

## ***The New Heaven and Earth***

Let's see what Revelation, using its fantastic symbolism, has to say about heaven. Our New Testament reading is from **Revelation 21:1-7**:

*21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals.*

*He will dwell with them;*

*they will be his peoples,*

*and God himself will be with them;*

*<sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes.*

*Death will be no more;*

*mourning and crying and pain will be no more,*

*for the first things have passed away."*

*<sup>5</sup> And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."<sup>6</sup> Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. <sup>7</sup> Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children.*

Since Nancy's departure to be with the Lord four months ago, I've become more keenly interested in heaven. I suppose all of us have at least someone we love who's now with the Lord Jesus. But no less a Christian scholar than CS Lewis says our interest in the afterlife is justified. He wrote that, though Christians have been accused of thinking too much of heaven, the truth is, we don't think enough of it. Lewis said we are called "pie in the sky" dreamers, longing for heaven. The truth is, he says, unbelievers who think this life is all there is are the real dreamers, thinking they can produce a utopia on earth. Revelation once and for all underscores the persistence of evil that negates all humanistic dreams of peace and prosperity without God. Indeed, history in the past century, with two world wars, and today's world filled with international and intra-national conflict shows how dreamily unrealistic is the notion of utopia. Lewis says that at least the Christian's dreams of heaven are more hopeful and even realistic.

Lewis also notes that those who think most about heaven are most likely to do the most good for this world. It's those who believe in the eventual triumph of justice and final reward of righteousness who work hardest to alleviate human misery in this world. Christians, believing in heaven, are willing to give of themselves and risk their lives in this world for the sake of God and others. In fact, continues Lewis, we as Christians don't think enough of heaven. For if we did, we'd work more zealously, and think more highly of the eternal potential of everyone we meet. It's often said of Christians that we are so heavenly minded

we are of no earthly good; in fact, the opposite is often the case. If we were more heavenly minded we'd be of more earthly good.

The spirits of believers who have died since the beginning of time have gone to heaven, or what is known by the Persian word, *Paradise*. This is the presence of God beyond his creation. Heaven, though not visible to our eyes, is a spatial, material place because Jesus is there, and he has a material, tangible body. The kingdom of the heavens is all around us. We're surrounded by angels even in this sanctuary. The fact that we can't see them doesn't diminish their reality. We'll discover some day that the eternal, unseen kingdom is greater reality, that is, a more substantial and permanent reality than the material world that's passing away. In his resurrection body, Jesus appeared immediately through the barred doors of the Upper Room. The departed are with Jesus, in a temporary body, or dwelling, as Paul calls this disembodied state (2 Corinthians 5:1-10). So, to die in the Lord is to be absent from the body and present with the Lord, in mind and in spirit and personality (Philippians 1:20-24).

Our text tells us that when history is over, and after the final judgment, heaven actually will come to us. Heaven as it now exists as the realm of departed saints and angels with the risen Lord, is temporary. As Scotty Smith says, it's more appropriate to say the new heaven and earth will come to us, rather than we'll go there. When Jesus spoke of the kingdom of heaven he included his presence with us now. He said, "The kingdom of heaven is within you." We need to be aware of the presence of the kingdom all around us. It's the kingdom in the wind around us and in the clouds above us. It's the kingdom of the heavens, and angels are doing God's bidding, and God himself is at work around us. The perfect will of God is being done now only in heaven, among those who now worship at the feet of Jesus and who await their coming to bring the City of God to the now-being redeemed city of man. God's heaven is real, and yet it will descend to take residence in a redeemed creation, inhabited by God's redeemed people, with resurrection bodies.

Heaven will come to this earth, and God will radically remake, transform, and renew his creation, which the first chapters of the Bible say is a very good (Genesis 1). God will have the last word about his creation. The theme of Revelation is that God is sovereign, and his purposes will prevail. He won't let the devil have the last word with what he has made. Paul speaks of how the creation is groaning in travail, waiting for its final redemption. This speaks of a renewal of what is (Romans 8:22).

God will turn his creation inside out, and transform it so it is perfectly suited for his redeemed people, who will have resurrection bodies. Perhaps the molecular structure will be changed. But it will be his creation, with mountains, rivers, and planets and solar systems. Just as our bodies will have continuity with our present bodies, so will the new heaven and earth have continuity with the present creation we enjoy. Like Jesus after his resurrection was recognizable to his

disciples, so we'll recognize and be recognized. I'll know Nancy, but it'll be a new and even more fulfilling relationship (Luke 20:36).

How amazing it is that Jesus wants us to be with him forever! Yet that's exactly his prayer to the Father in his High Priestly Prayer (John 17:24). How amazing that he could love us when we were his enemies, and die for us so we could be with him forever (Romans 5:6-10; 1 John 3:1)! Inhabiting the Holy City will be the redeemed people of God. In the new heaven and earth will be people who are saved by grace are even now being made holy. We read, "Those who conquer will inherit all this...." Not just a profession of faith, but a life-changing faith made possible by grace. Those made new creatures now will inherit the new creation then (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Moses longed to see the face of God (Exodus 33:20). What was denied this great man of God will be our glorious privilege. We will see the full measure of God's glory, and thus will be made like him in perfect holiness (2 John 3:2). If Moses' face radiated the presence of God after he saw God partially, imagine the glory on our faces when we behold him fully! Saul of Tarsus was blinded by a look at the risen Lord. We will behold him continually and directly.

