

Heaven Misplaced



Also by the author:

Easy Chairs, Hard Words
Conversations on the Liberty of God

Five Cities That Ruled the World

For a Glory and a Covering
A Practical Theology of Marriage

Future Men

Her Hand in Marriage
Biblical Courtship in a Modern World

Is Christianity Good for the World?

Joy at the End of the Tether
The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes

Mother Kirk
Essays on Church Life

My Life for Yours
A Walk Through the Christian Home

A Primer on Worship and Reformation
Recovering the High Church Puritan

Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning
An Approach to Distinctively Christian Education

Reforming Marriage



HEAVEN
MISPLACED

CHRIST'S KINGDOM ON EARTH

DOUGLAS WILSON

canonpress
Moscow, Idaho



Published by Canon Press
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843
800-488-2034 | www.canonpress.com

Douglas Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced: Christ's Kingdom on Earth*
Copyright © 2008 by Douglas Wilson.

Cover design by David Dalbey. Printed in the United States of America.

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 prior permission of the author, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Scripture taken from the King James Version or New King James Version, unless otherwise noted. All emphases in the verses quoted are the author's. NKJV, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wilson, Douglas, 1953-

Heaven misplaced : Christ's kingdom on earth / Douglas Wilson.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59128-051-4 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-59128-051-6 (pbk.)

1. Eschatology.
2. Christianity--Forecasting.
3. Christianity--21st century.
4. Church history--21st century. I. Title.

BT821.3.W55 2007

236--dc22

2007035256

08 09 10 11 12 13 14 15

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



For
LUKE JANKOVIC,
father of faithful generations,
full of hope and love



CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	9
1. On the Mountain of the Lord	13
2. Heaven Misplaced	19
3. What Abraham Saw	31
4. Hope Incarnate	39
5. Inexorable Love	49
6. The Strong Man Bound	61
7. What the Angels Said	67
8. At the Name of Jesus	75
9. Therefore Go	83
10. All Ends of Earth	91
11. Learning to Read the Promises	95
12. And the Stars Fell Out of the Sky.	105
13. 666 and All That	111
14. The New Humanity	117
15. Completely Nuts.	127
16. Epilogue	131
<i>A Brief Glossary: Appendix A</i>	135
<i>For Further Reading: Appendix B</i>	139



INTRODUCTION

This is a book about the future history of our world, about the future and destiny of the human race. Since the future is not something we are permitted to see directly—only God sees the end from the beginning—in order for this book to be anything other than an exercise in conceit, it has to be based squarely on what God has revealed to us in His Word. What has God actually *promised* us? Only God knows the end from the beginning, and while He has not given us every detail about the future, He has in fact revealed a great deal to us.

But unfortunately, what has been given to us has been greatly obscured by discouraging and mistaken assumptions. Most Christians believe in one way or another that the history of our planet is going to go from bad to worse, accelerating as we get near the end. At the same time, all Christians believe that after human history is over, and the day of resurrection is past, our experience will be one glory replaced by a greater glory, one after the other, world without end. No Christian is pessimistic about final glory. But most Christians are pessimistic about the course of history prior to the Second Coming of Christ. In this view, the world is God's Vietnam, and the return of Christ consists of the few lucky ones helicoptered off a roof during the fall of Saigon. When we get out of *here*, then there will be good times—but not before.

The view advanced in this book is almost precisely the reverse. This book is an introduction to historical optimism. This is the view that the gospel will continue to grow and flourish throughout the world, more and more individuals will be converted, the nations will stream to Christ, and the Great Commission will finally be *successfully* completed. The earth will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. When that happens, generation after generation will love and serve the Lord faithfully. And then the end will come.

But I have already noted that most Christians don't think this way, and so admittedly this is going to be a tough sell. This could quite possibly include many who decide (for various reasons) to read this book. So let's make an arrangement, you and me.

Whenever someone picks up a work of fiction, there is an implied arrangement between the author and the reader, something the author counts on and the reader gives him, and that something is called "the willing suspension of disbelief." Someone can really enjoy *The Lord of the Rings* and agree to temporarily set aside his knowledge that orcs and elves are not exactly real. But once the reader is in story grip, the story comes alive and is made real to him because of that willing suspension of disbelief. Even if the reader does not really "believe in it" after he has closed the book, he still knows the story far better than he would have if he had been saying, "yeah, right" every other page. He knows the story "from within," even if he cannot accept it at the last.

