



## **INTO THE CRYSTAL BALL**

Wouldn't it be nice to have a crystal ball that allowed you to see into the future? This handy tool could help you figure out whether you are wasting your time taking advanced calculus. You could know whether the girl or guy who just broke your heart could still be the one you will eventually marry. Maybe you could catch a glimpse of what your life is going to look like 15 years from now. Will you have a family? Will you be happy? How will you spend your time? Are you going to college? If so, which one? At one time or another, most everyone has wished they could know how a difficult situation is going to work out. Wouldn't it be nice some days to know how your life is going to work out in the future?

Now stretch this a little further: When we look into the crystal ball, what does the world look like? Can you imagine what those questions above might be if we stopped to think about the whole world? Where is the world going? Is everything eventually just going down the drain? Are things going to get better and better until one day there is no suffering? Are we all going to end up in some fiery, destructive mess at the end of the world? Should we even bother with being good stewards of the earth if God is just going to destroy it all one day anyway? What do you think you'd see if you looked into the crystal ball and saw the whole world and not just your whole life? What would the world look like? Don't rush here. Take some time to think about this. Where do you think the world is heading? Take a minute (on page 17)—draw or paint a picture, write down some ideas, make a list of adjectives that describe the end of the world, or simply try to imagine where you think the world is headed.<sup>4</sup>

Growing up, I don't think anyone ever sat me down and told me that the world was one day going to explode into a fiery mess. However, as far as I could sense, it seemed like things weren't going to end well for this world of ours. So over the years of growing up in church, I could never quite get a good sense of the future of our world and the people in it. My impression was that this world wasn't going to end well and it didn't matter if we messed it up further. I thought there wasn't much hope in trying to make the world a better place. There was simply too much wrong for things to change, and it was useless to hope for anything better.

*Where do you think  
the world is heading?*

Somehow over those years, I developed a sense that many of the people in the churches I had been a part of thought that trying to change the world for the better was simply an exercise in futility (or that only super-Christians worried about the direction the world was taking and thought they could make a difference). Yet I never became convinced they were right. For whatever reason, when I imagined what the world would look like in the crystal ball, I thought things might actually get better. Not because of some magic capabilities that human beings would come up with, but because I thought God was on a mission to restore and reconcile the world to its intended way of existence. It wasn't hard for me to see that human beings were often bent on destroying the world; however, this seemed to fly in the face of God. God seemed to be on a mission to reconcile the whole cosmos and everything in it to himself; yet humans were often doing all they could to dismantle the world. Humanity was making a mess, not just environmentally but through vicious wars, poverty, the shattering of families, broken friendships, and worse. I had this creeping feeling that I needed to trust God and believe that his mission could not be stopped. At the same time, it seemed like humans were constantly thwarting God's hopes and dreams for our world.

Now I realize that it is ridiculous to think there might actually be some crystal ball out there that we could look into to see the future; however, our thoughts on what the future holds will not only affect our understanding of what the future looks like but profoundly impact the

way we live today. It seems to me that our impression of the future and thoughts of what God is up to severely impact our ability to live into the hope of God for our lives. Where is the world headed? Are we headed toward reconciliation and restoration, or are we headed toward destruction and brokenness? Either way, what do you and I have to do with the future of the world?

In Revelation, one of the most confusing and intriguing books of the Bible, we read words that describe images and stories of what things are going to be like when God's kingdom will one day be on earth as in heaven. There is an image in Revelation chapter 7 that seems to spark hope for what our future reality will become. It is a larger-than-life image of people of various nations, speaking different languages, with different colors of skin, with different backgrounds, all singing praises before God. They are singing praises because there are none who are hungry or without adequate shelter from the sun or without water to drink—no one has any reason to cry. All of them have experienced the saving power of God. In the book of Revelation, we begin to see a hope-filled vision of where the world is headed.

I'd like you to take some time and read Revelation 7:9-17. As you read, take a couple of moments to ask yourself three questions:

- **Who is part of the grand vision?**
- **Who is the source of hope and salvation?**
- **What kind of life and reality are described for these people in verses 15-17?**

Take a moment to reflect on Revelation 7:9-17. If you are somewhere where you can read this aloud, try reading it aloud to yourself. Let the story be heard:

*After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:*

*“Salvation belongs to our God,  
who sits on the throne,  
and to the Lamb.”*

*All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:*

*“Amen!  
Praise and glory  
and wisdom and thanks and honor  
and power and strength  
be to our God for ever and ever.  
Amen!”*

*Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”*

*I answered, “Sir, you know.”*

*And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore,  
“they are before the throne of God*

*and serve him day and night in his temple;  
and he who sits on the throne  
will spread his tent over them.*

*'Never again will they hunger;  
never again will they thirst.  
The sun will not beat down on them,'  
nor any scorching heat.*

*For the Lamb at the center before the throne  
will be their shepherd;  
'he will lead them to springs of living water.'  
'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'"* (TNIV)

What a glorious image! Can you imagine anything better than a world in which everyone is able to gather together through the unifying power and good work of God, free from suffering and united in salvation? This image of God's profound work and hopeful future may not be found in any crystal ball, but it is found in the collection of stories and letters that God has inspired his people to share and keep, to help us recall the promises of his love. In what can be understood as the new beginning of the last chapter of this grand story of God's, we see that the next stage of life isn't riddled with nuclear explosions or hopeless destruction. No! God's hope and mission are to bring people together into a hopeful reality where there is no longer suffering, poverty, or sin.

