we have encountered in previous chapters, bases her prayers on the themes that arise through the seasonal and festive rhythms of each year. They are particularly rooted in the traditional solar festivals of the northern hemisphere: the winter solstice when the day is at its shortest (December 20–23); the summer solstice when the day is at its longest (June 20–23), and then the spring equinox and autumn equinox (March and September 20–23), when night and day are equal. Solstice is simply the Latin for 'the standing of the sun'. Between those four points are the quarter days, which are the lunar festivals celebrated at the full moon. Imbolc is the first, in February; Beltane is at the beginning of May; Lammas is at the start of August, and the Samhain is at the beginning of November.⁹

Traditionally, these solar and lunar festivals have been associated with paganism and the Church has steered away from them. But, a renewed appreciation for God's creation of the sun and the moon can give those of us who live in seasonal parts of the world confidence that we can use these points that mark the turning of the earth towards and away from the sun. They can be times for us to reflect on the passing of time in our lives, and on themes of darkness and light and gratitude for God's continued involvement in our world – even in those places and situations that seem darkest. And we can use them to consider how the seasons are changing because of the climate crisis, and as a prompt to commit ourselves to action.

Overlaying the rhythms of day and night, the natural markers of time, and the seasons of each year (however those look to us, where

we live in the world), there is also the rhythm of the Church, which has its own seasons and festivals. Readers of this book will come from a host of different denominations and networks: you may relate to a tradition that does not use any sort of church calendar beyond Easter and Christmas, or you may follow a full seasonal cycle of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost and Trinity – with Ordinary Time in between! Whichever kind of church we are a part of, there is benefit in discovering the richness of the annual rhythm of the Christian faith, as it helps us remember and dwell on the saving work of Christ and often links our faith with the agricultural year. (Churches in some countries, for example, will celebrate Rogationtide, Lammastide and Harvest.) This both honours those in our churches who are working on the land and helps those of us who are not to appreciate our dependency on it.

One ‘sacred time’ that is growing in popularity is the Season of Creation (sometimes called Creationtide), which runs from September 1 to October 4, the feast day of St Francis. This is a period when churches around the world can particularly focus on caring for God’s wider creation, through their worship, teaching and practical action. There are good resources available online to help with this.¹⁰ But, whether or not you want to make use of a particular set time, it is good for us to think about how we celebrate the sacred moments of our church lives, and whether the understanding of creation and God as creator that we have been developing through this book is part of those times, or whether it is neglected. As British Baptist minister and theologian Chris Voke says, ‘The vision of the triune God as the creator, recognition of the createdness and dependence of human beings upon God, and a stress on responsibility towards the world in which the Creator has placed us . . . are essential parts of the story [that should be] told in Christian public worship.’¹¹

One way to do this is to get outside! You could go out as a church to a nearby park or into your churchyard and hold a service there, closer to the natural world. You could collect leaves and reflect on the verses we looked at in Chapter Three from Psalm 1, thinking through how we might meditate on God’s word and be planted in his stream of living water. You could do a litter pick as a church,

taking time together to pray for the people whose rubbish you have collected and asking God to speak to you about their problems and struggles. Or you could spend time looking at the sky and reflecting on Psalm 19: ‘The heavens declare the glory of the Lord’. Ask yourself what strikes you about the sky today and look out for an image in the clouds that reminds you of something about God.¹² Though it is important to be mindful of those with limited physical abilities, the possibilities are endless and you will be surprised at the new life breathed into you and your church as you worship God in the midst of his creation.

Gazing into space

Throughout *Saying Yes to Life*, we are focusing on the world in which we live; the God who made it; our place within it, and how we are to live in relation to the rest of what God has made, both human and non-human. In this chapter, however, Day Four causes us to look beyond this world into the incredible, dizzying space that is . . . well, space, and to remember *all* of this was made by God.