So let's take the example of Tolkien's great work. He was once asked whether he believed that Middle Earth was real. His reply was, "One hopes." Even a work of fiction, if it is compelling enough, can awaken a deep desire for it to have been true. So here is my proposal. There are many Christians who believe that the future of our world (prior to the Second Coming) is bleak indeed. I am asking them to read this little book as though it were a work of fiction. Just for a short while, I am asking for that willing suspension of disbelief. And if that request is granted, then I believe that a striking feature of this kind of historical optimism will become plain. Every Christian can agree on one thing at least. Wouldn't it be glorious if this really *were* true?

For my part, I want to write as though it were a story because it actually concerns the most wonderful story in the world—which, as it turns out is the story of the world. And this means that a few things will be different. For example, this story I’m asking you to suspend disbelief about is built on passages that are probably familiar to you. However, there are different ways to understand many of them, so I’m going to suggest a take that may be unfamiliar—you’ll see the difference when the story is told that way. So yes, this is a work of theology, and I will be referring to many Scripture passages. But I don’t want to assemble a rock pile of proof texts. My goal, corresponding to the request I have made of the reader, will be to try to demonstrate how *lovely* this belief is.

This is an exercise, not so much in systematic theology,† but in lyrical theology.† Of course, if it is not true, then it doesn’t matter how lovely it is. We have all had some pretty good daydreams. But if it is altogether lovely, then perhaps some might be persuaded to reconsider if it might actually be true. And if that point is reached, it will become possible to build one’s Christian life on *the foundation of all encouragement*.

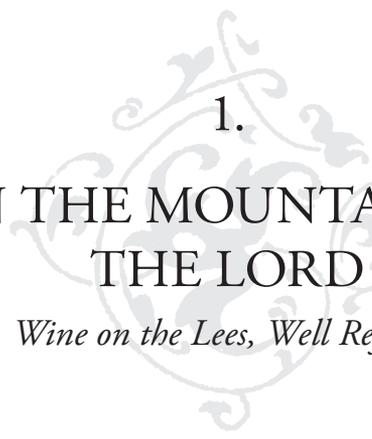
Do I really believe that, prior to the return of Christ, the earth will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea? Do I really believe that all the nations of men will stream to their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ? Do I really believe that Jesus Christ is the desire of nations? I really do. And I hope by the time we are done with this short book, the unconvinced reader will at least be able to say, “One hopes.”



† **systematic theology:** *the attempt to organize Christian doctrine into an articulate pattern.*

† **lyrical theology:** *a term first used by S.T. Kimbrough, Jr. in 1984, to describe theology that is couched in poetry, hymns and songs, and liturgy. It is characterized by rhythm and expressive of emotion and sentiment. (<http://theology-today.ptsem.edu/tt-V63-1-abstracts.htm>)*



A decorative floral emblem with intricate scrollwork and leaf patterns, centered behind the title.

1.
ON THE MOUNTAIN OF
THE LORD

Wine on the Lees, Well Refined

In his great sermon “The Weight of Glory,” C.S. Lewis has an astute observation—he refers to the reality of the coming resurrection in this way: “We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get *in*.”¹

The point here is not to take anything away from the glory of Lewis’ observation. But it does need to be said that the pages of the *Old* Testament were rustling with a magnificent expectation also. These prophecies and glimmers and glorious sketches looked forward expectantly to the coming of the Messiah, and not only to the coming of the Messiah, but to everything else that He would bring with Him. We celebrate this every Christmas, but we sometimes don’t pay close enough attention to the wording of these inspired rumors and rustlings.

In chapter seven of Isaiah, we read this:

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign: Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. (Is. 7:14)

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 13.

Two chapters later, continuing the same great theme, the prophet tells us that the Messiah will come from Galilee of the nations.

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. (Is. 9:2; cf. Mt. 4:16)

The thing we must realize is that these prophecies concern far more than just the arrival of the baby Jesus. The prophet Isaiah has more on his mind than providing feel-good quotes for our Christmas cards. Here is something he says in the next breath, something that has shown up on numerous Christmas cards. But we need to stop for a moment and reflect *on what he is actually saying*.

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and *the government shall be upon his shoulder*: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. *Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end*, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this. (Is. 9:6–7)

When the Christ comes, He will be born of a virgin. When He comes, He will be Immanuel—God with us. When He comes, we will call Him the Prince of Peace. Is that all? Is that it? No—the prophet explicitly tells us that the Messiah is going to accomplish a revolution in the government of heaven and earth. This Son that is given to us will take the government upon His shoulder. The results will be gradual, not instantaneous—but persistent and steady. Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end. When the Messiah comes, He will assume His rightful place on the throne of David, as He has done, and He is going to establish His kingdom in judgment and justice. That process will begin when the child is born, and the prophecy will be fulfilled completely “henceforth even for ever.” If anyone still doubts, remember that the zeal of the Lord of hosts will make sure it happens.