This isn't simply for some other world, somewhere "out there." We should be careful to include the end of the story of Revelation, where the author describes how

the new heaven comes down to earth and the world is restored to its intended wholeness. The author, John, writes about this vision of the new heaven becoming the new earth: *“I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God’”* (Revelation 21:2-3).

This is the hopeful end of the story of God’s mission in our world! While I hate to ruin the end for you, it is so important to know the general direction in which the world is headed. Through Christ, God is reconciling the whole world—the entire cosmos—to himself! That means you and me, our families, our friends, our nation, and every nation. God is on a mission to reconcile the whole world to himself and restore the world back to its intended wholeness, the way it was before our sin messed things up.

The good news of Christ is not only that he has provided the means of hope and salvation for us as individuals but also that his work on the cross has provided the means of salvation and hope for the entire world. We don’t know exactly how the events are going to happen, and we don’t know exactly how we are going to get there, but we can have hope in where we are going. The images in Revelation help us to have faith in a hopeful future, creating space for our faith in a future reality where all things are made right through the love and grace of God.

It may seem strange to start talking about hope by focusing on the end of our story and the end of world



to focus on where our ultimate hope may be. However, I believe that the rest of our discussion about sacred hope depends on what we imagine God is up to in the long run. I asked you to take some time at the beginning of this chapter to think about where you believe this world of ours is ultimately headed because I think it has far-reaching implications for the impact of sacred hope on the rest of our lives. N.T. Wright raises this same idea, saying,

What we say about death and resurrection gives shape and color to everything else. If we are not careful, we will offer merely “hope” that is no longer a surprise, no longer able to transform lives and communities in the present, no longer generated by the resurrection of Jesus himself and looking forward to the promised new heavens and new earth.<sup>5</sup>

The long view of sacred hope is that one day those whom God has called and made his own will one day join Jesus in new, resurrected bodies. In these transformed bodies, we will become participants in a new reality, where the new heaven and new earth are joined together and the sin and suffering of our current world will have no power. Instead, we will be able to rejoice in our new home, where God *“will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away”* (Revelation 21:4, TNIV).

The good news is that a new world will be formed, where a new heaven and a new earth will be joined together into a new reality; a new world where we are with God and God is with us and the suffering, despair, and sin of this current world will no longer have power. This

is something we can put our hope in! Through the love and mission of God we are each invited to become participants and members of this new world; a world where the sting of death that we will all one day experience will lose its power and we will enter into new bodies. The old things have gone away; the new has come! Our resurrected bodies will be free from suffering, sin, and the distractions of our current lives; instead, we will be reunited with God and present in the new reality that God has brought about through Christ.

You might think this sounds a little crazy at first. You might be wondering why I haven't been talking about our ultimate hope as getting to heaven, walking the streets of gold, angels playing their peaceful harps and sitting on clouds, and many other images we have in our heads when we hear the word *heaven*. You'd be right to wonder why I haven't been using that language and those images to talk about heaven. As nice as some of those images are, I think they have lost their meaning for many of us. Like many of the students I work with, I too have found it difficult to identify with some of the images that have been used to talk about heaven. They seem too much like a Hallmark card that I've read a hundred times. However, more than this, I have found the imagination and the creativity in the actual stories of Scripture to be even more provocative and hopeful than some of the fairy-tale images I grew up with.

Our ultimate hope should be something that forever rattles and sparks our imaginations and helps us to live better lives today. That ultimate reality—the ending to Act

I of our story on earth and the beginning of Act II in the new heaven and earth—should provide the long-lasting hope of what is to come. It is the beginning of the second leg of the journey but one that is of eternal significance and ultimate hope. In place of all the fractured and broken relationships of our current world, in the new world there will be wholeness. In place of all the oppression, violence, and hatred of our current world, there will be love, unity, and compassion in the new world. In place of all the suffering, poverty, and death, there will be no more tears, no more hunger or thirst, and only life in the new world.

While I can't tell you exactly what the new reality is going to look like, I think we'd be sorely missing the point if we focused on the details instead of the grand vision. It seems to me that the whole point of these awe-inspiring and larger-than-life stories in Revelation is to inspire us to have hope for a reality that is beyond the best world we can imagine. God is on a mission with us, through the power of Jesus, to usher in a new world order that will forever reconcile and restore the entire world and cosmos into right relationship with him. Even if Revelation might not be a scientific account of where the world is headed, it is a creative and prophetic account that helps us to imagine and become inspired about the world God is creating. You might think the story ends with sacred hope being that one day you'll die and through the grace of God you will be able to spend eternity in this new world order. However, this sacred hope of God isn't just good news for the future; it is also good news for today.

So now that we've taken a glance into the crystal ball, or at least explored the stories of Scripture to imagine with God the ultimate hope for our lives, what does this mean for us today? Before we head into the next chapter, I'd like for you to take another minute to think about the initial reflection point: **Where do you think the world is headed?** After reading some of the stories from Scripture, what is your ultimate hope for your life and our world? Take a few minutes, journal some thoughts, write a song, paint a picture, write a prayer, or do whatever you might find helpful to express some of your thoughts about the new world God will create.

*My thoughts and expressions of  
the new world God will create.*