The world is one tiny piece within a vast universe – so vast that I, at least, can scarce comprehend it. The world we inhabit is one planet within a solar system . . . within a galaxy . . . within the universe. Our sun is just one of between 200 billion and 400 billion stars in the Milky Way galaxy, and earth is just one of at least 100 billion planets. There may also be ten billion white dwarfs, a billion neutron stars and a hundred million black holes. And that is just one galaxy out of possibly two trillion galaxies!¹³

The moon is 240,000 miles from the earth, which is the average distance walked by a human being in their lifetime, and if you imagine the sun to be the size of a peanut then the earth would be a grain of salt on its surface. To represent the distance to the nearest star, another peanut would need to be taken 200 miles away. However, that is just a trip round the corner compared to the furthest object seen in our universe, which is GN-z11, a small galaxy observed by the Hubble Space Telescope. It is so far away that the light we observe set off from the galaxy 13.4 billion years ago.

As human beings we are constantly fascinated by whether life might exist beyond our world, as witnessed by all sorts of films and TV series and by the number of claimed UFO sightings. More than three and a half billion years ago, Mars did indeed have the potential for life. It was a blue planet with a lot of its surface covered in water, and organic compounds found in sedimentary rocks have indicated that some of the building blocks of life were present. We may yet discover evidence of the simplest lifeforms on Mars, or indeed on other planets and in places still to be discovered. Mercury, Venus, Earth and Mars all have had the potential for life at some stage in their history, but only Earth has become the flourishing planet that it is today.¹⁴

In our previous chapter we looked down at the ground beneath our feet and what has sprung forth from it. Now, we look up into the vast magnitude of space and see there a different kind of beauty and wonder. Saturn's rings are asteroids, moons and comets, shattered into billions of tiny frozen ice chunks by Saturn's gravity and pulled into gravitational orbit around the planet, glittering brightly. Gas giant Jupiter is a swirl of cold, windy clouds of ammonia and water, floating in an atmosphere of hydrogen and helium, and its famous Great Red Spot is a giant storm bigger than Earth that has been raging for hundreds of years. Close-up images reveal vivid colours twirling into stunning patterns, looking like an abstract painting of oils and watercolours. By contrast, Uranus exists in cold, white, icy magnificence.

Our understanding of the universe is constantly evolving. In Chapter Three we saw how Solomon was known for his great wisdom and insight about plants and trees. How he would have marvelled at the work being done by astronomical scientists today as they push back the frontiers of our knowledge about space! And how we wonder too at the vastness of the universe and at the fact that, amidst the billions of galaxies, stars and planets, we are here, on a tiny planet that is teeming with life. We can only join in with the Psalmist in exclaiming,

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings
that you care for them? (Ps. 8.3–4)

It is not only we human beings who praise the Creator: the heavenly bodies join in too:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world (Ps. 19.1–6).

In Psalm 148, the Psalmist calls on them to join in with the rest of creation in praising our Creator:

Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights above.
Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts.
Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars.
Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies.
(Vv. 1–4)

Polluting the night skies

The experience on Bardsey Island with which we started this chapter was so memorable for me because it was so rare. Most nights I consider it a clear night if I can see Orion and the Big Dipper, and it is a sad reality that most of us are seldom in places that are dark enough at night for us to enjoy the stars in all their splendour. In fact, light pollution is now so bad that more than one third of the human population is no longer able to see the Milky Way.¹⁵ In Chapter One we reflected on NASA's 'black marble' images, realizing that the earth at night is electric with lights criss-crossing the globe.