Historical optimism about Christ’s kingdom on earth means that we believe—because the child was born two millennia ago—

that since that time, the increase of His government and peace has been unceasing. We believe that the government *is* on His shoulder, not that it *should* be. Jesus believed the same thing, because when He sent His disciples out, it was with this truth as the basis for the commission. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt. 28:18, NIV).

For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. (1 Cor. 15:25–26)

In the common assumption shared by many Christians, at the Lord’s return the *first* enemy to be destroyed is death. But the apostle here says that it is the last enemy to be destroyed. The Lord will rule from heaven, progressively subduing all His enemies through the power of the gospel, brought to the nations by His Church. And then, when it would be easy to believe that it just couldn’t get any better, the Lord will come and deliver the kingdom to His Father, and God will be all in all.

But there is something else. What will it be like as His kingdom grows and expands? What will happen to our sin-plagued world as His government and peace increases?

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice’ den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea. And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse,† which shall stand for an ensign of the people;



† **root of Jesse:** *At the beginning of this chapter, Isaiah prophesies that “there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots” (Is. 11:1). This Branch is Jesus, a descendant of King David, whose father was Jesse.*



to it shall the Gentiles seek: and his rest shall be glorious. (Is. 11:6–10)

Now this language is admittedly over the top. It is so over the top that most Christians just relegate it to some time after the Lord comes again. That is the only way they can see that a fulfillment could ever be possible.

But there is a slight problem with this view. The glorious language, the too-good-to-be-true language is in the first half of this passage: predatory beasts become herbivores, and little kids are playing with the cobras. This has to be after the resurrection, right? This has to be after the close of history, doesn't it? No—because verse 10, the one that begins with the words, “And in that day,” is quoted by the apostle Paul in Romans 15, justifying his mission to the Gentiles two thousand years ago:

And again, Esaias saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust. (Rom. 15:12)

The great apostle Paul is appealing to Isaiah as a justification for *his* preaching to the Gentiles. And since then, we have had two thousand years of the Lord's government and peace increasing.

I asked earlier what the characteristics of His rule would be. The passage from Isaiah 11 should take your breath away. The earth will be as full of the knowledge of God as the Pacific Ocean is wet. The root of Jesse will be put up as an emblem, and all the Gentile nations will *stream* to Him. And when they put their trust in Him, they will become people of God and will be taken up to the Lord's holy mountain. What is that mountain like?

And in this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall

he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it. (Is. 25:6–8)

The Lord Himself will make a banquet to end all banquets. The feast will be for all people, and it will be a feast full of marbled beef. The best wine, the aged wine, will be served to all men, and as the banquet is served it will culminate in the destruction of death itself. The Lord will wipe every tear away.

And as we see in Romans, all this happens in the course of history, *not after history is over*. When death is destroyed, as mentioned here, *that* is when the Lord comes. But the coming of the Lord delivers the *coup de grace* to the last, most persistent enemy, death. The growth of the kingdom of God prior to that finale—the establishment of the mountain of the Lord on the earth—has subdued every lesser enemy.

Jesus Christ has ascended to the right hand of God the Father, and in that place He has been given universal rule and authority now. And the Bible says that He will remain seated there until all His enemies are made His footstool.

The LORD said unto my Lord, “Sit thou at my right hand, *until* I make thine enemies thy footstool.” (Ps. 110:1)

The Lord reigns from heaven, exercising all rule and dominion. From that place He will destroy every enemy, and every thought that sets itself up against the knowledge of God (2 Cor. 10:1–5).

The Lord’s promises to us are truly staggering, and it is not surprising that we cannot get our minds completely around it. But He delights to give to His people, and one of the greatest gifts that He has given to us *is the future*.

But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. (1 Cor. 2:9)

We must fix it in our hearts and minds that these staggering promises do not begin to be fulfilled at the close of history. They *began* to be fulfilled when a child was born, when a Son was given. What

is the future of this world, prior to the Lord's coming, going to be like? We can't say, because nothing that good has ever entered into the heart of man. We are slow to believe all that is promised, but the glorious fruition is headed our way nonetheless.

Questions for Discussion:

Once the "willing suspension of disbelief" has been granted, this affects the reading of many passages that have a "face value" that is very different than our accustomed reading.

1. Once the Messiah comes, what will His government and peace do? What are the implications of this?
2. When did the apostle Paul locate the beginning of the fulfillment of Isaiah's great prophecy?
3. When the root of Jesse is established as a standard, what will all the Gentile nations do?