As CS Lewis said, we were created for heaven. This is why, he says, when we behold or hear something incredibly beautiful; we sense homesickness, nostalgia. We have a longing for a homeland we have not yet reached. This is what Hebrews chapter eleven says about the heroes of faith. They were looking for another city, as are we. They endured tremendous suffering and martyrdom, and were sustained by this hope of the new heaven and earth. They were willing to relinquish earthly happiness, knowing they would inherit eternal happiness in heaven (Hebrews 11:16). So, in the new heaven and earth, there will be people also...

The picture we get from the symbolism of chapters 21 and 22 is that the new heaven and earth will be a place of incredible and unmitigated happiness. The total eradication of everything evil and the presence of bounty and blessing bespeak perfect joy.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism says the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. In this life, God is truly getting us ready for heaven. He's willing for us to experience painful trials now in order to produce, by his grace, the character that we'll take into the new heaven and earth.

All our appetites God created to be satisfied in his way and time, and for his glory and purposes. When we receive our glorified, resurrection bodies and brains, imagine how we can enjoy what then will be his perfected creation! Those images of God's river and tree of life tell us his blessings will be perfect and unending, far beyond what we can imagine.

Lewis says we cannot comprehend the level of joy yet to be. A nine-year-old boy cannot imagine any pleasure greater than playing in the mud while eating a chocolate ice cream cone, and for some adults the greatest pleasure may be a honeymoon holiday in a luxury resort. There won't be envy in the new heaven and earth, but I believe there'll be degrees of eternal blessedness based on one's faithfulness to Christ in this life. Those who long most to see Jesus will perhaps be most satisfied and blessed by him in eternity. As the saying goes, "In heaven, everyone's cup will be full. But some cups will be larger than others."

The first paradise was a garden, and the new paradise, the new heaven and earth, is symbolized by a city comprised of the nations (21:24). It's a city God will build with his people from every people group, language, nation and tribe (5:9; 7:9). In the international church I served in Brussels, Belgium, I always thought our congregation of people from about fifty nations, was a foretaste of heaven. But the sweetest fellowship you have enjoyed on earth will be far surpassed in the new heaven and earth.

God's purpose in his creation was that he be glorified (i.e. reflected) by his creation. This, obviously, will be his purpose in his new heaven and earth. God will accomplish this purpose that has been suspended by sin and the effects of sin on mankind and creation. In the new heaven and earth all of creation will reflect him perfectly.

Church is the people of God preparing for the new heaven and earth. Then, there will be no more need for churches or pastors, for that matter! There'll be no separation between the sacred and secular. Creation will be his holy dwelling, and we'll be his temple. All our work there will be an act of pure worship. And, our service now is in preparation for our service then. We read that "his servants will serve him." I don't know what shape our service will take, but it'll be in a redeemed creation and will perfectly reflect God. There'll be opportunities for us to grow in the use of gifts that were ours by creation, and will be ours in redemption.

The new heaven and earth should not be thought of as a host of cherubic angels, lying around on clouds, playing harps for eternity in an everlasting choir rehearsal. It'll be real and glorified people doing excellent and meaningful service in the spirit of perfect love and joy.

Eugene Peterson says that some folks are looking forward to heaven as a place much like Florida, where the weather is better and the people seem fairly nice. They view heaven as though they were consumers, and add heaven to their list of possessions and investments, like the rich young ruler wanted to add eternal life to his acquisitions. They really aren't living any differently than the rest of the world. They "made a decision" once for Jesus, and asked for eternal life, but they've never been transformed by grace.

Before such people would enjoy, or could enter heaven, there must be an immediate change. Heaven will come to earth (21:2), and it's not going to be like a weekend escape to somewhere else. Right now, you've got to be willing for Jesus Christ to enter your life, and bring his residence into the city where you live, and where you relate to your children and grandchildren, where you work and live. If God isn't at work building heaven in you *now*, you're not ready for the new heaven and earth *then*. Heaven won't be an escape "getaway." You've got to enter the kingdom *now* to be in it *then*.

The hope we have for the new heaven and earth gives us a proper perspective on our present trials, which Paul says, are not worth comparing with the glory that shall be revealed to us (Romans 8:18). Our hope also enables us to live like the heroes of the faith (Hebrews 11), who were looking for the heavenly city.

I think of the little girl, who was marveling at the night sky, brilliant with stars. She sighed, "If this is the wrong side of heaven, imagine what the right side of heaven looks like!" We're on the wrong side now; but because we're God's children of hope, we're heading for the right side, the new heaven and earth.