Light pollution is a challenge not only because it prevents us enjoying the aesthetics of a starry night sky, but because it can have fatal consequences for creatures that use both the dark and light in particular ways. One significant marine problem is the death of

thousands of baby turtles each year in Florida. When they hatch on the beach (generally at night but also in the early morning or late afternoon) they have an inbuilt orientation away from the dark shapes of the dunes towards the brightest direction, which naturally is the sea reflecting the night sky. However, the Florida beaches are lined with properties with artificial lighting that draws the hatchlings away from the sea, ultimately leading to their death by dehydration, predation or being run over.¹⁶

Another aquatic trial is the impact of artificial lighting on frogs and toads. Our world's amphibians are in a state of terrible decline: 40 per cent of all amphibians are threatened with extinction. This is due to a range of factors, such as disease, habitat destruction and their susceptibility to toxic chemicals in waterways, but research on the American toad showed that toads born in places with artificial lighting changed their natural behaviour and did not grow as well as those born in places with limited or no artificial light.¹⁷

Problems associated with light pollution do not only affect water creatures; numerous studies show that artificial light at night causes disruption for millions of migratory birds. It can lead them to become disoriented, and can change their flight behaviour, their sleep patterns and their reproductive capacity. One particular factor has been highlighted with regard to birds that fly at night and use flight calls to communicate with their flock and navigate their passage. Researchers have found that levels of flight calling intensifies when birds are over illuminated areas, suggesting they are becoming increasingly disorientated and need to communicate more. Moreover, although it is not fully understood why, it was also found that flight-calling birds have higher rates of death by crashing into illuminated buildings.¹⁸

To help us appreciate the wonders of the night sky and to enable other creatures to flourish, we need to reduce the amount of light we produce at night. For those of us in countries where solar lamps in the garden are fashionable, we can decide not to use them, however pretty they might look. In many countries, where shops and offices leave their lights on, we could ask them either to turn them off or, if security is an issue, reduce the brightness. And likewise, we can contact our

local authorities and ask them to turn off or lower street lighting and install downward facing lights that transmit less light upwards into the sky. If we are part of a church that shares its building with bats, we can help by ensuring we turn off lighting that is near a bat roost, so as not to cause disturbance and potential abandonment.¹⁹

Hands that flung stars into space

Graham Kendrick, in his beautiful worship song, 'From Heaven You Came (The Servant King)', wrote of how 'hands that flung stars into space' are also hands that 'to cruel nails surrendered'. This provides a glorious way to continue the link between creation and redemption that we have seen in previous chapters, as we are reminded that the Saviour Jesus Christ – the one who in the closing words of the Bible is called 'the bright Morning Star' (Rev. 22.16) – is also the Creator Son of God.

At various points throughout this book we have noted how the work of Jesus is rooted in the natural world – not only in his parables and teaching but also through the seminal moments of his life. He is the Lord of all creation and it should therefore be no surprise that this is the case, or that the winds and the waves obey him. Maybe what is surprising is how often we do not notice it!

Perhaps most obviously in relation to this chapter's focus, Jesus' birth is announced by a great heavenly company of angels, who appear to shepherds on a hillside with their sheep, and by a star that alerts the magi and leads them to where Jesus lies. The Word who was with God and was God in the beginning; the Word through whom all things were made; the Word who brings light into the world . . . his birth is accompanied by a night sky illuminated by the glory of the Lord and by a bright shining star. The heavens do indeed declare the glory of the Lord as, in the incarnation, the Creator takes on the flesh of his creation, and comes to live among us so that we might be redeemed and brought back to life in God. And then, as we have noted previously, his death – as he bears our sin in his earthly body – is accompanied by a dramatic response in the natural world, as the sun stops shining.

British Bible scholar, Richard Bauckham, has written a beautiful poem called *Song of the Shepherds* in which he describes the angelic visitation. Here is one extract, written from the shepherds' perspective:

They say that once, almost before time,
the stars with shining voices
serenaded
the new born world.
The night could not contain their boundless praise.

We thought that just a poem –
until the night
a song of solar glory,
unutterable, unearthly,
eclipsed the luminaries of the night,
as though the world were exorcised of dark
and, coming to itself, began again.

Bauckham reflects passages we have already looked at (Job 38.4, 7; Ps. 19.1–2) and shows the shepherds in a moment of illumination, seeing the truth of those scriptures as the Light of the World is born and the world comes to itself and begins again.²⁰

Sun, moon, stars and the end of the world?

The Bible is full of references to the heavenly bodies created on Day Four, reminding us that the story of salvation unfolds within the physical world: a world of day and night; sunrises and sunsets; starry nights, and the ever continuing rhythm of the seasons. Through it all is the recognition that these daily and yearly patterns come from God and are part of how he has ordained the world to be: 'The day is yours, and yours also the night; you established the sun and the moon. It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth; you who made both summer and winter' (Ps. 74.16–17); and it is God who 'causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous

and the unrighteous' (Matt. 5.45). The astronomical bodies both praise God themselves through the very wonder of their existence, and inspire our praise of him too, as we marvel at the enormity of what lies beyond us. But there is one particular way in which the sun, moon and stars are used in the Bible that we need to spend some time considering, and that is their use in texts that take us into the area of eschatology, or talk about the 'end times' (coming from the words *eschatos*: 'last', and *logos*: 'word').

When I was a young pre-teenager, I loved a Christian band called The Reps. One of my favourite songs on my cassette tape had the chorus, 'And the Moon shines red in the sky, And we can't change a thing, however we try. The trumpet sounds and the people run, but they cannot hide, Jesus Christ has come.' Some of those words are from Scripture, with the trumpet sound a reference from 1 Cor. 15.52. In particular, the moon shining red comes from Joel's prophecy about 'the last days' when God will pour out his Spirit on all people, which Peter also uses in his speech at Pentecost. God says:

I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.
The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.
(Acts 2.20–21)

This is just one of a number of references in the Bible, particularly from the time of the Old Testament prophets and into the New Testament, in which the sun, moon and/or stars are used to talk about the future times (eg. Isa. 13.9–10; Isa. 34.4; Lk. 21.25; Rev. 8.10–12).

What do these passages mean? Is the language to be taken literally, along with other passages that seem to speak about what will happen at 'the end' or are there other ways of understanding it? Certainly there is a very strong strand within Christian theology that does view such passages as plain fact. The Left Behind series is one of the most obvious examples of this:

The Bible teaches that at a time no one knows (thus all date-setting is folly), Jesus Christ will appear from Heaven in the clouds and true believers will be caught up to be with Him (1 Thess. 4.13–18), then comes the Tribulation (Rev. 6–19), culminating with the Battle of Armageddon and the Glorious Appearing (Matt. 24.29–31 and Rev. 19.11–21). Finally, the Millennium (the 1,000-year kingdom of peace when Christ shall rule while Satan is bound), after which He will set up a new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21).²¹

However, in order to understand these biblical passages correctly, we need to see that they fit within the genre of apocalyptic writing. Apocalyptic literally means ‘revelation’ and there is a strong tradition within Jewish literature of a heavenly being giving someone a vision of the future or of another dimension of worldly reality. The aim of this type of writing is not so much to answer questions we may have about how the universe is going to end and what events might take place as that happens. Rather, it is to speak to the people of God about their current situation – be that exile or persecution – to lift their eyes above their hardships in order to gain the ‘God’s-eye view’ on where they are and an understanding of their place in the unfolding of history. As Richard Bauckham explains in his writing on the book of Revelation, ‘The effect of John’s visions . . . is to expand his readers’ world, both spatially (into heaven) and temporally (into the eschatological future) or, to put it another way, to open their world to divine transcendence . . . It is not that the here-and-now are left behind in an escape into heaven or the eschatological future, but that the here-and-now look quite different when they are opened to transcendence.’²²

The language of apocalyptic writing is not meant to be taken literally. If I were to tell a friend ‘my world has collapsed’, they would know that something terrible has happened, but would not assume that the physical world around me had literally fallen apart. Or, to use an English expression, if I were to run indoors soaking wet, and exclaim, ‘It’s raining cats and dogs out there!’, you would expect it to be pouring with rain – you wouldn’t expect to see cats and dogs literally

falling from the skies. Apocalyptic language is poetic and evocative, designed to express theological realities and the enormity of events such as the overthrow and downfall of an oppressive regime. With that in mind, we need to be careful not to interpret words that are about an event in this present time and age with words that are concerned with the final future of the world. Sometimes it can be hard to distinguish between them. For example, the passage from Luke about the coming of the Son of Man (21.25–28) has traditionally been taken to describe the signs that will accompany Jesus’ second coming. Tom Wright, however, argues strongly that this is a misinterpretation and that Jesus’ words are actually about the forthcoming fate of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection, and the oncoming fall of Jerusalem that took place in AD70.²³ This is not to deny that there are other places in the New Testament that talk about Jesus returning to his world (1 Thess. 4.13–5.11 being the obvious one), just that this passage, with its references to wars, earthquakes, pestilences and famines, should not be taken out of its original, historical context and made into something that it is not.

The conclusion we can draw, therefore, is that passages about the moon turning blood red and the stars falling from the sky shouldn’t be taken literally, nor are they always about the ‘end times’. By way of another example, Joel’s words about the day of the Lord in 3.15 – ‘the sun and moon will be darkened, and the stars no longer shine’ – are clearly about the immediate, historical restoration of Israel to her land after exile, not about an end-of-the-world ‘day of the Lord’. We must be wary of lifting passages out of the Scriptures and claiming they tell us exactly what is going to happen at some indeterminate time.

However, that does not mean we can say nothing about the future of creation. Indeed, it is vitally important that we understand what we can say because what we believe about this impacts how we live today. It is worth noting that when questions of eschatology feature in the New Testament letters, it is always to inspire a response in the present: ‘Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing’ (after Paul’s words about the coming of Christ, 1 Thess. 5.11); ‘Therefore, my brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the

Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain' (after Paul's discussion on the resurrection body, 1 Cor. 15.58); 'What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look to the day of God and speed its coming (after Peter's teaching on the eschatological day of the Lord, 2 Pet. 3.11–12). As German theologian Jürgen Moltmann has said, 'From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present.'²⁴

So how does eschatology impact on the things we are looking at in *Saying Yes to Life*? If what we believe about tomorrow affects how we live today, that is no more true than when thinking about how we live as Christians in relation to the wider creation around us. At every talk I give and every interview I do for the Christian media, I can guarantee I will be asked a question along the lines of, 'But what about the belief that this world is going to be destroyed? Does that mean it's a waste of time to care for it now?' There are a number of excellent books on eschatology that I recommend reading if this is something you would like to think through more fully. I cannot hope to do justice to the topic here or cover every relevant part of the Bible, so please do look at the 'further resources' section at <www.spckpublishing.co.uk/saying-yes-resources>. Nonetheless, there are some themes that are important for us to consider in the context of this chapter.

I can remember as a little girl standing outside my parents' back door on the patio, looking up to the skies and saying to Jesus, 'Dear Jesus, please could you say hello to Granny from me and give her my love?' I had not carefully considered theology on which to base my prayer, but a natural instinct that, wherever Granny was, she was with Jesus in some way. And actually I believe that aspects of that prayer are still right and that Granny was – and is – being held in Jesus' presence until the time when he returns (though whether or not Jesus can pass on a message from me to her is a question that will have to remain unanswered for now).

I can also remember thinking about the concept of eternity and being with God in some immaterial, ethereal place for ever . . . and ever . . . and ever . . . and ever . . . and ever . . . and experiencing something like vertigo

at the thought, feeling a bit guilty because I wasn't sure if it really sounded that appealing! Thankfully, my more recent consideration of the subject has given me a different perspective, one that I believe is more strongly rooted in Scripture.

For many years, the dominant view within Christianity has been that, at some point in the future, God will destroy this world in judgement and we will spend eternity in heaven. In popular culture and classical art this has been portrayed as a place in the skies with clouds and angels strumming harps. Billy Graham was very clear when he said, 'My home is in heaven. I'm just traveling through this world', and in the 1970s, Christian rock legend Larry Norman reflected a similar view with his album, 'Only Visiting This Planet', and the song, 'I Wish We'd All Been Ready'. This was about the view held by some Christians that when Jesus returns, those who are still alive will be caught up in the air and taken off to heaven, along with those already dead who will be raised, leaving behind those who are not Christians (an interpretation known as the Rapture). Wangari Maathai talked of how a popular song at funerals in Kenya is the American Gospel one, 'This World is Not My Home', with the lyric, 'My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.'²⁵ We see this view today when we sing the wonderful hymn, 'How Great Thou Art', based on a nineteenth-century Swedish poem, with the line, 'When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation, and take me home . . .'

So what and where is our home? Is it true that it is not the earth and we are 'only visiting this planet'? And, wherever our home is, what is the future for this world and indeed for the universe? In order to work towards some answers, let us start by reminding ourselves of a number of key things we have explored over the course of this book so far. In Chapter One we saw the link between redemption and creation: that the saving God is also the creating God. As Paul affirms in his opening declaration to the Colossian church (Col. 1.19–20), Jesus' blood shed on the cross has brought peace for all things – not only people, but all things in heaven and on earth. In Chapter Two we considered the concept of God withdrawing to make space for his creation, and therefore the inherent connection between God and

that which he has made. In Chapter Three we reaffirmed the essential goodness of creation and the need to avoid a dualism that creates a false separation between physical and unphysical, earth and heaven, and sees earth as inferior to heaven. God's physical creation is loved by him and given value because he looks at it and declares each part of it good. We also saw the importance of the land as an integral part of the story of salvation; that it mattered to God how his people treated the land and its inhabitants – both human and non-human – and that the glimpses of the future in Revelation 21 and 22 give a picture of a garden city with land, trees and water.

The biblical passages that relate specifically to eschatology are tricky, particularly in the New Testament, with strange images that can be difficult to interpret. However, the themes above form the foundation for how we navigate biblical eschatology as a whole. So let us look now at three key passages that are important to this understanding.²⁶

The first is Isaiah 65.17–25. There are many other passages in the Old Testament where prophets speak of the future hope of God's people, but this one needs noting because it is the passage that the prophet John quotes when he talks about seeing a 'new heaven and a new earth' (Rev. 21.1). The context for these words is the time when the people had returned from exile and were looking forward to the rebuilding of their nation (the same sort of time period covered in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah).²⁷ The words are clearly spoken into that situation, but contained within them are the seeds of a wider hope for the eschatological future. We see here what we have noted already: the future hope that developed in the Old Testament, upon which the earliest Christian thinking was built and with which Jesus would have been so familiar, had a very physical dimension and encompassed the wider natural world and human society, people and animals living together peaceably.

Given the historical context of these words, it becomes immediately obvious that when this passage talks about 'a new heavens and a new earth' it does not literally mean the creation of completely new entities, but is speaking poetically to describe a situation of radical renewal. My elder daughter recently took a pair of scissors and a needle and thread to a t-shirt of hers, did some clever things with them, came

downstairs proudly and said to me, 'Look Mum, I've got a new top!' It was clearly the original t-shirt, but it looked very different: it had been transformed.

The second passage is 2 Peter 3, in which Peter writes about the day of the Lord and what will happen. Verse 10 in particular has been a foundational text for the view that the world will be destroyed, based on the King James Version translation which reads, 'But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.' From that reading a destruction-of-the-earth view is entirely understandable. However, as Steven Bouma-Prediger has put it, 'This verse represents perhaps the most egregious mistranslation of the New Testament.'²⁸

Our Bible translations are based on a variety of different manuscripts. There is not only one New Testament in the original Greek which translators then translate into their own language: there may be a number of manuscripts for one passage, dating from different times. These manuscripts often have variations in them and scholars have to decide which ones are the most reliable, one of the accepted criteria being that earlier manuscripts are best. In the case of 2 Peter 3.10, the KJV is based on a couple of manuscripts that use the Greek word, *katakaesetai*, 'will be burnt up' for the end of the verse, but most of the manuscripts considered the earliest and therefore the most reliable, actually use a different Greek word, *heurethesetai*. New Testament scholars think that those who wrote those manuscripts did not understand why *heurethesetai* was used and therefore changed the wording so it made more sense to them.

Heurethesetai carries the meaning of 'will be found' or 'will be discovered' (similar to 'eureka!') and is a positive term. It links to the words earlier in the chapter about creation and the flood (where the flood brought about a new creation that had not entirely obliterated the first, but had destroyed that which was sin and not of God). It also links to the fire of judgment of verses 7, 10 and 12 which, reflecting Malachi 3.2–3, can be seen as akin to the refiner's fire which burns up the dross so that the good might shine through.²⁹ The South African

Revd Rachel Mash, who we met in Chapter Two, told me that after recent fires in Cape Town, an amazing array of flowers bloomed, which gave her a fresh perspective on this passage. Tom Wright acknowledges that 2 Peter 3.10 is 'a difficult and obscure text, and likely to remain so', but reaches this conclusion:

The worldview we find is not that of the dualist who hopes for creation to be abolished, but of one who, while continuing to believe in the goodness of creation, sees that the only way to the fulfilment of the creator's longing for a justice and goodness which will replace the present evil is for a process of fire, not simply to consume, but also to purge.³⁰

Our third passage is Revelation 21 and 22, with its beautiful picture of 'a new heaven and a new earth'. It describes the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming out of heaven, with the river of the water of life flowing through it from the throne of God, and the trees of life (that we first meet in Genesis 2.9) standing on each side of the river, bearing fruit and giving their leaves for the healing of the nations. It is a truly stunning conclusion to the biblical story, and one we have commented on a few times already as we have seen how our themes of light, water, land and trees have found their place in this final narrative.

There is a great deal that may be said about these chapters, but we will restrict ourselves to two points. First, we need to note the recurrence of the new heaven/new earth language we have already encountered in both Isaiah 65 and 2 Peter 3. In New Testament Greek there are two words for new – *kaine* and *neos* – and they would appear to be used interchangeably. In the English language, we tend to think of 'new' as meaning something completely different – if I got a new car it would be a totally different entity to my old car. But, in a similar manner to my elder daughter's t-shirt, both Greek words can sometimes mean something that is not totally new, but rather something that is renewed or transformed.³¹

So, for example, Paul talks of there being a 'new creation' if anyone is in Christ (2 Cor. 5.17). When you became a Christian you didn't become a totally new human being, one your friends could not

recognize and had to ask, 'Who are you?' And yet . . . maybe you did become someone so transformed that your new behaviour prompted them to wonder, 'Who are you?!' The Greek for 'New Testament' is *kaine diatheke*, literally 'new covenant'. We do not understand this to mean that the Old Testament is replaced and no longer needed (so we stop reading it, as happened with the Marcionite heresy), but as being fulfilled and transformed.

As we have considered already, such a use of 'new' carries within it both continuity and discontinuity. We get some insight into this when we think of Jesus' post-resurrection body. There was continuity in that he could walk, break bread and cook, and Thomas could physically touch his scars; and yet there was discontinuity as he could appear and disappear and he was not always immediately recognizable. One of our key challenges as we envision what a renewed heaven and earth might look like is to hold together both continuity and discontinuity, not allowing either to overpower the other. Too much discontinuity negates the biblical witness that this physical universe is valued by God and will not be completely replaced; too much continuity negates the witness of contemporary science that this universe will come to an end, and the need, therefore, for the transforming action of our faithful God.³²

Second, Tom Wright (and others) has long argued against the view that our eternal future is in a non-physical heaven: heaven ('God's space') is a place where we will rest while we wait for the Lord to return.³³ Our final destiny is on the united and transformed heaven and earth, within a transformed universe.³⁴ It seems to me that the picture we are given in Revelation 21 and 22 is a wonderful vision of just that reality. The Holy City comes down out of heaven to earth, but it is a transformed earth unlike the one we know now. There is no more suffering or death, no more sadness and tears (quoting Isaiah 25.8). Human relationships are restored, and God now dwells with his people. The sea – representing chaos and wickedness, as we saw in Chapter One – has gone, symbolizing that all evil has been destroyed. The vision of heaven in Revelation 4, with its description of the living creatures praising God, presumably does not change when heaven comes down to earth, leaving us finally with a holistic picture of God and his creation, living and worshipping him together as we were originally intended to do.

Living in hope

Where does all this talk about heaven and earth, sun, moon and stars leave us as we draw this chapter to a close? Perhaps the first thing to say is that our call to take care of this world and all its creatures – including human creatures of course – does not ultimately rest on any particular eschatological view. As we are seeing throughout *Saying Yes to Life*, there is plenty else in the Scriptures that leads us in that direction.

Nonetheless, for too many people the belief that this world is going to be destroyed has been held hand-in-hand with the assumption that we need not bother looking after it now (a view that does not rest on strong biblical foundations).

What we have explored instead is a theology of the future that anticipates God transforming this present reality. Romans 8 looks forward to this time, when the children of God will be revealed and creation will be set free from its bondage to decay. As Tom Wright says, 'Creation will enjoy the freedom which comes when God's children are glorified – in other words, the liberation which will result from the sovereign rule, under the overlordship of Jesus the Messiah, of all those who are given new, resurrection life by the Spirit'.³⁵

This is a wonderful vision that motivates our hopeful action today. Director of Langham Partnership, Chris Wright puts it like this:

Ecological action now is both a creational responsibility from the Bible's beginning, and also an eschatological sign of the Bible's *ending* – and new beginning. Christian ecological action points towards and anticipates the restoration of our proper status and function in creation. It is to behave as we were originally created to, and as we shall one day be fully redeemed for.³⁶

Therefore, every action we choose to take that looks after this world (even when it's raining . . . or too hot . . . or inconvenient . . . or maybe more expensive . . . or not the usual thing to do and makes us look different . . .) shows our wish to live in anticipation of the future that Jesus' death on the cross and the presence of his Holy Spirit guarantees, and we move towards towards the future glory that God will reveal through his creation.

For discussion

- 1 Don't miss this chapter's interview with Professor Sir Martin Rees, Astronomer Royal and former Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and President of the Royal Society. You can watch it at <www.spckpublishing.co.uk/saying-yes-resources>.
- 2 How much is the wider creation brought into your church worship gatherings? Is it naturally incorporated into your prayers, songs, liturgies (if you use them) and sermons? How could you help that happen more? Use the suggestions earlier in the chapter or the online resources to do something outside as a church.
- 3 This chapter has had a strong focus on eschatology. Are there things in it that are new to you or that you don't understand? If you are in a Lent group, talk these things through together.
- 4 Do you feel the stretch of living in 'the overlapping of the ages'? How do you manage that tension? In what ways does the eschatology in this chapter motivate how you live now?
- 5 Look back over the last chapters and reflect on – or discuss with others – what things you have committed to do and whether or not you have done them.

A prayer on the sun, moon and stars from the Philippines

Our heavenly Father, as we look up to you in the vastness
of the skies,
The sun that you have made opens our eyes to a world lit in
colour and clarity,
And the moon and the stars remind us of your faithfulness and
steadfast presence,
Amidst the seasons of darkness and our community's
moments of uncertainty.
Lord Jesus, you have shown us how from beginning to end was
the light of love,
That as endless as the heavens above so is the grace that sustains
all things,

Saying yes to life

So with faith that the Spirit has wrought in us, we seek the care
every creature is to have,
As we dream, hope, and labor for a future wrapped in the fullness
of joy that your new creation brings.

Amen.

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integral mission based in Manila, Philippines.*